

Kinship and Foster Parent Responses to: On the Edge Between Two Worlds

Community Narratives on the Vulnerability of Marginalized Indigenous Girls

The Manitoba Foster Family Network partnered with the Office of the Children's Advocate to present their latest report, *On the Edge Between Two Worlds: Community Narratives on the Vulnerability of Marginalized Indigenous Girls*. A total of three Fostering Connections Forums were held, in three regions of the province - Swan River on October 5th, 2016, Winnipeg on January 17th, 2017, Ste. Anne on May 25th, 2017.

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Community Narratives on the Vulnerability of Marginalized Indigenous Girls

Kinship and foster families across Manitoba are often unheard voices within the Child Welfare System. At the Manitoba Foster Family Network, we strive to change that by empowering kinship and foster parents to be respected members of the child's professional team. We use a grassroots approach – collecting the voice of the kinship and foster parents to help influence change within the system. One way we are able to do that is through our kinship and foster parent forums.

Over the 2016-2017 year, the Manitoba Foster Family Network toured Manitoba with the Office of the Children's Advocate. The morning session was an opportunity for the Office of the Children's Advocate to present a synopsis of their latest report, *On the Edge Between Two Worlds: Community Narratives on the Vulnerability of Marginalized Indigenous Girls*. The report can be read online at: <http://www.childrensadvocate.mb.ca/wp-content/uploads/FINAL-Indigenous-Girls.pdf>.

The afternoon session was a kinship and foster parent forum. Guided by the recommendations made in the report, the Manitoba Foster Family Network created four questions (see sidebar) to gain a better understanding about the supports kinship and foster parents feel they need to provide the best possible care.

The Questions

1. What do you, as a kinship/foster parent, need to be able to address recommendation number two? Be particular, not universal.
2. How can you, as a kinship/foster parent, help, contribute to and support the family in their healing process?
3. What do you, as a kinship/foster parent, need to be able to maintain healthy connections to the child's family and their community? This is in reference to the last bullet point on page 83 of the report.
4. How do we move forward?

The Participants

Participants in the afternoon forum sessions were kinship and foster parents throughout the province of Manitoba. There were 49 participants in total and they were licensed through a variety of agencies in each of the four authorities.

The Challenges

Listed below are the responses that identify some of the barriers faced by kinship and foster parents when asked what they need to be able to support the child's exploration of their cultural identities, to support the natural family in their healing process, and to maintain healthy connections with the child's natural family and/or community. The responses collected from kinship and foster parents were consistent throughout the province and have been grouped into similar themes.

Child's Information

Kinship and foster parents feel they would best be able to support the child to explore and develop their cultural identities if they had access to more information about the child, their family, and their community. The information sought after by kinship and foster parents includes:

- parental lineages and family that may not be mentioned in the file (whom are still safe to visit)
- the child's whole story including past placements, reasons for placement breakdown, and biological connections

Access to the Natural (Biological) Families

The ultimate goal of fostering is to have the child reunited, whenever possible, with their natural family. Having access to the child's natural family and community, whenever and in whatever capacity it is safe to do so, would help kinship and foster parents eliminate some of the barriers to accessing the child's culture. With these connections, kinship and foster parents could:

- increase sibling contact and time spent with natural families
- increase visits to events in the home community
- discuss the culture of the natural family with them directly
- share the positive experiences and milestones that occur in the foster home so the natural family can be actively involved in their child's life

Experience tells us a child in care is going to want information about who they are, their family, and where they come from. Kinship and foster parents are aware that sometimes, however, it is

not always feasible to build connections directly with the natural family. In these situations, it could be helpful to have the following:

- a trusted member of the natural family or community be present at meetings in place of Mom and/or Dad if they cannot be present
- a safety plan in place for unexpected meetings and social media type interactions
- an age-appropriate explanation for the child about why they are in care and what is needed before reunification can be possible

Education and Knowledge

Kinship and foster parents feel that they are not currently receiving enough education. They would like to receive additional training and educational opportunities on:

- natural family-first style training
- training that addresses parenting styles and techniques
- culture and colonization, delivered by cultural leaders
- understanding trauma and how to work through it

It has been identified that kinship and foster parents feel as though they lack knowledge and/or an understanding on:

- their roles and responsibilities as a care provider
- the rights and responsibilities of different cultures
- how to proceed when the natural family and/or child don't actively follow any particular culture
- privacy laws and the pros and cons surrounding social media use

Resources

It is a common misconception that kinship and foster parents are “in it for the money.” However, in reality, fostering is not a source of income. Kinship and foster parents feel that more resources and better access to them could positively impact the care they are able to provide for children in care. Some examples of resources desired include:

- access to band offices, band members, and trusted elders which could lead to an increased participation in cultural events in the home community
- financial support; receiving more support hours and/or respite, funding to co-parent and support the natural family during as well as after reunification, funding to attend additional trainings/conferences
- more agency support

Making Change

To overcome the above mentioned challenges, kinship and foster parents have identified some changes they would like to see take place.

Worker Caseloads

Kinship and foster parents feel as though the workers assigned to them and the children in their care are often overworked. They would like the agency staff to be able to have manageable caseloads which would allow them to build better connections with their families. This could:

- help move past the “safe for right now” mentality and create better, safer long-term plans
- reduce unnecessary moves due to misinformation, therefore reducing the amount of disruption in a home
- allow more time to consider what is actually best for the child and the various ways they can be set up for success
- results of assessments of the child’s needs being completed and shared with the kinship and foster family in a timely manner to ensure adequate resources for the child and the fostering home
- assist the workers be more organized and use their time effectively
- increase agency participation in the child’s culture when the fostering family does not know what to encourage

Inclusion as a Member of the Professional Team

Kinship and foster parents have identified they would like to be included in the child’s professional team. They have a wealth of information about the child in their care. Kinship and foster parents want:

- to be included in all levels of planning and care from the very beginning
- clear expectations from the agency
- the agency to have an understanding of their skill level

Inclusion of the Natural Family as Members of the Professional Team

As mentioned above, children in care want and need to know who they are and where they come from. The natural family’s traditions and desires for the child play an important part in who that child is and will become. It is important for the child to feel a sense of belonging in the kinship or foster home AND in the natural family’s home.

Reducing Stigma

In general, society doesn’t understand foster care and, as a result, there is a very negative stigma associated with foster care for the child as well as the natural and fostering families. Some of the negativity can be addressed by:

- building relationships to help eliminate judgements and blame
- showing empathy and being understanding - to workers, to the child, to their families

- being mindful of language used - positive, people-first
- demonstrating compassion towards the child and seeing the child as a whole person with abilities and strengths rather than as a diagnosis with challenges
- showing the kinship or foster family they aren't "just" a foster parent and do have valuable insight

The Manitoba Foster Family Network would like to thank all participants for their insight. We'd also like to thank, in advance, our stakeholders for considering this valuable information. By receiving the information directly from the people who live and walk the path with children in care 24/7, we hope it can be used to positively impact the child welfare system and create better outcomes for those involved.

The findings of this report clearly demonstrated ***the importance of empowering kinship and foster parents to become members of the child's professional team*** – something MFFN strives for in all of its undertakings. Another core organizational belief of the Manitoba Foster Family Network is the ***Principle of Addition - always add rather than subtract people from a child's life.*** Adding people always expands the circle of support and the birth family always remains at the center of the circle. A kinship or foster family is not the center of the circle but a valuable complementary addition to the birth family. This will be the focus for our next round of forums that will be touring the province of Manitoba.

The next round of forums will be, once again, in partnership with the Office of the Children's Advocate. Over the 2017-2018 year, we will be bringing the Parent Wisdom Project to Flin Flon (September 27th, 2017), Winnipeg (January 2018), and Brandon (April/May 2018). While the system can sometimes feel like it pits natural families against foster families, *the best care for children and youth includes the wisdom and participation of all adults who care for them* and the Parent Wisdom Project sets out to gather each of those voices. To ensure all voices are heard, the Office of the Children's Advocate will also be partnering with other organizations throughout Manitoba to gather the wisdom and insight of natural parents and other foster parents. Please bring your opinions and your stories and come join the conversation at one of the forums for our Parent Wisdom Project!