

INTRODUCTION

Changing the Narrative

Rona Jualla van Oudenhoven,
Dawn Walcott-Parris & Steve Woodman

Child Welfare

Durham Children's Aid Society (DCAS) is committed to changing the narrative of child welfare. This involves embracing a change that witnesses a critical logic model approach, an analytical and innovative re-alignment of philosophical ideals and a fundamental re-thinking of the traditional notions of risk. Risk redefined, not only references risk in the home, but also involves identifying those risks associated with removing a child from home. *Risk Intelligence* and *Courageous Conversations* are the agencies new buzzwords. DCAS strives to keep families together and in those instances where a child has been removed, efforts will be made to engage family, kin and kith and to make the separation as short as possible. DCAS is making the commitment to children to enable children and youth to grow up in family based care and most importantly, to be able to live and be cared for by their own families; in the culture that they were born into. This translates into an increased focus on family engagement initiatives.

The agency continues to partner with families and their community to ensure that children are safe, healthy and happy, with the main goal being able to keep children safe in their family home by working with parents to address any challenges they may be facing. The DCAS vision is "*Building hope and opportunities with children, youth and families*" and its mission statement reads,

“Working with families and communities for the safety, stability and well-being of children and youth”. As an organization, DCAS recognizes that:

- Children belong in their families and communities;
- Removal from families results in trauma and places children and youth at very real risk of poor outcomes; and
- As a system, child welfare does not do well raising children.

The child-welfare service *goals* of the agency has seen an increase in focus on:

- Family and community continuity;
- Admission prevention through anti-oppressive approaches that focus on creativity and crisis support;
- A diversity, equity and inclusion strategy of change;
- Family care and reduction with the eventual halt in using group care altogether;
- Continued implementation of Signs of Safety practice and principles (i.e. families as their own experts, centering child and youth voice; family conferencing, family finding, articulation of harm and danger).

The child-welfare service *objectives* centers on the pursuit of child safety to:

- Work together to challenge each other’s views in order to prevent admissions to care through creative problem solving;
- Consider the timelines and expectations for preadmission and post admission conferencing and communicate going forward;
- Develop learning sessions and tools to help to focus on who our families and children are (identity), what they identify that they need for success and how they can achieve success;
- Utilize Signs of Safety (SOS), to recognize family as experts in their own lives, help families to find, build and engage their networks to keep children safe;
- Seek ways to support families in times of crises through use of additional services;
- Build capacity for identification and increased utilization of family finding processes;

- Review of children currently in outside resources and engage in interdepartmental collaborations to determine how best to plan for repatriation;
- Move to internal foster care or to a family setting.

Child and Youth Identity

Durham Children's Aid Society (DCAS) ensures protection of a child or youth's identity and connections and acknowledges this as critical to achieving child safety and well-being. The Society elicits and centers the voice of the child or youth and their identity characteristics in all decisions affecting the child or youth by working in collaboration with the child or youth, the child or youth's family, community and network.

The Society follows the 'guiding principles' of the United Nations Convention on The Rights Of The Child (UNCRC) and seeks to uphold:

- The principle of non-discrimination (Article 2);
- Giving primary consideration to acting always in the best interest of the child or youth (Article 3);
- Ensuring the right to life, survival and development (Article 6); and
- The right to be heard (Article 12).

Thus, referencing significance to a child or youth's identity characteristics such as, the child or youth's age, ability and evolving capacities, race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, family diversity, creed, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, cultural practices, linguistic needs and regional differences.

DCAS respects the right of children, youth and families who identify as First Nations, Inuit and Metis to receive service according to their cultures, heritages, traditions and concepts of extended family and community and as such, respects the mandate of *Dnaagdawenmag Binnoojiiyag Child and Family Services* to provide services to individuals whose heritage is First Nations, Inuit and Metis.

Feedback and Resolution Process

Durham Children's Aid Society (DCAS) is committed to fostering and promoting a culture whereby every compliment, perspective, worry and complaint is received as an opportunity for partnership and learning geared towards service excellence. It recognizes the power imbalances inherent in any feedback and resolution process and seeks to address these in a manner that reduces the deleterious effects of systemic oppression and structural inequalities; while remaining cognizant of the cultural, social and economic dynamics at play in shaping persons' social location. DCAS strives to bring the best service experience to children, youth, families and other service users. We honor our obligation to listen to the voices of our children and youth in care, our families and all service recipients. In particular, we respect the rights of the child to be an active participant in decision-making on issues affecting them as it relates to their safety and well-being.

The agency aims to translate feedback into tangible care outcomes designed to improve our service delivery model and the experiences of those accessing our service. To that end, choices will be provided to the service recipients at every stage of the feedback and resolution process, to collaboratively address concerns with partners as they arise and jointly achieve resolution. All feedback is a valuable measure to improve service delivery and will be utilized as essential learning tools. The agency aspires to continuous reflection on feedback provided through *respectful listening* and *appreciative inquiry* regarding our agency's anti-oppressive practice and principles of respect, equity and inclusion.

Global Solidarity and Community Partnership

Durham CAS stands in solidarity with all global marginalized communities, including the Black community of Canada and the world. Collectively we pledge to advocate and agitate for racial equity, social justice and humanity. We maintain that zero tolerance for violence in all its manifestations of direct,

systemic and cultural oppression and in the form of anti-Black racism is a matter of respect for human rights.

Together with our community partners we have created our Durham CAS Community Advisory Council [CAC] Statement:

“Our Canadian history speaks of the brutal transplantation of bodies in the legacy that is Black Enslavement; the continued strength and resiliency of Black Peoples to advocate, overcome and rise above oppression and recognizes Resolution 68/237 of the United Nations 2013 Declaration of the Decade for People of African Descent and their right to recognition, justice and development.

This Council has been born out of a commitment to advocate for the promotion of equity, transparency and accountability in practices relating to the lives of ALL marginalized and oppressed persons and stands dedicated to this task.”

Child welfare is witnessing positive changes with respect to ministry initiatives, provincial calls to action, modernization, re-imagination, societal solidarity, social justice and elevated individual awareness, accountability, ownership for change and self-reflection. These efforts, if promoted, can only prove beneficial to our children, youth and families serving to lessen historical harm and remove barriers of inequities.

This book is intended to be a handbook for change. It contains the stories of past researchers and actors in the field who share the process and the experiences so as to inform future practice. It contains lessons learnt and is in a way a repository of best practice. It is persons shaping and informing the discipline from within; it is about the validation of local generated knowledge. It is about recognition that theory is lived and informed by practice and vice versa and it is about congratulating each other's good work and looking inward within the context of the lived experiences to find the answers. It is intended as a guide, no more, no less.