

Child welfare approaches for Indigenous communities: International perspectives

Terri Libesman

Many of the problems associated with child abuse and neglect in communities are directly related to experiences of colonisation. Indigenous peoples in different countries and communities may have experienced colonial processes differently, but have experienced some common impacts. This paper provides a review of legislation and services delivered to Indigenous communities in Canada, the United States and New Zealand. While some of the issues and ideas may be useful and relevant in the Australian context, a key finding in the research is that a "one size fits all approach" does not work. Particular attention is paid to new approaches to family and community wellbeing that focus work on community strengths and healing, and provide a less problem-focused picture of Indigenous communities.

There has been much interest in overseas legislative reform that transfers real authority for children and families' wellbeing to Indigenous communities. This is widely considered to be important to the long-term empowerment of Indigenous peoples and a basis for the development of more effective support systems. The United States *Indian Child Welfare Act* currently represents the highest level of transfer of decision-making authority to Indigenous peoples.

The paper describes a range of service models that focus on Indigenous collaboration, community development, community participation and community control. Although local solutions will need to be found for different Indigenous communities, there is a preference across Indigenous communities for holistic, multifaceted approaches that heal all sections of the community and address the underlying causes of health and social problems. Some key policy and practice recommendations for the development of better child protection and child welfare/family support systems are described.

- It is contended that statutory child protection services be based on an understanding of communal identity and a "whole-of-community" rather than individually-focused response. Further, they require a more collaborative, community-based "grass-roots" approach. This should be based in part on the development of comprehensive neighbourhood-based supports and services, which draw on family networks and other informal resources.
- Good partnerships and meaningful collaboration between government and Indigenous organisations are vital to the development of effective child protection and broader child welfare strategies. Such partnerships must be founded upon inclusiveness and



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Contents

Introduction	2
Legislative framework	3
Canada	4
United States of America	7
New Zealand	9
Australia	10
Service delivery	14
Cultural competence	15
Implementing culturally competent care	19
Service agency relationships	18
Indigenous community control	21
Family preservation versus child protection	23
Family group conferencing and other similar models	31
Early intervention	32
Conclusion	33
References	35

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empowerment strategies. They will usually require government agencies to relinquish some power and to recognise the authority of the Indigenous community or organization. Ideally, this collaboration will be supported via appropriate legislation.

- Culturally competent service delivery requires not only the employment of Indigenous staff in support services, but the incorporation of cultural knowledge into the service delivery framework via community engagement and active participation.
- Community satisfaction with service delivery will be increased by a holistic approach to healing, autonomy and flexibility in service provision, and the capacity to respond or tailor services to meet local needs. Family preservation is a particularly important part of Indigenous family support systems. The flexible family and home-based nature of family preservation services renders it suitable for use with a variety of cultural traditions.

INTRODUCTION

In Clearinghouse Issues Paper 19, Stanley, Tomison and Pocock (2003) provided an overview of the issue of child abuse as it affects Australian Indigenous communities. Stanley and colleagues identified the failure of current responses to child abuse in Indigenous communities and the urgent need to identify more effective ways of addressing this problem. It noted the relationship between traumatic colonial experiences and ongoing intergenerational trauma experienced by many Indigenous communities. It was also noted that if the situation is to improve, Indigenous people need to be resourced to provide future directions.

While Indigenous peoples in different countries and communities have experienced colonial processes differently, many communities have experienced some common impacts. Frequently occurring problems that have been documented in Indigenous communities in Australia and other countries include: intergenerational traumas, such as the effects of child removal; social dislocation; community dislocation; consequent or related mental health problems; marginalisation from social services for health, housing, education and policing as well as from family and child welfare services; and more generally, the loss of power and community cohesion associated with colonial experiences. Common manifestations of these problems within communities include: alcohol and substance abuse, high levels of family violence and violence generally, economic deprivation, and related impacts on children's wellbeing. These issues are discussed in the Australian context in Issues Paper 19 (Stanley et al. 2003).

This paper provides an overview of legislation and service delivery programs in Canada, the United States and New