



Vancouver Aboriginal Child & Family Services Society

In the early 2000's, an Indigenous Committee of parents, youth, foster caregivers, staff, Elders, and community professionals associated with VACFSS came together to discuss inclusive fostering, impart knowledge and create a better future for our children. They discussed their experiences, their strengths, and the many ways of caring for children and families; they talked about learning from family and community. Discussions highlighted the inclusive fostering work that had been going on for years within VACFSS and with foster families: bringing in the parents, keeping the connections and the cultures. At the time, there had been no coherent policy developed to outline the skill development and teamwork required for Inclusive Foster Care; thus, the committee gathered their collective knowledge and created an Inclusive Foster Care Policy Handbook. This handbook hopes for the preservation of kinship and culture and the return to the traditional practice of shared caring of children.

With inclusive fostering, foster care is viewed as a temporary extension of the child's family, not as a replacement for it; foster caregivers share their knowledge and wisdom, just as a relative would do. Their vision is captured in this story of a ten-year-old boy who described his experience of inclusive fostering this way:

“He and his two older siblings live in a foster home, where his birth mother is welcome and has free access to him. There are times when she lives in the home. One night when his mother was staying over, there was a power failure. All the lights went out. He called his mother and she lay down with him. He fell asleep. When he woke, the power was back on. He could hear his mother and his foster caregiver upstairs, talking and laughing and having tea. He lay there and thought ‘It’s a miracle. The people I love the most are all together, here with me.’”

“Culture is your way of life, everything you do, who you are. It is the **shared values, beliefs and traditions which include family structure, child-rearing practices, spirituality, ceremonial practices, arts and language**”, thus Inclusive Foster Care can be seen as a way to honour cultural traditions of child rearing practices from Indigenous communities. Historically, child rearing responsibilities were divided among many members of a community and no single individual was overwhelmed with the care of a child. When a child needs to live away from home, Indigenous customary care arrangements are typically based on family relationships, concern the whole community and maintain the parent-child connection (di Tomasso & de Finney, 2015).

The view of family through an Indigenous lens includes “all your relations and all the people who raised you and all the people you were raised with. It is your connection to the Elders and to your ancestors”. **Positive child development occurs within interconnected relationships** with the broader community, the ancestors and the land. Although child-rearing practices and traditions differ from Nation to Nation (Johnston, 2012), they are grounded in a mutual understanding that a child's well-being – emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual – is supported by these interdependent relationships. Child-rearing practices of Indigenous peoples for children who cannot live at home does not disconnect children from their parents, family or communities. Concepts of Indigenous custom caregiving have much to offer current child welfare practices and Inclusive Foster Care, as we move forward in inclusive fostering determined through collaboration between the child's family and the caregiving family.



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The idea of “inclusiveness” in fostering also has a history in non-Indigenous communities. In the mid- to late-nineteen-hundreds there were two contrasting concepts of fostering: *inclusive* fostering and *exclusive* fostering. Exclusive fostering was seen as fostering that attempts to keep the foster child within the foster family while excluding other connections. On the other hand, inclusive fostering was seen as fostering that brings people together in the fostering experience, including a willingness for the inclusion of all fostering participants (ie. foster caregivers, parents, children, and social workers). Inclusive fostering emphasized that children need to **develop a true sense of their past history and present identity** through experiences of affection and connection. Researchers at that time assessed outcomes of the two types of fostering and found that **features associated with inclusive fostering were related to fostering success.**