



POLICY BRIEF 2024

Families United

Keeping Indigenous/BIPOC Families Together

Roberta Longclaws

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program takes place on the traditional and unceded territories of the *xʷməθkʷəjəm* (Musqueam), *Sḵwxwú7mesh* (Squamish) & *səlilwətaʔ* (Tsleil-Waututh) Coast Salish peoples.

GRAPHIC DESIGN

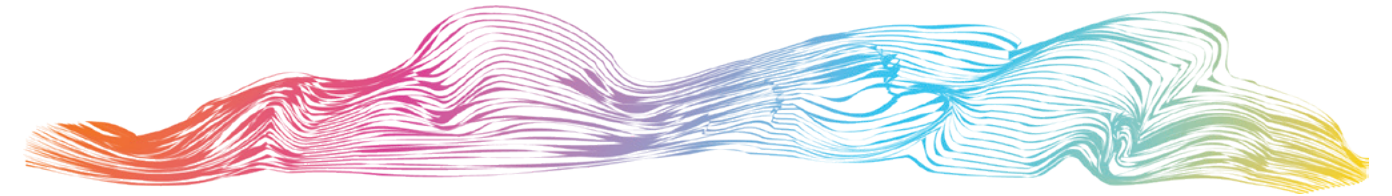
And Also Too

COVER ILLUSTRATION

Jessica Joseph

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About the LEVEL Initiative

LEVEL is a youth engagement initiative of Vancouver Foundation that aims to address racial inequity. We do this by investing in the leadership capacity of Indigenous, racialized, immigrant, and refugee youth to create more opportunities throughout the non-profit and charitable sector.

Despite being the fastest-growing youth populations in British Columbia, Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee youth don't have the same opportunities as other young people. Race continues to be a factor that hinders their ability to have a say in decisions that impact their lives.

LEVEL empowers these youth by building their capacity to challenge and change those systems that hinder their ability to build a more just world.

LEVEL consists of three pillars of work to advance racial equity

1. LEVEL Youth Policy Program
2. LEVEL Youth Organizing
3. LEVEL BIPOC Granting

About the LEVEL Youth Policy Program (LEVEL YPP)

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program (LEVEL YPP) brings together young people between the ages of 19 and 29 from across British Columbia who identify as being Indigenous or racialized immigrants or refugees. Indigenous and racialized newcomer youth are dispropor-

tionately impacted by certain public policies but are rarely included in the development and implementation of public policy process. The LEVEL YPP aims to provide these youth with equitable training and leadership opportunities to better navigate the public policy landscape, and to develop new tools and skills to influence, shape, and advocate for policy changes that are relevant in their own communities. Having young people directly involved in shaping policies that impact their lives is essential to creating systemic, meaningful change. The LEVEL YPP's training is grounded from and within Indigenous peoples' worldviews, which the program acknowledges, could vary from person-to-person or nation-to-nation. Indigenous worldviews place a large emphasis on connections to the land. This perspective views the land as sacred; where everything and everyone is related and connected; where the quality of the relationships formed are key in life; where what matters is the success and well-being of the community, and where there can be many truths as they are based on individual lived experiences.¹ As such, an important premise of this training is to centre and place a particular focus on the fact that the work that has gone into developing this training, as well as the training itself, has taken and will take place on unceded (never given away/stolen) territories of the *həŋq'əmin* 'əŋ-speaking Musqueam peoples, of the *Halkomelem*-speaking Tsleil-Waututh peoples, and of the *sníchim*-speaking *Sḵwxwú7mesh* (Squamish) peoples.

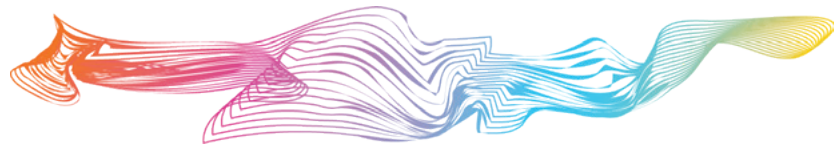
1. <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/indigenous-peoples-worldviews-vs-western-worldviews>

Biography

Roberta Longclaws

Roberta is an Indigenous mother of four. She started her advocacy journey in her early teen years, fighting for the rights and resources that were needed for youth in care. She was a part of an Urban Green Team, and it snowballed from there. Continuing into her adult years, she has been a voice in an Individual Placement and Support program (IPS) that helps youth and young adults, who are struggling with addictions and mental health, search for and keep jobs, or get into schooling. She has joined and suggested many programs to other young adults in her life, and is always trying to make sure everyone knows about the resources that are available, so they can gain the most that they can from them.

Roberta is passionate about seeing others thrive and getting what they need from the resources available, so that they are able to live comfortably and happily. Together is the best way to access things, and word of mouth is one of the best ways to find every bit of accessible and attainable knowledge.



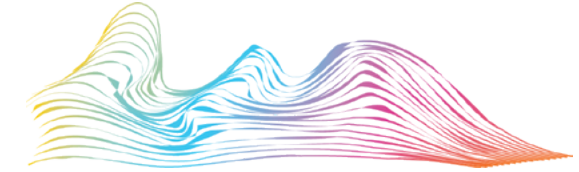
Executive Summary

In this policy, I am asking for stronger supports for Indigenous parents, and that of BIPOC / racialized parents, so that they are able to have more resources provided to them throughout the intake process for children in care.

There is a disproportionate number of Indigenous youth in care who are being taken from their homes and their families. And, while Indigenous children aren't the only ones being removed, currently, they make up a majority of the kids in care. This process has been something that has gone on for many years, and it needs to be addressed in the most-humane way possible.

“How can this be?” you may ask.

Well, the idea is to make sure that when there is a parent asking for help, when that parent is told to reach out to the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), that there is a proper intake process for the family to actually be helped, rather than scrutinized. We need to be able to reach out without fear of having the children taken out of their homes without properly evaluating what kind of help is being asked. Young parents should be able to believe that they are able to reach out and ask for help without being told that they shouldn't be asking for help. If there was help available to parents before things got bad, it would create a world of possibilities for things to be better.



We need to be able to reach out without fear of having the children taken out of their homes without properly evaluating what kind of help is being asked.

Not only for the children, but for the parents, as well. It seems, most times, that it is forgotten that the parent is also involved, and that the parent's positive mental state is the most-valuable thing to the children, so that they don't need to be placed in care.

Background

Reconciliation has already started on its journey when it comes to Indigenous peoples, and their families such as observing Orange Shirt Day (The National Day for Truth and Reconciliation), and land recognition.

But the only way to truly reconcile the hardships of Indigenous families is to keep them together, rather than tearing them apart. It is violent and traumatic to take a child away from a loving home which may have family members who are struggling with financial situations, or have mental-health struggles. The child's removal only serves to make things worse for the family and create a large gap that will ultimately be irreparable.

What does make sense is keeping the families together and having them attend classes, or counseling first, before deeming a parent "unfit to raise a child." Having the child out of home while making decisions about their lives truly makes no sense because then the parent doesn't feel like a parent anymore. There is a higher probability that the parent (or parents) will slip into addiction, or worse, once the child is taken away. They could lose everything, and then ultimately be unable to get their children back, when this scenario could've been avoided the entire time. When attending classes, I met other parents who had been ridiculed and reduced to nothing and then there was absolutely no hope of getting their children back. I was in that boat, but no matter what, I didn't give up hope. No matter how many times

I got kicked down I kept getting back up and proving that I would do anything to get my kids back. But as time went on it got harder and harder, and there was no hope left, but I kept going because I didn't know what else to do. Workers will literally work against you and use words against you and twist anything they can, even if that wasn't what you said, that is what they heard. They would then take anything they could, and use it in court, to MAKE SURE the child would never come home.

During this time, I experienced the worst of the worst when it comes to social workers. There was a specific social worker who was actively working against me and many other parents. My lawyer informed me of how hard this social worker worked to make sure I would never see my kids again. This situation is alive and still happening today to many other parents. This is a reflection of a system that is actively working overtime to ensure that Indigenous children are actively taken away from their parents. When I first reached out to MCFD, all I wanted was help; I wanted to join parenting classes. I was young and troubled and needed help, instead I was punished. Many people are still experiencing this and it needs to end.



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"3,331"

As of January 31, 2024, there were **4,835 children and youth in care in British Columbia**, and **3,331 of them were Indigenous**, which accounts for 68% of children and youth in care.¹ Although Indigenous students make up approximately 12% of the student population in BC, about 67% of youth in care identify as Indigenous.² Additionally, 49% of all children in care are Aboriginal, even though Aboriginal children constitute only 7% of the general population of children in the province.³

This is how serious the situation has gotten, and though valiant efforts are being made to change the removal of Indigenous children from their homes, it's still not enough. There have been many promises, but none have been acted on, and I'm here to make sure that you are reminded that this is still happening, we are still fighting. We are still here, and we are still needing help to get these kids home, and we still need to get their parents the proper resources to be able to PREVENT this pattern of removal from continuing.

Children and parents both experience the hardship it is to be away from each other for months, or even years, at a time. It can cause a break in the relationship where the child no longer respects the parents, depending on the child's age, where the parents will find difficulty in raising their own kids, who don't see the parents as parents anymore. The many bonds they have created with the kids that are just constantly ripped away from them.

These children get ripped from their homes, then ripped away from their foster homes, creating mental and emotional distress and distrust in the children. How are they supposed to know what's best for them when they're constantly getting moved from homes? As I mentioned earlier, this is a violent practice that has become relied on throughout the years. As a former youth in care, I got to experience this process firsthand. Not only did I not know my place in life, but I suffered mental-health consequences due to the constant moving around and instability. I'm sure many other families and children who have been subjected to the same situation are currently experiencing similar results. It's time for it to end, we are ready for a better life, for more resources to be available, and to be able to access them without fear or judgment. We know with these changes, we will make stronger family units and better lives for the children and parents involved.



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Proposal

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Access to parenting classes without having the parent lose the child would be ideal.

If the parent is seeking that kind of help, the help should be offered without taking drastic measures. Referrals to parenting classes that begin as soon as possible, because most of the classes favor the involvement and recommendation from MCFD.

2 Counseling for new parents would be extremely beneficial so that they develop the tools to cope and to learn more about parenting and emotions and such that are completely normal.

This is especially important if the mother experiences postpartum depression. There is such a thing as men going through postpartum depression alongside the mother, so it would be helpful to also look at counseling for the fathers, as well.

3 Financial resources, to be made available for struggling parents to help them get back on their feet, would be beneficial as well, so that they don't have to worry about going without.

Most parents will go without so their child never has to. With rising inflation this has become more of a problem, and it would make sense to provide those resources to struggling parents so that they can provide, not only for their children but for themselves. Even if it's only a one-time benefit, having such resources available would be life-changing for many. And, while there is such a thing as Jordan's Principle, they are entirely backed up with requests and can take YEARS to respond without proper advocacy, which, right now, is lacking.



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4 If resources provided to the foster parents become more readily available to birth parents, it might help birth parents cope so that their children are not placed in care.

The overcrowding for kids in care has gotten so bad that some children are being neglected.

5 Having parents at home with the children, so there is help and guidance readily available to everyone.

Respect is then maintained, as the parent learns to be the best parent they can be. If placement in a different home is deemed necessary, allow the parents to advocate for the child's needs, such as when they need new things, like clothing. In this way, the money can actually be spent on the child rather than going into a foster parent's pockets and not actually making it to the child.

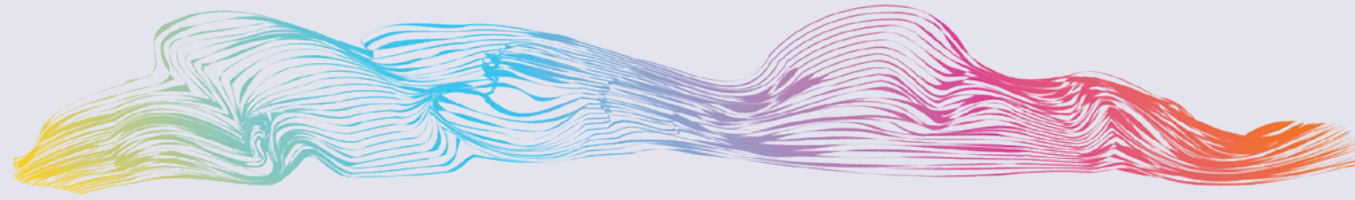
6 Respect needs to be given to the parents who reach out for help.

Basic, human respect. Instead of treating the birth parents like they are crazy for asking for help. Normalize asking for help as a good thing, rather than a bad thing.

7 Eliminate birth alerts.

Birth alerts can be sent to the MCFD when a mother of color gives birth. The social worker then visits the family in the hospital room, during recovery, to determine whether or not to take the child into care, even without prior involvement with the ministry. They will either take the child, or create a supervision plan, which gives the social worker access to visit their home without notice. The family is forced to either sign-off on this plan, or immediately lose access to their child, and the child is taken into care. Why are we harassing families, and especially mothers, in their most-vulnerable time? This is a form of coercion, and violence if you ask me, and anyone with decency.

Conclusion



I realize that MCFD thinks it is saving kids by taking them out of their homes, but they are telling the parents that they are not good enough to parent, creating a mindset for the parents that they really aren't good enough, and never will be, then returning the kids once the parents have met the standards that they set-out for them. And then having the higher risk of failing and losing those kids to care again, because the system didn't actually provide proper resources, time, or care to be able to raise their own kids. This is all due to punishing the parents rather than working with them, and keeping their children away from them so they wouldn't even know how to parent anyways. Parenting classes with children in care versus parenting classes while actively parenting looks vastly different.

We want the parents to be able to get back their children without thoughts of “never being good enough”, and just losing their children all over again. Because this treatment sticks with them, it becomes a constant fear, and frankly causes PTSD in not only the parent, but the child. The children then think their parents don't care for them, and aren't good enough for them. There are many things that the kids *can believe*, and *do believe*. An example would be that perhaps their parents never loved them, or that they don't love them anymore. It makes it hard for these parents to create a proper bond with their children, or the bond that had been created before removal, gets broken.

If judgment wasn't so quickly used against the parents, the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) would be able to actually help these families instead of ridiculing them.

And it's the children who pay dearly in this situation, and who have more consequences than benefits when being ripped away from a family that actually wants to provide for and take care of them.

If judgment wasn't so quickly used against the parents, MCFD would be able to actually help these families instead of ridiculing them. Never having children removed from their homes, without due cause would be the most-ideal situation, and though that may not be possible, it is better to work towards this goal than working towards continuing down the path that is currently being paved. It's time to rework or eliminate this situation, which has been normalized since the days of residential schools. It's time to start really reconciling with what has been done to Indigenous families for many, many years.

We want our children to have strong healthy bonds with their culture, their families and themselves. The children need to be safe in every aspect, including mentally.

ENDNOTES

1. British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development, *New Position Expedites Progress on Indigenous Child Welfare*, March 7, 2024. <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2024CFD0002-000292>
2. British Columbia Ministry of Education, *Improving outcomes for First Nations children in care*, June 4, 2024. <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2020EDUC0031-001014>
3. Ministry of Health Office of the Provincial Health Officer and Child and Youth Officer for British Columbia, *Joint Special Report, Health and Well-Being of Children in Care in British Columbia: Report 1 on Health Services Utilization and Mortality*, September 2006, (page 9). https://cwrp.ca/sites/default/files/publications/BC-Children_in_CareReport1.pdf

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I have many programs to thank for my knowledge and advocacy on my journey to be able to reach this kind of experience, with the LEVEL Youth Policy Program (YPP).

I am thankful to everyone who has believed in me and what I could accomplish and put my heart towards. I am just so beyond grateful for the support given throughout the years to keep me going on this path, that I constantly wonder if it's right for me.

I can't thank the YPP team enough for all the help, love, and support they have given me since meeting them. I am forever bound to you all through our shared desire to change the world one small step at a time, and never giving up on what we know is right. It's been a true blessing to learn from everyone around me, and everyone I met while in this program and cohort. It's such an inspiration to keep going and do what I know is best for me, and can hopefully help others in succeeding for a better tomorrow for our children, our parents, and our peers.

I'd love to personally thank my teachers and support workers from the New Beginnings Young Parent Program, because they really never gave up hope in me, really helped me get to where I am now.

I want to thank Amora, Dempsey, Spencer, and Elder Deb for the love and unwavering support they have provided. Without you all I don't know how I would've made it through some very hard and trying months. You really showed me what it is to be supportive in all places no matter what the world has thrown, you were there for me and my family and we are just so beyond thankful and grateful to you.



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Vancouver Foundation is Community Inspired. We are a community foundation that connects the generosity of donors with the energy, ideas, and time of people in the community. Together, we've been making meaningful and lasting impacts in neighborhoods and communities since 1943. We work with individuals, corporations, and charitable agencies to create permanent endowment funds and then use the income to support thousands of charities. We recognize that communities are complex and that collaboration between multiple stakeholders is needed to help everyone thrive and evolve. Vancouver Foundation brings together donors, non-profits and charities, government, media and academic institutions, local leaders, and passionate individuals to build meaningful and lasting change in the province of British Columbia. We see young people, their voices and experiences as part of that vision to building meaningful change.

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