

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS AND KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION



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Traditional decision-making for Indigenous child welfare

What you need to know:

By collaborating with First Nations and shifting child welfare policies to include traditional decision-making, governments may find solutions that meet the needs of Indigenous communities.

What is this research about?

In December 2016, 62% of the 7,010 children in foster care in British Columbia (BC) were Indigenous. Canada's colonial history plays an unparalleled role in the high numbers of Indigenous children in foster care. Current policies can undermine traditional decision-making (TDM) and Indigenous parenting practices.

BC's [Ministry of Children and Family Development](#) (MCFD) sponsored this research on using traditional decision-making in child welfare to support better dispute resolution strategies with Indigenous communities.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers conducted a literature review, cross-jurisdictional scan and interviews to help the Ministry better support TDM in communities they serve. These research questions guided the review:

- How do we meaningfully engage with Indigenous communities about alternative mechanisms for dispute resolution?
- How do governments successfully implement TDM and alternative dispute resolution with Indigenous communities?



This research shows that addressing Indigenous child welfare needs requires a shift from typical western authority structures towards traditional decision-making (Photo: Welcome Posts created by Doug LaFortune, Coast Salish from Tsawout First Nation; Credit: UVic Photo Services).



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What did the researchers find?

The literature reviewed consistently supports two ways the Ministry can build meaningful relationships with Indigenous communities. First, by investing in long-term relationships with Indigenous community members to earn trust. Second, by collaborating more often.

The importance of understanding Indigenous worldviews is a key finding. Focusing on traditional knowledge and family-centered approaches helps move away from western authority structures. These shifts support TDM.

Researchers' recommendations:

- Cross-cultural workshops with Indigenous leaders
- Longer contracts in communities for social workers
- Decision-makers build cooperative relationships with each Nation in their jurisdiction

How can you use this research?

This research is relevant to anyone working with Indigenous communities, including decision-makers and social workers. The intent of the research was to give the Ministry relevant information for better supporting TDM in communities they serve, specifically along the BC coast. The researchers' recommendations will also support policymakers in developing better child welfare practices for working with Indigenous communities outside BC.

Indigenous communities can use the recommendations of this research to work with Ministry staff to make TDM part of child welfare dispute resolution.

The researchers also created a tip sheet for child welfare professionals working with Indigenous communities. This sheet is available as part of the full report. Please contact communityresearch@uvic.ca for more information.

About the researchers

Chelsea Lake and Zach Lewis are University of Victoria (UVic) graduate students. This project was completed as part of the [Graduate Studies \(GS\) 505](#) course and supervised by instructors Drs. Gord Miller and Wayne Mitic. Facilitated by UVic [Research Partnerships and Knowledge Mobilization](#), GS 505 is a partnership between MCFD and UVic. This project was prepared on behalf of MCFD.

Keywords

Child welfare; children in care; traditional decision making; dispute resolution; Indigenous; Aboriginal; First Nation; child and youth care

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