

The Power of Language: What do “Family Policing” and “Child and Family Well-Being” Mean?

Shifting our Thinking, Shifting our Language

West Coast LEAF has been working and learning in the area known as “child welfare” or “child protection” for several years. As we have taken up this work, we have been privileged to learn from families, Nations, and advocates in BC and beyond, who have generously shared their wisdom with us.

As part of our learning journey, we have been reflecting on the power of language to name and describe what is known as the “child welfare system.” Family policing scholar and advocate [Dorothy Roberts](#) has advocated for people to challenge their framing and language to accurately reflect the system’s harms.

Through this learning and reflection, our organization has found a more appropriate term to name this system: **family policing system**. We use this term to describe how the system maintains power and control over the lives of families and children—most often Indigenous families and children—through surveillance, regulation, and punishment.

We are using the term **child and family well-being system** to name what we are calling for in place of the family policing system. This is a broad term that encompasses different frameworks, such as [social determinants of health](#) and [Indigenous determinants of health](#). A child and family well-being system would involve resourcing and supporting children, youth, families, communities, and Nations to thrive according to their own wholistic understanding of well-being, without interference from the family policing system.

In this document, we share resources that have shaped our thinking and language shift, including key actions and reports in BC calling for Indigenous self-determination for the care and well-being of Indigenous children, youth, families, communities and Nations.



Indigenous Activism for Self-Determination in BC

- [*Liberating Our Children Liberating Our Nation Community Panel Child Protection Legislation Review in British Columbia*](#)

Report of the Aboriginal Committee, 1992

Eva Jacobs, Kwakiutl Nation; Fred Storey, Project Manager; Loretta Adams, Researcher; Faye Poirier, Administrative Support

This 1992 report outlines the impact of the family policing system on Indigenous communities throughout BC and key recommendations in areas such as “Ending the Legalized Abduction of Aboriginal Children” and “Internationally Recognized Rights of the Child.”

Now more than 30 years old, the report remains extremely relevant in moving towards a system of child, family, and community well-being for Indigenous people.

- [*Indian Child Caravan Digital Collection*](#)

Union of BC Indian Chiefs (UBCIC)

Excerpted from the website description: “The Indian Child Caravan was a march and demonstration which took place in Vancouver, BC and eventually lead to the Minister of Social Services for the province of BC. The subsequent meeting of the Minister of Social Service, Grace McCarthy with the band lead to an agreement which gave the Spallumcheen control over their own child welfare program.

“The Indian Child Caravan took place over Thanksgiving weekend, October 9-13, 1980. The Caravan began in Prince George and picked up more people along its route. The group advanced to Williams Lake and Mount Currie, and merged with people from the Interior and Vancouver Island communities before culminating with a rally in Vancouver.

“The digital collection includes material from the Union's newsletter, Indian World: The Choice is Ours, audio recordings, video recordings of interviews with the main organizer, Chief Wayne Christian, and approximately 200 photos.”



Why Naming the System Matters

- [“‘Family Regulation,’ Not ‘Child Welfare’: Abolition Starts with Changing our Language”](#)

Emma Williams, *The Imprint: Youth & Family News*, July 28, 2020

While this opinion piece calls for the use of the term “family regulation system” rather than “family policing system,” it is a strong call to action to challenge our use of “child protection” and “child welfare.”

“We must divest from the inaccurate and misleading framing that the state offers us: This system does not generate children’s welfare or protection. ‘Child welfare system’ is an ahistorical and inaccurate term: Parents, advocates, and social workers inside and outside the agency lament the lack of welfare services that the system is able to offer. ‘Child protection system’ is inaccurate at best and harmful at worst: It paints the agency as an intervening body that shields children from the harms of their families, demonizing families before an intervention has even begun.”

Defining Family Policing - Further Reading

- [The upEND movement](#)

A collaboration between The Center for the Study of Social Policy and the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work.

They describe their work as “a collaborative movement that works to abolish the existing child welfare system, which is built on a model of surveillance and separation and more accurately described as a family policing system. Abolition requires ending this oppressive system AND imagining and recreating the ways in which society supports children, families, and communities in being safe and thriving.”

They provide a [definition of family policing](#) on their website. In their blog post, [“The Carceral Logic of the Family Policing System,”](#) they



further explain their framework for understanding the family policing system.

- [Rise Magazine](#)
New York City

“Founded in 2005 and led by parents impacted by the family policing system, Rise believes that parents have the answers for their families and communities. Our mission is to support parents’ leadership to dismantle the current family policing system by eliminating cycles of harm, surveillance and punishment and creating communities that invest in families and offer collective care, healing and support.”

Rise Magazine provides an in-depth look at their language choices in the blog post [Why We’re Using the Term ‘Family Policing System.’](#)

- [“Strengthened Bonds: Abolishing the Child Welfare System and Re-Envisioning Child Well-Being”](#)
Columbia Journal of Race and Law, July 2021

Published by Columbia Law School students, this volume of the *Columbia Journal of Race and Law* offers critical reflection and insight about what it means to abolish the current system of family policing.

Defining Family Policing – Webinars

- [Strengthened Bonds: Abolishing the Child Welfare System and Re-Envisioning Child Well-Being Symposium](#)
Columbia Journal of Race and Law, June 2021

In preparation for the launch of Volume 11 of the *Columbia Journal of Race and Law*, Columbia Law School hosted a symposium to insights from the articles published in this volume. The keynotes and panels were recorded and can be accessed as a YouTube playlist.

- [“How we EndUP: Black Feminist Dreams for the Future”](#)
the upEND Movement

Speakers:

- Victoria Copeland
- Chelsea Williams-Diggs
- Maya Pendleton (moderator)

Recorded May 18, 2021.

“Abolishing the family policing system requires the creation of another world and the reimagining, or remembering, of care. As Black feminism instructs, the liberatory project of abolition requires the making of a society that is free of all systems of oppression. Thus, this webinar will address how Black feminist theory and understandings, including reproductive justice, guide us toward the abolition of the family policing system and the creation of (envision) a society where children, families, and communities are no longer over surveilled by state systems and have the power and resources for what they need to live freely and abundantly.”

Defining Child and Family Well-Being – Further Reading

- [Beyond Survival: A Review of the Literature on Positive Approaches to Understanding and Measuring Indigenous Child Well-Being](#)

BC Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2019

Kathleen Jamieson, Researcher/ Writer

Karen Isaac, Editor

“This literature review is the first phase of an initiative of the BC Aboriginal Child Care Society (BCACCS) designed to develop positive approaches to understanding, fostering, measuring, and monitoring Indigenous child well-being.

“[...] It is based on a range of Indigenous and non-Indigenous sources that emerged between the years 2000 and 2016 and are available on the Internet or in print. The focus is on reports about positive approaches to Indigenous child well-being from three countries with Indigenous populations (Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) that were under British colonial rule well into the 20th century. The rationale is that by exploring the literature on Indigenous child well-being in three

countries, we can provide some useful comparisons and insights for strengthening de-colonizing approaches to government policy and programs in Canada and provide some balance to current Canadian academic research on Indigenous child well-being focused on a bio-medical approach.”

- [“Family Well-being”](#)

National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (NCPFCE)

This resource “offers a common understanding of what family well-being means for Head Start and Early Head Start families and children. When families are safe, healthy, and financially secure, they are more likely to reach the goals they have for themselves and their children.”

- [Measuring What Matters for Child Wellbeing and Policies](#)

OECD WISE Centre, July 2021

This policy brief “lays the groundwork for improvements in child well-being measurement and for building better data to inform the development of better child well-being policies.”

It outlines a new ‘aspirational’ conceptual framework for child well-being measurement, setting out which aspects of children’s lives should be measured, and how to best monitor child well-being. “It also outlines priorities for child data development and identifies key data gaps, with a view to motivating improvements in child data infrastructures.”

- [Can government measure family wellbeing? A literature review](#)

Family & Parenting Institute, 2010

Ivonne Wollny, Joanna Apps, and Clem Henricson

“This review, based on a wide-ranging examination of international research and other literature, considers the concept of family wellbeing and various tools that can be used to measure and understand it.

“Interest in wellbeing issues in the UK has tended to focus on the welfare of children rather than families. But growing policy interest in



children's welfare has led to efforts to improve the ways that wellbeing is measured more holistically, within the family as a unit. "There is also a growing recognition of the importance of relationships across the generations and an understanding that these involve a range of interests and support needs. It is therefore necessary to have the tools to measure the effectiveness of government policies in promoting the totality of family wellbeing."

- [Coast Salish Laws Relating to Child and Caregiver Nurturance & Safety](#)
Nl̓ TU,O Child and Family Services (Nl̓ TU,O) and Indigenous Law Research Unit (ILRU), March 2022

While this toolkit uses the language of nurturance and safety rather than well-being, the knowledge shared is relevant to reframing how we approach the current family policing system.

"The toolkit hopes to educate and empower families, children, service providers, and agencies to have a better understanding of how to be in supportive community while respecting and honouring Salish law."

Defining Child and Family Well-Being – Webinars and Videos

- ["Anishinabek Family Well Being - Dodem Mino Bemaadzing Nokiiwin Naaknigewin"](#)

Anishinabek Nation, November 2018

Sara Cornthwaite, Nipissing First Nation

"The Anishinabek Family Well-Being program is to improve the outcomes and opportunities for children and youth using holistic, community-driven approaches that keeps children connected to their families, communities and cultures. "This prevention-based program will address the root causes of violence, trauma and over-representation of Indigenous children and youth in child welfare and youth justice systems."