

**Reconciliation  
in Child Welfare:**

# Touchstones of Hope for Indigenous Children, Youth, and Families



Cindy Blackstock, Terry Cross, John George, Ivan Brown, and Jocelyn Formsma



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Reconciliation logo: Alyssa Collier



## DEDICATION

To our ancestors who entrusted us with the care of this generation and the generations we will never know. Give us the strength to do what we know is right.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to acknowledge the Six Nations of the Grand River for so generously hosting the *Reconciliation: Looking Back; Reaching Forward* event on their traditional territory in Niagara Falls, Canada on October 26—28, 2005. We also recognize the rich diversity of people who attended the event, for sharing their wisdom, vision, and commitment to ensure a better future for Indigenous children, young people, and families. It was a great honor to stand in the company of those who not only want to make a difference, but who are prepared to be the difference.

Special thanks to Donald Milligan, Charlotte Goodluck, Joan Glode, Pamela Gough, and Sue Sullivan for their thoughtful review of this document and to the Elders and youth who attended the Reconciliation event.



Mural depicting the river of the experiences of Indigenous peoples in North America with child welfare systems from pre-colonization to colonization, and beyond, completed on October 28, 2005, by Joey Mallett & Michelle Nahanee, with contributions by Paisley Nahanee, and Chelsea Marie Musqua.

*Doing “good” is apparently better than doing “nothing” well—and so hangs the tale of the residential school system, and the child welfare system too, which could only ever afford child protection (removal of children from their families), rather than prevention activity (building up families). Those good people constantly lobbied for better funding but rarely made any structural critiques and thus they became fellow travelers of a system they did not approve of and earned the ill-feeling of those to whom they delivered second-class service.*

— excerpt from John S. Milloy’s presentation,  
“How Do Bad Things Happen When Good People Have  
Good Intentions?” on October 26, 2005





## THE RIVER'S SOURCE

This document embodies an earnest intent to capture the wisdom of the approximately 200 invited leaders who attended *Reconciliation: Looking Back, Reaching Forward—Indigenous Peoples and Child Welfare* on October 26, 27, and 28, 2005, in Niagara Falls, Canada. It is intended to serve as a foundation for the development of community-based action plans. We offer this document as the testimony, and commitment, of those who understand that improving the lived experience for Indigenous children, youth, and families necessarily requires the improvement of the system that serves them.

### **We therefore:**

- Recognize the past, and current, multi-generational and multi-dimensional impacts of colonization on Indigenous children, youth, and families;
- Honor those who suffered the loss of their family relationships and identities as a consequence of child welfare decisions, and those who have kept family relationships strong despite all odds;
- Respect those who have worked, and continue to work, to build and develop culturally based services and policies;
- Affirm that all Indigenous children and youth have the right to family (nuclear and extended), safety, and well-being, and to be able to identify with, and thrive as, a member of their culture of origin.

### **Further, it is expected that the path to reconciliation in child welfare will:**

- Acknowledge the mistakes of the past, and establish a child welfare profession based on non-discriminatory values, social justice, and fundamental human rights;
- Set a foundation of open communication that affirms and supports Indigenous families and communities as the best caregivers for Indigenous children and youth;
- Respect the intrinsic right of Indigenous children, youth, and families to define their own cultural identity;
- Improve the quality of, and access to, services for all children, youth, and families to free the potential of each person;
- Build a united and mutually respectful system of child welfare capable of responding to the needs of all children and youth;
- Strengthen the ability of the child welfare profession to learn, ensuring past mistakes do not become tomorrow's destiny.

## THE HEADWATERS:

### Reconciliation in Child Welfare's Beginnings

Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders in child welfare gathered in Niagara Falls in October 2005 at a historic event, entitled *Reconciliation: Looking Back, Reaching Forward –Indigenous Peoples and Child Welfare*. The collective belief that child welfare can, and must, do better for Indigenous children, youth, and their families was the creative force behind this event. Using the analogy of a journey down the river, the profession courageously reached within itself to look at what aspects of child welfare worked for, and against, the well-being of Indigenous children and youth. Participants talked openly about the history of child welfare from both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives, exploring the values and beliefs that shaped the path the river has taken before identifying the touchstones necessary to build a foundation for an improved child welfare system.

This document draws from the rich conversations of the participants at the reconciliation event to describe why reconciliation in child welfare is needed, what reconciliation can mean in the context of child welfare, and to identify key values (touchstones) to guide reconciliation in child welfare. To all who read these words, let them echo in your mind, and live in your heart and spirit, feeding a sustained effort to do what is right for Indigenous children, youth, and families—and child welfare itself.



## **WHY IS RECONCILIATION IN CHILD WELFARE NEEDED?**

The safety and well-being of children and youth are highly valued by us all. Indigenous, state, provincial, and federal governments are obligated to ensure the protection of children and youth, and to promote their well-being.

For thousands of years, Indigenous communities successfully used traditional systems of care to ensure the safety and well-being of their children. Instead of affirming these Indigenous systems of care, the child welfare systems disregarded them and imposed a new way of ensuring child safety for Indigenous children and youth, which has not been successful. Indigenous children and youth continue to be removed from their families and communities at disproportionate rates, and alternate care provided by child welfare systems has not had positive results.

These historic and contemporary realities have resulted in many Indigenous communities viewing child welfare as an agent of colonialism rather than a support to the safety and well-being of Indigenous children and youth. Colonialism, in this sense, refers to the process of claiming superiority over the original peoples, deliberately usurping their cultural ways, and employing child custody as a means of extinguishing the Indigenous culture. Regardless of one's reactions to this perception, it is broadly held, has persisted over time, and is substantially supported by research.

The widespread negative outcomes for Indigenous children, youth, and families involved with non-Indigenous child welfare compels that we journey down the river to critically examine the values and practices of the child welfare profession and move forward on a new passage. The decision that reconciliation in child welfare is needed has already been taken—by the Indigenous children, youth, and families we serve. It is they who believe we can do better, and now is the time for the profession to join them on the journey.

### **What is a Touchstone?**

*A touchstone is a high standard against which we measure other things. Applied to reconciliation in child welfare, touchstones are the high standards and values that guide action in each of the four phases of reconciliation.*

*In many Indigenous cultures, stones are referred to as “grandfathers,” as they are the silent witnesses to the lives of generations of peoples who pass before them. They are symbolic of the strength and persistence of Indigenous cultures in North America.*

*Our touchstones are exemplary guidelines for reconciliation. We use the term Touchstones of Hope because these guidelines are a positive way to create a bright future for Indigenous children and youth.*



### **TOUCHSTONES OF HOPE in the Reconciliation Process**

Standing at the shoreline of professional change can be daunting and uncertain. The process of reconciliation can be difficult as it necessarily calls on us all to see with new eyes, to acknowledge responsibility for past wrongs, and breathe life into the commitment to optimize child welfare outcomes for Indigenous children, youth, and their families.

Analysis of the collective wisdom of the child welfare leaders who attended the **Reconciliation: Looking Back, Reaching Forward** event resulted in forming a concept of reconciliation that is comprised of four phases. Reconciliation engages both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in a process of:

#### **TRUTH TELLING:**

The process of open exchange (listening and sharing) regarding child welfare’s past;

#### **ACKNOWLEDGING:**

Affirming and learning from the past and embracing new possibilities for the future;

#### **RESTORING:**

Addressing the problems of the past and creating a better path for the future, and;

#### **RELATING:**

Having recognized that Indigenous peoples are in the best position to make decisions about Indigenous children and youth, we move forward together in a respectful way, along a new path, to achieve better outcomes for Indigenous children and youth.

Reconciliation begins with a truthful exploration of the harm caused by child welfare by all who were, or are still, involved. The definition of harm must be acknowledged to be the first property of those who experienced it, just as acknowledging the harm and learning from it is the first obligation of those who perpetrated it. The journey through the other phases is often more tidal in nature than linear—respecting the need for natural processes of thought and paces for change to flow forward and backward before finally settling on a new and improved reality.

## TOUCHSTONES OF HOPE

for Indigenous Children, Youth, and Families:

### *Four Phases of Reconciliation*

#### ***Relating***

Working respectfully together to design, implement, and monitor the new child welfare system

#### ***Truth Telling***

Telling the story of child welfare as it has affected Indigenous children, youth, and families



#### ***Restoring***

Doing what we can to redress the harm and making changes to ensure it does not happen again

#### ***Acknowledging***

Learning from the past, seeing one another with new understanding, and recognizing the need to move forward on a new path

## THE FOUR PHASES OF RECONCILIATION in Child Welfare are:

### *Truth Telling*

- Begins with a full and truthful accounting of child welfare respecting Indigenous children, youth, and families. This would include identifying past and current harms experienced by Indigenous children, families, and communities, and must be told from both non-Indigenous and Indigenous perspectives. Truth telling gives voice to, and recognizes, past harm, obliges it to be heard, and sets the scene for restoration.
- Requires non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples to acknowledge and accept responsibility for redressing the wrongs done to Indigenous children, youth, families, and communities, regardless of their degree of direct involvement.

### *Acknowledging*

- Recognizes that child welfare practices imposed on Indigenous peoples, and the values that guided them, are not the right or best path to continue to follow.
- Affirms the child welfare practices of Indigenous people, and the values that guide them.
- Adopts equality, fairness, and balance as essential guidelines to child welfare.
- Respects the intrinsic right of Indigenous peoples to define their own cultural identity.
- Brings alive a new understanding about child welfare between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.
- Asserts that Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples can follow a new path in the future—a path that reflects learning from the past and a renewed sense of mutual respect.

### *Restoring*

- Provides an opportunity for those who have done past harm to work in a respectful and trustworthy way with those who have experienced the harm to design and implement earnest steps to redress past harms and set frameworks in place to prevent their recurrence.
- Involves an ongoing process whereby Indigenous and non-Indigenous people take mutual responsibility for child welfare and its outcomes.
- Guards against the human tendency to revert to past practices when something new becomes difficult or uncertain.
- Builds personal and community capacity for addressing past wrongs and current child welfare problems, and for promoting child and youth well-being.

## ***Relating***

- Recognizes that reconciliation is not a one-time event or pronouncement but rather an investment in a new way of being and a relationship to achieve a broader goal: a child welfare system that supports the safety and well-being of Indigenous children and youth.
- Requires Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to work jointly to implement a set of core values, a vision, and a structure for best practice.
- Commits professionals and others to continue the journey of reconciliation—especially when energy and focus are diverted elsewhere.

## **TOUCHSTONES OF HOPE: Guiding Values**

Participants identified key values to guide these four phases of reconciliation in child welfare. They are essential to the success of a renewed child welfare system, and to set in play a basis for a respectful and meaningful relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples working in child welfare.

### ***Self-Determination***

- Indigenous peoples are in the best position to make decisions that affect Indigenous children, youth, families, and communities.
- Indigenous peoples are in the best position to lead the development of child welfare laws, policies, research, and practice that affects their communities.
- Non-Indigenous child welfare workers need the capacity and understanding to work effectively with Indigenous communities, experts, children, youth, and families.
- Only adequate and sustained resources will enable Indigenous communities to implement self-determination in child welfare.
- The role of children and young people in making decisions that affect them must be recognized.

### ***Culture and Language***

- Culture is ingrained in all child welfare theory, research, policy, and practice. There is no culturally neutral practice or practitioner.
- Child welfare policy and practice are most effective when they reflect and reinforce the intrinsic and distinct aspects of Indigenous cultures.
- Guidelines and evaluation processes for culturally appropriate child welfare are strongest when established by Indigenous communities, reflecting local culture and context.
- Language is the essence of culture, and child welfare knowledge, policy, and practice are most relevant when expressed in the language of the community served.

### ***Holistic Approach***

- Child welfare approaches that reflect the reality of the whole child preserve the continuity of relationships and recognize the child is shaped by her/his culture (including traditions, spirituality, and social customs), environment, social relationships, and specific abilities and traits.
- Effective child welfare services take a lifelong approach to making decisions, and give due consideration to both short- and long-term impacts of interventions.
- Relevant child welfare interventions acknowledge that non-Indigenous and Indigenous children and youth are citizens of the world. This means that the child welfare systems must ensure all children and youth in their care have opportunities to understand, interact with, and respect peoples of different cultures.

### ***Structural Interventions***

- Protecting the safety of children and youth must include resolving risk at the level of the child, family, and community. Without redress of structural risks, there is little chance that the number of Indigenous children and youth in care will be reduced.
- Consistent with United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, child welfare providers should not remove children or youth from their homes due to poverty. Impoverished families must be provided with the economic and social supports necessary to safely care for their children and youth.
- Social workers must learn to differentiate between structural (also known as distal) risks and family risks to a child or youth, and develop meaningful responses to both.
- Substance misuse is a major problem, and child welfare must develop programs to redress neglect arising from parental substance misuse—preferably in tandem with culturally based addictions experts and services—within the context of the economic poverty of many communities.

### ***Non Discrimination***

- Indigenous children and youth receiving child welfare services should not receive inferior services because they are Indigenous.
- Indigenous peoples are entitled to equal access to child welfare resources that are responsive to their needs, and the unique cultural context of their experience.
- Indigenous peoples are entitled to equal access to ancillary resources related to child welfare, such as services supported by the voluntary sector, corporate sector, and all levels of government.
- Indigenous ways of knowledge must be given full credence when child welfare work is carried out with Indigenous children, youth, and their families, and Indigenous interventions used as a first priority.

## PADDLING ON A NEW STREAM

A great message of hope has challenged child welfare leaders across the continent to put their paddles in the water to improve the life experiences of Indigenous children and youth. There is a saying among Indigenous peoples: We do not inherit our world; we borrow it from our children. We know this to be true or we would not exist at all.

For generations, Indigenous peoples across the world have held the earth, the knowledge, the spirit, and the strength of our peoples in a sacred trust for the generation they would never know. Now we are here, entrusted with all that is truly sacred and needed for the generation we will never know. We may feel uncertain or afraid on the journey of reconciliation in child welfare but we are not alone. We need only to call on the wisdom and love of those who went before us to guide us firmly forward. After all, all that we know in child welfare is really just some of what they knew.





I pray that the Creator gives us what we call in our culture, “the good mind.” The good mind will work us toward the one mind that we need to establish a network that will encircle the world, dealing with this one issue—child welfare—and how Indigenous peoples, by asserting the inherent rights that the Creator gave us, can put back in place their structures, mechanisms, and responsibilities.

“*Konnoronhkwa*” means love or caring. We have to invest love back into our families, our communities, our nations. We have to get up every day and be hopeful. We cannot live in a painful past. Part of reconciliation means shedding that. We don’t have to forget it, but we cannot let it blind us to where we need to go.

—Chief David General, Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, October 26, 2005