

FINDING OUR POWER TOGETHER Indigenous Early Childhood Disability: Mapping Disability Systems in Northwestern Ontario

Research Report

Written by: Rosario Dizon (RECE) April 2021

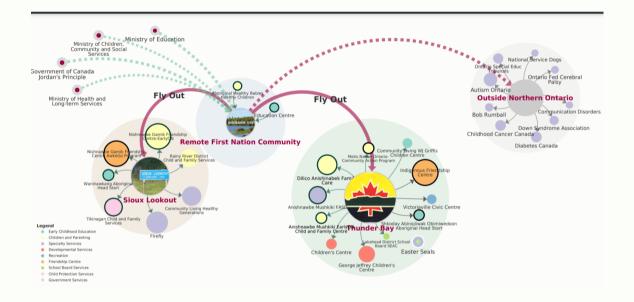
Indigenous Early Childhood Disability: Mapping Disability Systems in Northwestern Ontario

There is an increased awareness of the rights of children with disabilities that are enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child(1) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities(2). It is critical that a system of supports and services need to be accessible and culturally appropriate to fulfill children's rights with disabilities, including Indigenous children with disabilities. This report is aimed to assess the early childhood disability services and support systems in remote First Nations communities in Northwestern Ontario. While, assessing the system of supports and services we found it also important for families to help them understand what is available and accessible, for them to make informed decisions.

In order to achieve this, we researched a database of existing early childhood services and supports that are available and was completed in collaboration with team leaders and members of Finding our Power Together (FOPT). Information from this database was translated to a community map which provided a visual overview of the early childhood disability system of supports and services. Community mapping visually shows the services that are available in a geographic area and can show where gaps in services are(3).

Research shows that systems of disability supports and services for the Indigenous child to be effective, it needs to embed the cultural values of community interconnectedness and interdependence, and needs to include the whole system of family and community support(4). For this project, the service agencies and support programs that were identified were grouped into nine categories: (1) early childhood education; (2) child and parenting; (3) specialty services; (4) recreation; (5) child protection; (6) friendship centres; (7) school services; (8) government services; and (9) developmental services.

Figure 1: Community Map of Indigenous Early Childhood Disability Supports and Services



As shown on the map above, a combination of Indigenous and non-Indigenous supports and services available are located in Sioux Lookout and Thunder Bay, which requires community members living in the remote communities to fly out as there are no serviceable roads. Within the remote community, there are only two children and parenting supports, a healthy babies, heathy children program and an early education centre.

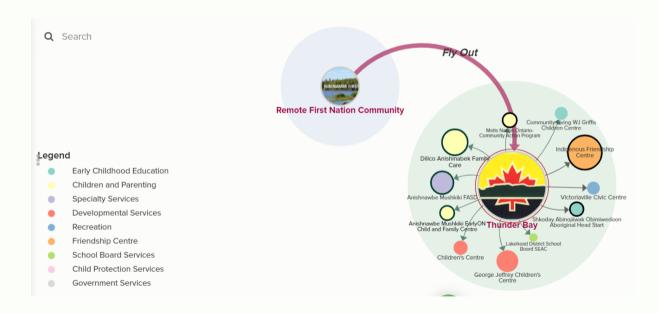
Taking a closer examination of the available supports and services in Sioux Lookout in Figure 2 below, shows that the nearest non Indigenous service agency is Rainy River District Child and Family Services. This organization is responsible for a broad range of children's services from welfare services, parenting, developmental services, and early intervention. There are two other non-Indigenous specialty services; Firefly, which offers a range of specialty services i.e. speech and language, occupational therapy, autism; and Community Living Healthy Generation, which offers specialty services focusing on supports for families affected by Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). There are three Indigenous services and supports; Nishnawbe Gamik Friendship Centre, which offers a hub for child and parenting support; Tikinagan Child and Family Services which is mainly a child protection service; and the Waninawkang Aboriginal Head Start that offers early childhood education.

Q Search Fly Out Remote First Nation Community Rainy River District Child and Family Services Legend Early Childhood Education Children and Parenting Specialty Services Developmental Services Sioux Lookout Recreation Community Living Healthy Friendship Centre School Board Services Tikinagan Child and Family Child Protection Services Government Services Firefly

Figure 2: Sioux Lookout

Figure 3 shows in detail that in Thunder Bay, there are five Indigenous services and supports available. The Thunder Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre provides Aboriginal supports for families with children ages 0-6. It is predominantly a program-based suppor service, with a focus on delivering programs that meet Core Standards including family healing parenting skills, child development, family nutrition, cultural development and retention, community development and outreach. There other four Indigenous services and supports are: 3 Anishnawbe Mushkiki Aboriginal Health Centre, which offers a variety of child and parenting wellness programs and specialty services particularly focused on Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder; Dilico Anishinabek Family and Community Care services; Metis Nation of Ontario, Community Action Program for Children; and Shkoday Abinojewak Obimiwedoon Aboriginal Head Start. Non-Indigenous service providers offer a range of specialty and developmental services, special education advisory council, and recreation.

Figure 3: Thunder Bay



The rest of the system of non-Indigenous specialty services and supports that address specific medical diagnoses such as; Autism Spectrum Disorder, Cerebral Palsy, communication disorders, hearing and vision impairments, are located outside of Northern Ontario as shown in Figure 4 and requires further travel and associated accommodation costs.



Figure 4: Outside Northern Ontario

Findings from the community systems map indicate that there are limited services available and accessible to Indigenous families living in remote Northern communities. To avail of this range of services and supports, families and children need to fly out, distancing them from their community and the support of their community members. This does not align with their cultural values of connectedness and interdependence with their community, which are strong determinants of their health and well-being. Based on the inaccessibility of these early childhood services and supports, this system does not satisfactorily meet the rights of the Indigenous child. To fulfill the rights of the Indigenous child, a system of supports and services need to be placed in an accessible and coordinated manner that is culturally appropriate(2).

Implications from these findings suggest that a mechanism for implementing children's rights, particularly Indigenous children living in remote locations needs to be in place. We can find some examples in remote Indigenous communities in Australia where community-led early years services are integrated(5). We believe the approach is to have an early childhood education and care program with integrated support services for children and their families built around it. These support services may include specialty health services such as hearing; speech pathology and maternal health; transition to school programs; cultural and arts programs; behavioural management programs; parenting programs; playgroups; legal and housing supports; and family violence counselling. The services have Indigenous community boards who ensure that culture is embedded throughout all service provision. This approach recognizes and highlights young Indigenous children as rights holders and the integration of early years services ensures services and supports address the needs of the whole child and family.

In Northern Ontario, there is a need to evaluate whether the current funding for services and supports for children with disabilities living in remote locations, can be thoughtfully allocated to more meaningful ways that will support a sense of community for Indigenous families. In essence, we have to funnel funding where the system of service and support harnesses the power of the 'village' in raising our Indigenous children.

Recommendations for Services and Service Providers



Coordinated and seamless referrals and warm transfers from service providers would ensure a smooth transition from one type of service to another.



Having a single plan of care for the child and family as they access various service providers would ensure that the plan is responsive to the growing needs of the child and family.



Services should have Indigenous community boards who ensure that culture is embedded throughout all service provision

References

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Rosario Dizon is a Registered Early Childhood Educator and has completed her Resource Consultant certificate at Seneca College. She is past President of the Early Childhood Resource Teacher Network of Ontario. Rosario has more than 15 years of experience working with families and children with disabilities and collaborating with community partners to build inclusive communities. She also has extensive experience in mentoring and building the capacity of early childhood educators in promoting inclusive practices in early learning settings.