

**Suggestions for Culturally Sensitive Support of Attachment and Parenting with Indigenous Families**  
**(Modified from Carriere and Richardson, 2009)**

The following suggestions are offered to assist child welfare workers to consider in culturally sensitive ways how children and their caregivers are being supported in their tasks of becoming attached and connected with each other in the parenting process.

**Dignity.** The language of dignity may be a more culturally appropriate way of talking about connection between children and caregivers. This came from teachings from former political prisoners and residential school survivors who identified humiliation as one of the worst indignities of violence. Many families who receive child welfare services experience this intervention as an affront to their dignity and a reminder of other humiliating professional interactions. Affronts to human dignity tend to interfere with well-intentioned child welfare interventions, and the energy diverted from parents in dealing with authorities may sabotage their chances of demonstrating what they are doing well. At each stage of life, caregivers such as mothers and fathers need to be accorded dignity so that they can accord the same dignity to their infants and children.

**Safe and Secure in many forms.** Although many parents do offer their children safe and secure relationships despite not having that same dignity extended to them, energy can be diverted away from parenting in times of negative social situations, creating challenges. When parents talk about the challenges imposed by the outside world, they are sometimes seen as complaining, ranting or not taking responsibility for their part. This is particularly so for people who are socially marginalized and must deal with affronts to their dignity and autonomy daily. In infancy, the dignity of the young one is met by responding, in culturally appropriate ways, to calls for love through the offering of physical contact, food, familiarity of voices and scents, cleanliness, and a safe family and community environment.

**Mothering and Fathering.** Mothering can be undermined in varying degrees by a lack of security, such as violence, humiliation, and psychological abuse. At this stage in the life cycle, fathers may need to be supported in the role of protector, provider, and nurturer of the mother and the child. This support may take the form of flexible employment, support to be away from work for longer periods of time, and emotional support during a time of transition in the spousal relationship. For indigenous fathers, this may mean that society must address the extremely high rates of unemployment in some Indigenous communities and the obstacles to hunting and food-gathering that exist in Canada. The expansion of the family may mean a change of routine and relationship for all family members.

**The Village.** Children need the security of extended family, community, and culture to ensure a sense of belonging and to feel a part of the larger group. Families can be assisted by Elders and other family members who share a perspective about raising children and becoming a parent in a long line of tradition in the family. For both the mother and father, learning about the histories of raising children in accordance with familial and cultural ways may support their unique situation, even more than learning through popular books and television.

**The Teen Years.** While an adolescent asserts their independence and seeks to consolidate their identity, we see the importance of cultural teachers and Elders in reminding them of the good way to live. The teen can experience indignity when asked (often repeatedly) to perform certain tasks—like cleaning their room—that have been assigned by others. Creating space for adolescents to choose, as much as possible, the ways in which they will contribute to the well-being of the family and household, along

with parents both accepting their need for independence and holding the teen within safe parameters and value-based expectations for social interaction, may enhance the teen's dignity. Many indigenous adolescents are already parents and learn about culture and appropriate ways of being alongside their children, ideally with the guidance of Elders and teachers.

**Cultural Match.** The dignity of the whole family may be at stake when it faces discrimination, lack of employment, or various forms of humiliation in the social world and when forced to receive service, particularly from outside the community. Today, dealing with the workplace, educational institutions, or government bureaucracies often involves forms of power abuse that result in humiliation for individuals and that harm their personal dignity.

**A Chance to Heal.** Many indigenous adults suffer due to the violence and even torture inflicted upon them in state-sponsored institutions and programs. Supporting healing in the community, in ways that proactively restore dignity and prepare adults for roles of leadership and community governance, simultaneously strengthens their capacity to function as role models for community members and as caregivers to children.

**The Importance of Elders.** Many Elders are the keepers of traditional knowledge and hold the important task of teaching, raising their grandchildren and supporting young parents. Yet Elders, too, need dignity, safety, and security to live out their traditional ways of being. Dignity includes having the freedom to extend caring to others, which is what Elders have often done in their communities.

**Research and Understanding.** To understand the community devastation of indigenous peoples, it is important to become familiar with the Indian Act and how this legislation continues to undermine First Nation, Métis, and Inuit families in Canada. When families are humiliated and destabilized, in both mundane and large-scale ways, they have less freedom or "room to move" in terms of dedicating their energy to their children while being called upon to address social concerns. For service providers and those engaged in assessing families, it is crucial to use tools that seek to discover what is right with people, rather than what is wrong, and that consider the social context and how disrupted dignity skews the results of assessment.

*Carriere, J., & Richardson, C. (2009). From longing to belonging: Attachment theory, connectedness, and indigenous children in Canada. In S. McKay, D. Fuchs, & I. Brown (Eds.), *Passion for action in child and family services: Voices from the prairies* (pp. 49-67). Regina, SK: Canadian Plains Research Center.*