

BEYOND NEGLECT

Webinar Summary

On October 14, 2021, the CWLC hosted a webinar with key child welfare experts to discuss actionable steps that stakeholders can implement to better support the families they serve.

The opinions and recommendations from the panelists represent diverse experiences and expertise drawn from the child welfare sector and community-based approaches.

Throughout the conversation, a common theme emerged centered on intention, in that we must be more purposeful in the ways we define child and family wellbeing as well as in the ways we intervene with children and families. The conversation unearthed several key areas for child welfare professionals to consider.



Redefining the child welfare “system”

The mainstream child welfare system is currently anchored in reactive child protection models that can be narrow in scope and punitive in nature. A fundamental shift is required, from interventions focused on family investigations, which by definition implies a degree of paternalistic authority for those investigating and guilt for those being investigated, to interventions focused on assessment.

Assessment also needs to be broadened and include the full circle of those who are able to support the wellbeing children and families.

“Broadly assessing the needs of a child and a family should include speaking to people in the schools, speaking to extended family and to community leaders.”

Prof. Nico Trocmé

Director of the School of Social Work and the Philip Fisher Chair
in Social Work, McGill University

In shifting the approach to child and family well-being to include a much broader assessment of needs and strengths, the idea that impact can only come from the child welfare system itself must be challenged.

Every single person involved in the lives of children and their families has the potential to impact and influence their trajectories, irrespective of job titles.

“Remember, your acts, no matter how small you might think, have profound consequences and can change lives.”

Irwin Elman

Fellow, Laidlaw Foundation of Ontario & Global Strategic Advisor, Until the Last Child

The mainstream child welfare “system” is critically flawed and not fully inclusive of those that it contends to support. The solutions to fix this flawed system cannot come from within; rather, they should emerge by looking beyond the system and obtaining insights from the entire ecosystem of child and family well-being.

Child welfare professionals must also be willing to make disruptive changes their intervention approaches, based on the expertise gathered from the community and those with lived experience.

2 Power

The system that defines much of contemporary mainstream child welfare processes and supports are built on a history of colonialism, white supremacy and power imbalances. Power within this system is allocated by the professional titles people possess and the ways in which funds are being distributed. This notion of allocated power is purposeful, artificial and excludes critical members of children and families’ support systems.

Each individual within this system holds power. Child welfare professionals must become aware of this power and reflect on their relationship to it, and they must continually reflect on potential biases and systemic racism embedded within their practice. To move forward, all those involved in the lives of children and families must be willing to look at power through these sometimes uncomfortable truths.

“It’s multifaceted. It really starts with workers being reflective on their practice, which is an ongoing and continuous process that incorporates addressing the biases, the racism, the structural inequalities that exist within the system.”

Keishia Facey

Project Manager, One Vision One Voice project, Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies (OACAS)

Professionals must be willing to share and relinquish power to allow it to flow more organically within the circle of care of children and families in order to better support their needs.

3

Positionality

To be able to support children and their families, child welfare professionals must understand and appreciate how their identities shape their world views and their values. Child welfare agencies and leaders must offer opportunities for workers to reflect on their intersecting identities, their specific cultural experiences, along with the oppression and privileges people face, in order to understand the lived experiences of others.

All stakeholders must pause to reflect on their positionality and inform themselves about those around them.

“It is important to reflect on the experiences of those around us as well as our own, to understand the ways in which we perceive and connect with each other.”

Dr. Gabrielle Lindstrom

Educational Development Consultant, Indigenous Ways of Knowing,
Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning, University of Calgary

4

The need for change is urgent

Marginalized families continue to be disproportionately impacted by child welfare interventions, and personal and societal biases are ingrained in the current approaches.

Child welfare professionals must continue to grow within their own roles and push for incremental changes where they can. However, they must also give equal attention to driving the disruptive change that is needed to dismantle the colonial, racist and oppressive foundations of the mainstream child welfare system.

Print out the next page and use it as a resource to reflect on how you can move into the practice of meaningful action.

What can stakeholders reflect on in order to move into **MEANINGFUL ACTION?**

1

At the individual level

- What are my values and world views on family, for example, and what are they shaped by?
- How can I share and/or relinquish power and divert it into the child and family's circle of care?

2

At the agency level

- How can we broaden our assessment tools to enlarge the scope of potential supports for children and families?
- Who do we think is responsible and should be included to help support the wellbeing of the children and families we serve?

3

At the policy level

- How can we move practice towards broad assessments rather than investigations?
- How can we relinquish power and divert it into the child and family's circle of care and empower communities around them?