

# Touchstones of Hope: Participatory Action Research to Explore Experiences of First Nation Communities in Northern British Columbia

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## Evaluation Report

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- **Carrier-Sekani Child and Family Services** (Burns Lake, Cheslatta, Lake Babine, Nadleh Whut'en, Nee Tahi Buhn, Skin Tyee, Stella'ten, Saik'uz, Takla Lake, Wet'suwet'en and Yekooche)
- **Gitxsan Child and Family Services Society** (Kispiox, Glen Vowell, Gitanmaax, Gitsegukla, Gitwangak and Gitanyow)
- **Haida Child and Family Services** (Old Massett Village Council and the Skidegate Band)
- **Nezul Be Hunuyeh Child and Family Services Society** (Nak'azdli and Tl'azt'en Carrier Nations)
- **Nisga'a Child and Family Services** (Gingolx [Kincolith], Gitlakdamx, Lakalzap and Gitwinksihlkw)
- **Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services Society** (Hartley Bay, Iskut, Kitamaat, Kitkatla, Kitselas, Kitsumkalum, Lax-kw'alaams, Metlakatla and Tahltan).

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# Executive Summary

*“Thank you for listening and taking the time to set up these very important ongoing steps to helping us to keep on the path of hope and perseverance.”*

—Touchstone Community Session Participant

This report presents the central themes identified through a participatory process evaluation to measure short- and longer-term impacts of the Northern British Columbia Touchstones of Hope initiative, a grassroots movement for reconciliation in Aboriginal child welfare systems. The evaluation process included everyone involved in community sessions designed to plan and initiate reconciliation in child welfare in order to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children, youth, families and communities.

A community-based participatory research approach was selected for this evaluation in order to:

- Encourage the active participation of the participating First Nation communities in defining the problem and ways of addressing it;
- Reveal First Nation communities’ strengths and the challenges faced when implementing reconciliation in child welfare systems;
- Identify common patterns, themes and courses of action in the development and implementation of Northern British Columbia Touchstones of Hope for child welfare; and
- Make recommendations for ongoing implementation of the Touchstones of Hope reconciliation initiative.

Participating First Nations child welfare agencies were engaged as co-researchers to help evaluate activities and provide their insights into the cultural understandings that constitute Aboriginal communities’ experiences with child welfare services. This grassroots initiative for reconciliation in Aboriginal child welfare involved the planning of broad based systemic reforms, in collaboration with the British Columbia Ministry for Children and Family Development (MCFD) and the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada (the Caring Society).

The Touchstones of Hope are principles, Culture and Language, Holistic Approach, Self-Determination, Structural Interventions and Non Discrimination, which are conceptualized by communities so that their realities are reflected. They guide a reconciliation process designed to engage communities in the redesign of child welfare so that Indigenous<sup>1</sup> children, youth and

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<sup>1</sup> This report describes uses the term *Indigenous* when referring to international issues and uses the Canadian term *Aboriginal* when referring to First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples inclusively. The child welfare agencies involved in this initiative are designated to serve First Nation populations but may also work with other Aboriginal peoples.

families are better served. Community Touchstones sessions gave participants an opportunity to interpret these principles and a participatory action research framework enabled them to be a part of and control the research.

Five First Nation child welfare agencies each hosted a community planning session, examined central themes and prioritized next steps for an action plan of reconciliation in child welfare. Agencies, communities and MCFD have been implementing these plans since early 2010.

## **Summary of Research Findings**

Overall, Northern British Columbia Touchstones of Hope participants reported that the community sessions helped increase collaboration among groups working in child welfare. Increased awareness and more respectful practice by child welfare staff members have made services more child-centred and inclusive of families. Involved families also reported learning new skills to cope and some are reunited with their children as a result.

Community session participants emphasized self-determination as crucial to realizing a better future for Aboriginal children and youth. Participants stressed that Aboriginal communities know what is best for Aboriginal children.

Gains have been made by professionals, community members and leaders as a result of sharing knowledge with one another. The evaluation results indicate that community session participants increased their knowledge, skills and motivation. Child welfare staff members reported more collaborative interactions with Aboriginal families and improved outcomes for children and youth as a result of their involvement with the Touchstones of Hope initiative. Participants also expressed their enthusiasm for and deep engagement in the reconciliation process, while recognizing the challenge of keeping key people actively involved over the long term.

Future opportunities to gather and share the successes and challenges and to keep the momentum alive are strongly and consistently recommended. The communities involved reported that the creation of opportunities to follow up on and share strategies for implementing the next steps is a key component for the ongoing success of the reconciliation initiative. Community oversight is essential to ensuring that community priorities are voiced and implemented. Reconciliation is not an event but a process of building and strengthening relationships through community participation and engagement.

The primary challenges that were experienced while launching the Northern British Columbia Touchstones of Hope and collecting data included poor audio recordings of the first three community sessions, project funding delays, project coordinator turnover, and high level administrative changes in the participating organizations. The low quality audio recordings and background noise limited data collection, as approximately 30% of first session was audible and 80 to 95% of the second and third sessions was audible. However, handwritten notes were used to supplement the poor recordings so that comprehensive data was collected from all the community sessions.

Based on the challenges identified by community session participants and this evaluation, the researchers made a number of recommendations in order to continue building and nurturing relationships and advancing the Northern British Columbia Touchstones of Hope movement.

In moving forward, the report authors envision a movement that will foster and strengthen relationships of reconciliation and encourage other communities to participate in future community Touchstones sessions. For the Northern British Columbia Touchstones of Hope future opportunities for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal individuals to engage in knowledge sharing, workshops and training are recommended. Continued reinforcement and acknowledgement of accomplishments in child welfare reconciliation are important to success.

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# Introduction

The Touchstones of Hope are guiding principles, interpreted by Aboriginal communities to respect the diversity of cultures and contexts. The Touchstones are the foundation for a reconciliation movement that aims to strengthen relationships among individuals, with a focus on child welfare. The overall goal of the reconciliation movement in Aboriginal child welfare is to identify gaps in services and policies, define what is needed for improvements and implement next steps for a healthier population. The movement aims to remodel child welfare systems so that they foster Aboriginal cultures and values in order to ensure the success of all Aboriginal children, youth and families.

Aboriginal communities across Canada continue to work to overcome assimilative government policies that have frequently disrupted self-governance and traditional systems of caring. It is widely recognized that Aboriginal children continue to be overrepresented in child welfare systems across the country. The First Nations Component of the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect reports that Aboriginal children are 12.5 times more likely than non-Aboriginal children to be placed in out-of-home care (Sinha et al., 2011).

The Auditor General of Canada (2008) reported that Aboriginal children in British Columbia are six times more likely to be taken into child welfare care than non-Aboriginal children. As of September 2009, an estimated 8,677 Aboriginal children were in care in British Columbia, representing 53% of the province's total number of children in care (MCFD, 2010).

Sinha et al. (2011) report that the disproportionate number of Aboriginal children in state care is grounded in the history of colonial policies imposed on Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. This is reflected in the widespread removal of Aboriginal children from their homes and communities into residential schools and later, into non-Aboriginal foster homes. Government policies also fostered systemic poverty in many Aboriginal communities, contributing to the poor housing conditions that boost the number of Aboriginal children apprehended by child welfare systems for neglect, which is defined as the failure to provide the basic necessities for a child's safety, health and well-being.

In 2008, a two-day regional information session was held in Prince Rupert, BC, to raise awareness about the Touchstones of Hope as a viable way to help First Nations children and youth in the North Region of the province. The North Region is defined by the MCFD and has a relatively sparse population spread across more than half of the provincial landmass. Service delivery is managed through Prince George; smaller towns and urban centres provide services to large rural areas. Aboriginal people make up 16% of the North Region's population, where approximately 51 First Nations are located. MCFD data indicates the region has a higher percentage of children in care than the provincial average and a large proportion of these children are Aboriginal (MCFD North Region Profile, n.d.).



The Prince Rupert session was designed to demonstrate to child welfare leaders how they could develop five- to 10-year plans guided by positive visions for safe and healthy children in northern British Columbia. After this session, six designated First Nation child welfare agencies and the communities they serve decided to implement the Touchstones of Hope movement in their communities. They are:

- **Carrier-Sekani Child and Family Services** (Burns Lake, Cheslatta, Lake Babine, Nadleh Whut'en, Nee Tahi Buhn, Skin Tyee, Stella'ten, Saik'uz, Takla Lake, Wet'suwet'en and Yekooche)
- **Gitxsan Child and Family Services Society** (Kispiox, Glen Vowell, Gitanmaax, Gitsegukla, Gitwangak and Gitanyow)
- **Haida Child and Family Services** (Old Massett Village Council and the Skidegate Band)
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- **Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services Society** (Hartley Bay, Iskut, Kitamaat, Kitkatla, Kitselas, Kitsumkalum, Lax-kw'alaams, Metlakatla and Tahltan).

The MCFD and the Caring Society assisted in the implementation of the Northern British Columbia Touchstones of Hope initiative at the request of the participating agencies. See Appendix A for a map of the community locations.

The Northern British Columbia Touchstones of Hope reconciliation movement uses the Touchstones of Hope principles and process to guide and measure practice and policy. At community vision planning sessions, participants formulated action plans based on their positive and achievable dreams for Aboriginal children and youth. The information gathered in response to the question of how to foster and build healthier communities, was unique to each community session, with shared common elements. This initiative is described in detail by Auger, 2011.

In February 2010, MCFD announced a change to Aboriginal child welfare service delivery based on a conceptual framework adapted from the Touchstones of Hope for Indigenous Children, Youth and Families (Blackstock et al., 2006). Key actions to be undertaken included acknowledging the need for reconciliation in Aboriginal child welfare in the province, allocating resources to address financial barriers, building relationships between key partners, addressing systemic barriers and socio-economic challenges, and supporting the self-determination of Aboriginal communities (MCFD, 2010).

## Understanding Reconciliation in Indigenous Child Welfare

The General Assembly of the United Nations declared 2009 the International Year of Reconciliation to promote reconciliatory processes in countries around the world. South Africa, Australia, Peru, Northern Ireland, Argentina, and Guatemala have participated in reconciliatory processes as an attempt to rebuild civic structures and communities following divisive, violent historical conflicts. Reconciliation provides the opportunity to respond to the past, take responsibility for the present and work towards renewed relationships in the future. As Lederach (1997) states,

*“[r]econciliation, in essence, represents a place, the point of encounter where concerns about both the past and the future can meet. Reconciliation-as-encounter suggests space for the acknowledging of the past and envisioning of the future is the necessary ingredient for reframing the present. For this to happen, people must find ways to encounter themselves and their enemies, their hopes and their fears” (p. 27).*

Many reconciliation approaches focus on conflict resolution and bridging the gap between those who have been in conflict. These approaches often center on truth telling. Truth and discovery processes are commonly led by truth and reconciliation commissions. In South Africa for example, a commission was formed to investigate apartheid and rebuild the nation. Reconciliation in Canada has included a 1988 government apology and compensation to Japanese Canadians for lost property, internment and forced relocation during World War II. In 2008, the government apologized to Aboriginal Peoples and families affected by the residential school system, which was designed to assimilate Aboriginal Peoples into Euro-Canadian society. The negative impacts of residential schools on Aboriginal communities have been long lasting. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRCC) was created following the Prime Minister’s apology to compensate for harms and to educate Canadians about the schools. The Commission was also created to investigate the impacts of the schools on Aboriginal Peoples in Canada through truth telling forums for attendees of residential schools at national and community levels.

In the 1960s, long before the creation of the TRCC, some individuals expressed alarm at the large number of Aboriginal children being removed from their homes and communities and placed in state care (Carriere, 2007; Sinclair, 2007). According to Blackstock et al. (2006), “[t]hese historic and contemporary realities have resulted in many Indigenous communities viewing child welfare as an agent of colonialism rather than a support to the safety and well-being of Indigenous children and youth” (p. 6). At an international reconciliation in child welfare event held in Niagara Falls in 2005, Indigenous and non-Indigenous child welfare leaders from Canada, the USA and Australia concluded that “the widespread negative outcomes for Indigenous children, youth and families involved with non-Indigenous child welfare compels that we journey down the river to critically examine the values and practices of the child welfare

profession and move forward on a new passage” (Blackstock et al., 2006: 6). As a result, a reconciliation framework was created to spur a movement to reconceptualize Indigenous child welfare. The framework has four main processes:

- Truth telling–Open and honest dialogue around child welfare and its effects on Indigenous children.
- Acknowledging–Learning from the past and embracing new possibilities.
- Restoring–Doing what can be done to fix the wrong doings of the past to create a new reality.
- Relating–Moving forward as a collaboration of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples who want the best outcomes for Indigenous children and families.

The reconciliation process is guided by five key principles, which are called the Touchstones of Hope:

- Culture and Language–Respecting the unique cultures and languages of all children and families.
- Holistic Approach–Looking at all aspects affecting children and their families.
- Self-Determination–Communities are in the best position to decide what is best for their children.
- Non-Discrimination–Indigenous children and families have the right to receive services and access to programs regardless of race or where they live.
- Structural Interventions–Poor outcomes of Indigenous children are often related to challenges such as poverty, poor housing and substance misuse (Blackstock et al., 2006).

The Touchstones principles are designed to be defined and interpreted within the unique culture and contexts of Indigenous communities and intended to support the creation of dreams and action plans to re-vision Indigenous child welfare systems.

Bloomfield (2003) asserts that:

*“[r]econciliation is both a goal—something to achieve—and a process—a means to achieve that goal. A great deal of controversy arises from confusing these two ideas[...]. The goal of reconciliation is a future aspiration, something important to aim towards, perhaps even an ideal state to hope for. But the process is very much a present-tense way of dealing with how things are—building a reconciliation process is the means to work, effectively and practically, toward that final goal—and is invaluable in itself” (p. 12).*

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# Methodology

In 2008, six First Nation child welfare service agencies and the northern British Columbia communities they serve began working with the MCFD and the Caring Society to implement a reconciliation process in their child welfare systems. A vast amount of time and energy was invested to coordinate and facilitate community gatherings designed to explore a new vision of child welfare using the Touchstones of Hope as a benchmark.

In order to support consistency in the Touchstones movement and entrench it in grassroots control, an advisory committee was formed by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members to serve as the decision makers for the Northern British Columbia Touchstones of Hope.

A staff member from one of the participating delegated agencies was seconded to the Ministry to help coordinate the movement and work with the Touchstones of Hope Advisory Committee and a coordinator employed by the Caring Society to plan community based events, evaluate those activities and develop resources to support the movement.

Elders, youth, parents, children, social workers, supervisors, child welfare administrators and other professionals were invited to attend a Touchstone session hosted by the community child and family service agency. See Appendix B for details on each community session.

The Touchstones Advisory Committee developed an implementation timeline and chose train-the-trainer sessions to prepare community members for participation in the Touchstones community sessions. Community based facilitators were trained to help the communities and agencies to develop culturally driven visions of healthy children and families. Approximately 30 representatives from the child and family service agencies, youth, Elders and other community members as well as MCFD staff attended one of two train-the-trainer sessions delivered by the Caring Society (Auger, 2011). Trainers were taught how to guide community sessions based on interpretations of the Touchstone of Hope principles.

The community sessions focused on articulating positive and achievable dreams for Aboriginal children and youth. Plans made were unique to each community. In addition to five two-day sessions with First Nation communities, session participants completed evaluations on the last day of the Touchstones session and were sent an online follow-up survey after the community sessions were completed.

## **Participatory Action Research**

Aboriginal research designs require scholars to think critically about research processes and outcomes with Aboriginal interests, experiences and knowledge central to research methodologies and the construction of knowledge (Rigney, 1999). As Smith (1999) stated,

“methodology is important because it frames the questions being asked, determines the set of instruments and methods to be employed and shapes the analyses.... Indigenous methodologies are often a mix of existing methodological approaches and Indigenous practices” (p. 143).

Castellano (2004) emphasizes that Aboriginal research designs must be compatible with Aboriginal values, traditions and worldviews as well as with Aboriginal methods of investigation and validation. Some researchers suggest that qualitative research methods including individual and group interviews, focus groups and participant observation can be more compatible with Aboriginal culture as opposed to quantitative designs such as using survey instruments (Baum, 1998; Kenny, Faries, Fiske and Voyageur, 2004; Thomas and Bellefeuille, 2006).

A participatory action research methodology was chosen to guide Touchstones data collection and analysis. Participatory action research is based on an awareness of the need to involve various stakeholders in the research process in order to ensure that the findings are relevant and strengthen capacity within local communities (Fals Borda, 2001). Many Aboriginal research designs use community-based approaches and according to Castellano (2004), participatory research is one of the methodologies acceptable to Aboriginal communities. Community-based research designs incorporate a power sharing process and the research benefits are shared by researchers and community members alike. Aboriginal research designs are grounded in a holistic tradition and recognize socio-ecological factors implicating health status and well-being (Chester, Robin, Koss, Lopez, and Goldman, 1994; Dickson, 2000; Fiske, Newell, and George, 2001; Haig-Brown, 1992; Kenny, 2002).

Fiske et al. (2001) report that when Chiefs and Elders take leadership roles within the research process, the research moves beyond the focus group methods and is directed in accordance with traditional principles and contemporary governing practices. Gone (2006) also describes a tribal tradition whereby younger people consult Elders on “pressing cultural matters” (p. 336).

Nabigon, Hagey, Webster, and MacKay (1999) define Aboriginal research as a project seeking the roots of a given problem and convening the voices needed to remember the history and assess the future. Aboriginal research is by nature holistic and inseparable from the principles and visions of the medicine wheel (cited in Kenny, 2004).

Fisher and Ball (2002) contend that community oversight is especially relevant in communities that have experienced oppression and discrimination because it helps to ensure that the community’s priorities are voiced throughout the research project’s duration. Turner and Sanders (2007) found that a critical element of a research project’s success with Aboriginal Peoples was community support. Researchers must be upfront about ownership, involvement requirements, and sharing of outcome data, they add, to provide sufficient information for informed decision making.

## Data Collection

Current data on Aboriginal child welfare was presented at the beginning of each community session before participants were introduced to the PATH (Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope) process (O'Brien, Pearpoint, and Kahn, 2010) which was used as a tool for all of the community sessions. The PATH process begins with participants imagining a positive future, from which they work backwards to operationalize how to get to the future vision. The PATH process was selected because it is inclusive, builds on First Nations oral traditions, meets the needs of participants at all literacy levels and was effective in conceptualizing and analyzing community ideas in previous Touchstones of Hope community sessions.

Large ideas were broken down into smaller parts as participants shared their aspirations for healthy Aboriginal children, youth, families and communities. In the first PATH step, participants presented positive possibilities that could be achieved within 10 years, completing a Dream statement that began: "Aboriginal children in northern British Columbia would be safe and living with dignity and respect if...."

The collective Dream statement became the basis for the second step, whereby participants identified indicators of progress towards achieving the Dream. In the third step, individuals articulated what currently is or is not in place to achieve the Dream and in the fourth step, they identified who or what is needed to achieve the Dream. In the fifth step, participants contributed their thoughts on what is needed to sustain the Dream in the long term. Finally, participants created action plans.

As the sessions progressed, some of the small groups revised their Dream statements to: "All Aboriginal children in northern British Columbia will be safe and living with dignity and respect when...."

With the permission of the communities and agencies, sessions were audio-recorded to assist with identifying central themes. Although poor audio recordings of the first three community sessions resulted due to the equipment and background noise, session facilitators' handwritten notes were used to supplement the data collected. In addition to the digital audio recordings, facilitators forwarded written notes to the British Columbia Touchstones coordinator who compiled them into one document before reviewing the findings and next steps with the Advisory Committee.

Digital recordings were sent to the researcher and qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA) was used to code, quantify and analyze the data into different themes. This process counted and grouped the words used in the community sessions to identify prominent themes based on the frequency that the words were used. See Appendix C for list of the themes and frequencies extracted from the raw data from all community sessions.

Prominent themes were words used with the highest frequencies at a community gathering. The themes were compared with the five Touchstones principles and the empirical literature to extrapolate key findings from the Touchstones community gatherings.

The coordinators and members of the Advisory Committee conducted three separate follow-up visits with participants from three of the five community sessions in order to introduce the initial themes and preliminary analysis.

The frequency analysis was supplemented with an open-ended follow-up survey that was posted online using SurveyMonkey software. Approximately 430 community session participants were invited via email to complete the online survey. Although only 32 participants (n=32) completed the follow-up survey, it provides data on expectations before, during and after attending the community session, thoughts about challenges to achieving the Dream and if anything had changed in their child welfare work since attending the session. A sample follow-up survey is included in Appendix D.

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# Results

Data analysis as explained by Stringer and Genat (2004) is a process of reducing large quantities of data through inductive analysis to provide a better understanding for stakeholders. McHugh (2008) describes four cognitive processes to analyze the qualitative data, as identified by Morse and Field (1995): comprehending, synthesizing, theorizing, and re-contextualizing.

The following analysis presents the major themes identified by participants within the five key principles of the Touchstones of Hope reconciliation framework.

## **Culture and Language**

Keeping children in their communities of origin so that cultural knowledge, traditions and language could be passed on was a central theme in all community sessions. Participants noted that when Aboriginal children stay within their communities, they have a greater sense of belonging and acceptance. This was identified as being essential to preventing developmental and social challenges later in life.

Community session discussions focused on a future where all children, youth, families and communities were able to embrace their cultural teachings and traditions. Indicators of achieving this Dream included having culture and language incorporated into child welfare, health, educational and justice systems. Community cultural programs, such as healthy nutrition, traditional parenting practices, rites of passage, and opportunities to interact and learn from the participation and engagement of elders were also identified indicators. Increased cultural programming and cultural awareness were seen to be important next steps towards achieving the Dream.

Taking an active role with the children and participating in traditional activities such as fishing and hunting was another central theme for participants, as was having more families to support children and the grandparents and other extended family members who are often involved in child care.

Participants envisioned a future where children and youth are able to stand up for themselves and have their voices heard. They also dreamed that children and youth will remain connected to the land, community and culture. In the future, children would remain in communities that are drug and alcohol free because cultural addiction services and supports are available to deal with the root causes of drug and alcohol use.

The discussion about current community circumstances focused on the children who had lost the connection to their culture through child welfare involvement. Alcohol and drug use and domestic violence were identified as some precursors to children being removed from their



homes and communities. Currently, some children who return to their communities no longer value the traditional ways and feel like they do not belong. Some are disconnected from their lands and resources. Some participants discussed the lack of traditional roles for males in the community and hoped that with support for men and boys in their roles and responsibilities, a sense of belonging can be achieved.

Community members dreamed of a future where no children are taken away and everyone is working together to return to the traditional ways of keeping children safe. Participants emphasized that all Aboriginal children should know where they come from and have cultural knowledge and an Indigenous worldview. In this Dream, children and youth are proud of their culture and heritage and have alternatives to destructive lifestyles and addictions that can lead to suicide. Providing youth with opportunities to share traditional knowledge was identified as a way to build upon community strengths and support a sense of youth empowerment.

It was noted that Aboriginal children are often influenced by negative stereotypes and unhealthy messages about Indigenous peoples. The media were identified as potential allies in promoting traditional values and highlighting positive changes occurring in communities.

Next steps varied somewhat across communities although common themes were implementing more cultural programs and awareness strategies and working more closely with community leaders and members. This was also seen as a way to build respect between community members and agencies. There was consistency in recognizing the need for natural leaders to be identified and drawn upon to support reconciliation in child welfare with their gifts and skills.

## **Holistic Approach**

Approaching child welfare and reconciliation through a holistic framework was identified in all community sessions. This included Indigenous notions of health and well-being that support the idea that culture is a way of life and should not be confined only to ceremony.

Participants discussed the importance of involving hereditary Chiefs and Elders in leading reconciliation and collaboration in accordance with traditional principles and contemporary governing practices. The wisdom and stories shared by Elders at each Touchstones session embodied a holistic approach and supported participants seeking to enhance their own holistic approaches. Dreaming of a future for Indigenous children and youth focused on connectedness across the generations.

Community dreams for the future focused on children being proud, knowing their ancestry, culture and language, knowing who they are and where they belong. These children have caregivers who are living with dignity and respect and able to love, nurture, and support balance in the children's lives. Participants agreed that child welfare policymakers should consider input from family members and Elders to ensure families are supported and that policies are in the best interest of the child, from a holistic approach.

Participants dreamed of a future where children and youth have self-esteem, a strong identity and are empowered to be themselves. This includes the right to be listened to and heard. Children also have a right to have strong extended families and communities that deal with families in a consistent, holistic and traditional manner. Children and youth with a sense of purpose and belonging do not commit suicide. Elders are actively involved in the traditional caring for children by sharing their language, stories, wisdom and culture.

An inclusive, holistic child welfare system focused on the whole extended family and not just on the children and youth. The system would support children and youth to stay connected to their traditions and values and encourage them to live and fulfill their dreams. Holistic child care would be accessible and affordable with opportunities to embrace the teachings and traditions and to learn the traditional language.

Children would have opportunities to learn how to dance, speak their language and participate in ceremonies and rites of passage. Participants dreamed of being able to live off the land and eat healthy food as healthy families, together. Through community engagement, individuals have viable alternatives to destructive lifestyles. A greater focus on prevention, including positive parenting classes, was viewed as a way to move forward in achieving community dreams. For child welfare, Dreams for the future included better collaboration between the MCFD and community agencies, and the development of First Nation protocols and policies leading to more effective child welfare service delivery.

Incorporating spirituality into the education system, community ceremonies and knowledge sharing was a predominant theme. Some participants discussed the development of spiritual protocols so that cultural modeling could contribute to building strengths within the community.

All the communities saw a holistic approach to Aboriginal children and families in child welfare as a good fit. Participants dreamed of a future where Aboriginal culture and language are incorporated into all child and family service sectors. Indicators that this Dream was being achieved are Aboriginal communities developing and providing their own services. It was acknowledged that each community has valuable teachings to pass on to the next generations.

## **Self Determination**

Throughout the Touchstones community sessions, self-determination was discussed most often when participants were referring to the need for Aboriginal communities to develop and implement their own child welfare cultural programming.

Fewer apprehensions of Aboriginal children into child welfare care was identified as an indicator of increased self-determination. Community-based collaboration and a sharing of decision-making within the child welfare context were considered to be important steps towards empowering communities for making positive changes. Each community would develop and deliver their own programs tailored to their unique needs, including cultural camps for children and their families.

The communities have different forms of government and varying levels of resources available to them. Some communities have their own education council and health facilities, while other communities have their own language and cultural programs incorporated into the local schools. The communities varied in terms of crime rates, levels of education, amount of substance abuse and the number of members able to speak their traditional language. However, each indicated they have Elders, family values and a culture that they value. Every community believed in the importance of providing culturally grounded services and programming rooted within their own worldview and way of life and agreed that continuing to build upon the relationships forged between professionals and communities were important next steps.

Dreams for the future included wanting children to feel valued, loved, wanted, secure and cherished. Participants indicated that many people should be ensuring children's safety and be fully present in their lives. Children should have healthy guardians, know their community's history and have opportunities to reach their full potential. Effective services are delivered by community programs that are designed to meet community needs, such as holistic addictions treatment addressing the needs of whole families.

Some participants saw self-determination as the elimination of oppressive legislation, such as the *Indian Act*. Other participants said self-determination included having a school and child welfare system that encompasses all aspects of the culture, in addition to programs and services focusing on wellness, prevention and recovery from addictions. A common indicator of self-determination was being empowered to develop their own resources and making child welfare decisions based on their traditional systems of care.

Taking responsibility, advocating for children and empowering parents to care for their children were also prominent themes for building on strengths. Providing opportunities for community members to learn from and be truthful with one another was perceived by some as essential steps to achieving the Dream.

Next steps identified included bringing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people together to identify what is going well and what needs improvement. Natural leaders need to be identified and acknowledged so their gifts can be drawn upon by the community. Social workers can be invited to cultural history training and to spend time with community members.

In two community sessions, participants learned about a grandparents group that was formed in one of the communities to help pass traditions down to younger generations. The group is actively involved in education and child welfare services. Creating links between Elders and grandmothers groups was also an identified next step so that Elders in different communities could learn from the existing group and create their own. Sharing the Touchstones and PATH results with community members, politicians and children was viewed as a way to encourage other agencies within the First Nation to look at the Touchstones and use them to develop and inform their policies and service models. Discussions about how to deal with lateral violence—

the expression of rage and violence by members of an oppressed group inflicted on those closest to them—reflected the need for attention in this area, with a focus on solutions rather than blame.

## **Non Discrimination**

Major non-discrimination themes included issues related to child removals, funding and policy. Across community sessions, participants wanted to see more First Nations children remaining in their communities instead of being placed in non-Aboriginal homes so that children could learn and acquire life skills in their traditional way. Current policies were seen to be sabotaging community self-determination and traditional systems of care. The need to address funding gaps in the provision of Aboriginal community services was one of the most common themes. Some participants said there should be more opportunities for knowledge sharing between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers in order to learn about one another and ultimately eliminate stereotypes and discriminatory behaviour.

Some communities suggested increasing the amount of positive reinforcement that professionals and community members give each other in order to acknowledge the positive work being done. Some participants discussed the need for professionals to work on their inner self and be mindful of what they bring to the services they deliver.

Participants said more services are needed to help parents identify their clan and assist children in their cultural learning.

First Nation child welfare workers working in offices where most co-workers are not Aboriginal said better cultural training and education are needed. A common theme throughout all community sessions was the importance of developing and nurturing relationships to address historical issues and to facilitate communication. Many participants said attending the Touchstones sessions provided child welfare workers with a better appreciation of the cultural context of working with First Nation children and their families.

## **Structural Interventions**

The second most common theme across community sessions was children and families being safe and secure in their own homes. Indicators of the success of this Dream included:

- Families having their basic needs met;
- Children and youth being involved in leading their Nations;
- A decrease in overt and covert racism; and
- A reduction in the number of Aboriginal children in child welfare care.

Sound and equitable structural interventions are necessary for better outcomes for children, youth and families who are involved with the child welfare system. Limited access to culturally respectful child welfare services was identified in all community sessions. Structural barriers to improving Indigenous child welfare were commonly identified as:

- Poverty;
- Lack of adequate housing;
- Inadequate funding;
- Changes in key government and ministry positions;
- Lack of education facilities within communities;
- Limited inclusion of Indigenous traditions, knowledge and values within educational curricula; and
- Limited health care facilities grounded in a holistic approach.

Participants identified a need for funding to increase programming. Aboriginal foster homes and access to traditional teachings are needed when it is necessary to remove children from their homes for their safety. Funding to address the need for language teachers and access to language classes could lead to further improvements.

Policies and cultural protocols for working with Aboriginal communities, families and children were identified in all community sessions both as Dreams and as next steps to achieve the Dream. Child welfare policies need to be reviewed by policy-makers who are knowledgeable about traditional ways. Cultural programming and training to improve cultural awareness are also necessary for community Dreams to be achieved.

Participants discussed the importance of resources in the community for education, skills and support, especially traditional parenting skills and mentoring programs for young parents with children. Participants dreamed of having education facilities in the community to prevent the cultural disconnection that occurs when children have to leave in order to attend school.

Participants dreamed of their community offering free language classes to children and adults with traditional language classes included in the core educational curriculum.

Having a clean, safe and healthy environment for children and their families was a common theme. The Dreams envisioned parents who are not afraid to ask for help and support, and children laughing and playing while families enjoy each other's company. Accessible and affordable child care would offer opportunities to embrace the traditions, teachings and language of each Nation. Dreams included proper sanitation, freedom from poverty, drugs and alcohol, and access to culturally adapted health services. Children would graduate from high school and post-secondary education without having to leave the community. Services would be integrated and delivered collaboratively.

Communities noted that currently, there are limited addictions services and long waiting lists. Young people are challenged by the absence of community youth activities and facilities, and parents often struggle to support the healthy choices of youth and pay for these activities. The lack of housing and overcrowding in homes was reported to be a challenge for families and their children. In the future, wealth would be distributed equally, youth have opportunities for employment and families would be self-sufficient and sustainable, leading to better economic conditions.

### **Follow-up Survey**

The follow-up survey indicated that community session participants had increased their knowledge and skills for working with Aboriginal families and that they were enthusiastic about the reconciliatory process. Keeping key stakeholders actively involved in the long term was identified as a challenge and future opportunities to gather and talk about successes and challenges were widely recommended.

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# Discussion

## Touchstones of Hope

The perspective of child welfare that emerged from the community sessions reflects each community's unique values, traditions and worldviews. Community session participants consistently emphasized the importance of self-determination for realizing their dreams for Aboriginal children and youth. Participants noted that Indigenous communities know what is best for Indigenous children; programs and policies need to be revised or developed in order to include Aboriginal values in service delivery. This perspective is also validated by research, as Rae (2006) notes, for many Indigenous peoples, self determination is "an inherent right that exists within a people even if it is not recognized and realized in practice" (p. 15).

Community Touchstones participants dreamed of a future when programs and services incorporate Aboriginal cultural values and traditions. An indicator of achievement is when Indigenous teachings and practices can be included in service delivery without being challenged by governments, funders or other communities. Traditional forms of caring, rooted in cultural knowledge and traditional languages, are well documented in literature (Auger, 2001; Bastien, 2004; Benton-Banai, 1988; Blackstock et al., 2007; Bopp, Bopp, Lane and Brown, 1984; Brokenleg, 1998; Cajete, 2000; Hand, 2006; Hart, 2002; Johnson, 1982; Peat, 1994; Rae, 2006; RCAP, 1996).

In stark contrast to deeply-rooted traditional systems of caring, community session participants characterized the reality for many Aboriginal children and youth as poverty and inadequate access to resources such as culturally relevant child maltreatment prevention services, housing, clean drinking water, education and health facilities. Structural interventions were the most frequent theme across all the Touchstones session.

The Canadian Council of Provincial Child and Youth Advocates (2010) and Unicef (2009) report concerns about Aboriginal child health, death rates, opportunities for educational attainment, the risk of sexual exploitation and violence and disproportionate rates of injury and suicide.

The disproportionate number of Aboriginal children and youth who are removed from their families and placed in care and funding inequities for First Nations children living on-reserve reflect systemic discrimination (Sinha et al., 2011). Jordan's Principle was discussed in the community sessions as a solution to discrimination against Aboriginal children and their families. Jordan's Principle states that when a jurisdictional dispute occurs over paying for services for an Aboriginal child, the services must be provided to the child immediately and the dispute settled by governments later.

Jordan's Principle received the support of the House of Commons in 2007, but has not been fully implemented by the federal and most provincial governments (MacDonald and Attaran, 2007; Canadian Paediatric Society, 2009; Unicef, 2009). Despite widespread public support and recommendations by the Auditor General (2008), the federal government has not made a sustained effort to educate professionals or the public about how to implement Jordan's Principle (Blackstock, 2011).

Touchstone participants identified poverty as a driver for the high rates of Aboriginal children in care and emphasized the need to address the structural and systemic factors influencing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and youth in care. Poverty has been recognized as a long-standing problem for Aboriginal communities. On First Nation reserves, polluted water, insufficient and unsafe housing and high rates of unemployment are widespread (RCAP, 1996, Auditor General, 2011). Research links child neglect apprehensions with poverty, poor housing and substance abuse (Trocmé et al., 2004; Trocmé et al., 2006; Sinha et al., 2011).

Poor outcomes for Aboriginal children and families are associated with a lack of basic daily needs. Sixty percent of Aboriginal children under the age of six live in poverty, compared to 25% of non-Aboriginal children (Blackstock et al., 2004). In the words of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1995):

*"Aboriginal people are at the bottom of almost every available index of socio-economic well-being, whether [they] are measuring education levels, employment opportunities, housing conditions, per capita incomes, or any of the other conditions that give non-Aboriginal Canadians one of the highest standards of living in the world"(p. 24) .*

Sinha et al., (2011) found that in 49% of First Nations child maltreatment investigations, social support was the family's primary form of income, compared to 26% of non-Aboriginal investigations. This report says that long term solutions are needed to address issues such as poverty and domestic violence.

Funding disparities for children on-reserve are also well documented, with an estimated 22% gap compared to off-reserve children (McDonald and Ladd, 2000; Unicef, 2009) and extensive research documents the negative impacts of systemic discrimination in funding for Aboriginal children and families (Blackstock, 2003; Blackstock et al., 2005; First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, 2005; Lavallee, 2005 and b; Loxley et al., 2005; McDonald and Ladd, 2000).

The Auditor General reported significant risks associated with the quality of drinking water in three quarters of drinking water systems on-reserve (Auditor General, 2011). The Make First Nations Poverty History Expert Advisory Committee (2009) reported that First Nations people are five times more likely than non-Aboriginal people to living in overcrowded housing conditions. Similarly, Sinha et al. (2011) found that 14% of First Nations child welfare investigations reported overcrowding compared to 6% in non-Aboriginal investigations.



There was widespread concern expressed about the lack of knowledge of traditions and language, and negative messages in the media about Indigenous cultures and heritage. These concerns are validated in the literature, which shows that the removal of Aboriginal children from their communities continues the legacy of the residential school system by corroding the ability of Aboriginal communities to pass down their culture and identity (Bamblett, 2006; Bennett, Blackstock, and de la Ronde, 2005; Blackstock and Bennett, 2002; RCAP, 1996). The race-based *Indian Act* is also identified as a barrier to self-determination (Anaya, 2004; Blackstock et al., 2007).

The Auditor General (2011) reported that change must occur if First Nation families and communities are going to experience more meaningful outcomes from services, be they in the child welfare, health, justice or education fields. Similarly, the community session participants emphasized the need to focus on achieving desired outcomes and service results.

Participants at the community sessions stressed prevention measures to ensure that the distinct needs of Aboriginal communities, children and families are met in a culturally appropriate way. Research shows that more funds are spent on children after they have been removed from their home instead of investing in maltreatment prevention and working with families using the least intrusive measures (McDonald and Ladd, 2000). Further research shows that government spending on preventative services results in substantial returns (Blackstock et al., 2005; Bowlus et al., 2003; World Health Organization; 2004). One study reported that child welfare prevention services resulted in a \$1.5-million in savings (Blackstock et al., 2005). This study also found that of the 12 Aboriginal child welfare agencies surveyed, a large proportion of their funds is spent on solving jurisdictional disputes between federal government departments (36%), between provincial departments (27%) and between federal and provincial departments (14%).

The Wen:de Report (FNCFCS, 2005) echoes the message from community session participants about the need for child welfare and prevention services developed by Aboriginal communities and reflecting local traditions, customs, culture and context.

The lack of suicide prevention and mental health services were also common themes throughout the community sessions, with participants proposing various solutions. Evidence supports the paramount importance of community self-determination for the health and well-being of Aboriginal children, families and communities (Chandler and Lalonde, 1998; Cornell and Kalt, 1992; Costellano et al., 1997).

Education was a key theme across the community sessions and related to all of the Touchstones of Hope. Challenges identified by participants were lack of access to educational facilities, poor quality educational services and the overall lack of Aboriginal owned and operated educational delivery options for families. Community session participants identified the need for access to community-based educational facilities grounded in local knowledge, traditions and customs. Many participants said a holistic approach and community control are important.

Insufficient education structures within First Nation communities are identified in the Auditor General's report (2011), which notes that 41% of First Nation members living on-reserve are high school graduates compared to 77% of the overall Canadian population. Sinha et al., (2011) report that academic difficulties were the most primary concern of child functioning in 18% of First Nations child welfare investigations.

Community session participants also expressed major concern about Aboriginal children in the child welfare system due to parental substance abuse. They noted the lack of culturally relevant addiction services and programs located within Aboriginal communities. The challenge of accessing appropriate addictions services is reflected in child protection worker concerns about addictions. In child welfare investigations, 47% of First Nations male caregivers were identified as having issues with substance abuse—two and a half times the rate in non-Aboriginal investigations (Trocmé et al., 2011: 58-59). First Nations families involved in child welfare investigations are referred to outside services at a rate of 4.9 times the rate for non-Aboriginal investigations and cases remained open for ongoing services at a rate of 6.7 times the rate of non-Aboriginal investigations (Sinha et al., 2011: 78).

Many Indigenous Peoples have a holistic view of health, which includes emotional, mental, social and spiritual components in addition to physical health (Alderete, 1999; Blackstock, 2009; Cross, 1998; Cross, 2002; Dossey, 1985; Graveline, 1998; Youngblood Henderson, 2000). Blackstock's *When Everything Matters* (2009) offers a holistic theoretical model that describes the factors "that must be in balance in order to eradicate or reduce structural risk and its manifestation at the level of individuals and groups" (p. 41). This model suggests that child welfare should focus on creating harmony and balance within families and communities rather than treating deficits and problems. A holistic approach to child welfare also recognizes that Indigenous children have a right to their cultural identity (Rae, 2006) and builds on the strengths and resources of the original peoples (Unicef, 2009).

The interconnectedness of the Touchstones is also reflected in the themes that emerged from the data analysis. Self-determination is rooted in participants' ability to develop and practice child welfare in their own language and culture, with a holistic approach. A major concern for children removed from their communities is the disconnection from their culture and traditions that often results.

Table 1 shows the main themes that emerged from the raw data from the community sessions and published research on Aboriginal child welfare in Canada that supports these themes.

**Table 1: Data Themes and Supporting Literature****Touchstone Principle**

## Culture and Language

Data Themes			Supporting Literature and Evidence
Acceptance	Elders	Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Blackfoot ways of knowing: The worldview of the Siksikaitapapi</i> (Bastien, 2004)</li> <li>• <i>Seeking Mino Pimatisiwin: An Aboriginal approach to healing</i> (Hart, 2002)</li> <li>• "Native wisdom on belonging" (Brokenleg, 1998)</li> <li>• <i>Native science natural laws of interdependence</i> (Cajete, 2000)</li> <li>• <i>Lighting the seventh fire: The spiritual ways of healing and science of the Native American</i> (Peat, 1994)</li> <li>• "Understanding family resiliency from a relational world view" (Cross, 1998)</li> <li>• "Spirituality and mental health: A Native American perspective" (Cross, 2002)</li> <li>• <i>The Northern Ojibwe and their family law</i>. (D.J. Auger, 2001)</li> <li>• <i>The sacred tree</i> (Bopp, Bopp, Brown, and Lane 1984)</li> <li>• <i>The Mishomis Book: The voice of the Ojibway</i> (Benton-Banai, 1988)</li> <li>• <i>Ojibway ceremonies</i> (Johnson, 1982)</li> <li>• "An Ojibwe perspective on the welfare of children: Lessons of the past and visions for the future" (Hand, 2006)</li> </ul>
Addictions	Families	Proud	
Alternatives	Family	Removed	
Ancestry	Generations	Responsibilities	
Belonging	Gifts	Role Models	
Ceremonies	Heritage	Roles	
Childcare	Identity	Safe	
Children	Incorporation	Services	
Clan(s)	Indigenous Child	Supports	
Communities	Knowledge	Teachers	
Community	Land	Teachings	
Connected	Language	Traditions	
Cultural	Leaders	Worldview	
Awareness	Members	Youth	
Culture	Parenting		
Disconnected			

**Touchstone Principle**

## Holistic Approach

Data Themes			Supporting Literature and Evidence
Chiefs	Elders	Island	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>When everything matters</i> (Blackstock, 2009)</li> <li>• <i>Circleworks: Transforming Eurocentric consciousness</i> (Graveline, 1998)</li> <li>• "Postcolonial Ghost Dancing: Diagnosing European colonialism" (Youngblood Henderson, 2000)</li> <li>• <i>Space, time and medicine</i> (Dossey, 1985)</li> </ul>
Child	Families	Land	
Children	Family	Prevention	
Collaboration	Health	Proud	
Communities	Healthcare	Well-being	
Community	Holistic	Wellness	
Culture	Indigenous	Youth	

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**Table 1: Data Themes and Supporting Literature****Touchstone Principle**

Self Determination

Data Themes			Supporting Literature and Evidence
Build	Families	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Cultural continuity as a hedge against suicide in Canada's First Nations" (Chandler and Lalonde, 1998)</li> <li>• <i>Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples</i> (RCAP, 1996)</li> <li>• <i>Aboriginal children and youth in Canada: Canada must do better</i> (Canadian Council of Provincial Child and Youth Advocates, 2010)</li> <li>• <i>Indigenous children: Rights and reality</i> (Rae, 2006)</li> <li>• <i>Indigenous Peoples in international law</i> (Anaya, 2004)</li> </ul>
Changes	Family	Potential	
Cherished	Government	Prevention	
Child	Healthy	Relationships	
Children	Implement	Resources	
Collaboration	Indigenous	Responsibility	
Communities	Knowledge	Safety	
Community	Legislation	School	
Control	Less removal	Secure	
Decision-making	Loved	Self-determination	
Decisions	Needs	Self-sufficient	
Deliver	Opportunities	Wanted	
Develop	Oppressive	Welfare	
Effective	Ownership	Well-being	
Empowered	Political	Worldview	
Empowering	Politics	Youth	

**Touchstone Principle**

Non Discrimination

Data Themes			Supporting Literature and Evidence
Acknowledge	Economic	Jordan's Principle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Reconciliation: Rebuilding the Canadian child welfare system to better serve Aboriginal children and youth" (Blackstock, Brown and Bennett, 2007)</li> <li>• "Jordan's Principle and Maurina Beadle's fight for implementation" (Blackstock, 2011)</li> <li>• <i>Aboriginal children's health: Leaving no child behind</i> (Unicef, 2009)</li> </ul>
Awareness	Education	Knowledge	
Child	Environment	Nurture	
Children	Families	Overrepresentation	
Communication	Family	Policies	
Communities	Funding	Racism	
Community	Government	Relationships	
Community	Historical	School	
Culture	History	Sharing	
Develop	Indigenous	Traditional	
Discrimination	Interfering	Youth	

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**Table 1: Data Themes and Supporting Literature****Touchstone Principle**

Structural Interventions

Data Themes			Supporting Literature and Evidence
Accessible	Facilities	Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Canadian Incidence Study on Reported Child Abuse and Neglect – 2008: Major findings</i> (Trocmé et al. 2010)</li> <li>• <i>Kiskisik Awasisak: Remember the children, understanding the overrepresentation of First Nations children in the child welfare system</i> (Sinha et al., 2011).</li> <li>• <i>When everything matters</i> (Blackstock, 2009)</li> <li>• <i>Wen:de: We are coming to the light of day</i> (Blackstock, Prakash, Loxley, and Wien, 2005)</li> <li>• <i>Auditor General of Canada report</i>, Chapter 4 (2011)</li> <li>• “Pathways to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in Canada’s child welfare system” (Trocmé, Knoke, and Blackstock, 2004)</li> <li>• <i>Joint national policy review on First Nations child and family services</i> (McDonald and Ladd, 2000)</li> <li>• <i>Economic consequences of child abuse in Canada</i> (Bowlus, McKenna, Tanis, and Wright, 2003)</li> <li>• <i>WHO report reveals economic costs of interpersonal violence</i> (World Health Organization, 2004)</li> <li>• “Jordan’s Principle, governments’ paralysis” (MacDonald and Attaran, 2007).</li> <li>• “Are we doing enough? A status report on Canadian public policy and child and youth health” (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2009)</li> </ul>
Activities	Families	Programs	
Addictions	Family	Protocols	
Affordable	Foster	Racism	
Alcohol	Funding	Resources	
Awareness	Government	Responsibility	
Barriers	Health	Safety	
Child	Healthcare	Sanitation	
Childcare	Healthy	Schools	
Children	Holistic	Security	
Clean	Homes	Services	
Collaboration	Housing	Skills	
Communities	Indigenous	Sufficient	
Community	Integration	Supports	
Cost	Involved	Sustainable	
Culture	Justice	Teachers	
Delivery	Knowledge	Teachings	
Discrimination	Language	Traditional	
Drugs	Needs	Training	
Economic	Outcomes	Values	
Education	Overcrowding	Wealth	
Education	Policies	Welfare	
Employment	Poverty	Youth	

**Touchstone Principle**

Other

Data Themes		Supporting Literature and Evidence
People		
Touchstones		
Hope		

Building relationships both within and between communities and government seen as key to achieving reconciliation in Aboriginal child welfare. One of the biggest challenges identified was getting all the players and stakeholders to make change and then follow through. Continued communication, support, respect for culture, and communities working together and staying connected were identified as key ingredients to achieving the Dream. Hope for the future and having a positive attitude were also viewed as contributors to achieving the Dream. Some participants noted that people can get discouraged when changes do not happen right away.

Some participants wondered how the next steps would be implemented and if there would be tangible benefits as a result. Funding was also identified as an ongoing challenge for some communities and agencies.

Community and individual healing was another identified challenge due to the time, commitment needed and effort needed to change ways of thinking. Collaborative practice, visions and goals with partners and local community resources were seen as essential to moving forward. Prevention, supporting families before and during a crisis and post-crisis services holistic approaches identified as being needed.

## **Follow-up Survey Results**

While many participants stated that they were unsure of what to expect before attending Touchstones, others said they thought that attending would provide an opportunity for relationship building and generate a better understanding of community issues, First Nations culture and ways of helping community and families. Some participants attended in order to gain an understanding of what the Touchstones could offer communities. Many participants said they wanted to hear and share information about what is going on in the agencies and ways of working with children. Through open dialogue, many participants believed that they could learn how to do things better for communities.

Some participants expected that solutions and plans would be made to build better relationships and community participation. Other participants anticipated some unity in ideas might be achieved and most indicated that collaboration was made possible with the community session.

One participant said, “I think it is a wonderful way to bring people together in the knowledge of the impact of the past and how to understand what happened then. Also, to be able to think of ways to change the mindset of people so it is not just brushed under the carpet.”

Some participants said the session emphasized the past more than moving forward, while others said they appreciated the grounding of current circumstances in the past and found it very informative. Participants also reported a better understanding of the reasons why families find themselves involved in the child welfare system and said they had a more compassionate attitude when working with First Nation children and families.

Some participants reported that by attending the Touchstones community sessions, they realized that most frontline child welfare workers are already following the Touchstones principles for the most part. Professionals and leaders were interacting with one another and sharing knowledge and this was identified by as strength to continue to build upon.

## **Session Organization and Process**

Touchstones community sessions were identified as an empowering approach to change that supported positive relationship building. Participants reported being impressed by the high level of open and informal information sharing that took place with a solution focus. A number of participants indicated that everyone being told to leave their title at the door made them feel free to speak openly.

Some participants suggested that more time to focus on the achieving the Dream was necessary. One suggested including other planning processes in addition to PATH. Another participant suggested having a briefing beforehand with MCFD staff members to clarify the objectives and purpose of the event and how the information will be used to move forward.

The calibre of the organized speakers, the small break-out groups and networking opportunities were commended. Overall, participants indicated that the Touchstones session was enjoyable, creative, fun and well worth the time. Many said they left the session feeling united as service providers for children, encouraged and hopeful for change.

*“Touchstones is an incredible way to draw communities together. I felt that Touchstones really allowed all people Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal to freely express their hopes for the future and share resources and ideas with one another.”*

The participant impressions reported during and after the Touchstones session were consistent. They expressed satisfaction with the support and openness of session participants. *“Very moved by the different perspectives. Surprised that MCFD management was so open to the truth telling.”*

Some participants wondered if the Touchstones values would be incorporated into the MCFD and create a more respectful approach to working with Aboriginal agencies and communities. Other participants questioned how much would change in child welfare as a result of the Touchstones session and how participants would continue to work together towards reconciliation.

A central theme identified was the usefulness of focusing on a team approach throughout the Touchstones community session. This was perceived as a good way to bring people together, to acknowledge the impact of the past and to work together to move forward for a brighter future. One participant said that each team player is an important stepping stone towards a positive outcome. Another said, *“I would recommend this experience to others that don’t understand the process of team building and the importance of each team player.”*

Another participant described the Touchstones event as ground-breaking and reported that they left the session with an increased understanding of the challenges faced by First Nations people and the need to increase the sensitivity of child protection social workers.

*“I think that Touchstones should continue in all Canadian provinces... more to build on relationships than to try and make work plans. People in all communities know the existing problems and are making plans and incorporating goals already.... What they are struggling with is simply trusting one another and working together as a team. Some people got frustrated when the same old issues were brought forward and they felt that this was just another workshop. But what I really noticed was the relationship building that was key.”*

Of the participants who came to the Touchstones community session with expectations, most reported being satisfied with the process and outcome. Participants expressed appreciation for having their work validated, the honesty and openness of others, and a sharing atmosphere. Some said they left the session with a better understanding of the issues and ways to change child welfare practice. Others said they will continue to refer back to the Touchstones material for next steps and how to achieve the Dream.

Overall, participants said the Touchstones community sessions met or exceeded their expectations and that they look forward to future sessions. The empathy and compassion of other participants, how children remained a constant focus and increased levels of learning and awareness were among the benefits identified.

*“Attending Touchstones was above my expectations as I was not sure what it all meant. I learned from listening to the people share their stories that the past has a profound effect on present day issues. I think it will take time for the healing process. I am glad that I was able to attend Touchstones.”*

Many expressed a desire for additional Touchstones sessions in order to continue the work and dialogue.

## **Challenges Facing Reconciliation in Aboriginal Child Welfare**

There were both common and differing perspectives expressed by participants about the challenges of achieving the Dream.

One of the biggest challenges cited was having all the key players and stakeholders together to make the changes, see the changes occur and then follow them through. Some participants noted that staff changes within Government and agencies can create barriers to moving forward.

Some participants said that funding may remain an ongoing challenge for some communities and agencies.



A central challenge identified was staying focused and committed to implementing the next steps in order to achieve the Dream. Continued communication, support, respect for culture, and communities working together and staying connected were identified as key ingredients to achieving the Dream. Hope for the future and having a positive attitude were also viewed as contributors to achieving the Dream. Some participants noted that people can get discouraged when changes do not happen right away.

Some participants wondered how the next steps would be implemented and if there would be tangible benefits as a result.

Community and individual healing was a theme for many participants. Some said that healing leads to being respectful of each other and having the courage to change. Other participants noted the large amount of time and commitment needed for healing to occur and for people to change the way they think about something. Participants said they could see relationships already improving, along with a commitment to improve the future for Aboriginal children.

Collaborative practice, visions and goals with partners and local community resources were seen as essential to moving forward. Knowledge sharing between MCFD and communities is necessary to move forward and build cultural awareness. Prevention and supporting children before and during a crisis, in addition to post-crisis services, were identified as holistic approaches needed. Building relationships both within and between communities and government was noted to be key to achieving reconciliation in Aboriginal child welfare.

## **Changes in Child Welfare since Touchstones Community Sessions**

Changes in attitude, perspective, skill level, practice and knowledge were among the outcomes identified after the community sessions.

Most change was seen as taking place at the attitude/perspective level. Many participants saw an increase in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working together. Participants who experienced a change in perspective reported feeling more confident in their work with a clearer understanding of the reasons why families find themselves involved in child welfare. They said they were more compassionate in their work.

Some participants said the sessions made them able to recognize and acknowledge the long term impacts of residential schools and child welfare systems on Aboriginal families and communities. *“I have a greater understanding and sensitivity to the trauma faced at Residential Schools and more appreciation for the strength of personality of those that have been able to work through this trauma and speak out about what happened and how people are impacted today.”*

Some participants reported increased skills to cope with discouragement, interacting more positively with people and focusing on moving towards the Dream of a better future for Aboriginal children and their families. Many participants reported a higher skill level in listening, especially to people's stories. Some participants reported that they had begun to incorporate traditional teachings into their everyday practice.

Front-line child welfare workers reported that their practice had changed in many aspects. Some said they had become less intrusive and confrontational and more inclusive when conducting child protection investigations. Other participants said they were being supported in finding other family members to care for children in need of alternate care.

Overall, participants reported that the Touchstones community sessions helped increase collaboration among groups working in child welfare. Some noted that these changes are evident in the increased awareness and accountability on the part of child welfare staff who practice in a more respectful and supportive manner. Other participants said their work is more child-centred and inclusive of families and communities as a result of the session discussions. Changes were also reported by families learning new skills to cope and who are being reunited with their children as a result.

The follow-up data indicate that communities are solving problems and improving over time. Some participants reported a decrease in rates of drinking in some communities, fewer young people starting to drink and take drugs at an early age, and some children being actively involved in anti-drug campaigns.

Some participants reported an increased level of communication about reconciliation in child welfare, indicating attitudinal changes had occurred. In one agency, the Touchstones principles were included in staff meetings and when discussing child welfare services, needs and responses to Aboriginal families.

Participants highlighted that families had become more engaged and sharing, demonstrating an increased level of trust between families and child protection workers. As a result, there was increased collaboration around family planning.

These gains appeared to persist long after attendance at a Touchstone community session. One participant stated:

*"When I get discouraged, I remember all the positive relationships and supports that I have made through Touchstones and I focus on moving forward towards a better future for the children and families."*

Participants identified the need for communities to follow through on making the Dream a reality for Aboriginal children. *"I think the biggest challenge is making that crucial shift from what we have learned from the past and how to make proactive, respectful and supportive changes in the here and now to keep the Dream moving forward."*

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# Conclusion and Recommendations

Participants said they were thankful for the Touchstones community session and the opportunity to share and listen to others. The Touchstones sessions were seen as an important step, helping to support hope and perseverance in the community. Blackstock et al., (2007:78) assert that the holistic approach Touchstone is “intended to inspire child welfare law makers, researchers, policy makers, and practitioners to consider whether their decisions not only are in the best interest of the child at that moment, but also will remain in the child’s best interest over time.” With this in mind, participants expressed hope that the work started in the Touchstones community session would continue and not be forgotten since they believed that the concepts and teachings from the Touchstones sessions were effective in achieving positive results. As one participant said, *“Please keep going; the work is so valuable to all involved with children.”*

Based on the analysis of the community sessions and information collected by the follow-up survey, the researchers recommend the following:

- Continue to provide opportunities for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal individuals to engage in follow-up Touchstones sessions and other knowledge sharing, workshops and training so that professionals are mindful of the way they provide services to families.
- Continue to provide positive reinforcement to professionals and community members and acknowledge reconciliation accomplishments.
- Develop and provide services that are culturally appropriate and assist parents and children in developing knowledge about their culture.
- Revisit the community Touchstones PATH results and action plans periodically to ensure new members join the movement and participants continue the learning process.
- Organize additional Touchstones community sessions in smaller communities to help strengthen the community collaboration on behalf of children.
- Continue to gather for the purpose of sharing Dreams and accomplishments, to continue to evaluate the Touchstones process and to share strategies for success.
- Continue an effective dialogue and support the Ministry for Child and Family Development in tracking measures and monitoring outcomes for Aboriginal children and youth in child welfare.
- Utilize processes such as Touchstones and community visioning to guide in the development of policies and practices for Aboriginal child welfare.

The participatory action research indicates that the Touchstones community sessions are a collaborative, effective and engaging way to bring people together to create a better future for Aboriginal children and their families. Stakeholders embraced the Touchstones movement and say they are committed to continue building on the momentum of the northern British Columbia initiative to find innovative ways to help the communities realize their Dreams. The participants stressed that this movement needs to be fostered and nurtured so that First Nations communities can continue to work towards reconciliation, health and community well-being.

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# Community Locations

**Community Locations**

**LEGEND**

- Provincial capital
- Other populated places
- Trans-Canada Highway
- Major road
- - - Ferry route
- - - International boundary
- - - Provincial boundary

**Scale**

100 0 100 200 300 km

**Map Labels:**

- Geographic Features:** YUKON, NWT, ALASKA, USA, PACIFIC OCEAN, Juan de Fuca Str, CHAÎNE COÛTIERE, COAST MOUNTAINS, ROCKY MOUNTAINS, ALBERTA, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.
- Water Bodies:** Atlin L, Williston L, Burns Lake, Vanderhoof L, Kimbasket L, Okanagan L, Columbia R, Fraser R, Stikine R, Liard R, Skeena R, Fraser R, Columbia R.
- Cities and Towns:** Atlin, Dease Lake, Fort Nelson, Stewart, Hudson's Hope, Fort St. John, Dawson Creek, Chetwynd, Fort St. James, Prince George, Quesnel, Wells, Valemount, Williams Lake, 100 Mile House, Revelstoke, Golden, Invermere, Elkford, Cranbrook, Creston, Trail, Osoyoos, Castlegar, Penticton, Kelowna, Vernon, Salmon Arm, Merritt, Kamloops, Lillooet, Ashcroft, Hope, Abbotsford, Sidney, Saanich, Victoria, Nanaimo, Ladysmith, Parksville, Courtenay, Port Alberni, Sechelt, Powell River, Campbell River, Port McNeill, Port Hardy, Port Alice, Bella Bella, Bella Coola, Kitimat, Smithers, New Hazelton, Rupert, Terrace, Old Masset, Sandspit, Dixon Entrance, Queen Charlotte City, Queen Charlotte Islands, Vancouver Island.
- Boundaries:** International boundary (dashed line), Provincial boundary (dotted line).

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## Appendix B: Northern British Columbia Community Sessions

Date	Location	Host	Community	Approx. Number of Participants
Nov. 25–26, 2009	Fort St. James Community Centre	Nezul Be Hunuyeh Child and Family Services Society	Nak'azdli and Tl'azt'en Carrier Nations	50
February 11–12, 2010	Prince George Civic Centre	Carrier-Sekani Family Services	Burns Lake, Cheslatta, Lake Babine, Nadleh Whut'en, Nee Tahi Buhn, Skin Tyee, Stella'ten, Saik'uz, Takla Lake, Wet'suwet'en and Yekooche	150
April 7–8, 2010	Terrace	Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Services Society	Hartley Bay, Iskut, Kitamaat, Kitkatla, Kitselas, Kitsumkalum, Lax-kw'alaams, Metlakatla and Tahltan	100
October 6–7, 2010	Terrace	Nisga'a Child and Family Services	Gingolx (Kincolith), Gitlakdamx, Lakalzap and Gitwinksihlkw	90
November 2–3, 2010	Old Massett	Haida Child and Family Services	Old Massett Village Council and the Skidegate Band	40

# Appendix C: Themes from All Community Sessions, Sorted by Touchstones of Hope

*f* = Frequency

## Culture and Language

<i>f</i>	Theme	<i>f</i>	Theme	<i>f</i>	Theme	<i>f</i>	Theme
589	Children	112	Language	40	Holistic	16	Alternative
459	Child	105	Traditional	37	Traditions	16	Identity
423	Community	100	Elders	34	Teachers	13	Belonging
292	Youth	92	Cultural	32	Connected	10	Island
276	Family	92	Roles	30	Grandparents	10	Community-based
273	Aboriginal	75	Leaders	28	Addictions	9	Role Models
252	Families	69	Knowledge	25	Land	8	Removed
240	Communities	69	Programs	23	Acknowledge	8	Teachings
174	Services	67	Safety	23	Acceptance	7	Children's
164	Culture	58	Members	21	Worldview	6	Gifts
151	Ceremonies	56	Leadership	20	Proud	5	Disconnect
145	Supports	45	Responsibilities	20	Culturally		
143	Parenting	41	Clan(s)	18	Generations		

## Holistic Approach

<i>f</i>	Theme	<i>f</i>	Theme	<i>f</i>	Theme	<i>f</i>	Theme
589	Children	102	Respect	25	Land	10	Community-based
459	Child	100	Elders	23	Prevention	10	Island
423	Community	79	Values	21	Chiefs	9	Wellness
292	Youth	62	Health	20	Proud	9	Included
276	Family	56	Healthy	17	Well-being	7	Purpose
273	Aboriginal	43	Policies	16	Collaboration	7	Children's
252	Families	40	Holistic	16	Identity	7	Healthcare
240	Communities	37	Traditions	14	Dignity		
164	Culture	32	Love	13	Belonging		
105	Traditional	32	Connected	11	Protocols		

## Self Determination

<i>f</i>	Theme	<i>f</i>	Theme	<i>f</i>	Theme	<i>f</i>	Theme
589	Children	92	Changes	48	Opportunities	16	Equality
459	Child	91	Needs	44	Empower	16	Collaboration
423	Community	90	Government	41	Build	15	Decision
292	Youth	80	Resources	38	Responsibility	15	Effective
281	Welfare	70	Wanted	32	Loved	12	Legislation
276	Family	69	Knowledge	26	Political	10	Community-based
273	Aboriginal	67	Safety	25	Self-determination	10	Collaborative
252	Families	62	Implementation	23	Prevention	9	Governance
240	Communities	56	Healthy	21	Control	8	Ownership
155	School	49	Relationships	21	Worldview	7	Children's
104	Development	49	Positive	17	Well-being		

*continued on following page*

## Non Discrimination

<i>f</i>	Theme	<i>f</i>	Theme	<i>f</i>	Theme	<i>f</i>	Theme
589	Children	155	School	50	Discrimination	14	Jordan's Principle
459	Child	105	Traditional	49	Relationships	10	Community-based
423	Community	104	Development	41	Communication	9	Governance
292	Youth	97	Education	38	Racism	7	Representation
281	Welfare	90	Government	33	Awareness	7	Children's
276	Family	86	Policies	25	Self-determination	7	Nurture
273	Aboriginal	80	Sharing	23	Acknowledge	6	Interfering
252	Families	78	Funding	21	Economic	5	Neglect
240	Communities	69	Knowledge	21	Environment		
164	Culture	53	History	16	Equality		

## Structural Interventions

<i>f</i>	Theme	<i>f</i>	Theme	<i>f</i>	Theme	<i>f</i>	Theme
589	Children	97	Education	43	Policies	21	Skills
459	Child	91	Needs	43	Activities	20	Drugs
423	Community	90	Government	40	Holistic	16	Barriers
292	Youth	80	Resources	38	Racism	16	Violence
281	Welfare	79	Values	38	Responsibility	15	Outcomes
276	Family	78	Funding	38	Involvement	13	Integration
273	Aboriginal	69	Knowledge	34	Teachers	11	Protocols
252	Families	69	Programs	33	Awareness	10	Community-based
240	Communities	67	Safety	33	Housing	8	Teachings
174	Services	62	Health	31	Employment	8	Wealth
164	Culture	57	Foster	28	Alcohol	8	Affordable
155	Schools	56	Healthy	26	Justice	7	Children's
122	Supports	50	Discrimination	26	Collaboration	7	Security
112	Language	46	Buildings	24	Addictions	7	Healthcare
105	Traditional	44	Poverty	23	Prevention	6	Suicide
98	Homes	44	Training	21	Economic		

## Other

<i>f</i>	Theme
446	People
290	Touchstones
172	Hope

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## Appendix D: Follow-up Survey Questions



### Northern BC Touchstones of Hope

#### Northern BC Touchstones Survey questions

1. Which Touchstones community session(s) did you participate in?
2. What were your expectations before attending Touchstones?
3. What were your impressions while attending Touchstones?
4. Thinking back about your participation at Touchstones, what impressions do you have now about Touchstones?
5. Did attending Touchstones meet, not meet, or go above your expectations before attending?  
(Please explain)
6. Thinking about the PATH, what do you think is the biggest challenge for achieving the Dream?
7. Since being at Touchstones, how has your work in child welfare changed?



8. How do you know Touchstones is making a difference for children and families in child welfare?

9. Do you have any comments or thoughts that you would to share about Touchstones?

Please return to:

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c/o Andrea Auger  
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Ottawa, ON K2P1X3