When teaching about the state of indigenous communities today, Cree/Métis Elder Maria Campbell (2008) sometimes calls upon an image provided to her by the late Anishinaabe Elder Peter O’Chiese. Campbell recalls that O’Chiese used to liken colonization to someone dropping a complex and snugly fitting puzzle, causing it to shatter into a million pieces. This shattered puzzle is an evocative way to describe the impact of settler intrusion into the worlds of indigenous peoples. O’Chiese used the image to encourage younger generations like Campbell and her students to go back and pick up the pieces of cultures, world views, families, and communities that were left scattered along the way. Decolonization can thus be seen as the process of bringing those scattered pieces back together to rebuild indigenous peoples and worlds and make them whole again. How do Aboriginal families fit into this process?

If we think about the puzzle as indigenous America, one of the central components was relationships: relationships between individuals, families, and communities as well as relationships with the land and the ancestral and spirit worlds. Campbell talks about the teachings she received from O’Chiese regarding the shattering of Wahkohitowin, a Cree word that can be defined as kinship relative, relationships, or the act of being related to each other and all things in creation. Of all the abuses that indigenous people experienced, the attack on indigenous relationships was perhaps the most devastating, for healthy indigenous communities depended on how they managed relationships and systems of relations.

The alarmingly high levels of crisis and poverty in many Aboriginal communities, identified in the final report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP 1996) and in recent findings of demographic and social surveys (e.g., Statistics Canada 2003) are evidence of the collateral damage from ruptured relationships on a number of levels—social, environmental, and spiritual. But as many contributors to RCAP and current community members note, the strength of relationships still holds in many families and communities, and many people are actively engaged in picking up the pieces of indigenous families, communities, and cultures and putting them back together. Family relations are...
a core element of Wahkohtowin, and the shattering and subsequent rebuilding of Aboriginal families are the subject of this chapter.

The authors acknowledge the challenge of writing broadly about 'Aboriginal families', since First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples are so diverse, both between and also within these categories. First Nation coastal cultures are, for example, very different from Plains cultures, as are Métis people who come from different geographies, and so on. Some common values, practices, and histories can be called upon, however, to construct a cohesive portrayal of the past, present, and anticipated future of Aboriginal families. Writing about Native American family systems, John Red Horse has asserted that 'the essence of traditional life is captured through important markers such as spirituality and relationship patterns among kin.' He adds, 'Indeed, these may serve as vital concepts in any general theory of American Indian culture' (Red Horse 1997, 243). A look at the shared characteristics of Aboriginal family systems can therefore tell us a lot about some of the fundamental elements or foundations of indigenous America, both past and present.

In this chapter, we focus on Aboriginal families using First Nation and Métis examples. We have not included the Inuit because we lack direct experience with Inuit families and we are not personally familiar with their distinct family practices and systems. Our chapter builds specifically on our understanding and experiences with mostly Algonquian, Haudenosaunee, and west coast peoples. We begin by examining the family's historical function and colonization's shattering effect on it, before moving into a profile of contemporary Aboriginal families and future directions.

Looking Back

Foundations: Kinship and Historical Aboriginal Societies

Family, as it was known in land-based or 'traditional' Aboriginal communities, was significant because it was the core societal unit. People lived and worked in extended family groups that allowed them to harvest and share resources through hunting, trapping, fishing, gathering, and agriculture. These groups often changed in size depending on the season and the resources available. This comes across in the following description of the Ojibway:

Ojibwa familial units would have looked rather different to an observer at different times of the year. In early autumn, in shallow water areas where wild rice grew, extended-family groups gathered canoes full of grain and processed it for winter use. After the rice harvest, Ojibwa groups both shrank in size and multiplied in number as people scattered to hunting and trapping areas inland from main bodies of water. The more northerly the environment, the smaller the winter camps tended to be, but no group could easily survive without at least two male hunters and two or more women to care for children, process food and furs, make clothing and moccasins, and net snowshoes, among other things (Peers and Brown 2000, 532).

Peers and Brown point out that the family was 'the primary unit of economic production within Ojibwa culture' (532), and the same could be said of other traditional Aboriginal societies (Volo and Volo 2007). Indeed, the RCAP report begins with a focus on family 'because it is our conviction that much of the failure of responsibility that contributes to the current imbalance and distress in Aboriginal life centres on the family' (RCAP 1996). Because so much of the economy depended on family well-being, marriages were considered in terms of how the extended family might ensure survival through resource procurement. Historians of the fur trade have demonstrated that the intermarriage of Aboriginal women with traders was considered beneficial to Aboriginal communities as well as to traders, since these unions cemented alliances that served the trade (Brown 1980; Van Kirk 1980). Business was family business, and survival was a matter in which everyone in the family played a part. Marriages were often arranged because this allowed families to match skills and needs for community well-being.

Prior to the implementation of the Indian Act, Aboriginal communities were governed by families and family alliances. In hunting societies such as the Ojibway, extended families were typically led by elder men, and often there were different types of 'chiefs'—for hunting, warfare, and so on (Peers and Brown 2000). Métis communities had chiefs and captains of the buffalo hunt, which were organized along family lines. In many west coast societies, hereditary chieftainships were passed to men or women. As leaders of the 'house', Aboriginal women also held political authority as clan mothers, through women's councils, or as leaders of extended families (Anderson 2000). First Nation and Métis Elders talk about 'head women' in their families, women who governed large extended families through the authority they had earned during their lifetime. This authority came from recognition that the elderly women made decisions based on the best interest of the family and future generations, a principle that is evident in a number of Aboriginal societies (Anderson 2000).

Spiritual responsibilities were also often managed through family networks. Different families were keepers of different bodies of knowledge and practice,
which were passed down through biological family members or to people who were adopted into their families for that purpose. Some families were known as healers or medicine people; some held sacred stories or songs. Collectively, these groups of families kept sacred knowledge and practices alive over the generations.

Dickason (2009) has described the changing and varied social structures among First Nation peoples over the past 600 years. Before contact, many Aboriginal peoples were organized according to clans, which represented broader kinship ties, both among humans and with the natural world (i.e., bear clan, eagle clan). Depending on the culture, clan membership passed through the mother (matrilocal) or the father (patrilocal). Clans were an important part of communities' social, political, and spiritual organization; they were the vehicle through which many Aboriginal societies governed themselves. Clans were led by 'head men' and 'head women' who ensured adherence to community laws. One law was that people could not marry within their clan, which prevented marriage between 'relatives'. Aboriginal societies often also organized collective and community responsibilities according to clan—one clan might be responsible for overseeing health, others for negotiating with outsiders, and so on. The family and clan one was born into thus prescribed one's greater role in society and the way in which one built family and community into the future.

Child-rearing was typically shared in family groups; traditional Aboriginal communities were the prototypical model of 'it takes a village to raise a child'. Children were raised with siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents and great-grandparents, great-aunts and great-uncles. Although children knew their biological siblings, parents, and grandparents, other members of the extended family could be equally considered a parent, grandparent, or sibling. The names people used to refer to one another are telling in this regard: a child might refer to any elderly person in his or her community simply as 'grandmother', Kokhiim, or 'grandfather', Mosam (to use Cree as an example). Likewise, elders would refer to young people in the community as 'grandchild', Nosam, and treat them accordingly. In Algonquin and Haadensoomne societies, similar words could be used to address one's mother and her sisters (ni howi, 'mother', and nikowis, 'little mother' or aunt in Cree), and the offspring of one's mother's sister or father's brother would be considered a sibling. Thus, a child could have many mothers and fathers, grandparents, and sisters and brothers who played intimate roles in their upbringing. Roles relating to discipline, teaching, and play were divided up in a systematic way among kin so that children received comprehensive and balanced guidance as they moved towards adulthood.

Through ceremonies, children were both challenged and celebrated as they moved through different life-stage milestones, and these events were grounded in community support. Babies were held and passed around at naming ceremonies, children were collectively celebrated at walking out ceremonies (first steps), and youth were taught by various community members in puberty fasts and seclusions. These practices contributed to children's sense of belonging and responsibility.

It was considered vital to educate children about their roles and responsibilities in relationships because community survival depended on how well the family worked together and how well they managed their relationships with the animals and the land. Maria Campbell has explained the significance of interconnecting roles within family and community by calling on a diagram shared by O'Cheese (see Figure 4.1). Within this system, Campbell explains, children were at the heart of the community. Everyone worked together for the children's well-being because children represented the future and the survival of the people. Elders sat next to the children because they were their teachers and typically their caregivers. It was understood that elders and children had a special bond, since they were closest to the spirit world on either side. Women looked after the circle of home and community. It is important to note that women were not caregivers in the Western patriarchal sense of being the family servant. Rather, it was women's job to manage the home and community in the most effective way. Men were charged with protecting and providing. They traveled outside the communities and brought in resources that women distributed and managed.

In this system, everyone was involved in ensuring the health and well-being of present and future generations. Responsibilities were organized according to gender and age so that everyone cared for their relations and was also cared for. Reciprocity in relationships was important and can be seen, for example, in the relationships between elders and children. Elders were teachers to children, who were expected in turn to help their elders. People also carried responsibilities to animals and plants, to the natural and spirit worlds, and were cared for in turn by these entities. These interconnecting responsibilities created a comprehensive web of relationships, and children were raised to know their responsibilities to this web.

This brief overview demonstrates the significance of families and family systems in traditional Aboriginal societies. Family underpinned everything from economics to politics, law, and social order, so the health of the family and family systems was paramount. 'Family' meant life itself, as Nuu-chah-nulth hereditary chief Richard Atleo has expressed:

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In the Nuu-chah-nulth worldview it is unnatural, and equivalent to death and destruction, for any person to be isolated from family or community. Nuu-chah-nulth life, therefore, is founded by creating and maintaining relationships (Atleo 2004, 27).

The following section will demonstrate how relationships, and thus life itself, were violated for Aboriginal peoples.

**Dismantling the Foundation**

From the earliest encounters, Aboriginal peoples were coerced and threatened by European newcomers to change the way they managed their families. This was not simply because the newcomers didn’t like the way indigenous peoples raised their children (although indigenous child-rearing practices were radically different from those in seventeenth-century Europe). Aboriginal family systems came under attack because they stood in the way of colonization.

In seventeenth-century New France, the Jesuits complained that Aboriginal children enjoyed the liberty of ‘wild ass colts’ and noted an ‘excessive love of their offspring’ among the peoples they encountered (Miller 1996, 46, 55). This was problematic to the Jesuits because the autonomy and respect afforded to children in Aboriginal societies made it difficult for them to ‘train’ and assimilate children through the schools they were trying to establish. These early missionaries had ascertained that working with children held the most potential for converting Aboriginal populations to Christianity, but they were thwarted by the strength of the Aboriginal family. Parents were reluctant to give up their children, and women were hostile to patriarchal family structures that would rob them of their power (Anderson 1991; Miller 1996). Yet these efforts to displace Aboriginal women and appropriate the education of Aboriginal children were not easily abandoned; they formed a central part of church and state policy and practice well into the twentieth century.

Pressures to change Aboriginal family systems intensified toward the end of the nineteenth century as Canada became a nation and settlers were encouraged to move west. Rose Stremlau connects the dismantling of kinship and removal from the land in the United States. She describes how reformers during the late nineteenth century campaigned for allotment, the subdivision of tribal lands into individual homesteads, as a way to dismantle ‘the kind of societies created by different systems of property ownership’ (Stremlau 2005, 276). Kinship systems supported indigenous relationships with the land and vice versa, and all of these relationships would need to be dismantled to get rid of ‘the Indian problem’. Stremlau writes:

Reformers concluded that kinship systems, especially as they manifested in gender roles, prevented acculturation by undermining individualism and social order, and they turned to federal Indian policy to fracture these extended indigenous families into male-dominant, nuclear families, modelled after middle-class Anglo-American households (Stremlau 2005, 265).

During this period, ‘field matrons’ were sent out by the Office of Indian Affairs in the US to train Native American women in the ways of Victorian womanhood (Emmerich 1991), and female missionaries in Canada took on a primary role in trying to convert Aboriginal women to Euro-Western standards of conjugality and domesticity (Perry 2005; Rutherford 2002). At the same time, indigenous motherhood came under attack through public discourse in which indigenous mothers and indigenous women in general were cast as dirty, lax in discipline, and in need of training (Carter 1997). With these tools and pretexts, the patriarchal nuclear family was forced upon indigenous peoples across North America.

All of these incursions were damaging to Aboriginal families, but two twentieth-century strategies in particular caused an implosion that sent communities reeling: residential schools and the child welfare system. Beginning in 1879 and operating until 1996, residential schools took over the role of raising Aboriginal children in Canada. Although they resisted, many communities lost whole generations of children; by 1930, almost 75 per cent of First Nation school-aged children were in residential schools (Fournier and Crey 1997, 61). Many of these children were abused physically, sexually, emotionally, and spiritually. Many never returned to their communities, and many found themselves alienated from their families, lands, and cultures when they did. When residential school survivors became parents, many struggled because they had not experienced positive parental role modelling, having been raised in abusive institutions. Residential schools thus blew Wałkohtowin apart in a way that no policy or practice had done before. In the wake of this devastation, child welfare authorities removed Aboriginal children from their homes in record numbers in what has come to be known as the (1960s) ‘Sixties Scoop’ (Miller 1996). By the early 1980s, Native children represented less than 4 per cent of the population but made up 50, 60, and 70 per cent of the child welfare caseloads in Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan, respectively (Bennett and Blackstock 1992).

O’Chiese and Campbell would link colonization, residential schools, and child welfare interference by referring to the aforementioned diagram of social
relations (Figure 4.1). In this narrative, men were the frontline of resistance to colonization through warfare and negotiations, and when these lines broke down, women protected the culture and family by resisting change. But in spite of colonial inroads made among indigenous men and women, strong kinship systems and relationships with the land persisted into the twentieth century. State authorities came to the same conclusion the Jesuits had centuries earlier: the fastest way to overtake Aboriginal communities, deal with ‘the Indian problem’, and gain access to land was to assume the education and rearing of Aboriginal children. Ojibway educator Sally Gaiłzebyongai explains that the mass removal of children from Aboriginal communities was akin to ripping the heart and centre out of indigenous worlds (Wemigwans 2002). Once the heart was taken, everything else began to shatter and fall away: elders had no one to teach, women had no one to care for, and men had nothing to protect and provide for. This created the conditions for an unravelling that communities struggle with to this day (see Figure 4.1).

The ongoing repercussions of these colonial intrusions are evident in the material presented in the next section.

**First Nation and Métis Families Today**

We begin this section with some basic demographic and socio-economic information about contemporary First Nation and Métis families. This information will be followed by a discussion of the current quality of life and emerging trends among Aboriginal families. This discussion lends itself to observations about the general character of Aboriginal families today and an understanding of where they might go in the future.

**Basic Characteristics of First Nation and Métis Families**

Between 1996 and 2006, the total population of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples in Canada grew by 45 per cent, nearly six times faster than the 8 per cent increase of the non-Aboriginal population over the decade (Statistics Canada 2006). Table 4.1 shows the number of residents in Canada who reported having a primary Aboriginal identity in the 2001 and 2006 censuses (Statistics Canada 2006).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent of Canadian Population</th>
<th>Percent of Aboriginal Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>976,305</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>1,172,790</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal ancestry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>1,300,000</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>1,700,000</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North American Indian</td>
<td>698,025</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Métis</td>
<td>389,785</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inuit</td>
<td>50,485</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Aboriginal identity</td>
<td>34,496</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The population of First Nation people on reserves is growing at a rate of 2.3 per cent annually, which is three times the overall rate for Canadians. The most remarkable trend can be found in the growth of Aboriginal children and families. With an overall median age of 27 years, the Aboriginal population is very young compared to the overall median age of 40 years. Table 4.2 provides available data on the youth of Inuit, Métis, and First Nations (registered and non-status Indians who make up this group are shown separately) in 2001 and projections for 2026. In 2006, about 9 per cent of the Aboriginal population was under five years, and 10 per cent was five to nine years old (Statistics Canada 2006). The proportion of Aboriginal people under five is approximately 70 per cent greater than the proportion of non-Aboriginal youngsters of that age.
Statistics Canada indicates that 40 per cent of First Nation people currently live on reserve, but First Nation people also experience a great deal of mobility. A steady migration of Aboriginal families into urban centres has been noted over the last three censuses: 54 per cent of Aboriginal families live in urban areas with a concentrated population of 1000 or more. Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Vancouver have the largest Aboriginal populations. Another one-third live on reserves, in self-governing First Nations, and in Métis settlements.

Aboriginal peoples suffer disproportionately from poverty, as the average household income of Aboriginal families in Canada in 2006 was little more than one-third of that of non-Aboriginal families. The 2006 census data estimated that 41 to 52.1 per cent of Aboriginal children live below the poverty line (depending on criteria for defining poverty and whether estimates include children with Aboriginal identity or ancestry). One in four First Nation children living on reserve lives in poverty, compared to one in six Canadian children as a whole. The gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal adults in average annual incomes has increased over the past quarter-century (Cooke, Beavon, and McHardy 2004). Aboriginal unemployment rates exceeded the jobless rate of the population as a whole in every province, with rates in Saskatchewan and Manitoba more than triple the overall rate.

Related to employment and household income, average educational attainment among Aboriginal parents, though improving, is lower than that among non-Aboriginal parents. This gap seems to be narrowing; for example, the proportion of Aboriginal people who have attained a high school diploma or education beyond high school increased from 38 per cent in 1981 to 57 per cent in 2001. Yet by 2001, the proportion of Aboriginal people who had not attained a high school diploma was 2.5 times higher than the proportion among non-Aboriginal Canadians.

**Quality of Family Life**

While some First Nation and Métis families are thriving, the evidence related to poverty and other socio-economic factors indicates that a majority of these families are not. Aboriginal leaders and scholars have asserted that the deteriorated quality of life for First Nation and Métis families is a direct consequence of the extent to which their parents and grandparents were negatively affected by colonization (RCAP 1996). These scholars make particular reference to the negative and intergenerational repercussions of residential schooling. Many of today’s First Nation parents and grandparents did not learn parenting skills because they were institutionalized from a young age (Dion Stout and Kipling 2003; Mussell 2005). Many lost confidence in their capacity to engage in the kinds of nurturing social interactions with young children that promote attachment and intimate social interaction (Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski 2003). These interactions are the primary vehicles for promoting self-esteem, positive cultural identity, empathy, language development, and curiosity about the world during infancy and early childhood.

Child welfare involvement exacerbated the disruption of Aboriginal families that began in residential schools, and this legacy continues today. Children who were removed from their homes and communities often suffered not only from a lack of nurturance but also from a crippling loss of identity because of being displaced from their homes, communities, lands, and cultures (Newhouse and Peters 2003). In addition to these losses, Aboriginal families have experienced trauma because of forced relocation of villages, the dispersion of clans, and urbanization.

Aboriginal peoples also suffer from the ongoing and pervasive influences of government policies and variations in access to supports and services. These conditions result in a very different quality of life for most First Nation and Métis families compared to most non-Aboriginal families in Canada. First Nation and Métis family life is a function, in large part, of the quality of the environments in which they are embedded, including social, economic, political, and physical conditions. Many of the risks and difficulties facing First Nation and Métis parents and their children arise from ongoing racism, political oppression, and structural factors. The latter include poverty, environmental dispossession

### Table 4.2 Median Age and Population under 25 for Aboriginal Groups* and Canada**, 2001 and 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Median age (in Years)</th>
<th>Percent Population 0-14 Years</th>
<th>Percent Population 15-24 Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Inuit</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Métis</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Registered Indian</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-status Indian</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Canadian population</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2026</td>
<td>Inuit</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Métis</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Registered Indian</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-status Indian</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Canadian population</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation 2007.
and degradation, and lack of community-based education, health, and family support programs that incorporate First Nation and Métis knowledge and are relevant to local circumstances (Salee 2006). All of these factors contribute to the quality of life indicators discussed below.

**Shattered Families and Lone-Parent Households**

The pattern of shattered families that started with disruptive government policies is evident today in the reportedly high rates of lone-parent families. Census data indicate that more First Nation and Métis mothers are lone parents and, overall, more Aboriginal children (35 per cent) than non-Aboriginal children (17 per cent) live in lone-parent households. Lone parenting is even more common among Aboriginal families living in urban areas, where more than 50 per cent of Aboriginal children live in single-parent homes compared to 17 per cent of non-Aboriginal children. Most lone-parent households are headed by mothers, although there are also more Aboriginal single-father-headed households (6 per cent) compared to non-Aboriginal single-father households (3 per cent) (Health Canada 2003).

It is possible that census data convey a distorted picture of life in First Nation and Métis communities, where households may include a varied and changing array of relations. Parents who are co-parenting may not be legally married and therefore not recognized. While census data are suggestive, there is no direct measure of fathers or mothers, and the numbers of lone parents may be overestimated. Individuals counted as lone parents may, in fact, be supported by extended family networks. Nonetheless, the reported high incidence of lone parenthood is a concern because of the potential impacts on the social and economic well-being of all family members; lone parenting is associated with a greater probability of living in poverty (Weitzman 2003). This is particularly likely for adolescent mothers, a phenomenon that is much more common among First Nation and Métis women than among non-Aboriginal women (Statistics Canada 2006). The number of First Nation children born to adolescent women has remained high since 1986 at about 100 births per 1000 women, a rate that is seven times higher than the rate for other Canadian adolescents and comparable to the adolescent fertility level in the world’s least developed countries such as Nepal, Ethiopia, and Somalia (Guimond and Robitaille 2008).

Statistical data and anecdotal reports from First Nation and Métis communities and family-serving agencies indicate that many First Nation and Métis fathers are elusive when it comes to family life. Increasing alarm about this pattern motivated an inaugural study involving interviews with 80 First Nation and Métis fathers of young children (Ball 2010). Statistical data sources show that as a group, and compared to non-Aboriginal men, First Nation and Métis men have a higher prevalence of living in poverty, homelessness, and unemployment (Statistics Canada 2003), nine times more incarceration (Correctional Service Canada 2006), and higher rates of suicide, mental and physical health problems, and injuries resulting in hospital admission (Health Canada 2003). Combined with negative social stigma, media stories, and expectations for their roles as fathers, First Nation and Métis men face formidable obstacles to positive involvement as fathers. The vast majority of the 80 fathers interviewed reported three or more of these problems as creating difficulties for connecting with their children, playing a role in family life, or sustaining connection with their children across changes in their relationships with their children’s mother or other changes in their lives (Ball 2010). Virtually all of the 80 men described past or current challenges with mental health or addictions, and most were struggling to generate a living wage and to secure adequate housing. Research about non-indigenous fathers shows significant correlations between father involvement and developmental outcomes for children, mothers, and fathers (Allen and Daly 2007). Father absence is associated with more negative developmental and health outcomes for children and fathers (Ball and Moselle 2007). Grand Chief Edward John of the BC First Nations Summit contends that ‘Aboriginal fathers may well be the greatest untapped resource in the lives of Aboriginal children and youth’ (John 2003).

As Claes and Clifton (1998) and Mussell (2005) point out, the frequent lack of involvement of First Nation and Métis fathers in their children’s lives tends to be widely interpreted as reflective of their indifferent attitudes. There is little acknowledgement in family support programs of the unique challenges faced by these men, most of whom have no memories of positive experiences with a father or fathers in their own lives as children and youth. And while there is a trend toward increasing numbers of lone-father-headed households, there are no programs specifically designed to help First Nation and Métis men become effective supports for their children’s health and development (Ball and George 2007).

**Aboriginal Child Welfare**

One of the direst consequences of structural inequities confronting Aboriginal peoples and the legacies of colonial disruptions is that Aboriginal children continue to be greatly overrepresented among children in government care. An early study estimated that in the late 1990s, Aboriginal children represented between 30 and 40 per cent of children in Canada in out-of-home care in
the late 1990s (Farris-Manning and Zandstra 2003). In 2005, analysis of child welfare data in three provinces revealed that a total of 10.23 per cent of First Nation children on reserves had been apprehended by child welfare agencies or placed voluntarily by parents in government care compared to 0.67 per cent of non-Aboriginal children (Blackstock et al. 2005). Currently, approximately 27,000 First Nation children under 17 are in government care, three times the number enrolled in residential schools at the height of their operations or at any time in Canada’s history (Blackstock 2003). In some provinces, Aboriginal children outnumber non-Aboriginal children in care by a ratio of 8 to 1, and removals of Aboriginal children from home into child welfare custody appear to be increasing.

The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (Trocmé et al. 2005) has shown that the primary reason Aboriginal children enter the child protection system is neglect, including physical neglect, lack of supervision of a child at risk of physical harm, or other examples of inadequate provisions for a child’s health, safety, or education. The study found that among children coming to the attention of the child protection system, Aboriginal children are twice as likely as non-Aboriginal children to be part of a family that survives on social benefits and lacks full-time employment and to live in public housing or housing that is unsafe or overcrowded and many times more likely to have family members engaged in chronic patterns of substance misuse (Trocmé et al. 2005). As Blackstock and other scholars argue, these factors indicate the grave socio-economic conditions of Aboriginal peoples. A child welfare study (Trocmé et al. 2006) indicates that First Nation children are not overrepresented among reports for child abuse compared to other children for whom a child welfare investigation is carried out, suggesting some protective factors at work in families, however impoverished.

The Assembly of First Nations (2006a) has commented that there is insufficient funding to support some First Nation families to keep their children safely at home, coupled with seemingly unlimited funds to remove them. Shortfalls in funding for prevention and early intervention programs within child welfare services on reserves have been acknowledged by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (Blackstock et al. 2005). In addition, no program within the department actively funds and monitors family support programs and early intervention services that are understood in Canada as important for promoting the transition to parenthood, effective parenting, and family stability—services that are available to First Nation children living off-reserve, Métis families, and all other Canadian families through provincial systems (Blackstock et al. 2005; McDonald and Ladd 2000).

Health Consequences of Poverty and Shattered Families

First Nation and Métis families experience frequent and often serious health problems causing loss of family members, long absences of family members for health care in cities far from home, frequent disruption of family routines in order to travel to health services, and accommodations within the home environment and household routines to meet the needs of a family member with a physical disability, psychiatric disorder, or chronic disease (Ball 2008; de Leeuw, Fiske, and Greenwood 2002). Research reviews have found evidence of poorer health outcomes on almost every health indicator among Aboriginal compared to non-Aboriginal children (Canadian Institute for Health Information 2004) and adults (Adelson 2005). For example, they are more likely to be born prematurely, to be diagnosed with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), to have a physical disability, or to suffer accidental injury. First Nation and Métis children have a 1.5 times greater probability of dying before their first birthday (Health Canada 2005) and a higher rate of hospitalization for acute lung infections (Canadian Institute for Health Information 2004).

The Aboriginal Peoples Survey conducted by Statistics Canada (2001) asked First Nation parents living off-reserve about the health of their children. This survey found that parents rated their children’s health lower than that of all children in the general population; the gap in ratings was largest for children under five. The survey showed that compared to all Canadian children, First Nation and Métis children living off-reserve are more likely to have been born with a birth weight under 2500 g (8 per cent of First Nation and Métis infants compared to 6 per cent of all Canadian infants), more likely to be accidentally injured (13 per cent compared to 11 per cent for all children), and less likely to eat breakfast.

In 1999, a First Nations and Inuit Regional Health Survey Committee (1999) reported that First Nation parents living on reserves and Inuit parents reported nearly twice the rate of severe disabilities among their children compared to non-Aboriginal parent reports. Prevalent disabilities included FASD, hearing loss, attention disorders, and learning disabilities. The highest rates were among First Nation children living on versus off-reserve. Health inequities such as these have been attributed to poverty, low-quality and overcrowded housing, limited education resulting in low health literacy, and high unemployment (Cooke, Beavon, and McHardy 2004). Adding a chronological perspective to these ecological determinants of health, the First Nations Centre (2005) reported that in 2002/3, six of 10 First Nation and Métis respondents to a regional health survey identified the legacies of residential schools as a significant contributor to their own and their children’s poorer health status. Data analysis indicated
that First Nation respondents’ health improved as a function of the number of years since family members were involved in residential schools (First Nations Centre 2005). Insufficient access to healing programs and other treatment options, particularly for First Nations living on reserves, was identified by parents as another contributor.

Chronic disease, severe learning disabilities, frequent illness, and overall poor health of children place enormous burdens on their caregivers in terms of financial implications, time and effort, parents’ sense of adequacy in being able to meet their child’s needs, and parents’ overall experience of stress. Coupled with a widely recognized lack of access to needed screening, diagnostic assessment, early intervention programs, treatment, and occupational therapy programs, particularly on reserves and in rural areas, many First Nation and Métis parents face enormous challenges on a daily basis with few resources.

**Families in Motion**

One noteworthy feature of life in First Nation and Métis families is the frequency with which they move. First Nations living off-reserve and Métis families move nearly twice as often as non-Aboriginal families (Statistics Canada 2006). First Nation families living on reserves move less often. Norris and Clatworthy (2006) refer to this high mobility as ‘churn’.

‘Churn’ refers to the very high rates of mobility and migration within urban areas, with high rates of in- and out-migration (to and from cities, between reserves and cities), and high rates of residential mobility within cities. These high rates of mobility and migration can impact in a number of ways, affecting the delivery of programs and services, and having disruptive effects on families and children. This is particularly relevant in the area of education, with indications that high mobility and change can negatively affect children’s educational outcomes.

Additional negative impacts identified by Norris and Clatworthy include the potential for family instability and dissolution and weak social cohesion in First Nation and Métis communities and neighbourhoods. The National Council of Welfare (2007) points out that the potential for these negative impacts is exacerbated when the family is headed by a lone parent and/or has low income and high needs, as do many First Nation and Métis families.

At the same time, First Nation and Métis parents often relocate as a strategy for gaining access to needed resources, including professional services and specialized programs for children with disabilities or health conditions, or education or employment for an adult family member (Ball 2006). Another phenomenon that sometimes accounts for relocating is that the boundaries of First Nation and Métis family units tend to be permeable and family members often transition from one home or town to another, one set of relationships to another, or divide their time among more than one place they call home. Sometimes an adult family member may leave the family unit temporarily or permanently because of difficulties in the primary–couple relationship. The remaining parent may welcome a new partner and one or more of his or her children or other relatives. Families may informally adopt a niece or nephew or even a neighbour. Families in urban centres may expand to include more distant relatives from rural or remote communities who come to the city for school, work, or special programs. The ‘open doors’ found in many First Nation and Métis families no doubt stem from the traditional extended family structures that were ubiquitous before colonization.

**Summary of Basic Characteristics and Quality of Life Indicators**

The quality of life of children everywhere depends not only on having necessary resources for survival and health but also on the well-being of their primary caregivers. No doubt some First Nation and Métis parents and their children draw on the many strengths of their cultural traditions and personal experiences of being raised in healthy families. Their cultures hold wisdom for child-rearing and positive predispositions toward children and youth. Values and approaches that inform socialization in many Aboriginal families include a recognition of children’s varying abilities as gifts, a holistic view of child development, promotion of skills for living on the land, respect for a child’s spiritual life and contributions to the community’s cultural life, transmission of a child’s ancestral language, and building upon strengths more than compensating for weaknesses. There is also evidence that many families still operate with the extended and fluid family structures and models that are part of Wahkkohtowin in traditional indigenous cultures. For example, data collected by Statistics Canada (2009) through an inaugural Aboriginal Children’s Survey indicate that the growing population of Aboriginal children is being raised in a wider variety of caregiver arrangements than are non-Aboriginal children. These findings demonstrate that some Aboriginal children continue to be supported through the extended family model of care: as shown in Table 4.3, Aboriginal children to age 14 are more likely to live with a grandparent or other relative than are non-Aboriginal children.

In spite of this promising evidence that remnants of Wahkkohtowin still hold, trends found in the 2006 census portray many challenges, including large
numbers of lone-parent households, very young parents, and families living in poverty. Many First Nation and Métis parents are struggling to hold their families together and to support their children’s health, development, and educational achievement.

A review of the data presented here draws attention to a few salient characteristics relevant to understanding First Nation and Métis families today, including the following:

1. The Aboriginal population of children under five is growing exponentially.
2. First Nation and Métis families tend to move much more often than non-Aboriginal families.
3. Families are increasingly urban-based.
4. Except for Aboriginal families living in urban census metropolitan areas, the average size of Aboriginal families is larger than the average size of non-Aboriginal families, with the largest families in rural areas off reserves.
5. While a majority of First Nation and Métis children live in two-parent homes, there is a much larger population of lone parents than among non-Aboriginal households. This trend is likely to continue.
6. Many First Nation and Métis families live in poverty, with low employment, education, and overall quality of life. Related to poverty, many families struggle to provide adequately for their children—a predicament that is the most frequent justification given by child protection agencies for removal of children from family to government care.

These characteristics depict circumstances that many Aboriginal families find themselves in as they work toward rebuilding their communities today.

Putting the Pieces Back Together

We will raise a generation of First Nations, Inuit and Métis children and youth who do not have to recover from their childhoods. It starts now, with all our strength, courage, wisdom and commitment.

Declaration of a collective of national Aboriginal organizations, quoted in Blackstock, Bruyere, and Moreau 2005, 1.

As the previous section demonstrates, First Nation and Métis families suffer the consequences of shattered families and communities in their everyday lives, and there is plenty of work to be done. In addition to reconsidering our relationships to the animals and the land, rebuilding Wahkohtowin will need to include ways to rebuild our human relations through residential-school healing programs, education and support for mothers and fathers during the transition to parenthood, infant development programs, quality child care, family-strengthening initiatives, family literacy, community development, employment, and social justice. Efforts are being undertaken in all of these areas, but it will take time and resources to rebuild healthy communities. To use residential-school healing initiatives as an example, Canadian government investments in the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (2006) have enabled important programs, tailored to local community groups, to aid in the healing process. Yet given the time needed to reconstitute strong cultural communities and family structures, federal government contributions to healing programs, administered by Aboriginal organizations, need to be recommitted for some time to come. Aboriginal people often assert that it took ‘seven generations’ to erode Aboriginal families, cultures, communities, and territories and it will take seven generations to rebuild their strength (Castellano 2002). This principle must be recognized in any dialogue around initiatives to rebuild the human relationships within Wahkohtowin.

Family healing is complex. Difficulties facing many First Nation and Métis families, such as high mortality and morbidity among infants and young children, apprehension of First Nation and Métis children into state care, early school leaving, and family dissolution, cannot be reduced simply by investing
in more medical care, parenting programs, and targeted school-based interventions. In the face of historically conditioned barriers, First Nation and Métis community representatives, leaders, advocates, practitioners, and investigators emphasize the need for adequately resourced, sustained, and culturally based strategies at every level of government to improve supports for First Nation and Métis families and particularly for young children and parents. Leaders have called for support to be delivered within the contexts of children’s families and cultural communities through community-driven programs operated by Aboriginal practitioners (Assembly of First Nations 1988; RCAP 1996). In other words, Aboriginal people are calling for strategies that, together, address a broad scope of issues and goals, co-ordinated holistically across sectors, to form a circle of supports to increase positive outcomes for First Nation and Métis children and their parents and to help rebuild a sense of community and positive cultural identification.

Although many initiatives could be highlighted to illustrate the good work of rebuilding indigenous families and communities, this chapter will conclude with examples that pertain specifically to children. For if the dismantling of families, communities, and lives really set in when the heart—the children—was ripped from the core, perhaps one of the most effective ways of rebuilding Aboriginal communities is to put the heart back in its place. A focus on children is particularly relevant considering the exponential growth of children in Aboriginal communities.

**Early Childhood as a Strong Foundation for Family Strengthening**

National organizations representing First Nation and Métis peoples have identified early childhood care and development (ECCD) training and services as priorities within a holistic vision of social development, population health, and economic advancement (see Canada Council on Learning 2007). In 1990, the Native Council of Canada (1990) undertook the first national effort to define Native child care and the meaning of cultural appropriateness with respect to the delivery of child care services. The council’s report, _The Circle of Care_, conceptualized a direct link between culturally relevant child care services that are controlled by First Nations and the preservation of First Nations cultures. First Nations scholar Margo Greenwood summarized:

> Aboriginal early childhood development programming and policy must be anchored in Indigenous ways of knowing and being. In order to close the circle around Aboriginal children's care and development in Canada, all levels of government must in good faith begin to act on the recommendations which Indigenous peoples have been articulating for early childhood for over 40 years (2006, 20).

In many First Nation and Métis communities and community-based organizations such as friendship centres, ECCD is seen as essential for protecting and enhancing the physical health, psychosocial well-being, and positive cultural identity of indigenous children and their families.

A review of non-formal and program literature, websites, newsletters, and agency reports yields a plethora of examples of community-based and community-involving Aboriginal ECCD programs that have been initiated in the past decade across the country. Steps that have been taken to develop First Nation and Métis capacity in the ECCD sector encompass training First Nation and Métis infant development and child care staff, mostly of a short-term, non-accredited nature, as well as creation of child care spaces, parent education resources and programs, and organizations that enable networking and resource exchange. Many of these programs reach out especially to families seen as needing extra support to provide adequate supervision, nutrition, and nurturance for their children to stop the cycle of recurrent removal of children by welfare agencies. Some programs reach out to children with health or developmental challenges. Many individual communities have developed their own approaches to home visiting programs, nurseries, and preschools, creating culturally based program elements and drawing upon curriculum found in early childhood programs, such as music and movement, storytelling, pre-literacy and pre-numeracy games, as well as parenting skills programs. A common objective of these programs is to reinforce the positive cultural identity of Aboriginal youngsters and their families. For example, program activities and materials often draw upon traditional motifs in arts and crafts, drama, dance, and stories and provide opportunities to engage with positive Aboriginal role models in child care and teaching roles.

**Aboriginal Head Start**

A significant contribution to family strengthening has come in the form of the federally funded Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) programs, which provide preschool and other kinds of early childhood programs to approximately 9100 First Nation children on reserves and approximately 4500 First Nation, Métis, and Inuit children in urban and northern communities (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada 2008). In total, about 8 per cent of Aboriginal children aged three to five attend AHS. A key feature of the AHS programs is the strong emphasis on parent involvement and family support. A community group that receives funding
for program delivery works with parents and other stakeholders to decide on program specifics, and the programs are managed in consultation with parent advisory committees. Some programs require parental commitment to volunteer or to make a monetary contribution. Overall, AHS programs deliver culturally based, community-specific programs embodying six components: (1) parent/family involvement; (2) education and school readiness; (3) health promotion; (4) nutrition; (5) social support; and (6) culture and language.

AHS programs help to fill gaps in services to support families during the early stages of family formation, when parents—many of them very young and with few resources—need social support and practical assistance (Ball 2008, Minister of Public Works and Government Services 2002). AHS programs have the flexibility to develop in ways that are family-centred, family-preserving, and delivered within a community development framework. The programs are informed by the communities’ internally identified needs and vision for improving the quality of life of young children and their families.

Some AHS programs have the potential to reduce the high rates of removal of children from their families and communities. Anecdotal reports in the non-formal literature and at gatherings often describe how the programs help the families of participating children to gain access to food, warm clothing, income assistance, and health, mental health, and social services. This is a uniquely promising aspect of AHS: one challenge for ensuring Aboriginal children’s access to needed supports and services is that they often do make it as far as the entry point in mainstream service delivery systems set up to meet the needs of children in middle-class families in urban centres (e.g., families with ready access to transportation as well as knowledge of how service systems work and how to advocate to get their child’s needs met). The potential for early childhood programs to become an entry point for young children and their caregivers, gradually introducing families to a range of other services and opportunities, has been documented in First Nations early childhood programs in BC (Ball 2005).

In view of a preponderance of lone-parent households, more investment is needed in quality, centre-based child care both to provide stimulating, safe environments for infants and children and to enable parents to further their education and training and to generate income. AHS and similar programs that are family-centred, holistic, preventive, and community-driven are one way that Canada can act to promote the health and development of young children who are the next generation of parents. Investments in AHS should be doubled to enable access by at least 20 per cent of eligible children. Expanded investments are also needed in First Nation and Métis community economic development, child welfare programs such as family support and parent education, and education outreach to children as well as adults.

Reconnecting First Nation and Métis Children with Their Families and Cultures of Origin

Significant numbers of First Nation and Métis children spend much of their childhood living in a series of foster homes or in adoptive families. Approximately one-quarter of children waiting for adoption in Canada are First Nation and Métis children (Adoption Council of Canada 2009). Across Canada, child and family service agencies operated by First Nation and Métis councils are innovating programs to reconnect children with their families of origin and/or with their cultural communities. For example, in British Columbia, the Métis Community Services Society operates a ‘Roots’ program to ensure that each Métis child and youth in government care has a plan that respects and preserves their Aboriginal identity and ties to their community and heritage. Another Métis program in BC is called The Circle of Life: Honouring the Spirit of the Family. This family preservation program works closely with families to provide education and support for Métis culture-based parenting, teachings from the Medicine Wheel, loss and grief counselling, family violence prevention, conflict resolution, life skills, and healing and spiritual growth. A third example is a program called Nong Sîla, a Lekwungen term meaning ‘many grandparents, many grandchildren’. This program arose in response to the fact that most First Nation and Métis children are placed with non-Aboriginal parents and these adoptees risk losing their cultural roots in their communities. The goal of Nong Sîla is to promote adoption strategies that are grounded in the needs and cultural traditions of urban indigenous peoples.

Child welfare policy reforms and expanded funding are needed to create effective systems of in-community placements for Aboriginal children needing temporary out-of-home care (e.g., kinship guardians and Aboriginal foster care) so that Aboriginal children and youth can maintain their identities and not be bereft of family, community, and the life that family and community provide, as described earlier in the quote by Chief Atleo.

Outstanding Work

On the whole, programs that serve Aboriginal children exist because Aboriginal people have advocated and worked tirelessly to secure the supports they perceive as necessary for change. Their successes are tempered by the knowledge that much work remains. Although Canada has an Aboriginal Action Plan (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development 1997), there is no legal
framework for implementing it and no mechanism for monitoring the extent to which it is implemented (Assembly of First Nations, 2006a). Federal, provincial, and territorial governments have failed to mobilize a thoughtful and co-ordinated response to improve the quality of life of First Nation and Métis families, beyond the level of the apology offered by the Canadian Government on 11 June 2008 (Office of the Prime Minister of Canada, 2008) for the multigenerational impacts of years of colonial interventions on First Nation and Métis children born into families today.

In terms of overall healing and support for adult caregivers, Ojibway investigator Chanielle Richmond and her colleagues (2008) find that First Nation and Métis adults report relatively high levels of social support. Yet it appears that colonial legacies have engendered some negative forms of social support in the form of relationship violence and peer pressure to engage in health-damaging behaviours (Richmond, 2009). Low social status, socio-cultural disruption, and the material deprivation of many First Nation and Métis families appear to combine to reduce their access to the kinds of social support and social networks that have been shown to be health-promoting in research with non-Aboriginal peoples (Link and Phelan, 1995). It is imperative to find ways of providing supports to Aboriginal mothers and fathers to regain the strengths of their ancestors in raising children and youth and caring for elders. A program of action research involving First Nation and Métis community groups could explore effective components of culturally based initiatives to support Aboriginal women and men during the transition to parenting and early family formation.

Investments in programs to prepare Aboriginal youth for parenthood are also imperative, given that many Aboriginal men and women begin having children early and have more children than non-Aboriginal Canadians. The United Nations Population Fund and countries with high adolescent fertility such as the United States implement strategies to reduce adolescent fertility and to meet some of the unique needs of adolescent parents. Few programs in Canada specifically assist individuals and communities to address high adolescent pregnancy rates or meet the needs of First Nation and Métis adolescent parents and their children. Sustained investments are needed to promote the success of Aboriginal youth in education, training, and transitions to the labour force, especially for girls. Research around the world has shown that employment that promotes social inclusion, a sense of purpose, and gender equality are the most effective measures to encourage young people to delay having children.

Regarding First Nation families living on reserves, whose well-being is the fiduciary responsibility of the federal government, the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society (2005) and the Assembly of First Nations (n.d.) have called for funding for quality child care, family support, prevention, and early intervention programs at par with provincial services for children living off reserves and settlements. Regarding First Nation and Métis children living off reserves primarily in urban centres, the National Association of Friendship Centres, the Congress of Aboriginal People, and the Métis National Council have called for implementation of policies to expand access to quality, culturally fitting ECECD and early intervention programs.

With respect to child welfare, the Wéndé report (Blackstock et al., 2005) draws on evidence from the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect to demonstrate the need to improve the funding formula for First Nations delegated child and family service agencies to support primary, secondary, and tertiary intervention services in First Nation communities on reserves. This would enable implementation of a policy of least disruptive measures for a child at risk of maltreatment or neglect (i.e., in situ rather than out-of-community foster placement or adoption). Examples of less disruptive measures include support for improved parenting, more supervision of children through placement in child care during the day, local access to services that the child or parent needs, supplementary food resources, or foster care with a relative instead of outside the community where the child cannot remain in contact with family members.

Among the efforts that First Nations and Métis organizations and communities are making to put the pieces of the family and community systems back together, many communities are forming their own child and family serving agencies. The range of programs and the scope of delegated authority for child welfare varies among these new agencies, from cultural consultation to mainstream agencies to a full range of family support, prevention, and early intervention services, as well as foster and adoption placement (Bala et al., 2004). The issues facing this agenda and ways forward are beyond the scope of the current discussion. The challenges are especially acute for communities on-reserve, partly as a result of federal funding shortfalls, a lack of credentialed First Nation and Métis child welfare practitioners, and difficulty recruiting qualified practitioners to work in settings with few support services or alternatives for children (Blackstock et al., 2006).

Finally, rebuilding Wôhkotowin will only succeed if poverty among First Nation and Métis children and their families is adequately addressed. The National Council of Welfare (2007, 26) links the high impoverishment of many Aboriginal families to their ‘tremendous programming needs, reliance on food banks, and cyclical poverty’. Poverty makes the health and development problems of Aboriginal children both more prevalent and more entrenched.
(Canadian Institute of Child Health 2000). In turn, poverty and a lack of practical supports for families make it difficult for parents to meet children's needs, contributing to a continuation of the time-worn pattern of government apprehension of First Nation and Métis children and their placement in foster and adoptive homes.

Conclusion

Aboriginal families will never look like they did in the past, when family was the foundation for indigenous economies, governance, social systems, and law. But the notion of Wahknohtowin can be reconstructed so that strong families and kinship systems and healthy relations with the natural world will make Aboriginal peoples strong again. As Aboriginal peoples and their allies come together to reconstruct the puzzle, many strengths exist to build upon; new pieces will be added and others adapted to fit new circumstances. Maria Campbell teaches that rebuilding piece by piece can involve something as small as a song, a story, or a gesture, working with traditional ways to reconstruct families and communities into the centuries to come.

Many Aboriginal children still have opportunities to be cared for by extended kin networks as they would have been in the past. But if we look at the structure of contemporary Aboriginal families and communities, we can also see a creative and adaptive process happening in the absence of blood kin. Marlene Brant Castellano (2002) notes that the extended family's traditional role is being assumed in many communities by Aboriginal agencies, many of which have borrowed from mainstream practice models and adapted them to reflect the community's culture. She describes how some Aboriginal adults, working on recovery, are finding their way 'home' not by returning to their original families but by knitting together connections in an urban environment with Aboriginal people who come from diverse nations, creating 'families of the heart' (2002, 1). This kinship model is evident in a story shared by Métis writer Joanne Arnott, who participated in a 'traditional parenting skills' program in Vancouver that was facilitated by 'Grandmother Harris'. Arnott's experience was one of 'home making' in which she was able to benefit from kinship support through the program's 'family of the heart' (Arnott 2006).

Another strength that will lend itself to rebuilding is the flexibility and accommodation to changing family configurations and new surroundings that many First Nation and Métis families have demonstrated over time. As was suggested by findings of the 2006 Aboriginal Children's Survey (Statistics Canada 2009), First Nation and Métis children may enjoy the benefit of multiple caregivers, of being raised by a community rather than in the nuclear and patriarchal family model that was imposed by colonial authorities. Ball's research on Aboriginal fathers is evidence of the complex, fluid, and mobile nature of Aboriginal families. Although this has often been cast in a negative light, it may also be seen as a strength to build on. Another strength is that Aboriginal families continue to work together to face adversities such as poverty. As the daughter—mother team of D. Memee Harvard-Lavell and Jeannette Corbiere-Lavell point out:

Even in its contemporary manifestation, as opposed to the more historical notions of communal tribal living, for most members of the Aboriginal community everyday survival is still dependent on extensive networks of family and friends who support and reinforce one another. Unlike the non-aboriginal middle-class whose adult members can generally afford to pay others to assume their familial responsibilities, such as child and elder care, those who have almost no economic opportunity, much less actual economic security, must rely heavily upon the help of others (2006, 189).

Between extended families and 'families of the heart', Aboriginal peoples have worked to meet the needs of children in their communities, and they call upon the genius of their cultures to do so. The Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres (2002), for example, demonstrates how families and communities work with children and youth on FASD by tapping into kinship models, working with the land, using traditional parenting techniques, participating in ceremonies, and drawing on the Aboriginal family as medicine. Other families are holding onto or reclaiming practices to strengthen individuals and rebuild families and communities. Naming ceremonies, walking out ceremonies, puberty seclusions, fasts, and traditional infant care practices (e.g., using a cradle board) reinforce these vital relationships.

In closing, we share a story told by Lakota scholar John Red Horse:

The Anishinaabe family drove its station wagon into a tight parking space at the Regional Native American Center in Minneapolis. Everyone in the family—above the age of toddler joined in unloading suitcases, folding chairs and bustles. A celebratory dance was being held tonight—the Wild Rice Festival—and the family was there to dance, sing, and visit kin as well as old friends. Once in the building, those family members who would dance this evening went to the dressing area and changed from street clothes to regalia. One daughter carried her 3-year-old son back to
the dance area; he was dressed in the regalia of a grass dancer. They got to their chairs, and the mother laid out a star quilt. She put her son on the quilt, and this was the first glimpse that any stranger had of the boy outside his mother's arms. These strangers looked at him with a sympathetic expression. The boy was disabled from the waist down.

As the evening wore on, the strangers were taken aback with the circle of care and concern organized around the boy by family and friends. He was the centre of attention. Elders, including grandparents and older aunts; older brothers, sisters, and cousins; and a host of teenage and adult friends joined together to meet the boy's needs: holding him when he became restive, carrying him around to retail stands, entertaining him with play; and supervising him when his mother was dancing. The strangers beamed with pride because the boy danced in his own way—from the waist up, with head and shoulders keeping time to the beat of the drums. He participated in every inter-tribal dance and entered the dance contest for little boys (Red Horse 1997, 243).

Like all Aboriginal stories, this one has many lessons and levels. The first observation might be that in many cases, extended family and community still work together, with children at the heart and centre. The significant presence of children in community gatherings comes across here; anyone who has spent time in an Aboriginal community will know that children are always around, even in business venues that might be considered off-limits in a mainstream setting. As with stories of FASD gathered by the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, Red Horse's story demonstrates that Aboriginal communities often recognize and honour children with different abilities and that cultural activities can be a way of providing them with a place and a way to participate. Red Horse's story, then, is the story of Aboriginal families, now and into the future—one of strengths and challenges; of time-honoured systems and cultures; of modern settings, emergent tools and techniques; of children at the heart and a resolute Wakhkotowin falling into place.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think family was identified as the most fundamental area of concern and the starting point for healing and hope in the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples?

2. Who took care of you as you grew up, and how did your experiences as a child contribute to how you view family now? In what ways is this similar to or different from the ways that Aboriginal peoples may have raised their children in the past?

3. What are Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal child and family serving agencies in your region doing to contribute to rebuilding the strength of First Nation and Métis families?

4. What challenges and opportunities do you see in your community or area of work that may affect the opportunities for First Nation and Métis families to a secure quality of life?

5. How might the growth of families of the heart as discussed by Marlene Brant Castellano contribute to the development of new kinds of 'kinship' networks and communities for Aboriginal peoples living in urban areas?

Further Readings


Notes

1. In this chapter, 'Aboriginal' is used to refer to First Peoples in Canada, which include First Nations, Inuit, and Métis as recognized in Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution. The term 'indigenous' (as used here) is inclusive of First Peoples internationally and, in particular, Native Americans.

2. We use 'traditional' in this paper to signify communities that were living in close relationship with the land. It is important to note that traditions and traditional ways are not static and that many of the values, principles, and practices that come from 'traditional' Aboriginal ways still operate in contemporary communities. Many traditional ways are also now being reclaimed to suit current generations.

3. These examples refer to Algonquian peoples.

4. Each source of data about Aboriginal peoples in Canada offers an incomplete set of information because of widely differing sampling opportunities and methods and different ways of asking questions, analyzing data, and reporting findings across data collecting agencies (e.g., Statistics Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Health Canada, National Aboriginal Health Organization). Thus, constructing a picture of First Nation and Métis families' quality of life and their health and development requires a synthetic process relying largely on proxies and anecdotal
and non-formal reports, along with a handful of program evaluations that are far from conclusive.

5. Several communities on reserves, including some with comparatively large populations such as the Mohawks of Akwesasne and Six Nations of the Grand River, did not participate in the 2006 census. The number of residents in Canada who report Aboriginal identity is considerably smaller than the number who report Aboriginal ancestry. Sources of population-level data about Aboriginal peoples are often conflicting and contested, and all are incomplete in terms of which populations of Aboriginal children have been surveyed.

6. To find bibliographies on the impact of residential schools, visit the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, www.ahf.ca.

7. Aboriginal offenders are increasingly overrepresented in the Canadian justice system. While Aboriginal people make up 3.3 per cent of the Canadian population, they account for 18 per cent of the federally incarcerated population and 16 per cent of people sentenced (Correctional Service Canada 2006).

8. The Aboriginal Children’s Survey is the first repository of Aboriginal parents’ reports on developmental milestones, health, and quality of life of young Aboriginal children in Canada (see Statistics Canada 2009). In 2006-7, more than 10,000 First Nation, Métis, and Inuit parents of children aged six months to five years participated in this new post-census survey conducted by Statistics Canada and guided by a group of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal advisors. The survey yielded quantitative data enabling disaggregated and combined analysis of development trends, estimates of health problems and developmental difficulties, and information on the perceived accessibility and frequency of utilization of programs and services for Inuit, Métis, and First Nation children living off-reserve across Canada.

9. The summary material presented here highlights some general characteristics and trends among First Nation and Métis families overall. However, as noted, there are many cultural groups among First Nation and Métis peoples and many variations among individuals within them. As well, many families today are composed of some children and adults with Aboriginal ancestry and some without, as couples with mixed ancestry have children and as family composition changes with separation, divorce, death, formal and informal adoption, and so on. Recognizing the diverse and hybrid character of First Nation and Métis families today is as important as knowing general trends when developing understandings, policies, and programs to support quality of life improvement and goal achievement among First Nation and Métis individuals, families, or communities.

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