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## Navigating Structural Violence with Indigenous Families: The Contested Terrain of Early Childhood Intervention and the Child Welfare System in Canada

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# Navigating Structural Violence with Indigenous Families: The Contested Terrain of Early Childhood Intervention and the Child Welfare System in Canada

## **Abstract**

Internationally, the welfare of Indigenous children continues to be severely compromised by their involvement with child welfare authorities. In this context, there are calls for greater investment in early childhood programs to support family preservation and children's well-being. This article reports on the findings from a critical qualitative inquiry undertaken with Aboriginal Infant Development Programs (AIDPs) in Canada. The findings highlight how AIDP workers' relational approaches countered Indigenous mothers' experiences of feeling "like a bad parent" as a result of their involvement with the child welfare system and how workers navigated an increasingly close relationship with this system. We draw on the concept of structural violence to discuss the impact of the child welfare system on Indigenous families and AIDPs.

## **Keywords**

Aboriginal, child welfare system, residential schools, children, early intervention, structural inequities, neglect, family well-being

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## Navigating Structural Violence with Indigenous Families: The Contested Terrain of Early Childhood Intervention and the Child Welfare System in Canada

State<sup>1</sup> intervention in Indigenous<sup>2</sup> families' and children's lives continues to be an apparently normal aspect of many contemporary settler colonial societies (Tilbury & Thoburn, 2011). In Canada, child welfare policies have been described as constituting "a broader colonial system" that has become "so fully naturalized as to be mostly invisible, especially to settler-colonists" (de Leeuw, 2014, p. 60). In this socio-political landscape, Indigenous leaders and child advocates have long called for a greater emphasis on, and investment in, early childhood programs that support both family well-being and preservation as well as children's optimal health and development (Aboriginal Children in Care Working Group, 2015; Hughes, 2013; John, 2016; Representative for Children and Youth, 2011). Currently, the influence of and relationship between the child welfare system and Indigenous-specific early childhood programs has yet to be adequately examined or addressed.

This article draws on the findings from a larger critical inquiry conducted in British Columbia (B.C.), Canada, with a province-wide Indigenous early childhood intervention program, the Aboriginal Infant Development Program (AIDP; Gerlach, 2015). The study explored how AIDPs both influenced families' and children's health and well-being and fostered child health equity (Gerlach, Browne, & Suto, 2016). AIDPs provide an entry point for examining the influence of, and relationship between, the child welfare system and Indigenous-specific early childhood intervention programs. In this article, we focus on the findings that show:

1. How AIDP workers were increasingly drawn into state mechanisms of surveillance and intervention;
2. How workers' strengths-based relational approaches provided a critical counter narrative to Indigenous mothers' experiences of being disempowered, judged, and required to prove themselves to the state in order to keep, or reclaim their right, to raise their children; and
3. The tensions AIDP workers experienced as they navigated an increasingly close relationship with the child welfare system.

We start with an overview of the socio-historical context of Indigenous families' and children's experiences of state intervention, and of Indigenous early childhood programs. Next, we describe and discuss our study and its research design. Following this section, we discuss the findings, which center on four themes:

- Helping mothers and children to make sense of what's happening;

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<sup>1</sup> By using the term "state," we draw from Fiske (2006) who noted, "we have yet to find an alternative concept to describe the comprehensive power exerted by governing authorities over citizens' daily lives" (p. 248).

<sup>2</sup> In this article, the term "Indigenous" denotes "a collective history among Indigenous Peoples of the world regardless of borders" and, in the Canadian context, is inclusive of all peoples who self-identify as having Indigenous ancestry, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2014, p. 2).

- Resisting the judgment of “bad parent”;
- Being drawn into a crisis-oriented system;
- Becoming “the eyes of the Ministry.”

Finally, we close with a discussion about the implications of the increasingly complex relationship between AIDPs and the provincial child welfare system in B.C., and we conclude by offering several policy recommendations.

### **The Socio-Historical and Political Context of State Intervention**

There are an estimated 1.4 million Indigenous Peoples in Canada, who make up 4.3% of the country’s total population (Statistics Canada, 2013). Prior to colonization, Indigenous children were frequently raised, cared for, and educated within extended and interdependent systems of relationships, which helped to ensure their safety and well-being (Irvine, 2009). However, multiple generations of Indigenous children have grown up denied of their families, communities, and ancestry as a result of historical and ongoing colonial policies and practices underpinned by assimilation, paternalism, and protectionism (McKenzie, Varcoe, Browne, & Day, 2016). For over 100 years, the state attempted to assert Canada’s nationhood through a legislated and mandatory residential school system (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Children as young as 5 years old were removed, by force if necessary, from their families and home communities to attend state funded, church-run residential schools<sup>3</sup> (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Syilx Okanagan scholar, writer, and activist Armstrong (1996) has described this system as “the single most devastating factor in the breakdown of our society. It is at the core of the damage, beyond all the other mechanisms cleverly fashioned to subjugate, assimilate, and annihilate” (p. x). Children’s experiences of physical punishment and emotional and sexual abuse, together with the absence of healthy and loving relationships with their siblings, parents, and extended families continue to impact Indigenous families and communities today, with many parents struggling to care for themselves and their children (Cull, 2006; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

Today, the continuity of colonial state power is structured through the contemporary child welfare system (McKenzie et al., 2016), which is upheld by enduring patriarchal and racialized discourses that portray Indigenous women as “unfit” mothers and their children as “at risk” (Cull, 2006; de Leeuw, 2014). In the province of B.C., where this research took place, Indigenous children currently comprise 8% of the total child population and 53% of the child population living in “out-of-home care” (Representative for Children and Youth, 2013). Across Canada, more Indigenous children have been removed from their families by child welfare agencies than were removed at the peak of the residential school system (Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, 2016). First Nations children (who make up 66% of Indigenous children) are investigated for maltreatment related concerns at a rate 4 times higher than non-Indigenous children (Sinha, Ellenbogen, & Trocmé, 2013).

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<sup>3</sup> Residential schools were operated under partnerships between the federal government and the Catholic, Methodist, Anglican, and Presbyterian churches, with the explicit goal of transforming Indigenous children into “de-indigenized” adults (de Leeuw, 2009).

The primary driver of Indigenous overrepresentation in the child welfare system is neglect<sup>4</sup> (Sinha et al., 2011, 2013), which, for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous families, has been closely linked to both poverty and other caregiver household factors, such as challenges related to single parenting, overcrowded housing, caregiver mental health, and substance abuse (Connell-Carrick, 2003; Sinha et al., 2011; Trocmé et al., 2006). For Indigenous families, these factors have been shaped by colonial, Canadian, and provincial or territorial policies (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). These policies include the construction of systems for assessing various forms of neglect, in which the default is to operationalize neglect as the failure to comply with normative (i.e., non-Indigenous) standards of parenting behaviour (Combs-Orme, Wilson, Cain, Page, & Kirby, 2003; Hearn, 2011).

Moreover, Canada's child protection approach to child welfare means that agencies are poorly equipped to support families struggling with chronic risk factors that are associated with neglect. The Canadian system is rooted in an Anglo-American approach that emphasizes individual caregiver responsibility for children, restricts child welfare intervention to relatively serious cases, focuses on investigation in order to determine whether children are exposed to harm or at serious risk of harm, and uses out-of-home placement as a key measure to protect children (Cameron, Freymond, Cornfield, & Palmer, 2007; Gilbert, 2012; Swift, 2011). Per this approach, investigation serves to document the ways in which parental action or inaction places children at risk of harm and to inform the development of plans to protect children from future harm. Over the last decade, child welfare systems grounded in this approach have adopted more child development and family support focused elements (Gilbert, 2012). In B.C. for example, families that meet the threshold for being screened into the child welfare system, but are assessed as having a relatively low risk profile, are streamed into a non-investigative service track, which features collaborative approaches to determining and supporting family needs (Fallon et al., 2015; Merkel-Holguin, Kaplan, & Kwak, 2006). Nonetheless, a child protection mandate remains at the core of the B.C. child welfare system. This focus is clearly reflected in provincial legislation,<sup>5</sup> in which the majority of clauses focus on "child protection" or "children in care," and the need for protection is explicitly linked to parental infliction of, or failure to prevent, physical or emotional harm to a child. Given this mandate, the provision of supportive services to help prevent "neglect" and other forms of child maltreatment are inadequately recognized or addressed (Cameron et al., 2007; Gilbert, 2012). As we examine in this article, the tendency of the child welfare system to emphasize neglect from an individualistic perspective has significant implications for Indigenous early childhood programs.

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<sup>4</sup> Neglect can result from the influence of individual, family, social, and structural factors on the ability of a parent to meet their child's basic needs. From a social work perspective, neglect tends to be defined as including both "failure to provide minimum care" and "lack of supervision." From this perspective, neglect represents a risk of serious harm to a child and thus meets the legal standard for state intervention. The concepts of neglect and "failure to provide minimum care" are often not clearly or consistently delineated (Blumenthal, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> In B.C., child welfare is governed within the legal framework of the Child, Family, and Community Service Act (2016), which was originally passed in the Legislative Assembly in 1996 and was amended in 2011. Child welfare in B.C. is administered and funded through the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

## **Indigenous Early Childhood Programs**

In response to the persistent overrepresentation of Indigenous children in state “care” in Canada, there have been renewed calls from both Indigenous communities and leaders as well as child and youth advocates for proactive, community-based early childhood programs and services (Auditor General of Alberta, 2016; Hughes, 2013; John, 2016; Representative for Children and Youth, 2013; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). In Canada, as in similar settler colonial societies, early childhood programs that are designed and delivered specifically for Indigenous families and children have become an established feature of the community landscape—primarily in response to Indigenous leaders, communities, and families reasserting their roles and rights with respect to what they want for their children (British Columbia Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2014; Greenwood & Jones, 2015; Guilfoyle, Sims, Siggers, & Hutchins, 2010; Kaomea, 2012; Mitchell, Tangaere, Mara, & Wylie, 2006; Wise, 2013). High quality Indigenous early childhood programs are increasingly viewed internationally as critical sites for pursuing cultural and language revitalization and as pathways to the collective health and well-being of Indigenous families and communities (Grace & Trudgett, 2012; Greenwood & Jones, 2015; Guilfoyle et al., 2010). Internationally, key features for quality programming include:

- A grounding in Indigenous knowledges, values, and ways of caring for young children;
- Community governance, involvement, and accountability;
- A broad and relational view of health and well-being;
- Family and Elder involvement;
- Comprehensive and coordinated programs; and
- Sustainable funding and structural supports (Ball & Le Mar, 2011; British Columbia Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2014; Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2006; Guilfoyle et al., 2010; Mitchell et al., 2006).

AIDPs are unique to B.C. and emerged from an established mainstream Infant Development Program in 1992. AIDPs workers, who typically have backgrounds and training in early childhood education, provide home visiting, outreach, and/or centred-based early intervention for Indigenous families with young children. As identified in this research and reported elsewhere, AIDPs are characterized by their use of relational perspectives towards family well-being, which emphasize the inseparability between maternal and child health, the influence of structural social factors on families’ life circumstances, and broader, socially responsive scopes of practice (Gerlach et al., 2016). There are currently 49 AIDPs of varying size across B.C.; they are administered and hosted by a diverse range of Indigenous and mainstream community-based organizations in on-reserve and off-reserve communities. Host organizations in on-reserve communities receive funding for AIDPs primarily from the federal government, whereas off-reserve communities receive funding for AIDPs from the provincial Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD)—the same Ministry that is responsible for administering and funding the child welfare system in the province. Currently, there is no explicit policy framework in place to guide AIDPs’ relationship with the child welfare system.

## Methods and Methodology

A detailed description of this study's research methods has been outlined in an earlier publication (Gerlach et al., 2016) and is summarized here. This qualitative study was undertaken by the primary author and guided by a community research partner (CRP), the provincial leadership of the AIDP, with whom the primary author had a long-term research relationship prior to beginning this study.

This study was grounded in relational epistemologies (Thayer-Bacon, 2003; Wilson, 2008) and postcolonial feminist (J. Anderson, 2002; Browne, Smye, & Varcoe, 2007) and Indigenous feminist (K. Anderson, 2000; LaRocque, 2007) theoretical perspectives. Using this comprehensive theoretical and analytical framework, we sought to reveal how intersecting micro- and macro-level social, historical, and political relations and factors shaped Indigenous families' and children's everyday lives, health, well-being, and experiences with AIDPs. Pertinent to the findings discussed in this article, an unforeseen consequence of using this theoretical lens was that it revealed how AIDPs were influenced by broader social and structural contexts, including the provincial child welfare system.

This research was undertaken in seven urban-based AIDPs that are hosted by diverse community organizations in four distinct regions of B.C. The primary author conducted semi-structured individual and small group interviews (see Appendix for summary of interview guide) with a total of 35 participants. These participants consisted of: AIDP workers ( $n = 18$ ), Indigenous women caregivers ( $n = 9$ ), Indigenous male caregivers ( $n = 1$ ), Elders ( $n = 4$ ), and administrators of host organizations ( $n = 3$ ). The findings in this article are centered on the Indigenous women caregivers, including eight mothers and one auntie who were aged between 30 to 48 years, had between one and eight children under the age of 18 years, and had varied educational and employment histories. The majority of the mothers in this study reported that their children had been removed from their care while the mothers were in late adolescence or young adulthood. All of the AIDP workers were women aged 30 to 58 years. Eight self-identified as Indigenous and 10 as Euro-Canadian, and they had on average 20 years of experience in mainstream and Indigenous early childhood programs. The Elders who participated ( $n = 3$  women,  $n = 1$  man) had been actively involved with an AIDP for many years. The administrative leaders who participated were Indigenous ( $n = 1$ ) and Euro-Canadian ( $n = 2$ ) and had many years of experience working with organizations that provided support to women, families, and children.

Using procedures described for narrative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), preliminary thematic analysis was undertaken concurrently with data collection. The primary author used a qualitative software program, HyperRESEARCH<sup>®</sup>, to help organize and code transcribed interview data. Analytical themes were identified and subsequently refined, clarified, and synthesized into findings through immersion with the data. Strategies to strengthen the credibility of the analysis included seeking feedback from the CRP and Indigenous early childhood stakeholders at two community meetings in which preliminary analytical insights and framing of the findings were presented, as well as ongoing self-reflexivity by the primary author. The credibility of the findings was further strengthened through both the inclusion of diverse research settings and participant groups (Berg & Lune, 2012) and the alignment between the research purpose, theoretical framing, and methodology (Tracy, 2010).

## Findings

Analysis of the findings centers on four themes. The first two interrelated themes of “helping mothers and children to understand what is happening” and “resisting the judgment of ‘bad parent’” focus on how AIDPs acted as a buffer between families and the harmful effects of state surveillance and intervention. The next two interrelated themes, “being drawn into a crisis-oriented system” and “becoming the eyes of the Ministry,” focus on the effects of AIDPs’ increasingly close relationship with the child welfare system. By presenting these findings, however, we are cognizant that our analysis was not inclusive of the perspectives of child welfare personnel.

### Helping Mothers and Children to Make Sense of What’s Happening

An unexpected finding of this study was the extent to which AIDP workers’ caseloads were full of families who were involved with “the Ministry”<sup>6</sup> or children who were in the foster care system. As one worker stated:

This year is the worst year I’ve had for families involved . . . Before it would be like not even half but now it’s like 94% to 96% of my families are involved with the Ministry.

Workers reported that they had had to educate themselves about the child welfare and legal systems in B.C. in order to support parents navigating the often opaque and inconsistent state-mandated requirements. One mother noted, for example:

My [AIDP] worker helped me to understand all the court information that I needed . . . because I didn’t understand it. Even reading the instructions it’s like I don’t understand this.

Parents often asked workers to help them understand and meet the necessary conditions to either prevent losing custody of their children or to help get their children back. As the following excerpts highlight, workers also “helped parents to make sense of everything” and encouraged them to stay mindful of their children’s well-being during the process of being apprehended. As one mother related:

It’s kind of traumatic for a parent to go through things like that with their children and having another person there that can explain things too if you don’t understand is really like heartwarming for the parent, it helps you keep your parent face and keep your strength for your child.

One worker provided another perspective, noting:

The parents are confused and in shock . . . So they’re going through trauma and they can’t see things clearly. They need clarity and so you’re that person . . . stepping in and helping them to make sense of everything because sometimes they just don’t really understand what is going to happen next.

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<sup>6</sup> “The Ministry” is the term that participants frequently used to refer to the provincial Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), which provides child welfare services in five regions through 429 ministry offices and 22 delegated Aboriginal agencies.



Workers reported that an increasing number of children who were living in the foster care system on a short-term or permanent basis had been referred to them. When workers were notified that children in one of their families were going to be apprehended, they asked to be present in order to support children through this traumatic process. As one worker recounted:

I had a relationship with the children . . . But no one was talking to the children. So that was really important to me, to be sitting on the floor and saying to the children, “so what we’re going to do now is we’re going to get some of your things together and we’re going to go in this car,” which if I wasn’t there who’s talking to the children? What’s going to happen? Those children were really confused and in shock . . . but being able to stay with them at the home with the foster parents who just met them and the social worker left.

As trusted people in families’ lives, AIDP workers supported mothers and children to “make sense of what was happening,” and they strived to mitigate the trauma of a system of state surveillance and intervention that has been described by the Representative for Children and Youth (2013) in B.C. as “confused,” “unstable,” and “chaotic” (p. 4). In this system, frontline child protection workers’ “chronically heavy workloads, combined with onerous responsibilities for paperwork, have undermined their ability to build the kinds of relationships with children and families that would help resolve safety concerns” (Representative for Children and Youth, 2015, p. 2).

### **Resisting the Judgment of “Bad Parent”**

As noted by Hughes (2013), the child welfare system has historically “focused on investigating and then addressing parental shortcomings or misconduct” (p. 30). In the B.C. context, the framing of child welfare intervention has been linked to parental “failure,” and the Child Family and Community Service Act (2016) explicitly terms a child in need of protection as a child who has been harmed, abused, or exploited by their parent or another person and whose parent is “unwilling or unable to protect” them (Section 13c).

Consistent with this viewpoint, workers voiced their concerns that mothers were frequently judged in ways that disregarded their positive attributes, achievements, love for their children, and the impact of poverty on their daily lives. Workers described supporting mothers who “felt like bad parents” because of their interactions with the child welfare system. One explained:

I worked with this mom, she was in tears because she told me that the Ministry made her feel bad and made her feel like she was a bad parent and she couldn’t do anything right.

The transparent, nonjudgmental, and strengths-based nature of workers’ relationships and interactions with the mothers in their programs provided a critical counter-narrative to women’s experiences of feeling disempowered, judged, and mandated to prove themselves to the state in order to keep, or reclaim their rights, to raise their children. One worker noted, for example:

It’s all about relationship. It’s all about these moms who have never been connected to somebody without feeling judged or having to be something . . . If we can go in and just accept them for who they are, right there we’ve done more for that person than anything else. Because really that’s what we all want—to belong and to be accepted and not to be told, you have to do

these million and a half things the Ministry often does about parenting and I totally get it. And they might say, okay, these are your skills but it always comes with a but.

Many of the mothers noted that their participation with AIDPs had helped them “break the cycle of what we went through growing up” and “raise our kids differently from the way our parents raised us.” In alignment with existing research noting opportunities during pregnancy and early parenting to turn around the effects of intergenerational trauma and related substance use (Rutman, 2013; Smith, Varcoe, & Edwards, 2005), workers recounted many “success stories” of parents in their programs:

And hearing that . . . if mother gets pregnant again that they’re having healthy babies, you know, “oh this time I didn’t use at all. You know I have no concerns for this child because I know I didn’t use at all”—it’s really something to hear. (Worker)

In her work, Métis feminist scholar K. Anderson (2000) has referred to a process of positive identity formation whereby Indigenous women resist “negative definitions of being” (p. 115). This study’s findings show how AIDP workers’ explicit resistance to the child welfare system’s perceptions of Indigenous mothers created a relationship in which mothers could exert their resistance to negative definitions of being “a bad parent,” thereby reaffirming their agency in motherhood. However, as we discuss in the following section, workers’ trusting and supportive relationships with and “relational accountability to families” (Gerlach et al., 2016, p. 10) often conflicted with their increasingly close relationships with the child welfare system.

### **Being Drawn into a Crisis-Oriented System**

Workers described the emotional toll of co-navigating opaque and inconsistent state-mandated requirements that determined whether parents would retain or regain their rights to raise, or be involved in raising, their children. As one worker stated:

There’s no transparency . . . there’s no honesty. You know it feels like that and I’ve got families that have children in care, families have supervised access and families truly believe that “oh my baby is coming home soon” . . . And there may be no intention of returning baby to family . . . No they’re just building a case against that family . . . And I mean it’s heartbreaking for me and they’re not my children.

Workers consistently reported that, despite their long-term relationships with families, they were frequently not informed or “told too late” of a child’s apprehension. In addition, workers expressed their concerns about being drawn into a reactive, crisis-oriented system that undermined their potential to play a preventative or proactive role:

It was always in that crisis state rather than that prevention state . . . and it spiked in the last few years. It’s not improving which is what bothers me because I know AIDP has that opportunity to do that.

The findings also highlighted workers’ frustration with a system that has failed to recognize the structural root causes of families’ living situations and has frequently defaulted to “pulling these kids out of their homes” as the primary solution. As one worker stated:

Often most of the family situations, it was poverty and neglect that was removing these kids, which I just struggle with always because I think rather than spending money and pulling these kids out of their homes and spending money over in this [foster] home, why don't you spend the money in that family and keep the child intact but that's not the way it worked.

Workers reported that "Ministry orders" frequently failed to consider families' incomes. In the following excerpt, a worker describes the expectations the Ministry applied to a young family living in a house with multiple occupants:

[There are] issues in that family that are deemed by the Ministry as unsafe . . . An expectation on that family is to go out and find their own apartment to live together but their income is probably next to nothing.

These findings point to a conflict regarding how AIDP workers and the child welfare system frame and seek to address "the problem." The concept of "neglect" has been defined by the provincial Ministry as a "failure to provide for a child's or youth's basic needs" and "involves an omission by the parent or guardian" (Ministry of Children & Family Development, 2016, p. 25). While the child welfare system emphasizes the need to protect the child, AIDP workers' orientation focuses on supporting families. As one worker stated:

We all have different agendas or different purposes with a family. So my purpose isn't going to fit with the purpose of the social worker.

These findings also highlighted how AIDPs' potential to provide proactive, preventative forms of early intervention with families and children was hamstrung by their increasing pull towards a reactive child welfare system that, as Hughes (2013) has reported, is focused on moving from crisis to crisis and lacks the necessary resources to address the impact of poverty on families' living conditions.

### **Becoming "the Eyes of the Ministry"**

Embedded throughout the findings of this study were ways in which AIDPs were shaped by the increasing number of direct referrals from child welfare social workers. For example, although AIDP workers repeatedly asserted the importance of their programs' voluntary nature, the findings show that parents' participation was increasingly mandated by social workers. In this context, workers described the challenges of engaging with parents:

Sometimes the social workers do pressure the family to be part of it [the program] because they can see that it would meet maybe some goals that they have or whatever. But because it's coming from the social worker they [parents] feel they should say yes. But then to follow through with them [the parents] and have conversations with them on the phone they don't necessarily call you back because they don't want to.

Under the provincial Child, Family and Community Service Act, AIDP workers have a legislated responsibility to report and share information about suspected "child abuse and neglect" (Ministry of Children & Family Development, 2016). Workers described the importance of being clear and transparent with parents, often during their initial interactions, about their "duty to report" and

supporting families where appropriate in addressing any specific concerns in lieu of or prior to initiating contact with the Ministry. As one worker noted:

I will talk to [parents] first, I won't run and call the social worker because I don't think you've changed your kid's diapers in the past hour or you need to clean your house. I will say to them I will bring my concerns to you first, see how I can help you with that, if they're not addressed then I will contact the social worker.

Despite this, however, workers expressed concern that they were frequently asked to report back to social workers on issues that were not directly related to a child's welfare, such as a parent's participation in their programs. For example, one worker explained:

Often it's highly suggested from social workers . . . that parents have a part in our program and I know for me that's a bit of struggle because . . . they're not participating, like if the parents aren't on board . . . and we have to tell the social worker if they decline, and so then they get their hands slapped for not participating right.

Workers also expressed concerns about being, as one worker described, "the eyes for the Ministry" through their close relationships with, and consequent expectations from, child protection workers. For example:

We worked really hard at being in contact with the social workers regularly . . . but I think you have to maintain a certain distance . . . [Social workers] are not trusting regardless of who they are and where they've come from. They work for the institution that has removed many of their kids, and so you have to maintain an arm's length.

In addition, workers frequently noted tension created by the Ministry of Child and Family Development's responsibility for administering and funding B.C.'s child welfare system and early childhood intervention programs, including AIDPs. As one worker stated:

The truth is we're funded by the system so how are you going to fight the system . . . You do have to be careful . . . At the end of the day we're there to support families and that's our role . . . but we're still navigating the relationship.

These findings shed new light on how AIDPs are being utilized by the child welfare system in ways that create tensions for workers and influence families' voluntary participation in their programs. While families may undoubtedly benefit from being referred to AIDPs, these findings raise serious concerns that AIDP workers are being pulled, albeit unwillingly, into a system that Wells (2009) has described as regulating, disciplining, and governing parents.

## **Discussion**

In B.C. and across Canada, neoliberal modes of governance, which shape contemporary child welfare policies, work to transfer responsibility from the state to individual families (Gurstein & Vilches, 2011). In this socio-political landscape, "the personal and individualized nature of child welfare work functions to separate mothering work from its context" (Swift, 1995, p. 173). Thus, locating blame and

responsibility for change becomes the prerogative of individual, neglectful parents—as opposed to that of the state and its auxiliary agencies (Sinha et al., 2013).

As we have explored in a previous paper based on this research (Gerlach et al., 2016), these findings point to the importance of understanding Indigenous families' experiences of the contemporary child welfare system within the broader socio-historical contexts of their lives (Walkem, 2015). This research also illustrates how AIDP workers' resistance to the state oppression of Indigenous women was enacted through AIDP relational practices that emphasized women's positive identity and agency in motherhood. A strengths-based relational approach provided a critical counter-narrative to historically-constituted and persistent racialized discourses that pathologize Indigenous women as unfit and uncaring mothers, thereby legitimizing the need for "child protection" (de Leeuw, 2014; Maxwell, 2014). AIDPs' strengths-based and relational orientation to supporting family well-being (Gerlach et al., 2016) is consistent with a transformative approach to the Child, Family and Community Services Act; this transformative approach has been advocated by Indigenous communities and leaders in B.C. (John, 2016; Walkem, 2015), and it stands in sharp contrast to the child protection focus of the child welfare system both in B.C. and across much of Canada (Gilbert, 2012).

Moving beyond individualistic analyses in our discussion of this study's findings, we draw on the concept of structural violence. Originating from the work of Galtung (1969), structural violence has yet to be adequately explored in relation to Indigenous children or early childhood programming. The concept is closely aligned with social injustice in that structures and social mechanisms constitute forms of structural violence when they cause harm, deny human rights, constrain human agency, and/or prevent particular individuals and population groups from having the resources necessary to help them reach their full potential while sparing other groups from the same treatment (Farmer, Nizeye, Stulac, & Keshavjee, 2007; Hanna & Kleinman, 2013). The insidious and silent nature of structural violence frequently results in its near invisibility, which prompts its acceptance as "the way things are" (Farmer, Kim, Kleinman, & Basilio, 2013, p. 5).

Adopting a lens of structural violence disrupts the notion of neglect as a "personal problem" (Swift, 1995), refocusing attention on the responsibility of governments to recognize and address underlying structural inequities. For example, poverty-reduction policies, particularly for single-parent Indigenous families led by women, are central to (a) disrupting the "social reproduction" of Indigenous women as negligent (Swift, 1995), and (b) reducing the number of Indigenous children in care (Aboriginal Children in Care Working Group, 2015). In addition, child protection workers must be provided with the resources necessary to both adequately address risks beyond those located at the level of individual parents and support family preservation by helping families access basic determinants of health, particularly secure food and housing (Hughes, 2013). A failure to address underlying socioeconomic structural inequities means that poverty, as a form of everyday structural violence experienced by a high proportion of Indigenous families, will continue to be misconstrued within the child welfare system as "willful parental neglect" (Sinha et al., 2013).

The prolonged underfunding of the provincial child welfare system in B.C. has left frontline child protection workers overburdened and children under protected (Representative for Children and Youth, 2015). According to the Representative for Children and Youth Child (2013) in B.C., child protection workers' engagement with Indigenous families is affected by:

- Lack of knowledge about the Indigenous children and families being served;
- Confusion around roles, responsibilities, and mandates in Indigenous child welfare;
- Failures to fund, regulate, and support the development of services required by Indigenous children and youth.

In this provincial landscape, the inability of child protection workers to meet Ministry standards around family engagement and support (Representative for Children and Youth, 2015) has serious ramifications for Indigenous families, children, and early childhood programs.

This research brings to light how the lack of both a policy framework and targeted funding for family preservation and support services in B.C. (Representative for Children and Youth, 2013) has led to the increasing use of AIDPs as ad hoc extensions of the child welfare system. Moreover, having the same Ministry responsible for both child welfare and early childhood programs may have facilitated the silent process by which AIDPs have become involuntarily enrolled in governing families. While referrals to AIDPs are consistent with a “family development response”<sup>7</sup> to intervention by the Ministry (Ministry of Children & Family Development, 2016), the increasing rates of referrals from the child welfare system, without increased resources or funding, risks eroding the potential of these programs to limit or prevent families’ interactions with child welfare authorities. Moreover, AIDPs’ growing affiliation with “the Ministry” may make some families reluctant to *choose* to participate in their programs, thereby making it more difficult for *all* Indigenous families and children to receive early intervention. The apparent appropriation and tacit re-colonization of AIDPs is a serious concern, given that decreasing Indigenous families’ access to timely, proactive, and supportive early childhood intervention risks continuing to both “over-police” Indigenous mothers (Cull, 2006) and over represent Indigenous children in state “care.”

A limitation of this research is that the majority of caregiver participants were women living in off-reserve, urban centers. The absence of teenage parents, particularly those who have grown up in the foster care system, is salient given participants’ concerns that this population is at high risk of having their children apprehended—often from birth. Additional research is needed to explore the perspectives of teenaged and male caregivers, and to examine how the relationship between other Indigenous programs and services and child welfare authorities is impacting family well-being and Indigenous children’s health and health equity.

## Conclusion

Oppressive structural policies that result in high numbers of Indigenous children being removed from their parents and family homes are not historical events, but current lived realities that are apparently acceptable in Canadian society. Moreover, there is ample evidence that the underfunding, current structure, and “protection first” agenda of the child welfare system is failing to support or improve the “welfare” of Indigenous families and children, both in B.C. and across Canada (Hughes, 2013; Lafrance

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<sup>7</sup> “Family development response is an approach that focuses on keeping a child or youth safe while the family stays together and works through its challenges. Family development response emphasizes and builds on the family’s strengths and connects them with resources such as counselling, parenting programs and other services in their community” (Ministry of Children & Family Development, 2016, p. 49).

& Bastien, 2007; Representative for Children and Youth, 2013; Sinha et al., 2011; Swift, 1995; Tait, Henry, & Loewen Walker, 2013). In this socio-political landscape, federal and provincial governments in Canada largely ignore the need to invest in Indigenous early childhood programming that could support family preservation and children's optimal health and well-being, as well as reduce the number of Indigenous children in state "care" (Hughes, 2013; John, 2016; Tait et al., 2013). This study provides insight into how AIDPs, as a province-wide Indigenous early childhood intervention program in B.C., can disrupt the continuities between residential schools and neoliberal child welfare policies, and thereby the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next (McKenzie et al., 2016). Importantly, these findings raise concerns about an increasingly close and complex relationship between AIDPs and the child welfare system. By framing the impact of a chronically underfunded and individual-focused child welfare system on AIDPs from a perspective of structural violence, we have raised questions about AIDPs unintentional involvement in the state oppression of Indigenous women and children. This article makes visible what is currently happening in B.C., and it has international relevance for all Indigenous early childhood and child health programs questioning their relationships with child welfare authorities.

### Policy Recommendations

The following policy recommendations need to be undertaken in close partnership with Indigenous leadership in B.C.

For the provincial government:

- a. To make greater investments in Indigenous early childhood programs so that they can play a greater role in timely and proactive prevention with *all* Indigenous families and with *all* Indigenous children in the foster care system.

For the provincial Ministry responsible for child welfare and early intervention programs:

- a. To develop a policy framework and targeted funding that supports child protection workers in their efforts to provide prevention services for Indigenous families, including proactive policies and resources to support families who struggle with chronic poverty.
- b. To develop a strategic plan regarding how to address the increasing number of families and children being referred to AIDPs by child welfare social workers.
- c. To invest in training for all early childhood program workers and social workers who work with Indigenous families. This training needs to include:
  - i. The history and impacts of the residential school system,
  - ii. How trauma is manifested in maternal–infant attachment and children's development, and
  - iii. Trauma- and violence-informed care.

For the AIDP leadership:

- a. To collect data, which could be used to support increased funding for AIDPs, on the number of families and children on each worker's caseload that:
  - i. Have been mandated to attend by a child welfare social worker, or
  - ii. Have some form of "Ministry involvement."



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## **Appendix: Interview Guide for Participants**

### **Interview Questions for AIDP Workers**

1. Can you describe your program?
2. Can you tell me about the families and children who receive your program?
3. Can you tell me about your experiences providing AIDP?
4. Are there any ways that you think your program could improve their services to families and young children?
5. Is there anything else that you think I should know about?

### **Interview Questions for Indigenous Caregivers**

1. Can you tell me about your experiences with the Aboriginal Infant Development Program?
2. Can you tell me about your AIDP worker and what it is like when she visits you at home?
3. If you could give advice to a new AIDP worker working in your community, what would you say?
4. If you could have whatever you needed for your family and children, what kinds of supports or services would help your family the most?
5. Is there anything else that you think I should know about?

### **Interview Questions for Elders**

1. Can you tell me about your involvement with Aboriginal Infant Development Program?
2. How do you think the AIDP supports families and young children?
3. AIDP workers visit a lot of families in their homes—what do you think about home visiting?
4. Is there anything else that you think I should know about?

### **Interview Questions for Administrative Leaders**

1. Prior to starting your current position, what did you know about Aboriginal children and their early healthy and well-being?
2. Can you tell me about your experiences, as an administrative leader, with your AIDP?
3. How do you think AIDP supports families and young children?



4. Are there any ways that you think AIDP could improve their services to families and young children?
5. Is there anything else that you think I should know about?