



# INUIT CHILD WELFARE AND FAMILY SUPPORT:

## POLICIES, PROGRAMS AND STRATEGIES SUMMARY

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Inuit Tuttarvingat



National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO)  
Organisation nationale de la santé autochtone (ONSA)  
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## **Inuit Child Welfare and Family Support: Policies, Programs and Strategies — Summary**

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## Introduction

Inuit Tuttarvingat of the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) is concerned with the health and wellness of Inuit across Canada. Recently, the Inuit Tuttarvingat's strategic plan identified children's health as an important priority. Within this area, the social services gaps and needs of Inuit children were seen as research priorities.

A reference group of individuals working in the four Inuit regions, as well as from urban centres in Southern cities with significant Inuit populations, was formed to identify common areas of concern within children's health. The group held three teleconferences in 2010-2011 and identified the following issues:

- Gaps in services for Inuit families and children in need of support.
- High numbers of child protection cases.
- Difficulties with custom (extended family) adoption and foster care including recruitment, training and support.
- Tensions between Inuit culture and values and service agencies' mandates and approaches.
- Need for more prevention services in the home and community.
- Need to support social services employees.

The results of their work, as well as research and writing provided by Lisa Rae, a Sauvé Foundation Scholar based at McGill University, led to the publication of the research report *Inuit Child Welfare and Family Support: Policies, Programs and Strategies* (2011) and four related resource lists:

- Inuit Child Welfare and Family Support: Inuit-related Documents.
- Inuit Child Welfare and Family Support: Aboriginal Documents.
- Inuit Child Welfare and Family Support: International Indigenous Documents.
- Inuit Child Welfare and Family Support: General Documents.

These publications are available at [www.naho.ca/inuit](http://www.naho.ca/inuit). This document is a summary of the full research report.

## Inuit Children in Care

All provincial and territorial legislation recognizes parents as having the main responsibility for raising children. It also outlines the duties of provinces and territories when a child is found in "need of protection". There are many children in Canada involved with their respective provincial or territorial child welfare systems. Some are receiving family home-based support, others have been temporarily removed from their families and placed in foster care or group homes, and some have been adopted.

Due to a lack of data, it is not possible to say how many Inuit children are involved with child welfare services in Canada. In 2003, the Northwest Territories conducted a study of reported abuse and neglect, and found that almost one-third (29 per cent) of the proven maltreatment cases involved Inuit children. Given that Inuit make up less than ten per cent of the population in the territory, they are clearly over-represented in the child welfare system (MacLaurin et al., 2005; Northwest Territories Bureau of Statistics, 2010; Statistics Canada, 2006). Nunavik also reports higher rates of children in care compared to the rest of Quebec. In Nunavut, the rate of children in care is 15.3 per 1,000 compared to a national average of 9.2 children per 1,000.

## Inuit Child Welfare Issues

The Inuit Children and Social Services Reference Group identified the following key issues in relation to family support and child welfare services for Inuit.

**1. Addressing child and family poverty** — Poverty, brought on by the high cost of living in Inuit communities, and addictions are major challenges for many Inuit families. Therefore, making changes to the child welfare and family support system alone, without addressing these related issues, will not be sufficient to keep children out of care.

**2. Fostering more community involvement** — It is critically important to involve communities in creating the solutions to the challenges they face. Inuit community members have the knowledge and experience of child rearing practices as well as the cultural values to develop an Inuit-based child welfare and family support system.

**3. Taking an Inuit-specific approach to child welfare** — An Inuit-specific approach to child welfare and family support is essential in order to build healthy Inuit families. Inuit have a distinct culture and history, and child welfare and family support practices need to reflect their values and build on the strengths of Inuit families and communities in caring for children.

**4. Developing more culturally appropriate services** — Culturally competent services and service providers are essential for successful interventions. A lack of knowledge about Inuit culture and values remains a problem both in the North and the South. Reference Group members recommended mandatory cultural competency training for all service providers prior to working with Inuit.

**5. Focusing on supporting families and preventing child welfare crises** — Families need support before they enter a state of crisis, working together with social services staff to address their challenges. Removal of children from their homes should be a last resort, after less intrusive support services have been provided.

**6. Improving supports in the home** — Inuit families experiencing distress benefit from more in-home support. Financial supports as well as programs and services are needed. One model that has shown promise is a Nunatsiavut home-visiting program where the service provider works closely with the family in distress.

**7. Supporting traditional Inuit practices** — Supporting traditional Inuit practices, such as custom adoption, is essential to improving family and child security. Formal support for kinship relationships and extended family and community responsibility for children can create healthy family environments for all Inuit children.

**8. Ensuring Inuit have access to legal services** — Inuit families need better advice and representation in the court system. Often, Inuit families and advocates lack information on their legal rights and are unprepared for court intervention. The legal system needs to improve its services both on an individual and system-wide level.

**9. Getting more Inuit knowledge in child welfare and family support** — Greater direction from Inuit in the design and delivery of child welfare and family support services will improve outcomes for children. To do so, Inuit need support to increase their knowledge of different models of care.

**10. Maintaining cultural ties and community connections for adopted children** — Significant numbers of Inuit children are adopted by non-Inuit parents and sent outside their communities and territories. This is hard on the children struggling to understand their identity, the Inuit families who lose their children, and the communities that are weakened by family breakdown.

**11. Involving families and communities in decision-making** — Inuit families and community members need to be more involved in decisions that affect their children and youth. Elders committees that mediate disputes and, under the right conditions, community justice committees have been effective in some communities.

**12. Building capacity in Inuit communities** — Building capacity in Inuit communities is key to ensuring strong and healthy Inuit families and children. Each Inuit region as well as Southern communities need to develop their own solutions and models, and will benefit from sharing information about promising developments.

## Promising Practices — Canada

The first section below provides examples of child welfare and family support practices that have shown promise in promoting positive outcomes for children and families in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities in Canada. The next section highlights international Indigenous approaches that are having positive results. Each example addresses a specific challenge identified by members of the Reference Group. For more information, please see the full report, *Inuit Child Welfare and Family Support: Policies, Programs and Strategies*, 2011.

**1. Making community and family investments** — A study that reviewed information from the Canadian Incidence Study (CIS) of Reported Abuse and Neglect concluded that agencies serving First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children do not have enough resources to meet the needs of the communities they serve. This study, along with other research, indicates that providing more resources (funding) to families and communities could help prevent many Aboriginal children from being taken into care (Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005; Fluke et al., 2010; Trocmé et al., 2006).

**2. Increasing Aboriginal input: Enabling communities to drive the visioning process** — The First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada launched the Touchstones of Hope: Reconciliation in Child Welfare Project in 2005. Touchstones of Hope leads communities in a visioning process, identifies indicators to measure their progress, and sets out the necessary steps and responsible parties for achieving their goals (Blackstock, Cross, George, Brown, & Formsma, 2006).

**3. Understanding what drives children into the child welfare system and participating in population-specific data collection** — First Nations child and family services agencies have greatly increased their participation in the Canadian Incidence Study (CIS) to gain a clearer picture of the contributing factors for Aboriginal children entering the child welfare system. However, significant limitations in data collection and data availability remain for Inuit regions, and agency participation is not widespread. The National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health has championed the collection of population-specific child welfare data (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2009-2010). Participation in data collection efforts can inform evidence-based policy and advocacy efforts.

**4. Improving cultural competency in services through consultation and inter-agency collaboration** — To build its cultural competency, the Children's Aid Society of Ottawa began consulting with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis social services providers (Engelking, 2009; Galley, 2010). This resulted in a pilot project involving an Inuit "pod" of Society workers who received Inuit-specific training by the Ottawa

Inuit Children's Centre. These workers better serve Inuit families given their enhanced understanding of Inuit culture and Inuit-specific services in the Ottawa area.

**5. Preserving families and providing a variety of services** — The Vancouver Aboriginal Child and Family Services Society (2010) is using an early-intervention, family-preservation model in which a counsellor works with parents, other caregivers, children, and youth to develop a plan to protect the children and prevent their removal from the home. The principle behind such models is to offer supports to families that do not meet the specifications of child "maltreatment" but are still considered at risk. Streaming families into different programs, depending on their needs as well as the quality and cultural relevancy of the services, also shows promise (Children's Bureau & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009).

**6. Increasing home supports** — Increasing in-home supports is a preventative strategy that has been called for by researchers (Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005; Shangreux & Blackstock, 2004). Further, if poverty is a contributing factor to child neglect, then in-home financial supports — on par with the funding received by foster parents — should be considered as an alternative to removing children (Galley, 2010).

**7. Further supporting custom adoption** — Nunavut and the Northwest Territories have a Commissioner of Custom Adoption whose responsibilities are mainly administrative, non-invasive, and respectful of the requests of the families. Some research has suggested that supervision from social service staff, or implementing stronger guidelines for custom adoption, could further improve this adoption process (Commission des droits de la personne et de droits de la jeunesse Québec, 2007; Rideout, 2000).

**8. Using the legal system** — The legal system can be used to improve the situation for children and families. For example, in response to a parent's lawsuit, a Nunavut judge ruled that parts of the *Child and Family Services Act* dealing with the removal of children from their homes were in violation of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (*Nunatsiaq News*, 2010, November 18). The human rights complaint continues to serve as a focal point in the First Nations child welfare community for advocating for equitable funding for First Nations child welfare (First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, 2011).

**9. Establishing specialized services** — In 2003, the first Métis Child and Family Services Agency was established in Manitoba. Prior to this event, the Métis Nation did not have a history of or experience in providing mandated child welfare services (Hudson & McKenzie, 2003). While challenges remain, there is ongoing support for this new model of service delivery.

**10. Connecting to culture and building identity** — Métis Community Services (MCS) on Vancouver Island has developed a Cultural Planning Policy that informs Cultural Safety Agreements for prospective adoptive parents of Métis children. The policy incorporates the concept of "cultural safety" and provides guidelines for adoptive parents so that adopted children maintain ties to the Métis community and knowledge of Métis history and experience while being raised in non-Métis families (Métis Community Services, 2009).

## Promising Practices — International

This section provides examples of child welfare and family support practices that have proven effective in promoting positive outcomes for Indigenous children and families in other countries and, in some cases, within Canada as well.



**1. Using alternative dispute resolution approaches** — Alternative dispute resolution (ADR) models, such as “family group conferencing,” “Aboriginal family decision-making,” and “family circles,” are all models currently used by Indigenous Peoples internationally as well as in Canada to resolve child welfare issues. Family group conferencing has been used by Maori in New Zealand since 1989 (Desmeules, 2007). The Children’s Aid Society of Ottawa is using an alternative dispute resolution model.

**2. Supporting kinship care** — “Kinship care” is the government or agency placement of children with extended family members, instead of with foster parents or other out-of-home placements. Its use is growing in the United States, Canada, Western Europe, United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia (Paxman, 2006). To be effective, kinship caregivers should be eligible for the same types of benefits and access to support as foster parents.

**3. Increasing Indigenous autonomy** — Research internationally and in Canada has pointed to the critical role of increased Indigenous autonomy to improve economic, health, and social outcomes for Indigenous Peoples. Within Canada, some studies have shown a strong relationship between these improved outcomes and meaningful self-government (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Cornell, 2006; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996).

## Models of Child Welfare Delivery

There are different governance models for delivering child welfare services to Aboriginal Peoples in Canada (Gough, Blackstock, & Bala, 2005; Harvey, Mandell, Stalker, & Frensch, 2003; Mandell et al., 2003). Aspects of these models could be used by Inuit to gain greater control over their child welfare services.

**1. Self-government** — Self-government recognizes the right of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis to assert jurisdictional authority over child and family services. Many First Nations governments, and an Inuit government, the Nunatsiavut Government in Newfoundland and Labrador, have expressed a desire to move towards this model for child welfare services.

**2. Band by-law** — The *Indian Act* allows for band chiefs and councils to pass their own by-laws that apply on reserve. These by-laws need to be approved by the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. The Spallumcheen First Nation of British Columbia is currently the only First Nation using this model. It is now the sole provider of child and family services and receives provincial funding to support those services.

**3. Tripartite agreement** — Three levels of government are involved in setting up such agreements. Under this model, law-making authority is delegated to a First Nation by the provincial and federal governments, and the First Nation must adhere generally to provincial standards of child welfare.

**4. Delegated delivery** — Provincial or territorial governments delegate the responsibility for the delivery of child welfare services to First Nations child and family services agencies. These agencies may operate on or off reserve.

**5. Partially delegated services or pre-mandated model** — Under this approach, Aboriginal child welfare and family services agencies provide services according to licensing agreements with the provincial or territorial government. This model is mainly used in Ontario.

**6. Mainstream services** — Most First Nations, Inuit, and Métis in Canada are served by mainstream services. Some mainstream agencies, such as the provincially mandated Children’s Aid Society of

Ottawa, have made significant steps in improving the way they work with Aboriginal, and specifically Inuit, clients.

## Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to highlight key issues in Inuit child welfare and family support, and describe some of the initiatives, programs, and policies that First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities in Canada and Indigenous Peoples internationally are using to address these issues. It is important to remember that changes in the child welfare and family support system alone will not address many of the issues that drive children into care such as poverty, poor housing, and alcohol and drug abuse.

Child safety and support for vulnerable families must be the twin pillars of child welfare. The Inuit Children and Social Services Reference Group supports strategies that focus on building the capacity and skills of the community to support its vulnerable families. The least-intrusive measures that promote healthy families and healthy communities, and cultural values are also seen as essential to improve outcomes for Inuit children, families and communities across the North as well as in Southern Canada.

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