

Loving Our Children: Finding What Works for First Nations Families

Canada Research Chair in First Nations Child and Family Services
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Information Sheet #3 What is Child Neglect?

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Child neglect is the most frequently reported concern in child welfare investigations involving First Nations children. According to the 2019 First Nations/Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, First Nations children are 8.5 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be reported to child welfare authorities because of neglect-related concerns.¹ Neglect is fuelled by structural risks such as poverty, poor housing, parental mental health issues, addictions and domestic violence.² Neglect varies in severity and chronicity. Children, especially young children exposed to chronic and severe neglect, can be prone to serious risk and lifelong impacts.

How Canadian Child Welfare Statutes Define Neglect

Canadian provincial and territorial child welfare statutes typically define neglect as a parent's failure to meet the needs of a child. This includes:

- inadequate supervision,
- physical neglect,
- medical neglect,
- emotional neglect.

Child neglect is the most frequently reported concern in child welfare investigations. Neglect was the primary concern in 44% of First Nations children investigated by child welfare

Neglect: A 19th Century Colonial Concept

The legal definition of neglect goes back to 19th century colonial concepts of good parenting. Ontario's 1893 *Act for the Prevention of Cruelty to and Better Protection of Children* authorized the government to remove children who "by reason of the neglect or drunkenness or other vices of the parents [are] suffered to be growing up without salutary parental control and education, or in circumstances exposing such child[ren] to an idle and dissolute life."

Despite more recent attempts to redefine *neglect* in less moralistic terms, the whole idea inevitably focuses on parenting failures rather than on poverty, inadequate housing and a lack of social services.

authorities in 2019. About a quarter of these neglect investigations also include concerns about intimate partner violence or emotional maltreatment. In addition, some physical abuse cases also involve concerns about neglect.

These definitions tend to codify structural risks at the level of the First Nations parents³ for the factors that undermine the development and well-being of their children, even when parents have little or no control over the situation.

Neglected Families

Almost all cases of reported child neglect involve families living in poverty. While many families living in poverty do meet their children's needs, despite the grinding, demoralizing reality of living with a lack of resources, the risk of child neglect increases when families living in poverty have children with special needs and/or when parents experience substance abuse or mental health problems or family violence. Many of these parents desperately want to provide better care for their children but lack access to the wraparound services that would address their needs.



Factors that Impede Child Well-Being

The chronic and severe impacts of colonialism, including residential schools and under-funded services to address its impacts, means that First Nations families are much more likely to experience poverty and inadequate housing and are much less likely to have access to parenting, mental health and addictions services. The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal found that the Government of Canada systematically discriminated against families on reserve and in the Yukon by failing to ensure substantively equal and culturally based services that target the actual needs of First Nations children, youth and families.

Duty to Support vs. Duty to Report

If a child is living in an unsafe, mouldy home on a reserve without clean drinking water, why are parents blamed?

If there's no after-school care available and the parent has to be at work when a child returns home from school, why is the parent faulted for failing to supervise?

If an exhausted parent is struggling with their own trauma and has no support, why haven't others stepped in to help the parent and the child?

Social supports can prevent neglect and also help reduce the negative effects on children.

Emotional support, help with food, housing, transportation and an extra helping hand with child care can help parents from becoming overwhelmed. Community connections help build coping strategies and supportive child-parent relationships.

Severe Neglect

Most cases that fall under the broad definition of neglect should be addressed in terms of the specific problems that place these children at risk of poor outcomes (poor housing, substance abuse, mental health crises, etc.). Sometimes, however, urgent intervention is essential to protect children. Given the critical stages of brain and physical development for infants and young children, severe neglect can cause serious permanent damage and a range of chronic health problems for a child later in life.

In the most tragic situations, severe neglect can lead to a child's death. In fact, child fatalities are more likely to be caused by neglect than by abuse.⁴

Families Need Support

Most situations that are labelled "neglect" are better described as families in need of support. While these situations are better addressed through voluntary

community-based services, long-term exposure to family problems can significantly harm the development and well-being of children. Follow-up studies of children who have been labelled neglected show that without support, they are likely to suffer from similar problems as children who have been physically or sexually abused.⁵ Children who are labelled as neglected are at risk of having:

- attachment problems,
- poor cognitive development,
- limited social skills,
- educational delays and school drop-out,
- behavioural and emotional difficulties.
- Studies show that their problems persist in adulthood, including:
 - unemployment,
 - homelessness,
 - substance abuse,
 - poor parenting skills.

When First Nations families struggle to meet the needs of their children, the children are also at risk of being removed from the home and even the community, resulting in a loss of connection to their family, culture and spiritual development.

Preventing Neglect

There is no quick fix for issues like poverty, poor housing, substance misuse, social isolation, spousal abuse and intergenerational trauma. Given that poverty is the main risk factor for families, effective long-term prevention should include income supplements, good employment and housing supports.

Services should target the individual needs of each parent and each child. Parents may need addictions or mental health programs, parenting education and support, domestic violence services and/or social programs designed strengthen their connection to the community.

In 2016, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ordered Canada to cease its discriminatory practices and to reform the First Nations Child and Family Services (FNCFS) program. Indigenous Services Canada will fund “prevention/least disruptive measures” at the rate of \$2,500 (adjusted for inflation) per person living on reserve and in the Yukon until the FNCFS program reform is completed. Concerns have been raised about the adequacy and implementation of this per capita funding approach.

This information sheet is [one in a series](#)⁶ about child welfare prevention services.

Children may have academic, social and/or medical needs. Their services could include a range of programs, from community-run tutoring, after-school clubs and recreational and cultural programs to specialized psychological services and speech therapy. Older youth might also need addictions or trauma support programs.

The well-being of First Nations children must be the primary focus of adequately funded, holistic and comprehensive interventions designed by and reflecting the strength of First Nations culture and traditions.

If you would like to share information about a First Nations child and family support initiative in your community, the Loving Our Children project researchers would like to hear from you. LOCwhatworks@gmail.com

Endnotes

- 1 Fallon, B., Lefebvre, R., Trocmé, N., Richard, K., Hélie, S., Montgomery, M., et al. (2021). *Denouncing the continued overrepresentation of First Nations children in Canadian child welfare: Findings from the First Nations/Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect-2019*. Ontario: Assembly of First Nations.
- 2 Center on the Developing Child (nd). *InBrief: The science of neglect*. Harvard University. <https://harvardcenter.wpenginpowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/InBrief-The-Science-of-Neglect-3.pdf>
- 3 Caldwell, J., Sinha, V. (2020). (Re) Conceptualizing Neglect: Considering the Overrepresentation of Indigenous Children in Child Welfare Systems in Canada. *Child Indicators Research*, 13. 10.1007/s12187-019-09676-w.
- 4 Krugman, S. D., Lane, W. G. (2022). Fatal child abuse. In R. D. Krugman, J. E. Korbin (Eds.), *Handbook of child maltreatment* (pp. 165–180). Child Maltreatment, vol 14. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-82479-2_7
- 5 Dubowitz, H., Kobulsky, J. M., Proctor, L. J. (2022). Recent Research on Child Neglect. In R. D. Krugman, J. E. Korbin (Eds.), *Handbook of child maltreatment* (pp. 35–64). Child Maltreatment, vol 14. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-82479-2_2
- 6 <https://cwrp.ca/indigenous-child-welfare>

