

MA MAWI WI CHI ITATA CENTRE

FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE

AN INDIGENOUS-BASED EVALUATION



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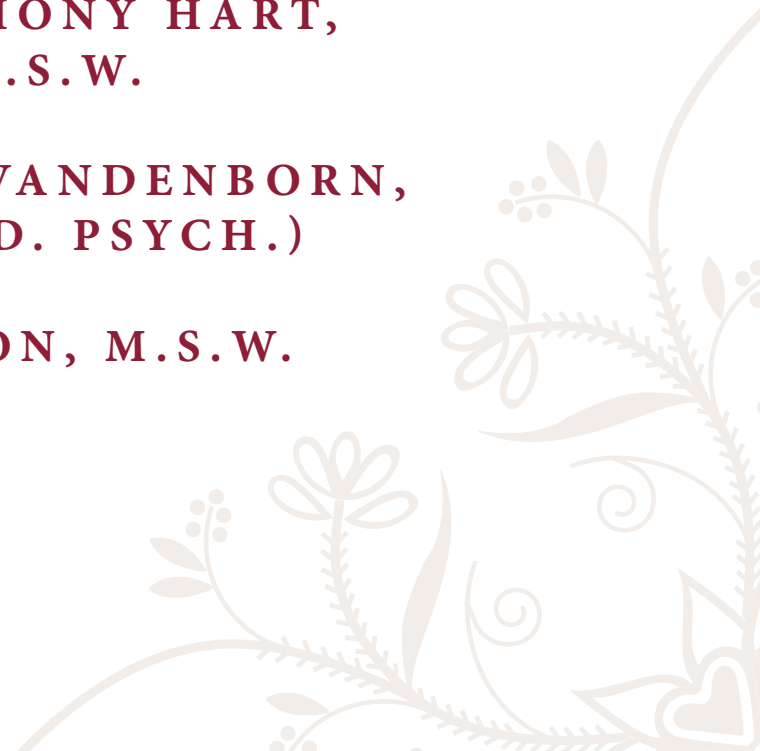
FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE

AN INDIGENOUS-BASED EVALUATION

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MA MAWI WI CHI ITATA CENTRE
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Since coming to FGC, I've been able to open up more because I know I'm not alone. The lump in my throat I can't feel anymore and with that I have something to look forward to! My babies are coming home. —FGC PARTICIPANT



MESSAGE FROM WAITOMO PAKAINGA

KIA ORA, E TE WHĀNAU O MA Mawi Wi Chi Itata, nga mihi aroha ki a koutou katoa kia kaha, kia ū, kia manawanui. (Greetings to our family of Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata, our love to you all, keep strong, brave and courageous, humble.)

Wonderful to hear from you all, thank you for the opportunity to read this report. This is incredible work and we acknowledge your tenacity in creating this document that highlights the process of FGC.

We realise this piece of work is an indication of your dedication in striving to assist, determine and achieve pathways to healing and wellness for those families who come to you for support.

This model and practice is conducive to who you are as Indigenous peoples, First Nations people of Canada, and who better to lead this out than an organisation that has strived to initiate, research, test, promote, support and advocate for those who may be struggling and unable to articulate or have their voice heard.

Your sister organisation Waitomo Papakainga over the years has visited, supported, observed, worked with your staff and within your organization with the FGC process. In New Zealand, the FGC process is in our legislation and enables organisations like our own and yours to work with and assist families to achieve healing and wellness for themselves and their children.

Wellness and safety of children first is paramount and acknowledging that within family is where children should be whether that be immediate family, extended family, sub-tribes or tribes, this is also part of our legislation. Non-kin placements for children are frowned upon now and only used in emergencies and for very short periods of time until appropriate family have been found and screened.

Once again, we realise all that you do and strive to do for your people and fully support that your organisation Ma Mawi Chi Itata is the guardian and lead organisation of this FGC process.

No reira te whanau. We hope you all stay safe and keep well in these uncertain times.

Arohanui
Katie Murray
CEO, Waitomo Papakainga
Development Society Inc.
22nd July 2020



CHANGE TO ORGANIZATION THROUGHOUT?



MESSAGE FROM THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

GREETINGS TO ALL OUR RELATIONS,

We are honoured to present this evaluation of the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre's Family Group Conference (FGC) program.

Since the model was gifted to the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre in 2000, the FGC program continues to make significant impacts within our community that will carry on for generations to come. FGC families are respected, honoured and cared for through Indigenous values, ceremonies, programming and approaches that support individual and family empowerment, healing and wellness. This evaluation is an in-depth look at just how impactful this program has been within our community and the opportunities we have in restoring the sacred bond within families.

The FGC model also honours our traditional roles and collective responsibility in the care and protection of all children. The program is a true reflection of the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre's name - we all work together to help one another and allows our families to build on their strengths and be the decision-makers for themselves and their families.

The FGC model supports our families on the path to achieving mino-pimatisiwin - the good life. In this same spirit, we also must acknowledge the evaluation process started in a good way with the passing of cloth and tobacco and an opening and closing in ceremony. We want to send a Chi-Miigwech to the contributors for special consideration in this process and honouring our traditional ways of knowing, doing, and being within the evaluation framework.

We hope this deep dive into the FGC process and program at the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre will inspire you to share in our vision of a child welfare system that is responsive to and capable of supporting the needs and aspirations of Indigenous children, youth and families.

Miigwech | Ekosani

MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

GREETINGS | BOOZHOO

It has been an honour to walk alongside the Family Group Conference mentors and participants, and it means a great deal to see their hard work and resilience acknowledged in this final report.

In the true spirit of our name, we worked together with a large circle of support to make this Indigenous-based evaluation possible:

— I want first to acknowledge our families. Your heart medicine work and resiliency are what inspired and drove this evaluation to completion.

— Miigwech to the contributors for the years of work dedicated to bringing this evaluation to life: Michael Hart, Elisa Lacerda-Vandenborn, and Don Robinson.

— Miigwech to the FGC staff who support our families and participated throughout this evaluation: Tammy Hamelin, Christine Dumaine, Dustin Leach, Sara Mowatt, Brandy Blind, Betsy Mayham, and Jackie Anderson.

— Miigwech to the staff and contractors who offered their gifts of editing, proofing, and designing in finalizing the final document: Rebecca Cook, Jennifer Rattray, Angie Hutchinson, Kirby Gilman, and Jess Koroscil.

The FGC model has provided many opportunities to our families and community in Winnipeg. It has been a gift to receive this program and an honour to work in partnership with our relatives at Waitomo Papakainga.



The program is based on values and practices broadly held by Indigenous peoples, that includes extended family involvement, self-determination, and a strength-based approach.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE MA MAWI WI CHI ITATA CENTRE has been operating the Family Group Conference (FGC) program for approximately 20 years. The consistently high reunification rates and the positive impact of the program with community has been recognized at local, provincial, and national levels. In 2017, the Winnipeg Foundation, the Province of Manitoba, and the Government of Canada committed to a three-year \$2.5 million-dollar investment that made possible the expansion of the FGC program by 445 additional enrollment spots. Following the expansion of the FGC program, Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata invited the original people of the community organization—who had gifted the program to Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata in 2000—to come back and support the expanded delivery of the model. In March 2018, the Māori delegates were welcomed to Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata and heard about the implementation of the FGC process. The guests shared their knowledge as the first peoples implementing the traditional Māori-based practice in a social service setting and provided key support to Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata mentors. Amongst the knowledge shared was the importance of keeping true to the model.

Recognizing this experience and the critical reflections of the Māori people, Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata has renewed the commitment to preserve the integrity of the model and FGC process as passed to them. The Centre has emphasized their commitments to be: (1) the main voice in its set-up, implementation, oversight, and evaluation; (2) culturally responsive to the Indigenous peoples they serve; and (3) empowering and inclusive of the families partaking in FGC processes.

To honour their commitment and to ensure that Indigenous perspectives were consistently the main voice in the program, Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata sought an Indigenous evaluation. An Indigenous evaluation approach is based in Indigenous knowledge or ways of knowing that includes Indigenous worldviews held broadly by Indigenous peoples. The FGC program evaluation consists of Indigenous evaluation methods that are augmented by a descriptive quantitative analysis. The evaluation framework provides a context of Indigenous ways of being and the colonial impacts on these ways of being, and the impact on Indigenous communities and families. It also presents a localized context developed through a review of online material, material made available by the Centre, and information shared by casual conversational, interviews, and sharing circles (Hart, 2002; Kovach, 2009).

The experiences of key participants and stakeholders involved in the FGC story created the main contributions of the evaluation. Key participants and stakeholders included: family members (particularly the parents); mentors; staff external to the program or collateral workers; Child and Family Service (CFS) workers; people historically involved in the program; and community members who have been indirectly connected to the FGC program. Contributions were gathered using traditional cultural protocols and practices.

The experiences shared by participants were synthesized to develop the story of the FGC program. Each of the common experiences are the foundation to five sections of the report, which focus on the Mentors, *the Mentors' Experiences*,

Families' Experiences, Collateral Workers' Perspectives, Community Members' Perspectives, and the CFS Workers' Experiences. These sections are followed with statistics data related to the services provided to augment and provide breadth to the story. The teachings that emerged from the story highlight the important ways that the program works as an antidote to many of the vulnerabilities that colonial systems have created and perpetuate. By supporting the rebuilding of the "family" and its relationships and structure, the program works to celebrate Indigenous ways of knowing and Indigenous sources of strength and safety. Amongst the key teachings that emerged through the evaluation, five have prominence.

FIRST, it is evident that the program is highly successful, and the key component to this success is the programs grounding in Indigenous cultural values and practices. The program is based on values and practices broadly held by Indigenous peoples, which include extended family involvement, self-determination, and a strength-based approach as one develops. Indigenous values and practices support individuals to move forward with consistency in their surroundings and experiences. The inclusion of ceremonies and other cultural practices set the foundation for families to positively reaffirm their identity and counter the colonial narrative. Having a culturally based practice offered by Indigenous mentors within an Indigenous organization further supports the reaffirmation.

SECOND, this culturally based programming has been effective when working with families who have or are facing the effects of trauma. While the program evaluation focused on its benefits or areas that need strengthening, families raised the importance of the impacts of trauma: anger, sadness, distrust, self-isolation, and numbing through substances misuse. Trauma events or experiences

shared involved residential schools, gang violence, racism, death of loved ones, and the removal of family members, particularly the children. Family members outlined how program mentors were able to build connections and establish trusting relationships with them, respond supportively to their efforts to address the impacts stemming from these traumas, and model positive ways of moving forward. The mentors encouraged family members to incorporate culturally based practices to address the traumas and their impacts, including participating in ceremonies, engaging in sharing circles, focusing on their personal gifts, and following traditional teachings. These supports were made available through the program directly and indirectly, by supporting family members to connect with traditional teachers and ceremonies (e.g., medicine picking, Sundance, and sweat lodges) in the Indigenous communities.

THIRD, offering the FGC program through a non-mandated Indigenous agency allows the mentors to support families to address the impacts of the family traumas based in Indigenous worldviews, values and practices. While it is possible that culturally based programs can be offered through mandated programs, the inherent contradiction between the values within cultural practices (self-determination, moving forward at one's own pace, healing with community, and contributing back to community) and the values within mandated services (power over service recipients, forced treatment, and individually focused) are best offered through a voluntary program. The mentors were able to quickly build on the trusting relationship Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata has with the families by demonstrating their support for the families and focusing on the positive aspects of the family and community. This quick connection developed because they (a) understood the families' experiences firsthand, (b) could share perspectives that

Empowerment encouraged families to act in their own best interest, as opposed to navigating the interests of mandated services. Thus, through the FGC program focus on supporting families as opposed to forcing them to act, families were able to concentrate on rediscovering their gifts and abilities, reaffirming their extended family relationships, and acting in their own self-interest.



The program positively affects the Child and Family Services (CFS) system by providing supports that ensure families are not coming back into contact with the system. The number of families that have their children returned to family caregivers and staying out of CFS's care is significant.



the families held, and (c) created an environment where the families felt they were understood and accepted by the mentors. By being a voluntary service, the power to determine how to make changes rested with the family. This empowerment encouraged families to act in their own best interest, as opposed to navigating the interests of mandated services. Thus, through the FGC program focus on supporting families as opposed to forcing them to act, families were able to concentrate on rediscovering their gifts and abilities, reaffirming their extended family relationships, and acting in their own self-interest.

FOURTH, the FGC program positively affects society and CFS agencies in particular. The program has clearly demonstrated FGC results in families reunifying. The reunification of families has meant that CFS involvement is significantly reduced. Matters that seemed as if they would take longer to resolve were addressed in a significantly shorter time. As well, more effective service is being offered, by having the mentors advocate on the families' behalf. CFS workers also noted that the mentors were better suited to advocate for other resources (e.g., housing) and support families directly. The FGC program reduces the length of time families are involved with the CFS system and the amount of time children are forced to be in care for reasons beyond the issues at hand.

THE FIFTH teaching relates to the effectiveness and efficiency of the FGC program with respect to concerns that the government and CFS systems are trying to address. The program positively affects the CFS system by providing supports that ensure families are not coming back into contact with the child welfare system. The number of families that have their children returned to family caregivers and staying out of CFS care is highly significant. Current savings—based on comparisons to estimated projection where FGC services are not made available and children remained in care of CFS for

the year—are estimated to be \$2,467,349.00. In addition, the overall amount of time that CFS agencies have to directly focus on these families has been significantly reduced. Currently there are 225 families and more than 630 children who are receiving effective, empowering services from the FGC program and avoiding a deeper fall into the CFS service system. Thus, the FGC program is not only a fiscally efficient program, it is a culturally effective one that strengthens families so that they no longer remain trapped in the CFS system.

The evaluation report closes with a list of 15 recommendations. All of the recommendations align with the overall message of this report—Family Group Conference at Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre is an effective program that should continue to be supported to meet the increasing calls for support by Indigenous families.

Overall, the evaluation findings of Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata's FGC program show the program is valuable. The program has a positive impact for Indigenous families and communities, as well as for the CFS system. The FGC program is redressing the colonial legacy through supporting the peoples' access to teachings and ceremony in relationships that make a substantive and concrete difference in upholding safety and community. Likewise, the program is exceedingly impactful in its support of families and their movements toward sustainable reunification. Program outcomes are highly effective in preventing children from going into care. In addition, FGC is fiscally resourceful. Most importantly, offering FGC through a non-mandated Indigenous program contributes to addressing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action on child welfare, in a culturally based, culturally relevant and culturally meaningful way. It demonstrates the commitment to work *with* Indigenous families and communities in a spirit of embracing Indigenous strength, knowledge and resilience.



MA MAWI WI CHI ITATA CENTRE FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE PROGRAM EVALUATION REPORT

1.0 INTRODUCTION

THE MA MAWI WI CHI ITATA CENTRE has been operating the Family Group Conference (FGC) program for approximately 20 years. The consistently high reunification rates of the program and the positive impact of the organization with community has been recognized at local, provincial, and national levels. In 2017, the Winnipeg Foundation, the Province of Manitoba, and the Government of Canada committed to a three-year \$2.5 million-dollar investment that made possible the expansion of the FGC program by 445 additional enrollment spots. This capacity expansion translates to an estimated potential to return over 1,200 children to their families or prevent children from going into care.

The praise-worthy work of Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata was noted by Provincial Families Minister Scott Fielding who stated, “[T]he family conferencing model has proven results and underscores our government’s priority to keep children with their families, when it is safe to do so, as we recognize families play an important role in the care and protection of children.” (Manitoba Government, October 10, 2017). Winnipeg Foundation’s CEO, Rick Frost, noted the FGC program speaks to top priorities of the organization including contributing to the well-being of communities and addressing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to

Action to return Indigenous children in care homes and rebuild families (Paul, 2017).

Following the expansion of the FGC program, Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata invited the original people of the community organization—who had gifted the program to Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata in 2000—to come back and support the expanded delivery of the model. Waitomo Papakainga is a Māori Indigenous-led and non-government social service agency in Kaitaia, New Zealand’s North Island. Waitomo was established nearly 25 years ago, with the main purpose to support youth at risk and their whanau (their extended families) (D. Redsky, personal communication, March 18, 2017). In March 2018, the Māori delegates, Katie Murray, Rima Witunga, Eva Trembilcock, and Merv Rawiri, were welcomed to Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata to learn about the implementation of the FGC process. The guests shared their knowledge as the first peoples implementing the traditional Māori-based practice in a social service setting and provided key support to Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata mentors. Amongst the knowledge shared by the delegation was the importance of keeping true to the model.

Even in Aotearoa/New Zealand, the model’s integrity has been compromised by the consistent pressure of colonial forces and the power of systemic disempowerment embedded within colonial

structures. The foundations of cultural responsiveness, empowerment of family and community, and family inclusiveness throughout the process of family conferencing has been undermined by Eurocentric, state-dominated interventions that marginalize Indigenous families and communities and their cultural philosophies and practices (Moyle & Tauri, 2016).

If the FGC is to work in the future as a culturally responsive, empowering, and whanau-inclusive process, indeed as the “restorative” process advocates portray it as, then it must be owned by the communities within which it is practiced. For any intervention to be effective for whanau (i.e., the FGC), Māori need to be involved in the development as well as the delivery of childcare and protection and youth justice initiatives. They also need to be involved in any subsequent changes to legislation, policy, program design, and evaluation. (Moyle & Tauri, 2016, p. 102)

Recognizing this experience and the critical reflections of the Māori people, Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata has renewed the commitment to preserve the integrity of the model and FGC process as passed to them. The Centre has emphasized their commitments to be: 1) the main voice in its set-up, implementation, oversight, and evaluation; 2) culturally responsive to the Indigenous people they serve; and 3) empowering and inclusive of the families partaking in FGC processes. These commitments were also the basis for seeking an evaluation process based on Indigenous methodologies. In line with the Moyle and Tauri (2016) critique, Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata recognized that too often FGC has been researched and evaluated based on methods that do not recognize Indigenous voices, perspectives, and knowledge. Therefore, the Centre wanted to be certain that the evaluation reflected Indigenous peoples' experiences and the context in which it was occurring as key components of the evaluation.

2.0 UNDERSTANDING THE LARGER CONTEXT

2.1 Indigenous Ways of Being

Any evaluation should be developed and understood within its context to ensure that the process and results are pertinent to experiences and perspectives of the people most directly impacted by it. To understand how current systems impact family relationships, the very integrity of communities and the safety of individuals, requires a basic understanding of Indigenous ways of being. There is a particular importance of relationships and of the extended family in many Indigenous societies in Turtle Island (refers to Central or North America).

Indigenous Elders, knowledge keepers, and scholars note several concepts that are fundamental

to Indigenous ways of being. Amongst them, are wholism,¹ connection/relationships, balance, and harmony (McAdam, 2015; Anderson, 2000; Anseloos, 2017; Hart, 2002; Simpson, 2017). In most of the Indigenous languages in Turtle Island, the root is on actions as opposed to things. Actions form the basis on which the individuals are then aligned, which in turn guides how people come to be in the world. The world is experienced as alive and acting; it is personified as the Mother of all. This part of the foundation requires people to see beyond specific

1 The spelling is purposefully written in this manner to reflect Indigenous concepts of “whole” and avoid any potential connection to the religious concept of “holy”.

things, to look at the whole of each context, and see the connection and relationships within and between them.

Recognizing that the world itself is in action, and all entities of the world are in action, Indigenous understandings hold that relationships are constantly evolving and changing. In order to maintain relationships, there is effort required by entities—persons, families, communities—to change and shift. These changes and shifts rebalance the relationships, and in turn support harmony in their existence. It is recognized that there are times when relationships are thrown into sudden changes. These changes require more intense attention and concerted effort so that actions can move entities back into a balance within the whole context.

There is an understanding held by Indigenous peoples that all are given gifts to carry them forward. To interfere with other people's gifts means that we are impacting people's ability to determine how to enact their gifts. There are times when individuals act in ways that are harmful to themselves or others and that require the community to intervene, such as when things are out of balance or when a sudden change occurs. These dynamics are found in *wihtiko* stories, for example Chabot (2016) noted that for Cree people of the territory, the ability to effectively function within the world depended on understanding "one's place within a larger network of interdependent relationships and cultivating self-control, hope and reciprocity. Understanding these ideals is important because the *wihtiko* embodies their antithesis...the *wihtiko* is the epitome of cultural disunity or artificial unity" (pp. 307-308).

The principle emphasized is the development of one's gift as contributions to well-being of the family/community referred to as 'respectful individualism' (Hart, 2009). To act in ways that focus on oneself, without considering the whole of the

family/community is seen as a critical concern that requires community involvement. The emphasis on the family/community is intimately tied to individuals developing their gift and vice-versa. How individuals and community interrelate is guided by foundational values.

While there are foundational values specific to particular nations within Turtle Island, there are some values that are emphasized across the nations. For example, many Indigenous peoples emphasize the seven sacred teachings of the Anishinaabe: love, respect, courage (bravery), honesty, wisdom, humility, and truth. Elders speak of additional values of reciprocity, faith, kindness, sharing, caring, and good childrearing. These values are shared and have been observed in the actions of other life-beings in the world so have been incorporated by the people to guide their actions. The values are viewed in ways that strengthen relationships found in the family/community, such as being respectful to others, using wisdom to support the family/community to move forward positively, and sharing what you have with others, particularly the children and older family/community members. It is important to note that family is broadly understood to include extended members, including aunties, uncles, cousins, grandmothers, grandfathers, nieces, and nephews as often playing important roles.

An example that reflected some of the principles and values in action was given by Clarkson, Morrisette, and Regallet (1992):

It was not unusual to "adopt" new members into the family for various reasons. This would happen whenever a child was orphaned, a family was unable to care for a child or whenever there was great respect for someone so that person would be adopted as a brother or sister (p. 15).

No one aspect of life takes precedence over any of the others, both within the individual, and with people and other life in this world. It also means that everything we do, impacts something else and that we are impacted by the actions of other life. In this way, life is a circle that moves in cycles. As such, when children are removed from the centre of the circles, it impacts the family, community and nation.



Such adoptions were seen as one of highest honours for all involved (Poitras, 2017).

Anderson (2011) also reflected these principles and values when she explained that Indigenous communities are understood wholistically. The children are the central focus for Elders, women and men. A shared function of each of these groups, as well as the community overall, was and remains to be, educating children and preparing them to become contributing members of their communities. Children are not less than adults; rather, they have a special role and place at this stage of their lives, as they are being prepared for the next stage of life, which depends on learning and understanding the lessons of childhood. Children are special and sacred: as Pace-Crosschild (2018) explained, these sacred beings—children—“were held in the highest regard because they were seen to be extremely close to the spirit world” (p. 193).

It was understood that children had their own responsibilities to the family and community. Noted by Clarkson, Morrisette, and Regallet (1992), children were given ample opportunities to explore and grow with their gifts in playful and inquisitive ways. “As they grew and learned about their environment, they would be expected to provide a frame of reference for the younger children” and “contribute to the family through the gathering of fuel, foodstuffs and materials for the maintenance of the camp” (p. 18). As a result of children’s sacred nature and the responsibility to properly prepare them for the next stage of life within the community, the collective efforts of the extended family and community are engaged in childrearing, wherein each segment of the family and community play particular roles. These roles would be defined organically, on the principle that while no one person could know everything, each person had teachings to offer.

While all genders were involved in preparation of children for the following stages of life, as life givers, women held a special relationship with the youngest of the children. This role was honoured by the community with ceremonies that were led by women, with primarily women, or only with women being present (See McAdam, 2015 and Anderson, 2011 for an example). It is important to note that the special relationships, ceremonies, and ceremonial roles were highly revered by members of Indigenous societies. The communities recognized that as children came from the spirit world to the physical world, women held the most important responsibility; as bearers of new life on earth, women hold the connection between the spirit world and physical world for the new life. As such, women were given the utmost respect, as “they are closer to the Creator than men could ever hope to be” (Clarkson, Morrisette, & Regallet, 1992, p. 18). Further, as the giver of life, women are first caregivers to the children while men have the responsibility to be the helper to women (Anderson, 2000). These principles and values were used to guide the people’s movement forward and more often than not, meant that Indigenous nations in the region were matriarchal. Genders were seen as each having important roles that contributed to the community, and as such, gender hierarchies within the society were unfounded. Differences in roles reflected practical divisions of labour, rather than power differentials, and were not strictly followed. (Anderson, 2000; Wilson, 2008)

Clarkson, Morrisette, and Regallet (1992), Hart (2002), and Ansloos (2017) explained that the ancestors of Indigenous people and the traditional People today, have used the concept of the circle to illustrate these principles and values. The circle helps people see how things of this world relate to one another, thus to all of creation. Individuals, family, community and nation have been identified as part the circle of people. People are seen as trying

to live in ways that reflects the earth's balance and harmony. To do so means that no one aspect of life takes precedence over any of the others, both within the individual, and with people and other life in this world. It also means that everything we do impacts something else and that we are impacted by the actions of other life. In this way, life is a circle that moves in cycles. As such, when children are removed from the centre of the circles, it impacts the family, community and nation. This impact was clearly understood by outside forces that look to destroy Indigenous peoples' circle of life.

2.2 Colonization

The context that most readily describes Indigenous peoples' experiences, both historically and currently, is one of colonialism. Colonialism has been defined from an Indigenous perspective:

Where, we as a Peoples of this land face impositions—from genocide to assimilation to marginalization—of views, ideas, beliefs, values, and practices by other Peoples at the costs of our lives, views, ideas, beliefs, values, practices, lands, and/or resources. It is when we, as a Peoples of this land, are stopped, hindered, cajoled, and/or manipulated from making decisions about our lives, individually and as a group, because of being a person of the peoples of this land. These decisions included how we are going to be who we are and how, if at all, we are going to incorporate the ideas, beliefs, values, and practices of other peoples. (Hart & Rowe, 2014, p. 35)

It is important to recognize that colonialism is not just about acquisition and accumulation by a dominating population, although these are fundamental to its operations; it is also about controlling people through a central ideology and narrative that sees colonized people as inferior or subordinate

to people of the colonizer group (Memmi, 1991; National Inquiry, 2019; Phillips, 2009; Said 1993). Colonialism is multidimensional in that it functions in various spheres, including the cultural, social, economic and political. It operates on the individual, family, community and nation levels. It impacts our identities, bodies, thoughts, feelings, and sense of being. It is enforced through policies, institutions, norms, and interactions (Hart, 2002; National Inquiry, 2019). It is consciously, but more so, unconsciously abided. Thus, it relies significantly on forgetfulness and the trivializing current and history events that actually reflect and reinforce colonial oppression. The means of enforcement changes as the context changes. Overall, it continues to privilege settler people to varying degrees while maintaining control over Indigenous peoples (Hart, 2002; Mullaly & West, 2018).

In colonial systems, Indigenous peoples have not been considered fully human and/or sufficiently civilized to have laws, systems, or methods of keeping order. Existing Indigenous systems are denied or devalued as “flawed” systems. These myths serve to reinforce the oppression (Memmi, 1991). They are repeated enough times to be internalized by people from all social locations and used to maintain the prejudice and oppressive discrimination. These myths attack the self-concept and self-esteem of Indigenous peoples, define and impact their families and communities' ability to function, and are used as a rationale to enforce certain family structures while dismembering other families and communities from society.

More specifically, colonial oppression has facilitated the removal of Indigenous children, which has served to undermine Indigenous families and communities' rights and obligations and broken relationships that flow from their familial centre. The dislocation of the children is a central strike against Indigenous societies. While there are times when these undermining perspectives and actions

of Indigenous peoples have been held unconsciously, there are many times when they have been held overtly by decision makers, politicians and bureaucrats who placed themselves in control of Indigenous peoples' lives. One of the great challenges that emerges is that Indigenous people, families and communities are left having to "prove" themselves, when too often the issue remains one of the imposed structures and people administering them.

2.3 The Ongoing History of Colonizing Indigenous Children and Families in Canada

Colonization was and is part of Canada. It started with the shifts in power that allowed multiple generations of settlers on Turtle Island to act on their racist beliefs about Indigenous peoples. While all Indigenous peoples were targeted under Britain's, and later Canada's colonizing processes, children were focused upon in key systems designed to undermine community and family survival. Amongst the overt expressions of the inferior-superior notion between colonizer and First Nations was the development of the Indian Residential School system, which saw over 150,000 children separated from their families between 1883 and 1996. It was based on the idea that Indigenous peoples were not caring for their children in the manner deemed civilized or acceptable by non-Indigenous people (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015; Mackenzie, Varcoe, Browne & Day, 2016). The schools were seen by officials as the easiest way to speed the process of assimilation. As Deputy Superintendent General Duncan Campbell Scott, who ran the residential school system between 1913 and 1922, explained, "I want to get rid of the Indian problem...Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department, that is

the whole object of this Bill" (National Archives of Canada, Record Group 10, vol. 6810, file 470-2-3, vol. 7, 55 (L-3) and 63 (N-3)). While the stated intent was assimilation of Indigenous children to address the "Indian problem," there was just as much acceptance of the death of Indigenous children as a means to be rid of Indians. This was evident by the ongoing deaths of Indian children in residential schools despite effort by individuals such as Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce who reported concerns in 1907 that the schools were incubators for the spread of tuberculosis. Notwithstanding his knowledge that an average of one out of two children were dying of the disease within the first two years of attending residential school, Deputy Superintendent General Scott stated:

It is readily acknowledged that Indian children lose their natural resistance to illness by habituating so closely in the residential schools and that they die at a much higher rate than in their villages. But this does not justify a change in the policy of this Department which is geared towards a final solution of our Indian Problem. (BC Teachers' Federation, 2015, p.8)

Clearly, death was an acceptable outcome to ensure the final solution was met. It has been noted that over the entire run of residential schools, the children were dying at rates slightly greater than soldiers in World War II (Truth and Reconciliation Commission: By the Numbers, June 3, 2015). With well over a hundred years of this mentality, Indigenous families were judged and forcibly restructured through the state's effort to sever children from their cultural roots and to destroy family relationships in ways that reflected, and ultimately benefitted, dominating groups (Rotabi, Pennell, Roby, & Bunker, 2012; Strega & Esquao, 2009). The residential school era forced Indigenous families into processes where children were no longer the centre of the community circle. By removing the

children, governments and religious organizations that ran the residential schools were not only separating families but also tearing apart Indigenous societies and destroying family and community roles. Through the colonial indoctrination processes, children were forcibly learning to devalue these societies and roles, and to accept the patriarchal, nuclear family as the inevitable and desired norm (Phillips, 2009).

In addition, Indian Day Schools, that were running during the similar time period as residential schools, operated on a similar rationale of assimilation and of devaluing Indigenous culture. While students may have been able to return home at night, many were not spared the abuse—physical, emotional and sexual—of students attending residential schools. The Government of Canada established and operated over a hundred Indian Days Schools, alongside other schools run by provinces or religious orders. Close to 200,000 Indigenous children attended a federally operate Indian Day School.

The number of residential and day schools peaked in the 1930s. By the late 1940s, after the extensive voluntary participation of Indigenous people in the Second World War, some people began to alter their views about Indigenous peoples as they fought side-by-side and defended the Crown. The conversations surrounding Indigenous peoples by political leaders and the general population began to change. Instead of discussing the problems of Indigenous peoples as rooted in savagery or lack of civilization, people began to engage in a somewhat different conversation, one that framed Indigenous peoples as in need of help from “benevolent” organization such as the Canadian Welfare Council and Canadian Association of Social Workers.

As early as 1947, these organizations “advocated” on behalf of Indian people in front of a Special Joint Parliamentary Committee on the Indian Act

and recommended “the full assimilation of Indians into Canadian life as the goal of the Government’s Indian program” (Shewell, 2004, p. 192). They also presented the process to achieve this goal, including the imposition of provincial child welfare services on First Nations people. Thus, the underlying reason for child welfare services within Indigenous communities has been admittedly more about assimilation than about the well-being of children. Indigenous cultures and identities were seen as the problem. Laws were rewritten to support the enforcement of particular provincial services on reserve, particularly child welfare services. Through new programs and initiatives like the Adopt Indian and Métis Project in Saskatchewan, Status Indian, Métis and Inuit children from across Canada were removed by the thousands between the years 1951-1991 and sent to non-Indigenous homes as far as Europe and southwestern United States. As Stevenson (2017) explains,

The ‘over-representation’ of Indigenous children among those removed from their families reflected a complex mixture of historical factors: paternalistic professionalism of social welfare experts, provincial child welfare legislation that unfairly targeted Indigenous families, jurisdictional disputes between federal and provincial governments, gendered discrimination in the Indian Act, poverty and discrimination, the impact of residential schools, and Indigenous dispossession. (n.d.)

Within this context and ignored by these social workers were the impacts of the oppression that Indigenous peoples had been facing for decades. Under the premise of “benevolence,” children continued to be removed from families as a means for changing Indigenous people. By holding the children, social workers were able to force parents to change their behaviours to meet particular standards established by racist and colonizing

authorities. In many cases however, and despite the work that many parents put in, they were never able to get their children back.

The child welfare policies enforced a central colonial structure, that of the two-parent family, as a “natural” social arrangement while other forms of family structures were undermined (Phillips, 2009). As they had within the context of residential and day schools, within the child welfare process, Indigenous ways of parenting were forcibly replaced by colonial values that ultimately justified violence and dispossession. Such colonial processes were further validated through systems that emphasized the vulnerability of Indigenous peoples, promoted by the idea of so-called “civilized progress.” Indigenous parents suffered under stigma that sought to characterize systemic economic, political and social marginalization as a personal failure, despite the decades of oppressive perspectives of Indigenous peoples and overt ignoring of the extended structure of Indigenous families. The underlying reality of poverty that was established and enforced by colonial law and policies, trauma caused by separations imposed by the federal and provincial governments, and deep impacts of the ongoing racism faced by Indigenous peoples remained invisible to child welfare stakeholders. This invisibility and lack of concern was evidenced by social workers injudicious conclusions that the parents, and not their profound context of disadvantage, were responsible for the dire conditions in which they found themselves and being unable to provide for the well-being of the children. Instead of interrogating the structures and systems that had created and upheld these conditions, these conclusions served as the basis for the continued removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities (Fournier & Crey, 1997; Hudson & McKenzie, 1985; Johnston, 1983; Linklater, 2014), well into the present.

The systematic removal of children from families and communities was the motivation behind Indigenous nations standing up against the provincial and federal governments and demanding changes to the system in late 1970s and early 1980s. Initially, their efforts resulted in tripartite agreements where First Nations agencies would deliver services on First Nations, while services outside of the nations remained under the jurisdiction of the province. This arrangement functioned for approximately two decades, but it did not result in a significant change in dynamics. The mandate remained the same, with a focus on the deficits of the two-parent family while the impact of colonial oppression on Indigenous peoples and their communities remained unaddressed. The number of children in care continued to increase regularly with tripartite agreements. The steady increase from previous decades was a consequence of more direct oversight of Indigenous families by people within communities themselves, who were required to follow (colonial) provincial and federal law, policies, and standards.

These agreements between the federal government, provincial government, and First Nations governments were not intended to remain; it was “most often identified as an interim measure that will eventually give way to separate First Nations legislation and standards” (Hudson & McKenzie, 2003, p. 50). In 1991, The Aboriginal Justice Inquiry identified that greater changes were needed in child welfare than what was put in place through these agreements (Hamilton & Sinclair, 1991). The call for changes was echoed by commissioners of Aboriginal Justice Implementation Commission in their first quarterly report, given on March 21, 2000 (Chartrand, Whitecloud, McKay & Young, March 31, 2000). Efforts in the following years led to the identification of how the call for greater control over Child and Family Services by Indigenous peoples in all jurisdictions of the province would

Currently, 10,000 of the 11,000 children in CFS care in Manitoba are Indigenous (90%) (Manitoba Government, 2018). From a governmental perspective, this new structure has been “effective” in fulfilling the provincial mandate of taking children into care based on the perceived risk, but from an Indigenous perspective it has been devastating.



be implemented. The result was the passing of the Child and Family Services Authorities Act in 2002. This Act, developed in collaboration with Indigenous partners, created an organizational framework for the new policies to ensure that culturally appropriate standards for services, practices and procedures would be developed (Hudson & McKenzie, 2003). However, as identified in the analysis by MacDonald and Levasseur (2014), it was evident that the resultant structure and processes reinforced vertical accountability to the provincial government. They stated, “At best, the idea of collaborative governance is an illusion; at worst, it has serious negative impacts on Indigenous autonomy and on standards of accountability” (p. 97). The new arrangement with the development of four Child and Family Services authorities overseeing mandated agencies (First Nations of Northern Manitoba Child and Family Services Authority, Southern First Nations Network of Care, Métis Child and Family Services, and General Child and Family Services Authority) remained dependent on the provincial government that determined the distribution of roles and functions to the authorities. This structure compromised the establishment of culturally appropriate standards to be met by the agencies, as originally intended.

The incongruence of this governing structure and its policies is evident in the significant increase of Indigenous children in CFS care since its implementation. Currently, 10,000 of the 11,000 children in CFS care in Manitoba are Indigenous (90%) (Manitoba Government, 2018). From a governmental perspective, this new structure has been “effective” in fulfilling the provincial mandate of taking children into care based on the perceived risk, but from an Indigenous perspective it has been devastating. This governing framework, and associated legislation, practice, and professional training concerned with family well-being have failed to consider that the criteria used in such assessments of risk

remain based on non-Indigenous beliefs, values, and practices. It contradicts the very reasons that led to the passing of the Act in the first place and misses the important consideration of community level well-being. Clearly, the mandate of protection has been implemented in ways that emphasize two parents, deficits, and the privileging of services that are based in non-Indigenous worldviews and practices. Practices centred in Indigenous wholistic perspectives, the extended family/community, the support of people to develop their gifts, and children in their family and community context, have been relegated to a secondary and/or irrelevant status. The problematization of Indigenous peoples translates into families being referred by Child and Family Services worker to social programs that pay little attention to them as Indigenous peoples in the colonial context and services based in non-Indigenous paradigms and theories (Hart & Rowe, 2014). Further, the systemic oppression of Indigenous peoples is not reserved to child welfare; it is enacted in concert with and through the education, health, justice, political, and economic systems that also do not recognize the issues Indigenous families have and continue to face. This lack of a wholistic view only serves to reflect the compartmentalized and hierarchal and professionalized approaches of the colonial system. Clarkson, Morrisette, and Regallet (1992) noted the impact of professionalization of helping services decades ago:

The professionalization of helping services is a barrier to healing because the relationship is fundamentally unequal. Often, people who need assistance dealing with life stresses are not prepared to use existing services because the structure of services requires them to adopt a subordinate position relative to the helper. Real healing only occurs in an environment of equality where, no matter how serious someone's problem, they still have something

to offer someone else. Equality in helping relationships means recognizing that no-one is without life stresses and no-one is without personal resources that are valuable to others. (pp. 85-86)

Overall, harmful narratives of colonial misrepresentation have abounded since contact, working to build systems that have targeted Indigenous individuals, families and communities and rendered them vulnerable to systemic discrimination today. Negations of the value of Indigenous perspectives and worldviews were rooted early on, in government-led systems designed to destroy the structure of Indigenous families and displace communities from the literal and figurative landscape. These tactics went beyond a single system or policy and beyond physical means of assimilation or destruction; rather, they formed part of a comprehensive system designed to eliminate Indigenous languages, to dehumanize Indigenous Peoples and especially women, and to remove the structures that served to ensure community strength, continuity, and identity (National Inquiry, 2019, Vol. 1). In other words, “As a structural process, and under its various systems, colonization targeted whole communities through policies designed to undermine and challenge what people knew and who they were” (p. 233). Today, they continue under new labels and guises, but with similar impact, undermining Indigenous safety, security, and connections to community and family.

2.4 Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata’s Context

Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata has a strong history that began in the 1980s. It is one of continuous development and commitment to the Indigenous communities of Winnipeg and surrounding areas.

2.4.1 The Organization

The idea of an Indigenous-based family centre came forth during the time when Indigenous

peoples were challenging the two and half decade carryover of the Sixties Scoop. With the increasing number of Indigenous children being removed from their families and communities by the child welfare system, concerns were being voiced about the over-representation of children being adopted out of the communities and cultures. One particular event impacted the community. That event was the drowning of an Indigenous child in a bathtub. Questions were raised about the services available for Indigenous families. Community members asked themselves, “How can this single mom access resources? Where in Winnipeg could this mom have gone?” This group of concerned citizens realized there really wasn’t any safe place Indigenous families could go for support. These citizens looked to change this situation and colonial context.

Through the work of concerned Indigenous community members, a new Indigenous-run organization developed and was incorporated in 1984 with the intent of supporting and empowering Indigenous families. The organization was given the Anishinaabemowin name Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata, meaning, “we all work together to help one another.” This meaning, rooted in relational community knowledge, has been the central driving force in all of the organization’s programming and activities. Since its formation, Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre intentionally avoided seeking a mandate, choosing instead to work with families in a supportive, collaborative manner. As such, while the organization offered services to individuals, the focus has been on families and community and strengthening their connection to their own Indigenous values, beliefs, and practices, and to each other.

The Centre experienced a successful beginning, but faced a period of uncertainty, pulling the Centre off its path. This uncertainty arose from the Centre trying to fulfill expectations that originated from outside the Indigenous community. Because of this pull, in the early to mid 1990s, the Centre became a

very bureaucratic organization where services were being directed and influenced by mainstream rules and expectations. A story shared by a long-term staff member of the Centre spoke to this example:

A single mother in the North End would bundle her child to seek support from the Centre. She would trek from her home in the north end of Winnipeg and travel with her young child to the Centre's location on Broadway in the south part of Downtown Winnipeg. She arrived to find the elevator locked and had to wait for someone who could allow her to ride the elevator to the third floor to see someone, as the Centre was closed over the lunch hour. When she arrived on the 3rd floor, she was faced with a glass partition and was required to speak through a little hole to the receptionist on the other side. Upon making her request, the person behind the glass would look at a calendar to find a person who was available and a time when the person could meet. The mother was then expected to put her concerns on hold and come back.

This example presents the typical process that was followed in those years, which did not reflect the original intent of the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre.

In the later 1990s, under a new executive director, members of the Centre engaged in a self-reflection and consultation process by reaching out to the Indigenous community in Winnipeg to seek direction. The Centre was informed that it had separated itself by moving to Broadway and needed to move back to the central location where the largest number of Indigenous people resided. As a result, the Centre established the Anderson Street location in 1999, which was followed by other locations on Selkirk Avenue and Ellice Avenue. The members of the Centre also learned from the community consultation that at one time, the Centre was seen as a

leader for the Indigenous community, but this position was lost when the Centre moved to Broadway. The community provided direction to start leading again and be a voice for the community.

The third learning gained from the community consultation was that the community wanted the Centre to develop and facilitate ways for its members to give back to the Indigenous community. The community wanted the Centre to maintain its roots in the community by having community members directly involved in the delivery of programs and services. As a result, the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre created a volunteer program. This program has led to more than 200 volunteers working with the Centre. Many past volunteers have moved into staff positions within the Centre. In addition, many services provided by the Centre are co-facilitated with community members. Part of the development of the volunteer program meant that the Centre became a learning organization where the gifts, talents and skills of community volunteers, staff and community members are supported and strengthened, so they themselves are better situated to share with other members. This learning orientation/model does not see people from a deficit perspective but looks at people's strengths, and how best to support them and their strengths. This in turn also creates opportunities for the staff.

The Centre developed both an executive team and a leadership team of about 25 people, who helped to determine the path the Centre would take. The Centre had shifted from the hierarchal orientation in the early 1990s to reflect a horizontal organization structure that reflects a community sense of leadership, ownership and participation. This structure not only creates learning opportunities, to develop leadership and inter-relational skills, but it also influences how the Centre's members are in relationship with one another. This path led to the development of the Centre's Code of Honour and a three-day training program on the

Code of Honour. This training is required for all new members and is open to community volunteers and care providers.

Today, Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata is self-described as a strength- and value-based family resource centre. It focuses on members, particularly families of the community, and working with them and other community partners, including funders and governments. There are over 200 staff, at more than 10 locations, and well over 50 programs offered throughout the week. Together the staff, volunteers, and community partners aim to create solutions that strengthen members' power and abilities for self-care and self-determination. Through accountable, transparent, and effective use of resources, Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata implements initiatives aimed directly at supporting families.

One such initiative is the establishment of several Community Care locations in Winnipeg's urban area that are driven by the community. Preventative and support-based programs take place at the Community Care locations, including drop-in and emergency services, parenting groups, personal growth and development opportunities, and training and volunteer opportunities.

Another initiative focuses on keeping families together, where the Indigenous community broadly defines family. The aim is strengthening families and building a circle of caring in environments familiar to the children and families, including their schools and neighbourhoods, where relationships have been established with members of the community. Programs include: the *Circle of Care* program (that provides a short-term assessment home for young women between 13-17 years of age); the *CLOUT* program (that focuses on reunification of birth families through the provision of short-term licensed homes and intensive support); and *Isobel's Place* (that provides residential learning

opportunities for young women and transgender youth between 13-17 year of age).

A third initiative is the strengthening of individuals through positive interactions and skill development. This includes the *Future is Yours* program that supports youth and adults between the ages of 15 and 34 years of age to gain employment by providing them with training, skills and volunteer experiences. In addition, this program supports the youth with personal development and empowerment opportunities through workshops that address goal setting, self-esteem, healthy relationships, community awareness, leadership, and suicide awareness and prevention. Another program that provides opportunities to families and youth to strengthen their pride in themselves and their cultures is the *Rising Sun Pow Wow Club*. Families are also supported to engage in fun and interactive opportunities such as by linking them with the *North End Hockey* program.

These few examples of initiatives and activities taking place through the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre emphasize the strengths and capabilities of Indigenous families, the relationships between families and the communities, and positive individual, family, and community development. The Centre's philosophy is a direct reflection of Indigenous ways of being that permeates all programming, including the Centre's development and implementation of the Family Group Conference program.

2.4.2 Historical Background of the Family Group Conference Program

This way of working with families and community sets the foundation for when the Family Group Conference program emerged. In approximately 1998, the province's Department of Family Services conducted research on the FGC work being done in Newfoundland Labrador and decided that they would fund pilot projects in four Manitoba communities: Dauphin, Lynn Lake, Brandon, and

Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata began receiving more community referrals for FGC, making clear the program needed to be further supported and reached out to various funders, including provincial and federal governments and community foundations, such as the Winnipeg Foundation.



Winnipeg. Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata was chosen for the Winnipeg pilot and Don Robinson was hired as the first coordinator. As the FGC coordinator, Don Robinson was supported by Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata management in creating a partnership model with Winnipeg Child and Family Services (Keewatin office), the Norwest Community Health Centre, Gilbert Park Tenants Association, and other community groups. Robinson developed a close working relationship with the Keewatin CFS team by attending the team's meetings and building a presence within the system.

At that time, the Gilbert Park Tenants' Association also saw FGC as a positive development. The FGC Coordinator met regularly with the Gilbert Park Tenants' Association to create a respectful and trusting relationship and to ask for their support with families who agreed to the association's involvement. The coordinator also had office space at the Norwest Health Centre for family meetings and involvement in the centre's referral sources, and resources. According to Robinson:

I found in the beginning that CFS workers were resistant to referring families to FGC because it was a model of empowerment, giving them [families] more power in decision-making. Child welfare workers were trained systematically in established case management processes where case plans are created by them, in consultation with supervisors, so the idea of families making decisions was an unacceptable shift. With the support of Patrick Harrison, the CFS team lead, workers began to refer families.

The early FGC program relied on a single person, Robinson, which meant that administrative duties were done after hours. Recognizing the need for support, a person was hired to address administrative tasks.

The initial FGC program also included Elders and traditional knowledge keepers, who opened conferences with ceremony and shared teachings about parenting, impacts of colonization on family, and traditional ways of healing. The inclusion of Elders provided an opportunity for families robbed of the chance to learn about traditional Indigenous ways through fragmentation, disruption and the denial of the value in their own systems. Conferences were held in various areas in the city, usually in community centres like Andrew's Street Family Centre, churches of the family's choice, or leisure centres in the family's area. As a result, the Indigenous community awareness of the FGC program increased.

Knowledge of the FGC program also grew among organizations, as meetings were held with directors of various programs to provide information and collaborate with their organizations. As CFS agencies learned about FGC, the project expanded from the one office on Keewatin to child welfare agencies on Broadway, Jarvis, and in the North End. Through this experience, Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata became known as an innovative leader in child welfare and established the FGC model as a legitimate way of working with families. After the pilot project ended in early 2000, the provincial government decided to allocate additional funding of \$75,000 to the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Blake residential site for young adolescent expecting mothers. The Blake site, now named Isobel's Place, has been using FGC to support young mothers during their pregnancy. It has also included the support to and from fathers and families, ever since. When the implementation of FGC began at the Blake residential site, there was notable outreach to CFS agencies by the coordinator. At that time, agency workers were provided with an orientation of FGC, to learn about the program and expectations. In the residential care program, two FGC processes were done; the first prior to the young mother moving

into the residential unit and then again before they moved out, about a year or so later. The two FGC processes were meant to increase support for the young mother; the first prior to the baby being born and the second, after the baby is born (H1). These processes helped to emphasize the centrality and importance of this connection for maintaining Indigenous culture and safety through connection and relationship.

During these early years, Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata established a relationship with Aotearoa/New Zealand Māori community organization, Waitomo Papakainga, which was delivering the FGC program. Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata invited Waitomo Papakainga's delegation to Canada and also visited them in New Zealand in the mid-2000s. The Māori people recognized Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata's positive work with FGC and handed over responsibility to Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata to continue with the programming in Canada (H2).

One of the first workers of CLOUT (Community Led Organizations United Together) noted, that in 2004, the FGC program had several strengths, helping families to realize that they had an extended family group who would provide support, and supporting many extended family members to participate in the planning process. The FGC process was seen as effectively bringing families together who were in crisis, providing them time in the conference to talk together, and supporting the family in long-term healing processes. The connection between CLOUT and the FGC program grew and strengthened. Considering CLOUT was established under the auspices of eight community-based organizations primarily serving Indigenous people, this recognition of the program's impact was significant (H1).

The early years also carried many challenges. The CLOUT worker observed that during that time, Indigenous CFS agencies and Winnipeg CFS were

in the process of changing to the existing structure with the four authorities overseeing the agencies. That reorganization process resulted in many social workers and supervisors moving to different agencies, making it challenging to locate and communicate with workers with whom the CLOUT worker had formed relationships. Another challenge was the high turnover of workers and supervisors in the CFS system, many of whom lacked the knowledge about FGC and would not support family group decision-making process in the CFS system. Families who were already enrolled in FGC felt the negative impact of the changes. Young mothers in the residential program had their FGC implementation plans affected by the declining knowledge and support of FGC. An example was the closure of the young father's group that operated in tandem with the young mothers' group, which caused diminished father participation in FGC (H1). As Indigenous systems make clear, responsibility for child raising and protection must lie with all family members, and not simply with the mother. The larger circle of care and relationship are essential to the effectiveness of the program and overall strategy.

Despite the many challenges, Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata pressed ahead, working on their strategic plan and identifying the tools needed to conduct and expand the program in a sustainable way. The recognition that the number of children in care was increasing steadily reinforced the Centre's design plan.

Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata began receiving more community referrals for FGC, making clear the program needed to be further supported and reached out to various funders, including provincial and federal governments and community foundations, such as the Winnipeg Foundation. This relationship building with potential supporters is noteworthy in that it led to the partnership that made possible the expansion of the program in 2017.

In November 2015, the Māori delegation from Waitomo Papakainga returned to Canada once again to lend support to Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata, facilitating the Māori Family Group Decision Making Learning Conference attended by over 300 participants. At the conference's closing, senior facilitator/ educator David Rawiri, conducted a traditional cloaking ceremony, wherein Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata's executive director, Diane Redsky, was presented a ceremonial cloak that further symbolizes the bond between Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata and Waitomo Papakainga. This bond cemented the relationship and stands as a concrete expression of many of the values of the program itself. Learning from one another and growing in partnership through ceremony is a key expression of a most sacred relationship and intention.

The bond between the organizations was further expressed in 2017, when the Māori delegation honoured Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata with a visit to celebrate the seven-fold expansion of the program. While it was important to celebrate growth, the visit was also educational and intended to re-calibrate the FGC processes at Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata. An FGC mentor explained that this recalibration took place because in the years immediately prior to the 2017 expansion, the FGC processes had not been consistently following the original format passed to them by the Māori FGC representatives. During that time, staffing changes caused gaps in training that led mentors to rely on processes learned through the mainstream child welfare system that were colonial and not respecting of the values at the core of Indigenous relationships and ways of knowing and healing. More specifically, the focus had changed to one of increased oversight of families rather than support.

With the impending expansion of the program, the former long-term Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata coordinator, returned to the organization to lead the expanded FGC program. Together, the coordinator

and Rima Witanga (one of the Māori delegates from Waitomo Papakainga) worked collaboratively and intensively to train new FGC mentors, connect with CFS agencies to raise support for the FGC program, and exchange knowledge of traditional teachings that have supported families in the process of FGC. The positive outcomes of the expansion and new leadership are apparent in the numbers of children reunified with their families and prevented from entering care as a result of proactive supportive intervention.

2.4.3 Overview of the Family Group Conference Process

The FGC program at Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata is now facilitated by a team of 11 mentors and a coordinator, all of whom have close ties to the organization and community. The FGC program typically lasts between three to five months from the time of referral to resolution (Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata, 2017). Following reunification with family (defined broadly as immediate and extended family members), FGC mentors monitor the families for a year, to ensure the agreed plan is being followed and to support families to make reunifications everlasting. The program has four stages: Assessment, Preparation, Family Group Conference, and Review and Monitoring.

Lacerda-Vandenborn (2020) details the stages of the program as follows. Parents learn about and access the FGC program in multiple ways. They can self-refer or be referred to the program. Referrals come mostly from Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata's Community Care sites. The first stage, *Assessment*, begins following a formal intake process where the families are assigned a mentor by the FGC coordinator. The mentor sets a meeting with the parent(s) to review their situation and support them to see it wholistically, including CFS's view about the situation. It is also reviewed whether the family is considered at low to medium risk as identified by the CFS agency with which the family is working.

The purpose of the meeting is to shift the power from the systems to the family where the family develops the plan that addresses concerns, including CFS concerns, in their own way. This shift in power and decision-making gives families the central voice and a greater sense of control over their plan and their circumstances.



Families at these levels of risks are the focus of the FGC program, while high risk families would continue their work directly with the CFS worker. At this meeting, the mentor explains what the FGC program is and how it works. If the parent(s) is/are interested in moving forward with FGC, they sign a consent form. Next, the mentor emails the consent form to the family's case worker/agency and sets up a meeting to learn more about the case. The parent(s) is/are kept informed of the process the entire time, which is in contrast to many of the standard practices of child welfare, which either deliberately or inadvertently exclude parents from essential information in the care of their child. Due to the fact that many CFS case workers are unfamiliar with FGC, the meeting also serves as an opportunity to introduce the program to them. If the case worker is in agreement with FGC as a possibility, a meeting is set for the mentor, parent(s), and the case worker to discuss whether FGC is a good fit. If there is consensus that FGC is a suitable option, the program is initiated.

In the second stage, *Preparation*, the mentor works on behalf of the parent(s) and reaches out to family members and other individuals identified by the parent(s) as possible "supports". Supports are typically members of the immediate and extended family (e.g., siblings, grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles), friends, and others who directly or indirectly support the family in significant ways (e.g., spiritual advisors). The mentor meets with the supports individually to discuss the concerns the family is facing and explains the FGC program, the focus on keeping families together and the reunification objectives. These individual meetings help mentors and the family get a better sense of the family's history, strengths, challenges, and dynamics. It is also an opportunity to share the philosophy of the program with the supports. In keeping with the many philosophies that centre Indigenous children's learning and experiences within a

larger Indigenous framework of identity, mentors emphasize interdependence, kindness, community thinking, and connection to traditional Indigenous ways, where the well-being of children is seen as a priority and responsibility of all. Mentors focus on the strengths of the family rather than challenges and on the importance of constructive solutions, rather than assigning blame or waiting for failure. The mentor emphasizes that it is the family that develops the plan and that the mentor is present to be a support to the family prior, during and after the plan has been developed. While the engagement with the support network is in process, mentors are also working supportively and closely with parents, to access documentation (e.g., ID cards, income tax filings), services (e.g., mental and physical health care), education (e.g., parenting classes, nutrition workshops) and resources (e.g., Manitoba child benefit, housing subsidy) that will contribute to a successful reunification plan. Mentors also meet with the children as it relates to ensuring they have input into their family plan. The process for the meetings to take place depends on the age of the child/children. For example, kids under 12 will be asked questions on how they want to see their family through a casual, child-centred interview. These interviews may have the children respond in a variety of ways including having them draw a picture, write a story, or video or audio recordings of what they want to share. The mentor will present their presentation on their behalf at the FGC ceremony.

Although the timeframes of the preparatory stage vary in accordance to the logistics of the individual meetings, complexity of the case, and the timeline of other services parents need to fulfill CFS requirements for reunification, the family conference is usually scheduled within a few weeks of the preparation stage. Mentors move swiftly to bring all the supports together to be involved in the third stage, the *Family Group Conference Ceremony* (or *Family Meeting*) at Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata.

The FGC meeting starts with a smudging ceremony lead by an Elder/knowledge keeper from Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata who has previously interacted with the family. The smudging and ceremony start the meeting in a good way where the participants cleanse themselves of any negative feelings and come to a positive focus on the task on hand.



To support attendance, mentors make a number of arrangements available to the participants, such as covering accommodation (e.g., hotel stays) and transportation (e.g., fuel, airfare, transit, cab) expenses, nourishment (e.g., meals and snacks), child minding, and loss of wages. In the event a support family member or friend is unable to attend the meeting, letters with their input are also accepted and read by the family during the meeting.

In the *Family Group Conference Ceremony*, the family, their supports, and representatives from the community organizations identified in the preparation stage, gather to discuss the issues that led to involvement with CFS in an honest and non-judgmental way and to support the family to identify potential collaborative solutions. The purpose of the meeting is to shift the power from the systems to the family where *the family* develops the plan that addresses concerns, including CFS concerns, in their own way. This shift in power and decision-making gives families the central voice and a greater sense of control over their plan and their circumstances. This method respects the idea of collaborative solutions and Indigenous knowledge by providing a space within which Indigenous parents can articulate their path forward.

The FGC meeting starts with a smudging ceremony lead by an Elder/knowledge keeper from Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata who has previously interacted with the family. The smudging and ceremony start the meeting in a good way where the participants cleanse themselves of any negative feelings and come to a positive focus on the task on hand. The Elder/knowledge keeper also shares traditional teachings on family, community, interdependence, balance and well-being, among many other topics, and reflects the strengths of the family and community. The Elders/knowledge keepers with direct ties to Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata conduct most of the ceremonial aspect of the meetings. The family, the supports, members from collateral organizations, the FGC

mentor and the CFS caseworker participate in this traditional opening. This opening is crucial for the coming together of people and of perspectives, and for upholding Indigenous ways of knowing and understanding, and anchoring relationships. The circle format that is followed communicates a key principle of FGC as an Indigenous program, that everyone should have a say and be heard, and that each person has something of value or a teaching to contribute.

After the ceremony, the family identifies the concerns for which they will create a plan in their FGC ceremony. These concerns typically align with the protection concerns identified by the CFS agency. The mentor writes the concerns identified by the family on large easel-sized paper. The family members are asked to develop a primary plan and a secondary plan and are given the time to ask any questions of the other in the room. The family members are asked to identify what will be done to address the concerns, who will be responsible for each part of the plan, and the resources or services needed to implement it. One of the participants is identified as the note taker and facilitator who ensures the planning process moves forward. Once the family is prepared for the planning process, the Elder/knowledge keeper, mentor and CFS worker leave the room and the family begins to develop the plan.

In the process of sharing their thoughts and feelings, families, including the children and youth who may be present, have a chance to (re)connect and work collaboratively for solutions that will best suit their family. The meeting does not have a specific time frame, it lasts as long as needed to reach a consensus about the primary and secondary plans. On average, meetings last about six hours, although some have lasted as little as four hours and others as long as twelve hours. During this time, mentors only enter the room to provide support upon the family's requests.

When an agreement is reached, the meeting enters its final stage. The mentor is invited back into the room by the family and the proposed plan is presented to the mentor for review and discussion. If the plan is ready for presenting, the CFS worker is invited back into the room and the plan is presented. If it is seen by all as viable and acceptable, the CFS worker sanctions the plan and confirms that resources will be provided. Closing comments are made and a closing ceremony is facilitated by the Elder/knowledge keeper involved. In the very rare event the plan the family devised is not deemed acceptable by CFS, a new family group conference is performed at a later date when the gaps are addressed.

The fourth and final stage of the FGC program is the *Monitoring and Review* stage. The draft plan is then written following the necessary format for the CFS agency to sign, typically within 10 days from the FGC ceremony. Copies of the plan are provided to all parties involved in the plan. The written plan is reviewed, commitments of support are highlighted and confirmed, and the formally drafted plan is signed off by the CFS agency.

During this stage, the FGC mentor typically maintains contact with the family for a year after the FGC family meeting to support the implementation of the plan as agreed by families, supports, and the social worker. Arrangements are made to start transitioning the child(ren) to their family. Typically, this part of the plan is done by increasing the length and frequency of visits between the primary caregiver(s) identified in the plan and the child(ren). All parties keep in touch at least once a week for the first three months. The mentor provides supports and encouragement and facilitates the family's connections with Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata's many social and cultural events and activities, including women's group, men's group, traditional ceremonies, pow wow club, and community feasts. Bear's Den remains a key place where families are

able to connect with their mentors, other mentors, the coordinator, and other families involved in the FGC program. These opportunities act to strengthen the family ties and connection with additional supports in the community. The activities work to strengthen family members sense, of identity and esteem. At the three-month mark, there is a review of the plan and the family's activities between the mentor and family. Others may participate in the review, but the focus is with the family. If circumstances changed since the plan was developed, and if the plan is no longer sustainable, a new FGC family meeting is scheduled. If things are moving forward as planned, the family, mentor and supports continue with the plan with other reviews that take place through the remaining months to support the family and to see if the plan is remaining on track.

2.4.4 Bear's Den

Likely the most important place for the Family Group Conference program is Bear's Den within the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre's Gathering Place for Truth & Reconciliation on King Street. Bear's Den is where the coordinator and mentors are housed and where the families come to when they are reaching out for support from the program. Due to its location, it is tied to other supports and activities offered through Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata in which families become involved. It was developed based on a particular philosophy and teachings. This philosophy has been outlined by Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata:

Space is key when working with families. It is important that the workspace engages families to feeling not only comfortable, but also to feel safe and secure within that space. Families need to have a sense that the space is sacred in some way to help create the importance of the work that will be undertaken. Therefore, the space needs to have a spirit of its own. The FGC Bear's

The Bear's Den represents a place of safety. The FGC space will be a safe environment where families can come together to discuss where they have come from, where they are at today, and the next steps into tomorrow's journey.



Den will have a spirit of being a safe, nurturing, respectful, reunifying and healing space.

This philosophy and the teachings are captured in the painting that adorns one of the walls of Bear's Den.

In addition, the FGC mural has been interpreted in the following manner that connects the FGC program with Indigenous teachings:

THE BEAR'S DEN

- Represents a place of safety (bear in the late fall retreats to her den where it feels safe from possible predators, where she won't be disturbed). The FGC space will be a safe environment where families can come together to discuss where they have come from, where they are at today, and the next steps into tomorrow's journey.
- Rejuvenation (a bear during hibernation replenishes itself, heals old wounds, while at the same time not having to burn a lot of energy). For FGC families the space will be an opportunity to refocus, to replenish the resources needed by being connected to those resources, while utilizing only a little of its energy as may be needed.
- A place where we invite new life (mama bear in the spring emerges with her cub(s) to begin a new cycle of life). FGC families will gain opportunities to redefine their family circle so that it becomes healthier and stronger. This will be a time when families are reunited with one another and are ready to experience family life together, to grow together.

FAMILY UNDER THE EMBRACE OF THE BEAR

- They represent yesterday, today and tomorrow. Part of FGC process is helping families

understand how they got to where they are, where they are today in terms of the family situation and where it is they wish to be as a family.

- FGC process is to help families see themselves as a healthy/strong family.
- Three family figures can also represent the mind, body and spirit of the family, which is part of what FGC does.
- The family and the bear are sitting/standing on a braid of sweetgrass.
- The first seven strands represent the 7 sacred teachings...Love, Respect, Honesty, Courage, Wisdom, Truth and Humility.
- The role of FGC is to incorporate the 7 sacred teachings into the work they do with families.
- The next seven strands represent the 7 generations ahead of us.
- Role of FGC is also to help families coming to the understanding that it's up to them to break unhealthy patterns so that the next generations don't suffer the same consequences.
- The last 7 strands represent those generations before us.
- Where did our families learn to be families? Having family members understand that how they operate today as a family are learned behaviours... once they recognize healthy and unhealthy patterns of behaviours /coping, they can then decide which ones they wish to continue using and which ones are no longer helpful to the well-being of family members.

Then we talked about the 4 or 7 suns each with 4 rays (one of the rays connecting to the bear) representing the 4 stages/4 directions/4 seasons or the 7 sacred teachings. (FGC Bear's Den Mural Interpretation Document)

Bear's Den figures prominently in the program's intention, and it was established at the time of the renewed initiation of the FGC program. It includes two private meeting rooms, and a large open area for families to gather. This area includes many materials, such as games for the children that support interaction between the family members. The mentors have space here to complete their written work

on computers. There are less computers than mentors, like the space, the computers are shared. Right beside Bear's Den is the kitchen used by Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata staff and programs overall. There is food available to the families at Bear's Den, thus directly reflecting a vital part of Indigenous cultures that hold food as a central point of attention and the means to facilitate people to come together.

3.0 AN INDIGENOUS EVALUATION DESIGN

3.1 Indigenous Ways of Knowing, Research, and Evaluation

To honour their commitment to the Māori who gifted the FGC to the organization, and the Indigenous communities being served, Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata sought an Indigenous evaluation. An Indigenous evaluation approach is based in Indigenous ways of knowing. The foundation to Indigenous ways of knowing, including Indigenous evaluation, is that Indigenous worldviews are grounded in the peoples' long held values, beliefs, and perspectives. Indigenous peoples have developed specific practices and actions to develop their knowledge over millennia.

Until recently, Indigenous ways of knowing have been marginalized and ignored by the non-Indigenous society (Hart, 2009b, 2010). While social scientists have noted the need for emancipation from only hearing the voices of non-Indigenous peoples (Guba & Lincoln, 2005), there is recognition for an expanded understanding of ways of coming to know. Chilisa (2012) stated:

Social science research [evaluation] needs to involve spirituality in research, respecting communal forms of living that are not Western

and creating space for inquires based on relational realities and forms of knowing that are predominant among the non-Western Other/s still being colonized. (p. 3)

She went on to note that when Indigenous-based researchers have attempted to expand ways of knowing and engaged in knowledge development—and we add evaluation—they are faced with imperialism and colonialism where colonial epistemologies, or ways of coming to know, set limits on what counts as acceptable development processes and acceptable knowledge. Through her seminal work, Smith (1999) critiques non-Indigenous research practices and outlines the need for decolonizing approaches to research. Several Indigenous scholars carried this discussion further and outlined methods for Indigenous research (Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2009, Hart, 2009b, 2010).

From these and other efforts, several key points have emerged for conducting research. These points include several distinctions between non-Indigenous and Indigenous research methods, including the purpose for research, specifically that it should be done in collaboration with Indigenous peoples to decolonize, rebalance power, and

contribute to the healing of the people. Further, the methods employed should be culturally relevant, privilege Indigenous ways of knowing, and serve to strengthen relationships while supporting Indigenous self-determination (Drawson, Toombs, & Mushquash, 2017). The relationships should at least include the Indigenous communities with which the research is taking place (Lavallée, 2009). Indeed, it is crucial for researchers engaged in Indigenous research and evaluation to recognize and work within the context, as well as reflect on who owns, oversees, designs, interprets, and reports and benefits from the research process, reports and related outcomes (Drawson, Toombs, & Mushquash, 2017; Hart, 2009b; Smith, 2012; Snow, Hays, Caliwagan, et al. 2016).

Indigenous research and evaluation should contribute to the welfare of Indigenous peoples; thus, it is a moral act that is guided by Indigenous values. Several values have been highlighted including (1) relationships and reciprocity, where research and evaluation is based in relationships where all parties are giving, receiving and impacting one another; (2) respect of place, where people and other life are understood as being of a place and having unique relationships with their living place; (3) honouring of diversity and uniqueness, where there is recognition of the subjective nature of knowledge, hence differences and the patterns of individuals of a place are held in high regard and appreciated; (4) wholism, and reflections of it, such as community, is actively included in the scope of any study; (5) that everyone has something to offer, their gifts, and these offerings strengthen the whole; (6) trustworthiness where individuals and communities will act with integrity to how they have come to know and in turn enact their gifts; and (7) self-determination, where people and communities are best situated to determine their direction (LaFrance & Nichols, 2009).

Perhaps one of main components that characterizes Indigenous ways of coming to know is spirituality. Non-Indigenous research, particular that based in positivistic epistemology, gives little consideration to spirit as it is not seen as something that can be defined and measured. For Indigenous peoples, spirit is just as important as mental, emotional, and physical aspects of life. It is often seen as that which connects all entities (Chilisa, 2012), and plays a significant role in the inward reflection process that leads to insight (Hart, 2009; Wilson, 2008). It is understood that “wahwaa!,” “aha!” or “Eureka!” moments are reflections when our spirits are moved. This insight is interwoven into personal and community experiences and confirmed within the community context and understanding at which time it is seen as a knowledge contribution (Ermine, 1995; Hart 2009b).

One set of processes that help Indigenous people develop their knowledge in relation to these practices and actions include: (1) engaging in and paying close attention to the activities and/or stories, (2) sharing our own direct personal experiences of the activities and/or stories with others, (3) developing an understanding of the larger contextual experiences and stories, (4) connecting our experiences with the experiences of key people around us, particularly knowledge keepers or Elders, (5) reflecting thoughtfully on the stories and connections through the peoples’ perspectives, core cultural values, fundamental beliefs, and historical experiences, (6) continuously revisiting these stories for (a) those parts that extend the understandings/story further, and (b) things that stand out and challenge any of the understandings, and (7) telling the full story openly while listening for how others within the context relate to the story.

Overall, Indigenous peoples rely on interpreting their lived experiences by relating these experiences to the stories in their lives and the larger stories of which they are part. As noted previously,

knowledge is not seen as separate from the people and contexts involved. However, perspectives, processes and understandings not based in their context or worldviews, such as statistics, can be incorporated by weaving them into their contexts and understanding. It is noteworthy that sometimes new experiences, whether from experiences of the people or from other characters or events outside the context, are seen as key figures meant to create flux and changes to the stories. The flux and changes are not usually immediately understood and require time and careful reflection to understand. Like teachings in the stories of the older brother of the Anishinaabe, nanaboozoo, or the older relative of the Cree, weesahkecahk, these experiences are not ignored, but are carried forward for future interpretation and knowledge development. The wealth and diversity of these influences amount to Indigenous evaluations relying on Indigenous ways of coming to know that are based within Indigenous perspectives, practices, and understandings, while incorporating other means of evaluating to address matters of fundamental importance to Indigenous peoples and their context.

3.2 Following Indigenous Methods to Evaluate the Family Group Conference Program

3.2.1 Indigenous Protocols

This evaluation is based in Indigenous methods as outlined above, augmented by descriptive quantitative analysis. It followed regional Indigenous protocols and practices even before its implementation. To reaffirm the commitment to be true to its Indigenous cultural roots, members from Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata made a ceremonial commitment to the Māori delegates who were present to guide and witness the resurgence of the Family Group process. The ceremony included the sharing of gifts, song, prayer and feasting in an open process. This

ceremonial commitment included the completion of the evaluation in an Indigenous-based manner, where cultural protocols would be followed, and community would be respected. This commitment was maintained from the initiation of the evaluation where the Indigenous methods were the leading points of discussion for the oversight committee made up of members from Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata and the funding bodies.

The evaluation process was initiated with ceremonies where offerings of tobacco and cloth were presented in both a sweat lodge ceremony and a Sundance ceremony by the lead evaluator. Throughout its implementation, the evaluation was addressed in additional ceremonies in order for the evaluation process to maintain the cultural base and connection. Cultural protocol was also included directly in the evaluation process. All requests made of individuals and families to participate was accompanied with an offering of tobacco, and two metres of cloth. The offering of tobacco and cloth is an Indigenous practice of making a request that has a wholistic, particularly spiritual, aspect to it. It has some practical understandings connected to the practice as well. The individual making the offering is confirming (1) they are requesting something, and (2) that the request comes with a commitment to behave with integrity and respect. The acceptance the offering is (1) parallel to the giving of consent by the persons receiving the tobacco to address the request and (2) recognition that the process will be following Indigenous principles of conduct. This practical and spiritual understanding was the reason for the offering.

In addition to the tobacco and cloth offering, families participating in the FGC program are provided with a token honorarium and funds for transportation and a small meal. People who were not employees of Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata were provided with a consent form that was verbally reviewed

“Hands on training was what was best. All the stuff received from coordinator and [knowledge keeper] was greatly beneficial” (M6). One mentor who provided FGC prior to the group training identified that the learning has been “amazing”, extensive, and ongoing” (M5). Similarly, another mentor stated, “You never stop learning. It’s a day-by-day thing.”



with them to seek their confirmation of their willingness to participate in the process.

Upon completion of the final draft of the written report, offerings were made once again in a sweat lodge ceremony to acknowledge the work completed to date. The final stages of the report connected to its dissemination will also include ceremony with community to acknowledge the work and path ahead.

3.2.2 Evaluation Methods Included

The evaluation included hearing from people from various perspectives. A literature review was completed to provide a larger context on various levels including the historical background of Indigenous ways of being, the more recent colonial context impacting Indigenous families and communities, and the history related to the local context of Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata and the FGC program. In addition to the inclusion of literature, the localized context included a review of online material, material made available by Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata, as well as information shared by some of the people who participated in the casual conversational interviews. Casual conversation interviewing outlined by Kovach (2009) is a method based in Indigenous perspectives, values and practices.

The experiences of key groups and people involved in the FGC story at Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata provided the main contributions of the story. These people were family members, particularly parents, who participated in the FGC process, and mentors who facilitated the inclusion of the families in the FGC process. There were 50 interviews with family members that took place over a period stemming from spring of 2018 to the late summer of 2019. In addition, an opportunity emerged to include a sharing circle with seven Indigenous fathers. In

light of the notably lower number of fathers participating in the family interviews, these fathers' contributions were weaved into what the families had to share to develop a larger shared story. Sharing circles, sometimes referred to as talking circles or healing circles, are group discussions and with a process that follows particular guidelines. The process followed is rooted in Indigenous perspectives, protocols, values and practices (Hart, 2002; Lavallée 2009; Rothe, Ozegovic, & Carroll, 2009; Tacine, Bird, & Cabreara, 2016)

The story that emerged from the interviews with the families and circle discussions with the fathers was enhanced and reinforced from the ten casual conversational interviews with Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata staff members in the summer of 2018 and nine repeat interviews completed in the summer of 2019. Mentors' contributions were provided through casual conversational interviews. In addition, nine collateral supports, nine CFS workers, and four other community member interviews were included. The experiences of these contributions were provided through casual conversational interviews with collateral supports—Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata staff members, FGC team members excluded—and sharing circles with CFS workers and community members.

The casual conversational interviews were based on, but not limited to, several guiding questions (see appendices) that were audio recorded. The questions were vetted by the evaluation oversight committee who oversaw the development of the evaluation process. The recordings were replayed and/or transcribed for the evaluators to develop interview summaries. These summaries were based upon the interviewing evaluators' synthesis of highlighted points related to the questions that were asked and the stories shared by those interviewed.

The sharing circles followed a similar process. They involved the participants being asked guided questions by one of the evaluators and each person responding without interruption from other circle members. The circles were recorded, and transcribed. The evaluator completed a summary of each circle where highlight points related to questions and other key points raised by the circle participants were synthesized.

The summaries of the interviews and circles were then brought together to create an overall story of the FGC process and its impacts. This story was then supported with the addition of the quantitative descriptive statistical data collected by the manager of the FGC program. Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata's FGC story was then set in larger context that was described through the literature.

4.0 THE MENTORS' EXPERIENCES

IN JUNE AND JULY 2018, TEN MENTORS were interviewed about their experiences with the program. Eight of these mentors, plus another mentor who recently started, were re-interviewed in July and August of 2019. They shared their perspectives on the training; working with the other members of the FGC program, families and CFS agencies; impacts of the program; and how to strengthen the program. The mentors' responses were consistent from one year to the next, which demonstrated the stability and consistency of their work and the program over the year. It appears a key to this stability and consistency was the training that was received.

4.1 Learning as a Team and Ongoing Learning

The mentors spoke highly of their original training. The bulk of the training for most mentors took place during a two-week orientation once the mentors' employment commenced. Most staff took the training in late fall of 2017. In addition, the mentors toured internal Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata programs and learned from Rima Witanga who is one of the Māori mentors who helped with the teaching of the mentors during her stay from April

2018 to September 2018. Mentors who started after the initial group had the additional benefit of shadowing other mentors for a period of time. The training topics included FGC, historical Indigenous ways of knowing and being as it relates to traditional familial context, community resource, vicarious trauma, trauma informed care, Code of Honour, first aid/CPR, mental health first aid, non-violence crisis intervention, food handling, safe talk, ASIST suicide intervention, child welfare 101, harm reduction, and realities of sexual exploitation/human trafficking. The extensiveness of the training was reflected by mentors, of which one said, "Training really took flight when talking with mentors during the meetings, and in being part of the ceremonies. We did have a lot, but the easiest part was doing the initial FGC team training and meeting all involved. Hands-on training was what was best. All the stuff received from coordinator and [knowledge keeper] was greatly beneficial" (M6). One mentor who provided FGC prior to the group training, identified that the learning has been "amazing," extensive, and ongoing" (M5). Similarly, another mentor stated, "You never stop learning. It's a day-by-day thing. Sometimes it is with [Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata] staff team and sharing suggestions, reaching out

and asking questions with other mentors and Jackie [FGC Coordinator]. The early training was really good. I prefer hands on training” (M9). Overall, mentors spoke positively of the training and none of the mentors suggested changes to the training.

4.2 Connecting with the Team

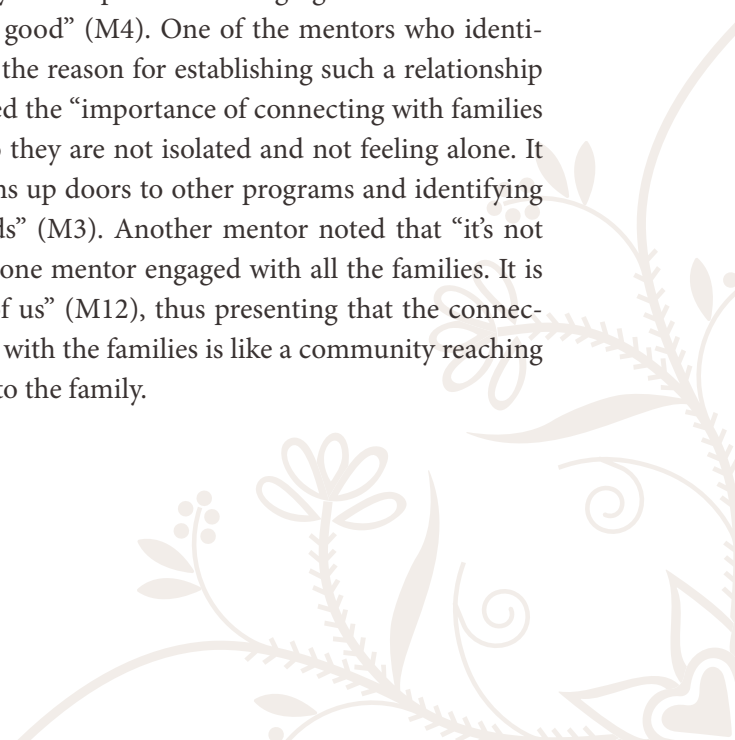
The earlier training was noted for more than the content and process; it also established strong connection between the mentors. For example, one of the mentors explained how she felt that the FGC mentors were more like family than co-workers. She outlined that she had a lot of growth in the past couple of years with the program. Her growth was based on learning about relationships she had with the mentors. She identified that they helped her to focus on what is positive in life, independence, and gaining more confidence when talking with [CFS] workers and groups (M4). Similarly, another mentor stated, “I learned a lot from my team...Lots of mutual support for one another. It’s like a process now. Knowing the template of...what we need to do...having this checklist helps me” (M10).

4.3 Connecting with Families

The experience of connecting, or establishing relationships, was also an important process that took place between mentors and families. A mentor emphasized that “relationship is the biggest part of our positions” (M1). One mentor explained this process and stated, “If you don’t have a connection with a family, things don’t seem to go smoothly. We make connections with families by talking with them and communicate with them, not being judgmental about mistakes. It has a lot to do with trust. You have to demonstrate you will be there for families. No matter what kind of issue, the workers are there to help solve the issue, not report them. Support them making their own decisions. At times we

may not agree but we still don’t judge their choices” (M9). Another mentor stated, “We are another voice checking with them and making it so that they are treated as your own family. They get to a point to speaking with you in confidence. Building that trust is important. It helps them be able to see things differently.” This mentor went on to explain, “Helping them get back on their feet is key to building trust. Rebuilding their home again helps build trust. Seeing them at some of the outings we do helps building trust and relationships” (M6).

Other mentors identified that establishing a relationship with the family was the most important activity (M1, M2, M5, M7, M10, M12). A mentor identified that building trust was key, along with active listening, demonstrating support of the family, and connecting regularly so the family does not feel isolated (M3). One mentor identified that the relationship with the family should be a reciprocal one. She went on to state that establishing a relationship with the family is the first thing to do. She explained that “you have to build the relationship with them. Driving is a good way, so you are not face to face with them. Let the relationship develop naturally. Very important that they feel comfortable with you. It is best to get to know them. Especially for couples. Even bringing another mentor is also good” (M4). One of the mentors who identified the reason for establishing such a relationship stated the “importance of connecting with families is so they are not isolated and not feeling alone. It opens up doors to other programs and identifying needs” (M3). Another mentor noted that “it’s not just one mentor engaged with all the families. It is all of us” (M12), thus presenting that the connection with the families is like a community reaching out to the family.



4.4 Importance of Relationship-Based Approaches

Professionals can be defined as individuals who espouse a body of knowledge, behaving in ways representative a professional body, and are accountable to the expectation identified by the professional body. As there are no FGC professional bodies, the mentors are focused on their actions in relation to the family in outlining how to work with families. They focused more on being personable and creating positive relationships. A mentor noted, “When they [families] come here, you can’t tell who are the mentors from some of the families. It is just comfortable...it is our relationships, before our documentation...we get to understand them more” (M3). They do not call the families or family members clients (M6), concentrate on the family as a whole unit in a given context (M3), focus on developing an understanding of the difficult times that families experience (M9), and actively work to establish trust with the family (M6). This trust is integral to connecting with the families on a personal level: “We are another voice checking with them and making it so that they are treated as your own family. They get to a point to speaking with you in confidence. Building that trust is important. It helps them be able to see things differently” (M6).

This personal approach stems from many mentors’ experiential learning. One mentor stated, “I’m experiential and have been in the same situation. I think of some of the things that social workers don’t think about, such as cable TV for a year [which] helps bring comfort to their space. Look for the small details that give the information that families are stable (M3).” This was echoed by another mentor who spoke of sharing these experiences and the importance of connecting with one’s own family for support (M5).

The personal and contextualized approach emphasized by the mentors means “learning with the

families.” According to this same mentor, it also means learning from the social workers, such as learning that there are some social workers who refuse to engage, that there are injustices done in child welfare where there are some children in care who shouldn’t be, and that there are social workers who are overwhelmed and cannot connect with families the way the mentors do (M3).

This relationship-based approach recognizes that the mentors are not present with all the answers for the families. Instead, the mentors support the families. One mentor stated, “Families need their voices back as opposed to being told what to do by workers. Families know what they need, and they know what steps to take” (M9). By being personable they are able to support families to feel secure and comfortable enough to share their needs and intended directions. Another mentor agreed by stating that she is focused on supporting families along their journey since “the families know what they need to do” (M3).

By focusing on relationships, mentors have noted that they have been impacted by the situations that families face. A mentor stated, “Not everyone is given an equal chance. Makes me want to love all the more. People want to be accepted, loved, and belong. [The families’ circumstances] opened me up more. The past traumas that our families have had—we have to nip these in the bud” (M3). Thus, the personal commitment has reinforced their commitment to supporting the families.

4.5 Importance of Quantity and Quality of Time Spent with the Families

To facilitate the wholistic, personable approach, the mentors identified the need to consistently spend time with the families in quality interaction. This combination of consistent and quality time supports the mentors to develop deeper understandings of

the families. One mentor stated, “Communication is better—we have to communicate differently with each family. The families [that have] been with us have been with us for awhile. [We] can tell when to be direct and when to be more gentle. The bond is stronger and [we are] able to communicate better and work more respectfully. Less concern about how to talk” (M3). This commitment to being with the families has meant that the mentors have been working flexible hours. One mentor noted that “all the work is really a 24 everyday kind of thing” (M6). Another mentor explained, “The relationship is key. Phones don’t turn off at 4:30.” (M3) This deep commitment to families continues throughout the process. A mentor explained that they continue until “families are stable; families stop reaching out so much. Make sure they are settled with what they need to be successful” (M3).

4.6 The Bear’s Den: A Cultural Place of Acceptance and Safety

A key contributor to creating positive relationships is the Bear’s Den. The mentors have described it like a home where families come in, kick off their shoes, make snacks, and put on cartoons. A mentor shared, “It has been said it is like going to Grandma’s home. It’s a safe place. The staff are welcoming. Each mentor talks with every family. It is an open arms area. All is okay, even when a family has a terrible day. Allow them to vent. They are not getting into trouble because they had a bad day. Resources are their right when families are facing challenges” (M9). Another mentor stated, “The Bear’s Den is basically their home. This is different that CFS office which is not seen as safe place for families.” This mentor went on to explain: “Bear’s Den is the families’ place. A safe place. There [are] daily visits. It’s a positive environment. That’s all our home. Families meeting one another and supporting one another. Amazing spot for the families. Cultural

room within it is important. Cultural space” (M6). A third mentor explained, “Our open-door policy [is important]. The Bear’s Den with no rules or expectations is a safe place, where they can see other families with no judgement. They know they are loved and cared for there (M3). This sense of safety was also identified by other mentors (M1, M12). For example, one mentor identified Bear’s Den as a welcoming, respectful place. She explained that it is a safe place. She continued by saying that the people who come there are asked to come with good spirit and they try to smudge the Bear’s Den once a day. She described it as a “homey feel, not an office” (M4). It was also noted that families, “prefer to have their visits here [Bear’s Den], instead of the little room at the CFS office...They get extra help, not just with me, but the other mentors too” (M10).

4.7 Relationship with CFS Agencies

The mentors spoke about the connection with CFS agencies. They identified that the connections were mostly cooperative, but also noted that some workers are not cooperative and that most of these workers are from a particular agency (M8, M9, M10). Another mentor explained that “the workers are not bad people, it is just how the system has been set up.” This mentor then explained that the focus with FGC was on making the relationship between families and CFS agency “smoother.” The mentor also noted, “That will always be challenging— there are still families with nothing good to say about CFS. We have to work to try and reverse that” (M6). Another mentor noted that making the relationship smoother did not rest only with the families. Instead, the relationships with some agencies requires the agency to engage in their own work. This engagement included addressing the micromanagement by supervisors. She also noted that not all agencies are on board with FGC, so more education for the CFS workers on FGC is needed

(M3). An explanation about the relationship with CFS workers was given. This mentor stated that helping the CFS workers to see the benefits of FGC, “takes some convincing—they [CFS workers] think there are a lot of meetings, or that they have to pay, or provide other things. It takes some convincing, but once on they are good. We let them know that we are there to support them as well (M4).

Within the support offered to CFS workers is the mentor’s effort to support the development of a relationship between the CFS workers and families. One mentor stated, “You have to have the relationship with the family, and also the worker. Relationship-building, building that trust with one another. The family needs to see that the agency is not against them...we help families start to see that the CFS is trying to help with reunification.” (M10). Another mentor identified that the effort to help families to establish relationship with most of the workers, especially when families did not have a good relationship with workers, has worked well. The mentor stated, “We help families let go of negativity against workers. We advocate on behalf of both and come with a positive light. We help workers to let go of some of the power and work with families on a more equal basis” (M6). A second mentor outlined that they help families to learn about the FGC program and how it helps them to connect and work with CFS workers in a better way (M3).

4.8 The Program’s Success

The mentors identified the successes of the FGC program. The success is noted through its wide program recognition as evident by people from throughout the province calling to learn and/or be included in the program (M9). The success was also identified through the relationship the program has with other services. This collaboration with other organizations, especially community-based

organizations, was another indicator noted by the mentors (M1, M3, M9, M11).

But the successes most readily identified by the mentors was related to the families. Mentors noted that family members are coming together to support one another and families are changing their attitudes to be more positive. Their attitudes towards CFS shifts from being scared to engaging in good communication where there is a focus on the goals of the family being reunited and positively supporting one another (M1, M3, M4, M9, M10). Another mentor re-emphasized this point stating that the FGC program has been successful in strengthening families—you can just experience the changes families go through. They have stronger connections as a family, greater confidence with themselves (M4). One mentor focused on the results that “more kids back at home, we are touching aunties, uncles, families, friends and we see kids with their families in the community. More positives with children back at home” (M3).

Another way success was identified was through the impact the FGC program had on the community and how other agencies are referring families to the program (M6, M11). One mentor suggested, “It has built up the Indigenous community. All families are from the community. The word is getting out. Up to 22 different CFS agencies are referring. Reunification is up to 98 percent. The more word gets out there. The impact is huge. As we gain more staff, more impact. Impacts beyond families is coming in the future. Agencies are referring directly and seeking FGC. Shows that the word is getting out there” (M6). This recognition by the community was emphasized by another mentor who stated, “It’s a word of mouth [recognition] and hearing of the great work being done. Community see hopes for families” (M3). It was also suggested that the program is impacting the broader community since not all families are Indigenous (M3).

It has built up the Indigenous community. All families are from the community. The word is getting out. Up to 22 different CFS agencies are referring. Reunification is up to 98 percent. The more word gets out there. The impact is huge. — FGC MENTOR



A mentor highlighted the ceremonies as a part of the program's success. She stated, "I see a lot of strength built up within the families with ceremonies... Being part of that ceremony has encouraged them to be involved in other ceremonies...Being involved with FGC has built up their cultural awareness of being Indigenous. I think it's important that they connect with [the ceremonies], if they choose to, not everybody chooses to. But I feel a lot of them were never raised and they don't know that way of life and they all tend to share that they are needing that. They are coming to a point now where they are saying, 'I'm really struggling. I need to go to a ceremony. I need to go to a sweat'" (M1).

There were several other points raised by the mentors about the success of the program. These include the role modelling that takes place and how it is encouraging other Indigenous peoples (M12), how hope is being established (M12), how well the voices of families are supported (M12), the support of families in ceremonies that is taking place (M12), the impact of the Bear's Den with the toys, food, and phone being available to families (M1), and how families are coming together to support one another (M1).

4.9 Challenges

There were some challenges identified by the mentors. One such challenge was getting the referral forms from the CFS agencies (M10). Another mentor noted the significant wait time for the review to be completed by the CFS (M4). Another challenge includes multiple kids in different foster homes and the children are dealing with different workers. Families need help staying engaged. In these situations, there is much need for reminding and reassuring (M4). In addition, suggestions brought forward by families that are not possible to implement were identified as challenging (M4.) Another challenging area included the assessments [the

assessment process], that needed to be addressed. One mentored noted that the assessment could be deeper to see how much families are involved with their kids and commitment to the process (M4).

Mentors also noted that it has been difficult to work with the Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) program. One mentor viewed the EIA workers as protective of their funding and that, "it is always difficult to prove that the family needs the support and they are very much about proving that...They are always trying to catch them doing something wrong" (M11).

Another challenge related to housing, as a mentor stated: "As far as housing goes, it is always a really long wait. We write letters and try to advocate for families...housing is the only thing left keeping the children away from them" (M11).

It was also shared that not all parts of the community speak of the program or make referrals. For example, one mentor stated, "[Agency Name] CFS has not been too involved. We are not getting a lot of referrals from them. [We are trying to] get the message out that it is not a power struggle to take over things. We are just trying to support families to have a voice." The challenge in this situation was establishing a relationship with a particular CFS agency so they could see the benefits of the program (M6).

4.10 Mentors' Recommendations

The mentors made several recommendations to strengthen the program. One suggested the program would work better if all the CFS agencies were on board to work with them. This mentor identified that they would need a lot more staff to address the increased demand if more agencies were on board (M6). A mentor suggested that more mentors are needed, even now (M11). Another recommendation was the need to move away from things being

dictated to families, and to let non-mandated agencies who do not have negative stigma be involved. The mentor identified that “working together with everybody and treating them all fairly is better—a circle of community” (M6).

One mentor also suggested if the program was to become mandatory, then the requirement should be related to the obligation of the CFS agency. This mentor suggested, “It should be mandatory for

agency to look at it, but not mandatory for families to participate” (M3).

Another recommendation related to the Bear’s Den. The importance of this space was emphasized and hopes to expand the space was expressed. Mentors thought more families will be successful if the safe place was expanded (M3, M11). Also, it was thought that it was not possible for Bear’s Den to get too big and that it would be better that all visits to take place at Den (M3).

5.0 THE STORY FROM THE FAMILIES’ PERSPECTIVE

THE INTERVIEWS WITH FAMILIES TOOK PLACE BETWEEN 2018-2019, with most interviews being conducted in the spring and summer of 2019. Participating family members in the evaluation process were primarily mothers (33 participants), fathers (7 participants), mother and father (7 pairs of participants), and grandparents (3 participants). The family experience comprised the greatest depth of information for the evaluation.

5.1 A Variety of Reasons for Involvement

Access points of referral (e.g., self-referrals, internal referrals, non-mandated community partner organization and mandated agency referrals) varied, as did the reasons for involvement with the FGC program. As noted below, a number of these reasons related to the vulnerabilities created by the systems’ biases impacting the families. These systems include mental health, addictions, Child and Family Services, housing, justice, etc.; each contribute to perpetuation of colonial processes that disempower families.

Of those who came forward to access services on their own, many reported hearing about FGC services through other people, or based on the program’s reputation. One of the fathers shared he had been involved with Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata for many years. He initially accessed services to assist him with family matters, including housing and parenting support. He shared he had been living in precarious housing in serious state of disrepair and struggling with a landlord unwilling to perform such repairs. He had also been experiencing challenges raising his four children. His two older children, aged 17 and 14, were being bullied in school and the youngest of the two was becoming involved with gangs. He was also experiencing distress over having his two younger children becoming apprehended by CFS for a brief period, particularly his youngest child, who was out of his care and consequently out of his control. This father approached the program on his own to access help (48).

A couple also reached out for support of their own accord. This couple was struggling with a customary adoption of a relative’s baby who was about to be born. It was known the baby would be apprehended at birth, so they had decided to step in

and become the child's guardians. The family's plan got derailed when one of them suddenly became ill and required a lengthy hospital stay, complicating the original adoption plans. It was at this point that the couple requested the FGC services to help them proceed with the adoption (44).

Another example of a person coming to access services of their own volition was a mother who was feeling overwhelmed parenting her six children at different ages and stages (7- 18 years old) (12).

In some cases, self-referrals were also encouraged by families. One mother who was feeling very depressed and had suicide ideation, was encouraged by a family member she confided in to contact an FGC mentor for help, to be well and to care for her son (3).

Other times, families were referred to the FGC program through other service programs in the city. For example, one mother explained, "I was struggling financially with my kids, and poor housing. My public health nurse told me about this program that would help me with my family." The mother has five young children (2 months, 3, 5, 7, and 10 years) (37). One set of parents found out that their daughter had a medical condition. One parent stated: "Her brain is telling her that she's going through early puberty, so she needs a needle every month to suppress—she's two years old. She will have to have this condition monitored." This parent shared that with medical treatment, the child will continue to develop normally but that the family needed support to have this health matter addressed (5). Another parent was struggling with three younger children with complex needs. As there were few supports available to her, a support worker in a CFS agency referred her to FGC (41).

Although such referrals were not uncommon, they were not the usual means by which families engaged with the program. Most of the families connected with the FGC program through CFS

referrals. Several families had members confronted with addictions. One mother shared that she had been a ward of CFS and had aged out of care. She subsequently struggled with addictions and lost custody of her children (ages 5 and 6). When she had her third child, CFS placed an order of supervision and she was connected with FGC program (43). Another parent of two children (ages 5 and 8) became involved with CFS after becoming addicted to crystal meth and alcohol (21). More than one family referred to the program due to facing addictions, did not agree with the allegations directed at them. For example, one parent was referred to FGC after her children were apprehended. She explained that CFS cited abandonment issues related to drug abuse as the reason for the apprehension. She stated she was falsely accused of both allegations and had passed a drug test (42).

Sometimes the challenges with addictions were compounded by other challenges, as well. For example, one parent explained that she had been using drugs and had a psychotic breakdown. When admitted into the hospital, her teenage daughter expressed concern about her mother's mental state, which led to a CFS worker being called in and determining she was not fit to provide care for her nephew who was in her care. He was subsequently placed into CFS care (29). Another parent stated that alcohol abuse was a major factor in her situation, along with people whose unhealthy lifestyles were negative influences (36). A third parent was referred to FGC by her CFS worker for having troubles with alcohol addiction and being in an abusive relationship (31). Similarly, one mother stated that she and her partner had a child in care due to their alcohol/drug abuse and domestic violence (34). Concerns around violence also existed unrelated to drug-related issues. One mother noted that her first child was taken from her because she was homeless and in a domestic violence situation. Her second

child was taken three days after birth and her third, unborn, child was under a birth alert (30).

Lack of social support and services were other reasons for involvement with CFS. A young mother sought services from FGC when she became involved with CFS. The agency worker expressed concerns about her ability to care for her child and suggested that child was not going to be in her care (26). Another single parent mother of two left her community because of the limited resources in her community, had her children apprehended because she had to work and leave her children alone. She was connected with the FGC program to access support (33). One woman became involved with a CFS agency after her son spoke with a school counsellor about suicidal thoughts he was experiencing. The school counsellor contacted the CFS agency who opened a file and contacted the mother. The mother stated she had been trying to access services for her son but came to realize that her teenage son needed to reach out. She was glad that he spoke with the school counsellor but noted he did not receive help from the school. It was through the CFS agency that she found out about FGC and was able to access services for her son (28).

Some parents became involved after it was determined that the primary caregivers were unable to care for their children. One young father of non-Indigenous descent shared he had separated from his child's biological mother, who is Anishinaabe. She became involved with CFS and their child was apprehended at birth. After the biological mother ceased to be involved in the CFS planning, he stepped in to seek custody and accessed the FGC program for support (39).

In another example, a mother was struggling with addictions at the time of involvement with a southern CFS agency. Her ex-common-law partner shared that he was homeless for a while after their separation and did not see his children for a year

because of their relationship conflicts. After the apprehension of their children, she contacted him to advise him what happened. She felt that he had a better chance to gain custody of the children. She asked him to connect with FGC. The father was initially hesitant to get involved with the FGC program. From his discussions with others he came to believe that while agencies say they will help, they give people trouble instead. Despite this initial thought, he decided to enroll after the FGC mentor reached out to him and explained the process (38).

In another case, a father stated that CFS did not notify him when his daughter was apprehended from her biological mother and he was excluded from the case management process. He believed that CFS considered him unfit to parent because of his struggle with addictions and the family breakdown. He did not find out about his daughter's status until her maternal grandmother informed him. He began to deal with his addictions through programs and connected with FGC (27).

Another example was the experience of one set of grandparents who wanted to obtain custody of their grandchild and were seeking to be licensed to do so. Their son, the father of the child, was killed and the mother was overwhelmed and began struggling with substances as a result (3).

Overall, while there are a variety of reasons behind families connecting with the FGC program, most were related to children being taken into CFS agency care and caregivers facing challenges related to addictions and needing support. While substance misuse is a major factor, it is not an issue in-and-of itself. Instead, and as reported by participants, this issue was deeply linked to systemic or structural factors and deep social and interpersonal issues, such as intergenerational and multigenerational trauma, economic marginalization and related issues (e.g., improper housing, homelessness), a lack of services (e.g., medical and special needs

Having my family
work all together in
a positive way—we're
here to support you,
we love you, and we
want you to get your
child back. It made
me accountable to
them and honest with
myself. — FGC PARENT



care, childcare, mental health services) and a lack of social support.

5.2 Initial Processes and Relationships with Mentors

The FGC intake process was reported by participants to be easy and prompt. One parent stated she was assigned an FGC mentor the same day she sought the service (9). Another couple noted that the FGC mentor talked to them on the phone, before they came in, to let them know what was to be expected during the FGC so they would be prepared. They also explained that the FGC mentor prepared them for a host of scenarios, including letting them know that challenging things might come up during the FGC. This couple noted that overall, their “FGC went pretty smoothly” (8).

Other than a few family members expressing initial apprehension about being involved with an agency, family members who shared thoughts about the initial process spoke of it in a positive manner. Much of the positivity related to how the mentors connected and related to their families. One couple noted the mentor “learned about us and what we both needed to be addressed in our lives” (5). Another parent felt the mentor believed in her. She went on and stated, “She’s seen me, she’s seen me for me, not for what she hears” (1). Even with the challenges such as addictions, the mentors were supportive. For example, one parent credits her FGC mentor for supporting her despite her reluctance and struggles with drugs (7). At times these positive steps were met cautiously, but soon these parents shifted in how they related to the mentors. For example, one mother admitted to having trust issues but found the FGC team accepting of her feelings and concerns (19).

5.2.1 Bringing the Family Together

Many FGC participants spoke of how their mentors had managed to bring their family members together. They spoke about the mentors’ ability to recognize their closest family members who were healthy and helping out (17). Others noted that FGC mentors brought members from both sides of the family together as well as non-familial supports who were important to the family. One mother explained, “As part of the FGC, she got everybody, everybody involved. Everybody that was important to my kids, you know what I mean? She trusted my opinion” (1). In some circumstances, families noted how the mentor was able to include family members who lived a significant distance away, even in the northern part of the province (15, 21). For example, one parent noted that the grandparents lived out of the city, so in the first three weeks, the mentor helped with gas money to get them to the FGC and back home. The mentor also arranged for hotel rooms for those who stayed overnight to attend the FGC meeting (22).

For some families, this outreach was very important since they either had trouble getting support from their families or felt that no one would have come if they tried to arrange for the participation of their families on their own (5, 16). For example, one family had to cancel the FGC meeting twice because nobody showed up. It ended up taking about three or four months to get everyone to attend the meeting (30). Another example was shared by a family’s mother: “The FGC mentor met with me and the kids and saw that I needed help. She asked if the father was involved and I said when he has time. She said that more of the family needs to be involved and I said they don’t get involved. She helped me get them involved. We made a list of supports that could become involved to help us” (12).

Another family noted that the process took two months. During this time the mentor “contacted

all my supports, my family members and she met them individually.” She explained, “With my mentor’s help, I was able to explain to my family what happened, why I went down that road, why the kids got apprehended. She broke the barrier between me and my family, letting them know what was going on in my life—that was hard to me to talk to them about. They didn’t have all the information; they didn’t know what happened” (9). On the other hand, one mother noted that her mentor was able to bring family together quickly, taking less than a month to connect with her family supports, CFS, and other support services, including connecting with family from out of the city (15).

Sometimes the people important to the children were the foster parents. Some families included foster parents at the FGC and were very supportive of them (1, 38). One father shared that the non-Indigenous foster mother has been helpful and asked her to be at his FGC. The foster parent had grown to really love his children. He was asked if he wanted his children moved to an Indigenous home, he felt that this would be traumatic and asked that his children remain with the current foster parent. FGC supported his decisions regarding current placement and as directed by the family invited the foster parent to the FGC (38). Initial foster arrangements were not always the most suitable. For example, one family noted their children were in separate foster homes. The FGC mentor was able to facilitate a new arrangement for the children to be placed together, which was positive for them and for the parents. The mother was grateful that her children were in an excellent foster home, happy and well taken of (42).

5.2.2 The Family Group Conference

Once the supports were identified for each family, they were brought together, taught about the family group conference, and supported to work together to develop and implement their plans. One parent

confirmed that the FGC helped by getting the family together for the gathering and putting the family plan in place (2). Another set of parents explained that it was really helpful to get their families working together and cooperating to develop their FGC family plan (5). One mother highlighted that while getting support from her mentor to help with CFS matters was very helpful, going into circle proved to be the most powerful aspect of FGC for her. She explained they were left alone in circle to develop their plan and had time to share and write down their ideas for what was best for the family (29). Another mother reflected on the family group conference and stated nothing negative was said: “Having my family work all together in a positive way—we’re here to support you, we love you, and we want you to get your child back. It made me accountable to them and honest with myself” (29).

This positive experience was also reflected by others. A mother stated she liked the process where all the family had the opportunity to be in one room and say what had to be said. She shared that during this process her brother said he just wanted the best for her. She stated: “Usually, I don’t talk to my brother because he has his own family and I have mine. Hearing support from him broke my heart a little bit because I thought none of my family liked him... but now it feels that they accept and support him” (34).

The planning process itself was impactful in many unexpected ways. For example, a mother identified that the family group conference process made her accountable. She felt she could not lie to family members who have known her all her life, and if she did lie, she would be called on it. She stated, “When we got into the circle with my aunties, my uncles, my mom, my brothers, my sister, and my daughters, my mom never talked about her residential school experience, but she brought it up in that circle. And, she said I’m 70 years old and she never got hit until she was nine, so she decided to

never hit us kids. She never lost any of us.” This mother stated her mother felt relieved that she didn’t have to worry about her anymore, and that she was on the right track. She stated that her family circle was not only powerful for her and her family but also helped motivate her toward traditional ways of healing (29).

Overall, while the family group conference lasting from a couple of hours to several hours, it was identified that the process was relatively prompt and that it was not complicated (22). All families had positive comments to share about the experience.

5.2.3 Addressing a Variety of Issues through the FGC Plan

A variety of issues were reported to have been addressed through the family group conference and development of the family plan.

At least one family spent time during the conference talking about family values, the importance of passing on these values to the children and setting up healthy boundaries. This family was facing the health condition and passing of a grandfather who had suffered a stroke (23). Other families were addressing matters of basic necessities (37). One mother shared that her mentor supported her to move to a better place, obtain new furniture and other furnishings, complete her tax filings for the past couple of years (so she could access the child tax benefit to which she was entitled), and connect with Wahbung Abinoonjiiag (domestic abuse treatment centre in Winnipeg) for counselling so she could process the grief over her parents’ deaths and the recent loss of her sister (37).

Some plans focused on healing. For example, as part of a plan addressing a mother’s sobriety and safety, the mother was to attend a healing program that could help her to maintain her sobriety and stay away from her abusive relationship. She explained that when the father of her children was around and when under the influence of meth, he could be

a very dangerous man. She shared “his mother was involved in my FGC and that’s the reason he’s leaving me alone because his mom is on my side now” (31). Similarly, one couple committed to addressing their addictions through the family plan; the father was to apply to the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba (AFM) in-patient program and the mother was scheduled for in-patient treatment in Ste. Rose du Lac, Manitoba. Their plan also included a seven-day couple’s retreat at Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre and ongoing follow-up with a Men’s Group and Wahbung counselling services (35). For another mother, her family plan included completing the Pritchard House in-patient and out-reach aftercare program. In addition, her plan including parenting classes, speaker’s meetings (AA and Native Women’s Transition Centre), anger management, and programs within Native Women’s. The major focus of her family plan was on after-care, particularly relapse prevention and creating a healthier support network (21).

Another mother identified that the activities from her family plan included parenting courses. It is noteworthy that this mother highlighted that she wanted to go back and take some additional courses offered through Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata (1). Similarly, one parent noted that the plan included learning about parenting: “I have to learn how to be a parent again. I lost them for four years. We had attachment therapy with my little boy—we went once a week and everything was going good, and then the therapist sent a letter to the workers that it’s a go for [her son] to come home. He is the baby” (23).

As part of his plan, a father committed to Spirit of Peace, a father’s group, and cultural activities. His family’s plan included support from relatives, including his ex-partner, and other members who agreed to provide childcare when he was working. The plan also included programs for his children that were available through Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata (14). Another family plan included summer

Without FGC I wouldn't have been able to do all this stuff on my own, I really appreciate their support. I think what helped me succeed with this program is the support I get. When I'm going through a hard time, they tell me not to worry, that they're here to help. Sometimes I have unhealthy family coming around drinking, doing drugs and I have a hard time with that. It would be so easy to just jump in there. What really impacted me about this program is that they're always there, the door is always open, I can talk anytime I need to.

— FGC PARENT



camp and drop-in recreation programs for the children (16).

Overall, there were a variety of other issues that families were addressing through their plans including social anxiety (23) and other health matters (6), trauma (10, 25) including sudden death (murder) in the family (20), moving from rural areas and homelessness (17), inadequate housing (18), unemployment and poverty (6, 10), and missing too much school (13). All of these issues were deeply rooted in the longer history and contemporary legacy of colonialism, and in the need to bring families and communities together in order to address healing and the safety of children in a wholistic and community-grounded way.

5.2.4 Families' Experiences Implementing Their Plans

The families' experiences of implementing their plans was equally diverse. Some of these experiences were the challenges families faced in trying to complete their plans.

One father shared a pivotal moment when he realized the enormity of the challenge he was taking on. He spoke about being confronted on his commitment to the plan when he was dividing attention meant to be given to his son during a parent visit at the Bear's Den by speaking to a friend on the phone during the visit. He said an FGC mentor challenged him to examine what he was doing. He was encouraged to remember that he did not have a bond with his son and that he needed to build that bond. He stated that being challenged made him realize that he had to make a big commitment to his son and was grateful for FGC pointing this out. He began to learn about parenting and focusing on his son (18).

Another mother noted that she was challenged going through with the plan. She had a relapse but was able to get back on track by finishing a relapse prevention program, continuing with one-on-one counselling, joining Alcoholics Anonymous and

Crystal Meth Anonymous, and looking into an outpatient treatment program (25). Another mother was facing some initial difficulties due to the passing of her mother and her children not attending the after-school programs. Fortunately, her family started to get more involved; her brother, who was a truck driver, stopped driving for a while to help her and the children's paternal grandmother started to help with the kids more (12).

A few parents who had engaged with the program reported still struggling with sobriety. A mother advised that she could not maintain her sobriety since learning that family and friend supports who committed to FGC eventually withdrew from participating. She realized that she did not have the motivation and/or intensive support to stay sober and was still struggling. She was maintaining visits weekly at the CFS agency office and was still connected to her FGC mentor (32). Another mother shared that though her FGC plan was working well, she was still struggling with alcohol addiction. Her family remained supportive despite her challenges and she credits them for the success she had up to that point. She was still trying to remain on a path toward sobriety and is scheduled to begin a 21-day in-patient program at Ste. Rose (36).

Most parents spoke of moving ahead positively with the implementation of their plans. One mother noted that because of the FGC, she was able to reunite with her children. Since then she returned to school and her kids were in daycare. She was taking S.M.A.R.T—(Single Mothers Actively Reaching the Top), finished Grade 12, and was getting some additional upgrading. The children's dad also had applied for Red River College for business administration. They were both working on themselves with a focus on their personal development. During this time, her cousins, who were part of the family's FGC, watched the children when she ran errands, like grocery shopping (30).

Through FGC, a family was able to connect with a number of other services and supports, as well as with the wider community. For instance, one family was able to connect with the Jordan's Principle program, which provided them with a year's family membership at the YMCA, extra supports in the school, and an Elder to take them out on the land (31). Some fathers also noted that with the help of the FGC program, they were able to get involved in different programs and groups for single fathers. One father involved in the dad's group offered by the Centre identified how the group helped him open up to other fathers who were going through similar challenges. The group supported him as he went to court and attended meetings (27). Another family secured subsidized housing and got start-up furnishings with the help of the FGC program. The parents worked on reconciling their relationship with the help of the FGC mentor and counselling resources. This couple were addressing their daughter's serious health needs and learned sign language so they could communicate better with their daughter (2).

Overall, families spoke positively about the implementation of their plans. They spoke of being supported and encouraged by the mentors and people identified in their plans.

5.2.5 The Supports Received

The families identified that the FGC mentors were key contributors to their success. One mother stated, "I believe that if Ma Mawi gave up on me, I wouldn't be here right now because I thought I had nobody. When I was at the point where I was losing my mind, I came here for help and they didn't push me away, and I'm very grateful for that. I needed the support. I was honest with [the mentor], told her what I was doing and when I did it. Well now, I'm sober! I'm starting to find out who I am, so it's very awakening" (7). Another young woman stated she has been trying on her own for three years to

get her five-year-old son back into her custody. She had not been able to find appropriate housing for them both as she could not afford a one-bedroom apartment. She had been seeking resources in Winnipeg that could help but was unsuccessful until she came to FGC (15). Another mother stated the unconditional support of the mentor and the FGC team has been what she has appreciated the most. Her mentor was always available for meetings and to advocate for them both at all stages of the process. She identified that the support was consistent throughout the ups and downs of the entire FGC process (47). Another mother said, "I couldn't have done it without Ma Mawi, I couldn't have done it without [particular CFS agency]. I couldn't. You know, they protected me and my family" (1).

Fathers also shared their thoughts of the support they have received. One father explained that he was getting support from his mentor, and that just knowing that there is another person supporting him when he goes to court and meetings shows him that they believe in him. He stated that this support gives him the strength to continue on with what he's doing (27). Another father stated that, "without FGC I wouldn't have been able to do all this stuff on my own, I really appreciate their support" (38). This father explained further and stated, "I think what helped me succeed with this program is the support I get. When I'm going through a hard time, they tell me not to worry, that they're here to help. Sometimes I have unhealthy family coming around drinking, doing drugs and I have a hard time with that. It would be so easy to just jump in there. What really impacted me about this program is that they're always there, the door is always open, I can talk anytime I need to." A third father summarized the support he felt: "You know they're supporting me massively, even, even up to today. It's good to know you have a support system like that. They made me feel like I'm a powerful father" (1).

The families noted various aspects of support that they received from their mentors and the program. A few of the mentioned supports include: emotional support (1, 3, 4, 13, 16, 19, 21, 22, 24, 29); listening to family members on their perspectives and experiences (21, 24); strengthening family relations and family boundaries (2, 9, 10, 21, 28); dealing with stress (13, 21); expanding the circle of positive supports (7); encouragement when family members were facing a particularly difficult time and stumbled (13); respecting the family (16, 17, 24); supporting family members (28, 30); providing resources (5, 9, 13, 15, 16, 37); teaching about community resources, how to access them, and overcoming barriers (1, 2, 5, 7, 8, 16, 19, 20, 21, 26, 28, 45); educating about a family's rights (8, 17, 27); mediating between family members and other agencies (8, 14, 15, 21, 29); advocacy (2, 3, 8, 24, 36); and being regularly available to families in an ongoing manner (4, 7, 12, 21, 22, 24).

One family's statement reflected what many families experienced: "We came here, met with the workers and liked it. If not for this program, we wouldn't have progressed at all—we wouldn't have our visits where they are now" (8).

5.2.6 Strengthening Family Members

One special form of support was highlighted by the family members interviewed, namely, strengthening family members and therefore, the family unit. From when they first met with families, mentors focused on supporting the family by recognizing the strengths of the families. While at least one family felt they were already strong (40), most others noted how the mentors positively impacted them. One mother noted how her mentor believed in her even when she did not believe in herself. This mother explained that there were times when she was doing so much and she was still full of self-doubt, but they cheered her on (31). Another mother noted she had doubts, so her mentor helped her to change this

way of being. As she explained, her mentor "was very supportive and reassuring me that I got this, making me believe in myself again" (9). Similarly, another mother noted, "That's something that FCG has done for me, has given me the mental strength that I didn't think that I had...I was able to make my case plan. I had this long list of things. I had everything figured out and I followed through" (1). This supportive strengthening was noted by other parents. One father also identified that with the mentor's support he learned to persevere despite challenges of CFS involvement, parenting young children, and being concerned about his 16-year-old daughter (14).

5.2.7 Support With the Family-CFS Relationship

Another key means of support provided by the FGC program and the mentors was work on the relationship between the families and the various Child and Family Services agencies. One mother noted that through the FGC intervention, the CFS agency involved was able to realize that the family has many strengths and made an excellent plan to address the major issues (28). Another mother stated that her CFS worker saw her potential and thought FGC would benefit her family. That worker supported the referral to the program (31). Another parent explained that she self-referred to the FGC program. She went on to say, "They didn't refer, they didn't know what it was, my worker had no clue. The FGC supervisor and mentor did a lot of explaining what the process was through meetings with my worker, and they invited her to my FGC meeting. It was good that she came" (9).

In other situations, the mentors were able to facilitate improvements in relationships between families and the CFS workers. One mother related that the previous CFS worker was negative towards her, making things seem worse than they were, and not seeing what she was trying to achieve in order to get her children home. She identified that the

FGC process raised the CFS agency's attention to the fact that she has many strengths and was trying to get on a good path. She credited the FGC program with the resolution that resulted in the family getting a new worker, with whom she was able to develop a positive relationship and maintain regular contact. The new worker's participation was critical in the plan developed by the family (19). This experience was similar to one of the father's, who outlined how he and the children's mother were grateful to the FGC program supervisor who addressed how the family was being treated and facilitated improvements in the relationship with the worker. The parents identified that the worker's attitude improved, and even resulted in an apology to them (8). Another parent noted how the FGC program, through his mentor and the team, facilitated a strong working relationship between the family and the CFS agency. He noted he is now able to ask them for support as well (18). Similarly, a mother noted, "It was most helpful getting my CFS worker on the same page as me; before that, things weren't going well at all—a totally opposite way" (11).

Some families identified how the FGC mentors were important supports for them as they worked with CFS. One parent noted that "just having that support system, someone that's always there, facing CFS with you so you don't feel overwhelmed and easily intimidated like me. Because all the time with my old social worker especially, I always felt so intimidated by her. I just felt really good to have someone" (4). One set of parents stated that the FGC mentor supported them in this relationship and advocated on their behalf with CFS. They shared that their relationship with CFS had improved somewhat with FGC being involved (5).

It is significant to note that many families spoke of the CFS agency and/or worker negatively impacting the FGC process by not acknowledging or responding to the program. One agency was officially involved in the FGC process, but workers

from the agency usually would not respond to requests from a mother or her mentor for meetings. This parent stated that when her CFS worker did respond, the worker would not show for the scheduled meeting with herself and her mentor, which led to delays in the process. These missed meetings happened despite ongoing efforts to keep CFS advised of her progress (45). Some parents identified that the family group conference can be sabotaged and delayed by an agency worker who is not working in collaboration with the FGC team. These parents described their frustrations with the setbacks and delays when their family plan was not implemented within the time frames set out and agreed to by the agency worker at the FGC (8).

Other families also did not feel supported by the CFS agency as they entered the FGC process. For example, one mother stated that the CFS worker was uncooperative with FGC process, was not returning calls, and not providing the information for the FGC intake. Once the plan was established, she stated that the agency worker was difficult to work with. The responsibilities of the worker to the FGC plan remained unfulfilled (33). Another family had a similar experience. The family group conference took some time to organize and the CFS agency cancelled on the day of the FGC. The mentor decided to proceed with the FGC because 10 people were present and ready to meet. The family group conference was about three hours long and resulted in a family plan for reunification (27). One CFS agency worker would not cooperate with the mentor and would not accept that this mother was part of FGC program. Despite the lack of cooperation, the family was able to make a care plan that worked and resulted in reunification of this child back with the mother (24). One parent thought that when CFS workers do not understand the FGC process, they impede family plans (44).

Overall, families appreciated the support they received from the FGC program in dealing with

One mother stated, “It was easier because we weren’t dealing with CFS; we were dealing with FGC. CFS sets you up to fail, FGC builds you up to succeed.”



CFS. One mother stated, “It was easier because we weren’t dealing with CFS; we were dealing with FGC. CFS sets you up to fail, FGC builds you up to succeed” (42). One couple was supported by their mentor to recruit First Nations Family Advocate Office and the higher-level management of the agency. Through these actions, the family and agency were able to reach a solution and their daughter was able to return home. The parents spoke of appreciating their mentor and the FGC process (20). Another family shared appreciation that they have somebody to talk with to safely express their frustration about CFS. It seemed to them that CFS listens to mentors, and they expressed how it was helpful that the mentor could take their concerns and advocate for them (17). One mother recognized a structural limitation of the CFS agency and how the FGC mentor was able to offset it. She stated, “CFS just goes by what they read on a paper, they don’t make the effort to meet you, get to know you as an individual—they’re always too busy” (7). This is directly in contrast with the approach of the FGC process and the work of mentors within the program.

5.2.8 Increase CFS Visits

A significant change that the mentors were able to facilitate was increasing the time between parents and children. One mother noted that, “through the FGC program, we were able to increase visits and have our children returned to us in June (5). Similarly, a father stated that “even though the agency did not sign off on it [the family plan], they are being more accountable and fair on visitation and my rights because [the mentor] calls and makes sure that missed visits are made up. They can see that I’m trying and that I have the support to make it work” (27).

5.3 Ceremonial Involvement

One of the means to support families was through the incorporation of Indigenous ceremonies and language. The ceremonies support the ability for some families to reach goals related to personal growth and healing. For example, one mother spoke about how she started going to sweats after she started with the FGC program. She also spoke of wanting to go back into her culture and wanting her kids to know about it (29). Another mother shared how she attended a letting go ceremony outside the city, which she enjoyed and she was able to let go of negative emotions (15). The support provided through ceremonies and speaking their Indigenous language was highly significant for several other families. One mother stated, “The traditions pretty much saved me. My beliefs that I have to honour it and will be dancing Sundance.” She was also involved in ceremonies and sweat lodge and explained that was what was keeping her sober. She identified she was also involved with Mama Bear Clan, sharing circles, and drum groups at the Point Douglas Women’s Centre. She would take her children with her as much as she can (31).

Another mother also spoke of attending sweats and her plans to Sundance that year. She is making a skirt for herself and plans to make one for her daughter (25). Another parent noted that she was getting more involved in traditional healing. She stated, “I didn’t want to smudge or anything while I was using because I felt like it was wrong, disrespectful. Now I feel like this is the right path. I know there is a lot of work ahead of me to work on myself, but I want to heal myself and be there for my kids” (7).

One father identified that he enjoyed going to the Tuesday night men’s group as he was learning about sage teachings, learning from the facilitators, teaching his children about respect, and has been to two sweats with the FGC program (35).

These parents' inclusion of their children in the ceremonies was a dynamic shared by many families.

One father found out that his family has traditional teachings and practices that might help his children. He and the children's mother planned to become involved with Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre pow wow club. Through the FGC program, these parents came to realize the importance of traditional ceremonies and making these practices part of their lives. They wanted to begin ceremonial practices starting with getting spirit names for the children (2). Another family also wanted to get their children involved by starting with their spirit names. These parents planned to attend sweat lodge and other ceremonies as a way to learn about their culture (5). Another mother noted that since she started with the FGC program, she has been having visits with the older children and taking them to cultural activities like the pow wow club (11). Still another parent noted that her daughter and son join her every morning to smudge. She stated, "I've only been to one sweat but I'm going again with [program supervisor]. I haven't got our names or colours yet so I'm going to get that done when I go with [the program supervisor]" (9). Another parent identified that she would like to go to more ceremonies. She explained that she was learning some things at the Native Women's Transition Centre, like how to make skirts. She went on to explain that she will make her own skirt and then an additional skirt for her daughter. She stated that she doesn't have her spirit name and plans to ask for herself and her daughter's names once in her care (21).

The children were not the only ones to be included in the ceremonies. One family planned to go to Windy Hill as a family so they can sit in a circle and talk about the pain and grief each individual has been going through (3). Members of another family spoke of attending a Sundance ceremony and the plans they made for additional traditional ceremonies with their family (5). An additional

family suggested that the program is for Indigenous families and highlighted the importance of the FGC team's awareness of cultural ways of being for these families (16).

Indigenous cultural ways of being include ceremonies that are a direct part of the FGC program. One family spoke of the welcoming back ceremony where the children were welcomed back home and reunited with the family. The mother described it as an amazing experience that produced a really good feeling. She explained that the ceremony was emotional and that she and her family really enjoyed it (9). Another mother noted this ceremony as well and stated she really liked the reunification ceremony (4).

For participants, the ceremonies help them connect to culture and to identity in a positive way, in contrast to many of the experiences that Indigenous peoples face when trying to understand who they are and where they come from. The ceremonies and their importance in reconnecting families through culture, as well as in healing individuals, speaks directly to the idea of cultural strength and resilience-based in relationships and in connection.

Importantly, the ceremonies are tied to and rooted in Indigenous languages. One mother noted that the FGC got the family involved with activities like traditional feasts, doing crafts with the kids, and learning traditional teachings. She shared, "I grew up traditional, used to dance and sing, want to teach my kids our ways, and our language. My uncle stays with us and he speaks fluently to me all the time and the kids hear so they practice what they hear. They like learning our language." She feels that FGC is the traditional way and that fits her values (16). Another mother similarly felt that language was important, and she would like her daughters to learn their language and their culture (21).

A few families had members who did not accept the importance of traditional cultures. One father's

mother was at the FGC briefly. She left when the smudging took place (10). A mother said she really liked the FGC process where her grandmother and her family learned about the sweetgrass teaching. Previously, her grandmother had never allowed sweetgrass in her home believing it to be wrong for their family (15).

Despite a very small number of people not agreeing to participate in traditional cultural activities, families felt that ceremonies and Indigenous languages were important to the families, especially the children's well-being. This point was well summed up by a dad who stated that amongst the strengths the program has to offer families is, "that they get you in touch with your Indigenous side, the traditional teachings. This will be great for the children" (35).

5.4 The Families' View of the Bear's Den

The Bear's Den was addressed by many families. Its importance cannot be underemphasized. Some families spoke of the activities taking place, such as workshops, family meetings, and cultural activities. Families are able to partake in ceremony, such as smudging, to receive support from the mentors, program coordinator and peers. One mother noted her daughter "loves coming here, especially if she is feeling down" (33). Some parents noted that the Bear's Den provides a safe place to engage with others, and a place where people have someone to talk to (42). These activities were seen as promoting self-healing (23, 27).

People felt comfortable enough to just come by for coffee and be in a relaxed, positive and welcoming environment (6, 9, 19, 20). Some individuals noted that they feel at home at the Bear's Den (2, 10). Families highlighted that the children were also seen as being comfortable at the Bear's Den (9, 10, 16, 27). Considering the challenges families

were facing, the children's comfort was a very significant point.

Some parents stated that being able to come to the Bear's Den has been a very important part of their FGC plan. They identified feeling connected to the FGC team when there and that they could ask for help from the mentors who were there whenever they need it. Also, they outlined how they would learn about upcoming programs and were able to attend ceremonies whenever they are happening there (5, 9).

Overall, the Bear's Den provided a safe and positive environment for all members of the family. Family members were at ease, and able to learn about themselves with support from the FGC team, engage in self-development in a supportive context, and build stronger family bonds. They were able to access ceremonial material, engage in community through sharing of food, and access mentors when they needed to discuss matters concerning them.

5.5 Impacts of the Family Group Conference Process on Positive Change and Healing

The families involved in the FGC program had much to say about the impacts of participating in the process. One set of parents outlined that all FGC staff, not just their mentor, contributed to things going well for their family. They identified that the staff were very friendly, spoke to them when they saw how things could be done in a healthier way, and were available any time they needed them (35). Another parent stated, "FGC offers stability to me and to other families too. They have so many resources to check into" (49). Another mom stated that prior to FGC, she always felt isolated, alone, and with nowhere to go. She identified that, "the strengths that FGC has to offer other families is that they're always there, they check on you to see how you're doing. It's nice to have someone care and

If I could make the process different or add something to it, I would add more traditional elements, like sweats, teachings, medicine picking. I grew up in Winnipeg, so I never grew up traditionally, but I see my baby and I want him to be involved in his traditions. He has a little hand drum that he loves. - FGC PARENT



reassure us that we're not alone." She appreciated the FGC Bear's Den and sees it as a safe place for families and children (42).

One mother outlined how the FGC process supported her to make positive changes in her life. She clearly explained that she needed a program like FGC to highlight her successes and her strengths. She explained that her family has grown stronger with the FGC plan and that all of the family group who attended the FGC and made commitments to help with their baby, have kept their promises and fulfilled their part of the plan. For this family, both the maternal and paternal relatives have supported them as a couple. This family expressed their appreciation of their mentor's ongoing support and continuous kindness (43).

This expression of appreciation for bringing the family together was shared by many others. For example, one father explained his family had never talked to each other about deep family matters. The FGC process was credited with having strengthened his family, and by focusing on his daughter they've come together. He stated the conference was very positive for them as a family and making decisions. He stated, "What made my FGC successful is that it has helped the reunification process occur. Nothing was happening until we had the FGC" (39). Another set of parents also experienced an increase in involvement. Both parents stated that prior to FGC, the maternal and paternal side of the families did not really know what was going on in their lives. The program made them aware and more supportive of them as parents. Both parents can now ask for extended family's help and that previously they did not believe they could reach out to them. The extended family is now aware of the FGC program too, so they can reach out to the team when there is a need, or something is not working out for the parents (5).

One parent was able to outline some of the ways the FGC program was able to teach them to address some of the family needs before matters became too great of a concern. She explained that having the positive motivation that the FGC program established "helps you see how to keep your family bonded together and to set healthy boundaries. For instance, I have a sister who drinks and it's not like she's not welcome at my place, but when she uses, I don't answer her calls. Even though I find it hard, boundaries have to be set and done because even though it is family, it has to be done to keep your family safe." She continued on to say that, "healthy structure and boundaries with my children is important. We do a lot of things together, we do more family things together; we never used to but now that we're in a healthier place, we smudge every day, we eat together as a family, discuss how our days went" (22). Other parents identified similar experiences. One mother stated that the family is having more positive activities together. She explained that, "we have family nights now and we go places together. I couldn't get them in the same room before. Now when they hear the keys, they're all in the vehicle before me" (12).

While families move forward with more positive interactions, they also noted that they are on their learning path. One mother stated that she is continuing to learn more positive parenting strategies and is able to rely on her family for help (12). This experience was reflected by another parent who said, "They taught me not to be afraid to ask for help and I appreciated their honesty" (13). One parent said that the FGC program has strengthened her as an individual, so that she sees things differently and she is continuing in a new, positive way (29).

Overall, only one family spoke of things not moving forward. This family noted that they did not follow through with the FGC plan because nothing else went as planned (13).

The rest of the families reflected the successes, such as one mother whose son came home. She stated, “He’s in kindergarten already and hugs me and says, ‘I’m happy’” (15). Similarly, a mom said she believes that without FGC, she would still be struggling alone and thanked the team for their time, support, and caring (15). Another father said, “Getting my kids back is the best thing,” and that “this wouldn’t have happened without FGC helping me” (48).

5.6 What Families Did Not Like about Involvement with the FGC Program

Despite being asked directly about what they disliked, only one parent had a comment. This mother identified that she did not like some of the CFS programs and she did not want to do them. She also explained that her mentor helped her through her ambivalence about these programs and she was guided to take what was most useful from the opportunity. She stated that having her mentor to talk to about her thoughts and feelings helped her through this experience (42).

5.7 Recommendations from the Families

When asked about how they would make the FGC program different, most families stated they would not change the program.


Of the families who offered recommendations, most focused on providing traditionally based services. One parent stated, “I would say more traditional teachings because we need to light everybody’s fires to wake up” (31). Another parent added some specific suggestions of traditional practices. She stated, “If I could make the process different or add something to it, I would add more traditional elements, like sweats, teachings, medicine picking.

I grew up in Winnipeg, so I never grew up traditionally, but I see my baby and I want him to be involved in his traditions. He has a little hand drum that he loves” (34). Similarly, another parent stated that FGC should have more cultural activities, such as sweat lodge ceremonies and Elders’ teachings, naming ceremonies, and outings for the families. She also stated that she did not learn any of the traditional teachings in her life, so she would like to participate and learn along with her children (21). Another mother said the whole process was a ceremony and recommended that the name reflect this point. She explained, “My experience was great. If I could change anything, I would name it Family Group Ceremony, not Family Group Conference. It’s a ceremony, bringing our kids home” (42).

There were a couple of suggestions regarding outings. One of the mothers suggested that the program could offer more outings—more things to do as a family. She suggested maybe seeing different parts of the city or going to the zoo (12). Another mother said, “Sometimes it’s a packed house with so many families involved, I was thinking they could have some kind of function for families, maybe once a week or once a month or something—just so the parents could get to know each other a little more...it might be a little easier if there was an actual function or an actual setting to meet each other” (27).

There was one suggestion about the location of the program. This mother was concerned that the agency was located in an area where her ex-partner resided, and she feared meeting him by accident. She offered that as the reason for rarely coming to the office. She explained that she would only come when she had to be at the program site, and that she would not come by herself. She also stated that once she was in the building, she felt safe (31).

There were also some specific recommendations around programming. One parent stated,



“there was a workshop type of thing with exercises regarding self-awareness—I think they need more one-on-one supports for that—it really messed with me. They need some follow up after because I had to deal with that on my own. I dealt with it by making a fire, offered tobacco, threw the paper in the fire and I felt better after that—it wasn’t haunting me anymore. I did that outside my house” (10). Another parent gave a few suggestions, including providing job training, and an addiction programming at the Centre. He stated, “I’m clean and I could say, ‘hey, I was in your shoes’” and suggested people could offer peer support. He also suggested that Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata could have housing available so a family could be together for the weekend (13). One father who was interviewed earlier in the implementation of the program identified that he wished they had more programs for men to access (14). This father also suggested having couple’s therapy available on site (14).

A few parents focused on recommendations as related to the mentors. One mother stated, “I would add a little bit more one-on-one with the [FGC] worker. Spend a bit more time with her” (37). Another mother said, “I wished that the FGC mentor was a bit more involved in our daily life at home, to come and visit more, see what’s going on, see if everything is ok.” She enjoyed having her mentor connecting with her frequently (16). One mother wanted more support in the process. Specifically, she stated that the FGC mentor could have provided clearer instructions about the writing part in circle (29).

There were also recommendations related to their experiences with Child and Family Services and other organizations. One set of parents stated, “If we could add anything to FGC, I would make sure that everybody who works with children in care know about FGC, including other programs and agencies. The idea of FGC is great.” The mother went on to explain that her CFS worker did not know about FGC. Both stated they wished that everyone knew about the successes of FGC (43). This recommendation was reflected by another parent who said, “I would say they’re the best support anyone can have when dealing with CFS. It should be mandated and presented throughout all the agencies instead of having people come and look for it, scout it out” (8). Another parent recommended advertising the program more, to get it out into the community so that everybody would know about it. He said to use a billboard or something of the sort, instead of word of mouth. He explained that his family just stumbled onto this program and was so happy that his ex-common partner found it (38).

Overall, with few exceptions, the recommendations were mainly about adding to what the program was already doing, and with the biggest focus on increasing the traditional components of the program.

She [FGC Participant] stated that the Bear's Den has a positive environment and that going there was like going home to her grandmother's kitchen, with smells of cooking and sage. She felt that the welcoming presence positively impacts on visitors, children, parents, and the larger community who visit.



6.0 PERSPECTIVES OF COLLATERAL STAFF FROM MA MAWI WI CHI ITATA

NINE COLLATERAL STAFF FROM MA MAWI WI Chi Itata, but not part of the Family Group Conference program, participated in the evaluation processes. Throughout the interviews, they focused on the strengths, areas that could be strengthened, and impact of the program. They also provided some thoughts on some additional topics.

6.1 Strengths of the FGC Program

The collateral staff appreciated the learning opportunities they participated in and shared their positive perception of the program. They felt they had a foundational understanding of the program, noting the intake and referral process as working well. They felt the intake form was efficient and relatively straightforward, especially since the changes made to address points raised earlier in the program (C2; C7).

6.1.1 Mentors

The collateral staff shared several points related to the mentors. One collateral identified that the mentors are quick to respond to the referrals (C8). It was noted the mentors come to the site where the referral are made to support the families and help them to feel comfortable (C8). Some of the collaterals stated that mentors are very supportive and responsive to the children's and family's needs (C1; C4; C5). It was also identified that the mentors take their time to develop a relationship and trust with the family to better support them (C7; C8). Several of the collaborators noted that the mentors take a strength-based approach when they are supporting the families (C1; C4; C8). Some collaterals noted that this approach is particularly important in that it supports the family to work together (C4) and helps them to see their own strengths and progress

positively (C8). One collateral thought that this reflected the focus by the mentors on utilizing their own life experiences to connect with and understand the families (C4). Another collateral worker thought "the FGC [mentors] functions like extended family because they have strong relationships" with the family members (C8).

6.1.2 Traditional Knowledge

Several staff members saw that a particular strength of the FGC program was how it supports families to connect with traditional Indigenous cultures and ceremonies (C1; C4; C6). For example, one collateral staff member stated she observed how FGC opens the door for families to learn about their culture and that some families have taken the opportunity to participate in ceremonies. She explained that when families do this, they connect to their history and their Elders. She also noted that FGC presents cultural ceremonies as one pathway and an opportunity for families to learn. As such, it is offered in a voluntary manner and that she has seen how some families take on learning about their culture (C6). Other cultural aspects beyond the ceremonies were noted to be used by the mentors. For example, one collateral noted that there is a strong focus on being supportive and responsive to the children's needs, which reflects the strength-focus used traditionally. This collateral staff also noted that the Bear's Den played a central role in supporting and teaching about cultural practices. She stated that the Bear's Den has a positive environment and that going there was like going home to her grandmother's kitchen, with smells of cooking and sage. She outlined how the team at the Bear's Den was very welcoming to the people who went there, and that this was just like how her grandmother welcomed people in her home. She felt that this

welcoming presence positively impacts on visitors, children, parents, and the larger community who visit. She re-emphasized and placed great value in how the Bear's Den directly exemplifies Indigenous cultures and traditions (C1). Other collaterals noted how this welcoming aspect of the Bear's Den and actions of the mentors helps establish strong connections with the larger community. A collateral worker stated that this welcoming approach and positive way of connecting with others was extended to child welfare agencies, community organizations, and extended family members. This worker noted that the Child and Family Services workers welcomed this approach rather than an adversarial and antagonistic relationship (C4). Further, it was noted that the FGC program has made strong connections with the school system and the community organizations related to leisure, sports, and outdoor activities (C1). Lastly, another collateral worker noted that with the FGC model, this welcoming and supportive approach of establishing connections, is directly reflected in how the children are supported to maintain connections with their parents, families, community, and culture (C5).

6.2 Opportunities for Strengthening

The collateral staff members identified several opportunities or areas of the FGC program that could be strengthened.

6.2.1 Information Gathering

The interviewed staff of Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata identified some parts of the FGC program that could be strengthened. While the form has been updated, it was suggested that it needs more space to record information (C2). Another collateral worker suggested that the form should include spaces for other significant family members involved with the parent (C3). When completing the form, one

collateral noted that some mothers are reluctant to provide some information, particularly about the biological. For example, she explained that a single parent mother had stated that their current partner was the father of the child and later found out that the couple had only been in that relationship for a brief time. This staff member also suggested that, at times, the staff members do not know the families very well, so it is difficult for them to provide information about the families and their parenting (C3).

6.2.2 Child and Family Services

Another collateral worker stated it would be helpful to have a handout that provides more information about the FGC process when informing the families about the program, such as CFS involvement, extended family involvement, and the implementation of the family plan. She stated that families are apprehensive when they know their CFS worker is going to be contacted and involved. Such a handout would help them better explain the program and ease some of the apprehension parents may have (C8).

A couple of the collateral staff also noted that the relationship with CFS agencies could be stronger. One of them stated that she noted that the FGC mentors were challenged establishing relationships with the CFS workers in the beginning of the process. She thought that this challenge reflected her own experiences where CFS workers are difficult to reach (C5). Another collateral noted that difficulties with CFS workers also arise around the family plan. She said that there are times when it was difficult to get the family plan approved when the CFS worker changed or there was a change of the CFS supervisor (C6). Another collateral worker suggested that the FGC program and its relationship with CFS could work better if FGC was included in the legislation. He believed if this was the case, then CFS agencies would change their policies and procedures, to include FGC as a legitimate process for social workers to access (C4).

6.2.3 Need for More Mentors

One collateral worker suggested that there is a need for more mentors. The demand for services has become so great that more mentors are needed to meet the demand (C5).

6.2.4 Greater Involvement of Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Collateral Resources

Finally, one collateral realized that in situations where children have been in CFS care for awhile, the disrupted/severed attachments created in early childhood experiences of separation could not be repaired without intensive preparation and counseling for the family. She outlined an example where the family plan included a weekend visitation schedule when the youth would be with his family. In this situation, a group/foster home kept the youth's space open during the short-term phase, which was supposed to eventually lead to reunification. The collateral stated that the family plan did not work as envisioned, and the boy subsequently returned to his group/foster home. She suggested that the group home/foster home and team members could have been invited and involved as support for the youth during the whole FGC process and that he could have benefited from having a trusted staff member while he was going through the FGC process. She also suggested that the staff members could have possibly contributed to solutions to individual and family crisis that arose. She recommended that the counselling resources be accessed and provided for the family in preparation and throughout the whole process to help with healing complex trauma (C9).

6.3 Impact of the FGC Program

The collateral staff have noted several impacts of the program.

One of them noted that families have begun to communicate and share about the FGC program. She suggested that the program is being well

received within the Indigenous community and that the word of mouth about the services is leading to more families asking about the program (C8). She and another staff member noted many CFS agencies are beginning to refer families; an indication that the FGC program is being seen as valuable in the community (C8; C6). This other staff member also noted that FGC mentors have continued to develop their partnerships with CFS to problem solve challenges (C6). A third staff member identified that the FGC program has developed ongoing effective partnerships with other organizations in the community (C4).

One member noticed the progress of families who participated in the FGC program. She stated that when they returned to her program, they are stronger and are more determined to get their family together. She noticed that initially these parents are reluctant to ask for help but once they realize that the FGC program is really there for them, they begin to reach out more and access resources (C7). Similarly, another collateral staff member has seen that the families who have received FGC services become more involved in the community. She stated this involvement has reduced isolation and promoted community relationships with other parents (C8). In some situations, the strong connections established were with the foster parents who still maintain contact with the children and families after reunification (C5).

Finally, one of the staff members noticed families attending ceremonies, which was taken as meaning they have incorporated traditional healing practices in their plans. He stated that this reflects how the FGC program is working differently than the CFS system. He explained that this way of working is what is behind widespread interest in FGC and why many organizations see Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata as a leader (C2).

One participant shared that Bear's Den is such a nice environment compared to an agency's office and seeing the kids in the visiting room. The Bear's Den was described as very homey, where parents can come and relax without feeling that somebody is staring at them and watching them.



7.0 COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES

ONE SHARING CIRCLE WAS HELD FOR MEMBERS of the community. While the participation in the community circle was quite small with only four participants, there were significant points made about the FGC program. Three participants were from other Indigenous non-CFS organizations in the city, and the fourth was a student from an educational institution who was active in his work-based learning at Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata.

7.1 Strengthening Families

When speaking on how the FGC program has strengthened families, one of the people working in a community-based Indigenous organization stated that they have built a relationship with the FGC program and often refer families to the program. She explained that “I do a referral to the FGC because I think they have more support and more one-on-one with the families than we can specifically offer.” This circle participant stated that her organization has teamed up with the FGC program on several occasions. She identified that they had nine successful reunifications so far and that the families are holding strong to the plans they created. She spoke positively about how the program was impacting families (CM1). A second participant stated that he observed families getting together with their mentors to work out a plan that seems to fit each of the families. He believes that the process and plan empower the families (CM2). Another community-based employee identified that the program has a positive impact on the families that he has been working with (CM3). Similarly, the fourth circle participant outlined that in the year she observed the program operating, she has seen a lot of positive things within the program, particularly how the mentors help and support the mothers and the families (CM4).

7.2 Based in Traditional Indigenous Cultural Practices

One of the main areas of focus of the community circle participants was the cultural aspect of the FGC program. One community member noticed that Indigenous culture practices are a big aspect of the program and that these ways gives the parents more strength and more empowerment to complete the work that they have committed to. He believed that by incorporating traditional practices, FGC is strengthening the families because Indigenous culture practices have been lost by many people for so many years. He observed that “some of the young people don’t have any culture, so when they come here, a lot of this is new for them and it’s such a warm feeling when you get that culture back. Even for myself, I lost my culture a long time ago, and when I came to Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata, I finally got my culture back and it’s been great having it. I think it’s perfect for anyone who needs it” (CM2). Another employee in the community-based organizations stated that, “It’s nice to see that the philosophy and procedures that FGC provides is truly traditional. It’s returning authority back to the parents in decision-making and that’s more important than what other people tell the parents to do.” He went on to state, “Oftentimes we neglect our spirit and as we know, our spirit is the foundation of our families. It connects who we are to the Creator and Mother Earth and bringing that back into dominance and establishing that connection is a definite asset in helping our families. It’s often the missing piece when kids go in care. When they grow up, they don’t know who they are. FGC has a big part in re-establishing that connection. It’s a cultural approach and that is very powerful. It’s important to be part of those ceremonies that FGC offers.” (CM3). Similarly, one of the other community members stated, “I’ve been a part of a few of the FGC ceremonies,

and I think bringing the culture into it has kind of veered away from the mainstream. Kicking out all of the authority during the family's planning time is very powerful. If people aren't connected with FGC, it is the agency that is dictating the case plan. This is the only place where I've seen that—this is your family, this is your journey, you create something, and I think we see a lot more success when they're the ones guiding their own journey. They put more effort into completing what they've come up with rather than the mainstream case plan that every client gets, so that's a big thing" (CM1).

The traditional aspect of the program emphasizes seeing people as family and reflects culturally grounded understandings of relationship, strength and safety. This reflects the cultural foundations of Indigenous nations in the region where people are taken in as family, even when there is no biological basis for the relationship. One of the community circle participants stated, "It seems like FGC is very family-based." He went on to explain that no one is looked at as a client; they are looked at as a family member, like a brother, or sister or mother or father (CM2). Finally, the traditional role of Elders in FGC was highlighted as an important part of the FGC program. A community participant stated that she has observed that when the FGC develop family plans, they include traditional counselling approaches such as talking to an Elder. She went on to explain that the mainstream case plan wants to have Western-based counselling approaches. She observed in one family, this young mom had connected with one of the Elders and that need to recognize this as their cultural way of moving forward instead of having a Western way of counselling. She appreciated that those Elder services are there for the families (CM1).

7.3 Example of FGC Services

The community circle participants identified that the FGC services are important since such services are not available elsewhere. An example emphasized by the participant (CM2) who volunteers with Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata was the supports provided to fathers who participate in the FGC program. He noted that the fathers are all at different stages in their plans. He identified that the CFS system does not seriously consider that men could be the primary guardians. He explained that the group is very impactful among the fathers. These fathers are able to gather together, be there for one another, and share about their challenges and the issues that they face within the system as they try to get their kids back as the primary guardian. He also explained, "A few dads that already completed the FGC process are fully reunified with their children. These dads come back and share their stories. The dads see other dads going through similar things and it's almost like they are building support systems within themselves." He also identified, "New dads feel so welcome that they want to come back. The other dads really support each other in this circle."

7.4 The Bear's Den

The circle participants also spoke about the Bear's Den. One participant shared that the Bear's Den is such a nice environment compared to an agency's office and seeing the kids in the visiting room. The Bear's Den was described as very homey, where parents can come and relax without feeling that somebody is staring at them and watching them. She explained, "If a parent needs to be redirected, it is done in such a relaxed environment that it doesn't feel like somebody is dictating how to parent your kid. The Bear's Den really is a beautiful setting" (CM1). Another participant (CM4) shared that some of the moms she works with like coming to the Bear's Den. She explained that they attend a

women's group and are able to bring their kids. She also noted that FGC program arranges for childcare to look after them in the Bear's Den while they're attending their program and that this childcare in the Bear's Den is an important service. As she stated, "The FGC program helps the families a lot and families feel good to be in this space (Bear's Den). They've [FGC program] made it so convenient for people. They're centrally located and it's an open-door policy." She observed that when families go to other services, it is a totally different environment where you have to get someone to buzz you in.

7.5 Working with Collateral Organizations and Contributing to Community Change

One of the community circle participants (CM1) shared that building a partnership with other collaterals is very important and that FGC program has been incredible in relationship building. She stated that FGC program coordinator and the FGC Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata team really helped during the forest fire evacuations. "Jackie stepped in, was able to gather all of these helpers in no time...and [established] activities for all the kids in all of these different locations. Ma Mawi really stepped in and did a big job. That's a ripple effect, people don't forget that kind of impact." Another circle participant (CM2) believed FGC is strengthening the community by getting these families reunified, helping them get back into the community where they are able to manage on their own after FGC. He observed that after spending time with FGC mentors, families are ready and willing to change, and just need some guidance. He identified that the mentors seem to know how to help families with resources like housing, clothing, and supports in the community, such as the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba and other treatment centres. He also observed that FGC helps families even if they don't end up in

the program. In these cases, the FGC mentors also direct the families to other resources in the community. Similarly, another circle participant (CM3) stated that Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata truly practices the philosophy of community and understands what it takes to be part of a community. He stated that Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata's FGC program has gone above and beyond to serve the community and has an open-door policy and wants to help.

One of the women participants (CM1) stated she appreciates the generosity of FGC program as they allow them [community organizations] to put the referrals in and then are able to financially support these families when there are no other resources out there that can help in this way. "There could be minimal barriers such as proper beds that you can't get from one of the resources for free, but Ma Mawi steps in and fills the gap, they get the bed." She concluded her participation by sharing, "I want to say that we have enough kids in care to fill the MTS Centre. If Ma Mawi didn't exist, if we can clear kids to go home to their families when it's safe to do so, row by row, how many rows has FGC sent home? If there was no FGC, those kids would still be sitting in a loveless foster home."

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8.0 PERSPECTIVES OF CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES WORKERS

TWO CIRCLES AND THREE INDIVIDUALS' INTERVIEWS WERE conducted with nine workers from Child and Family Services. The participants were from six agencies: Southeast, Sagkeeng, Cree Nation, Awasis, Island Lake, and Nikan Child and Family Services. One circle took place in the late summer of 2018 and the other in the summer of 2019. The interviews took place in the summer of 2019.

8.1 Overall Experience with FGC

Each of the workers stated that their experience with the FGC program has been very positive. The agency workers spoke of the constructive impact of families developing their plans, having effective collaborative relationships with mentors, and improved communications between all people involved. They all spoke of experiences of working well with the mentors and the successful reunification of families. While there was acknowledgement by a couple of the workers that there were families that were not reunified, they also noted that these families were not ready to engage in the process and by their choice, ended their participation. One of the workers shared her experience with the mentor from Aotearoa/New Zealand. Through their discussion, the worker noted how her belief in the importance of doing things in the Indigenous ways emerged. Since then, she has since become a staunch supporter of the program and has been providing program information to families. She highlighted that she is aware of several families who became involved with FGC as a result of her direction.

8.2 Strengths of the Program

The CFS workers identified several strengths of the FGC program, including:

8.2.1 Family Decision-Making

Decision-making was offered as a major strength of the FGC program. Three workers agreed that the family group conference was the most powerful aspect of the program as it provides an opportunity for families to reclaim their decision-making. Another worker stated that the family circle was the most powerful aspect of the program. She stated, "Everybody getting together in a circle, and the parents feel like they're in control—I think that is the biggest aspect."

One of the other social workers agreed that the FGC meeting itself was important. She explained that it gives the power back to the parent. She stated that it shows that the worker is present and supportive of the family. This worker also identified the accessibility of the FGC mentors and the time made for families as a strength of the program. She gave an example of a crisis situation that took place on a Saturday where the FGC mentor jumped in right away and was able to prevent the kids from coming into care. She stated, "It shows the strength of the FGC worker, how important they are to the families."

Another worker went beyond components of the program, identifying that the FGC process as a whole, is the strongest aspect of the program. He explained that the FGC mentor works with the family group, gets all the family and friends together with their social worker, and brings everyone a little closer. The mentors help to build a stronger connection. He also observed that the family plan is a list of action steps they can take, and it builds motivation for the family. Two other workers noticed that most of the families referred to FGC were resistant to partaking in a new program. They

attributed this resistance to a lack of trust with CFS. One worker gave an example of two families she referred to FGC who were slow to respond to the mentors. She went on to explain that once the mentors were able to build a relationship with each of these families, the families began to respond. She stated that the relationship-building process of successfully connecting with families is the strength of the program and key to engagement. Another worker noticed that many of her families believe they lack extra support within their own families. She saw that when families start working with the FGC mentors, they were more successful in connecting back to their healthy and supportive family members. She stated that those families in FGC are starting to work more towards fulfilling their case plan and that the efforts of the mentors have contributed to strengthening the families she referred.

8.2.2 Time with Families

Most of the workers commented that one of the strongest components of the program is the time that FGC mentors have to spend with families. One worker stated, “One of the benefits is that the FGC mentors have the time to invest in these parents, to walk alongside them in their journey; time that we, as workers, just simply don’t have.” Another worker echoed this point, “The mentors here are able to develop more of a friendship, whereas we don’t have the time.” Other workers also stated the mentors have more time to spend with families; engage in home visits that the workers are not able to do; build stronger relationships with families; and talk about more things than they would not tell the workers given the problematic nature of relationships with CFS.

8.2.3 Supporting and Strengthening the Family

The workers also noted that how the mentors are able to support the families is another strength of the program. One worker stated, “I like how they go above and beyond. That’s what I found with my


clients’ mentors, all the time, always that constant contact and that lifelong friendship that is always there.” The workers of one circle all agreed that the support that FGC mentors provide after children are returned is critical to the success of family plans and decision-making. One of the workers said, “I think one of the huge things is the involvement after the kids go home. Because as an agency, we can provide support workers, mentors, financial assistance while the kids are in care, but as soon as they go home, we pull out and there’s no more therapy dollars, there’s no more purchase orders to support families, and when they’re reunified, sometimes they’re waiting up to three months to start getting child tax [benefits], and I think in some ways we set them up for failure, so having that person walk alongside them after reunification to make sure the kids don’t come back into care is so important.”

One worker noted the FGC program and close relationship with mentor have strengthened one of the families on her caseload by making the father responsible for his actions. This worker identified that she knows how the FGC team worked to get the dad to where he is at now, specifically that he is taking responsibility for his children. She stated she could not take all the credit because she did not have as much time to spend with him as FGC mentor did. Another worker noted that the way that FGC supported the family is in a strength-based manner, which helps the family.

One of the workers noted that the focus of the mentors is not on the failures of parents, but on acknowledging their capacity and successes. She identified that the FGC process supports parents reconnecting to their healthy family members, which is helpful to them in the long term.

8.2.4 Empowerment and Self-Determination

The workers agreed that participation in the FGC process empowered parents as they came to see the level of supports available to them from family. The



parents realized a degree of self-determination in the realm of caring for their own children, decision-making, and creating reunification plans. One worker stated, “I think it [the FGC] lets the parent know how much support they have. Extended family, friends, social workers, FGC mentors, all in that one room. With my families, the parent always breaks down, because they don’t realize how much support they have. They didn’t realize how much people care.” Another worker stated, “I think the family feels empowered by coming together and really taking charge of the care plan, and everybody has a sense of accomplishment and they all have their role to play. A third worker stated, “they help in reunifying the family by creating the plan with the family. When I sign off on the plan the family created, it puts the control back on the parents. They feel like they’re in control and that works great in terms of reunification planning, which makes FGC successful.” She also stated, “I find that when extended family and friends are invited in by the parent(s), who makes the choice to invite them in, everything is aired out. I find that when they are aware of what’s going on, they act right away; it’s proactive. One of the workers outlined an example where the FGC process gave a mom her power back and made her more confident to the point where she was able to see that she can parent and is a good mother.

Another worker noted how the empowerment also extended to other family members. He stated, “I think because extended family and friends have their names on that plan, it gives them the authority to act rather than not. They feel like they’re part of it.” One of the workers interviewed also expressed her belief that helping the families find their own path and create their own plans also helped the family to feel more involved with CFS, and that the families had more supports through FGC.

8.2.5 Building Trust

Another key aspect of the program is how the program builds trust. Several workers identified that the FGC program allows trusting relationships to be developed between the mentor and families, between family members, and even between families and the CFS workers.

8.2.6 Financial Support

It was noted that the FGC program’s ability to support families is important. The workers identified that the FGC program provides financial supports to families that child welfare agencies cannot do because of funding constraints. One worker gave an example: “They can provide financial supports that we can’t...So there’s little things that the mentor can do that we, as an agency, can’t do. And then the family feels even more supported—not only emotional support but financial support.”

8.2.7 Importance of Cultural Practices and Ceremony

Perhaps one of the most frequently raised aspects of the program was the importance of cultural practices and ceremonies. The workers commented how the FGC process is part of the reconnection by families to circles and ceremonies. As one explained, “The meetings are set in a circle and...I think it activates their cultural background. I think the sharing makes them all a little bit closer. I think it makes an impact on the family and family members. I think that’s why it’s so helpful.”

The CFS workers noted that many families are introduced to traditional practices (including medicines, sharing circles, sweat lodges) through the FGC program. In this way the workers noted that the FGC program has created an environment that offers a safe place where parents and relatives can attend cultural activities and have family visits. They also noted that this reconnecting to culture is part of the families’ healing from addictions, violence, and complex trauma. One worker even

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how much people care.



noted, “I think the FGC itself is being looked at as somewhat of a ceremony, I think that is important. There’s a cultural component there.” He also stated, “Families have the opportunity to come here, get medicines, smudge if they want—all of that is important.” Similarly, another circle participant shared that FGC reflects the Anishinaabe culture in that there is a lot of programming that includes dads. The programs offer traditional teaching on parents’ roles and does have fathers’ groups, which focus on these topics including ceremonies. A third worker in the circle agreed with what was said and stated, “I notice a big difference from when they come here versus when they come to the office. They feel safe coming here [Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata] and having the opportunity to smudge, see the Elders.” Another worker observed, “There is some kind of welcoming back ceremony of the child to the family and to the community.” This worker also outlined that the FGC process itself, involved ceremony.

One worker explained the importance of the ceremonial aspect of the program as follows: “It’s so rare to have ceremonies nowadays for our families—a lot of them haven’t experienced it so when they do, it’s that instant realization of it all and they respect the sacredness of it, so I find it really grounds them and they are anxious and nervous a lot of the time and the ceremonies help a lot—even the workers.” Another worker explained, “I think that because FGC is more traditional, more Aboriginal-based, the people are more comfortable. They’re being reconnected to their Aboriginal culture and I feel like that is a big strength for FGC and the parent.”

This aspect of the program is not forced upon the families but offered in a supportive manner. One of the workers stated, “Even with families who are not traditional, the mentors work hard to make everyone feel included.” Another worker noted that the two families she had referred were not very involved with their traditions but one of the mothers did attend a few sweats and was smudging. She also

noticed that the families working with FGC program were more involved with church at first and not really involved with Indigenous spirituality, but that was gradually changing.

One of the workers reflected on the overall experience related to ceremonies and traditional practices. She noticed positive changes with parents being more aware of their cultural identity. She also stated that she knows that many parents involved with a particular CFS agency in Winnipeg, are rarely involved in traditional culture because in her opinion the agency did not see the importance of these ceremonies. One of the positive changes she noticed when families participate in traditions like sharing circles is that extended family are included more often in the family activities.

8.2.8 Extended Family and Other Supports

Another aspect of the FGC program that some identified as important was the inclusion of extended family members. Some of them commented on learning more about the extended families through the FGC processes. One of the workers stated, “I was able to meet the family which I really liked, it’s so helpful to meet everybody and how they’re all willing to help out right away but they’ve never been asked. When we go to the home, we don’t meet the entire family, we don’t know who is able to help. When they participate in FGC we know we can contact the other family members.”

8.2.9 The Bear’s Den

Workers identified Bear’s Den as another important aspect of the program. One worker explained, “I know that our agency visiting room is completely booked for the next two weeks. When children come into care, it would be a two or three week wait. So that [Bear’s Den] opens up the door in terms of people getting to visit their kids sooner.” A second worker spoke of the Bear’s Den relaxing atmosphere, and how it was clearly space where families felt comfortable and at ease. While she did

not initially engage with the families in the space, as she wanted to be respectful of the families there, she was welcomed and encouraged to be engaged, including eating a meal with the members there. A third stated, “Our office is small, and it gets booked. The families like it better here anyway, the atmosphere. It does help with the relationship between CFS and the families. I like that.”

8.2.10 FGC Program Support of the Relationship between CFS and Families

The CFS workers discussed how the mentors of the FGC program were actively supporting a positive relationship between them and the families. This support was initiated with the efforts of the mentors as they reached out to the workers. For example, a worker stated that the two-way communication between FGC and CFS really improved the relationship between CFS and the family. She noted that all people involved, that is to say, the worker, the mentor and family members, were in constant communication during the FGC process. Another worker stated that the FGC processes really did strengthen their relationships with families because FGC mentor does have a lot more time than the worker to spend with families. The mentor supports families to complete a lot of the things that they need to address and played a central role in facilitating the communication of the activities between the family and worker. A worker explained, “This interaction gives us a connection to our families. For instance, a lot of our families don’t have simple things like phones and to be able to connect with their mentor from Ma Mawi and to be able to come here and feel supported here. They trust their mentors, so we are able to communicate [through the mentors] with families. Sometimes my moms are hard to get a hold of, but I know they’re here so I can contact them through the mentors.”

Another worker agreed with the importance of the FGC mentors helping to connect the workers with families. She stated, “The FGC process has created

opportunities for me as a worker to learn about positive family dynamics and their strengths...FGC has demonstrated a commitment to families even with those who continue to struggle.” A third worker stated, “The FGC program has improved the relationship between CFS and families a lot. We’re starting to not take kids away from their community. We want to keep them in their community, we want to keep them with extended family—that’s what we call our Kinship Homes. We’re focusing more on keeping children in the community, with family. Family Group Conference fits with our values and beliefs.”

Other workers agreed that working with the FGC program has translated into improved relationships and information between CFS and families. It was explained, “Yes, and there’s things the families share with the mentors that they would never share with us and it opens the line of communication where we are able to learn about the families, their strengths that they may have felt we didn’t care about.” Another worker explained it further stating, “I think because we’re in the position where we’re mandated, we have to be the bad guy sometimes and so I think they’re able to develop more of a supportive relationship than sometimes we are able to when we have to wear that, “mandated,” A third worker also explained this dynamic: “We have to focus on protection concerns and in some instances they act as a liaison between the parents and us; they can approach the parents and say the same thing we’re saying, but it’s received better from the mentor than it would be from a worker.”

A worker explained they appreciate how the mentors focus on the positive aspects of all involved. “I like how they [the mentors] work with CFS; when they’re talking to the families, they talk about the workers and CFS in a positive way so it kind of reinforces the we don’t mean to cause you harm but this is something we need to do for the children.” Another appreciated attribute noted by a second worker is that the mentors help develop trust. She explained,

“Having that 3rd person [the mentor] strengthened my relationship with the mother. Having her [the mother] text, me or call me when something has gone wrong tells me that she trusts me now. It took a few months to build and I don’t think it would’ve been that fast if FGC wasn’t involved.”

8.2.11 Addressing the Relationship with Foster Parents

One of the activities mentors have fulfilled that was appreciated by the workers was around the inclusion of foster parents. The workers observed mentors working with the parents and helping them to understand that, while in care, the children have bonded and become attached to foster parents. The FGC mentors have made time to help the parents deal with the conflicted grief and loyalty children have to their foster parents. The workers noticed that the mentors helped parents and worked to repair the disrupted attachment and bonding that occurred when their children were separated from them. A worker explained, “Part of that too is when you return kids to their families, parents struggle with kids missing their foster family, and kids struggle with attaching and reconnecting to their parents and we aren’t there. Even if we have a supervisory order, we are only in the home once a week. We may be talking to you [the parent(s)] on the phone, but we are only in the house once a week. So, we’re not there to offer support to say that ‘this is normal, and we can help you,’ and this program helps them understand all that kind of stuff—that it’s going to be ok.”

8.2.12 Difference in CFS Role and FGC Role

The CFS workers noted differences in their roles and the mentors. A worker stated, “We have to throw the Child and Family Services card if they cross the line.” Another worker identified that, “It’s hard for us to maintain that nice level of relationship with them [the family] and here, they’re so open to communicate and participate.” Workers also commented that having the mandate also provides access to

information to them that impacts their relationship with the FGC program.” A worker explained, “Because we’re connected to Child and Family Services Information System (CFSIS), sometimes we know things about the family that workers [mentors] here don’t know, which makes a difficult dynamic because we can’t have them on the list for supporting children when I have this information. So that makes it a little bit awkward but I didn’t address those issues because how can you, right? So that puts us in an awkward position in the whole planning.” Another worker stated, “When you have had serious concerns, how do you share that information with the mentors and Jackie Anderson and the others?” A third worker outlined how she would address such situations and stated, “That would not be an option. If there was a serious concern, we would say that we can’t go into detail but that there is a serious concern that prevents that person from being high on the list of family supports.”

8.2.13 FGC Program Connecting to Community

Connection to community resources was also raised by the workers as a key aspect of the FGC program. Several of the workers commented that FGC mentors are able to facilitate access to community resources like Jordan’s Principle, housing supports, and the YMCA more quickly than CFS can.

One worker outlined that there is a perception that CFS has the financial resources and the responsibility to provide all that families need, and that these perceptions create barriers for CFS to access these resources. Another commented on the support that her FGC referral received with the mentor accompanying the family to court and helping them through the entire process. A third worker stated, “Yes, some of the parents I have worked with have been connected to Wabung, I think it [the FGC program] does connect families to other resources.” Finally, one worker stated that FGC does an excellent job helping them navigate through the system to get the

The FGC process has created opportunities for me as a worker to learn about positive family dynamics...FGC has demonstrated a commitment to families even with those who continue to struggle.



resources they need as part of the family plan. For example, a parent and her family identified addiction treatment as part of the plan, and FGC was able to connect her to a program. In another situation, a mother was homeless and not on employment assistance prior to the family group conference; FGC really helped her connect to those resources and now she is in treatment and doing well.

8.3 The Relationship between CFS and Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata

The workers agree that the relationship between their agencies and the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata FGC program has greatly improved. The mentors have been able to respond to situations where mandated workers are not able to due to time and caseload responsibilities. One worker explained how things have changed for her: “I have mandated authority, so I try to step out of that role to get on the same level as the mentor and the parent when we do the planning. I do my assessment and everything I have to do, but I try not to use my authority as a CFS worker. I want to work side by side with the mentor in terms of case planning.”

From another perspective, a worker explained how she saw the relationship and its impact on the staff in Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata. She suggested that FGC program, “has supported the relationship because it allows them [mentors] to see what we have to do and not having enough time or resources to really help these families.”

One of the workers stated that the program has supported and helped improve their relationship with Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata: “Ma Mawi is almost like an extension of our program. We meet halfway. We don’t have the time, the manpower to be specific, with this specific client. We want to spend time with them, to help them as much as possible, and Ma Mawi is an extension of our hand. Ma Mawi helps us with everything.”

8.4 Challenges the FGC Process Faces

The CFS workers outlined a few challenges in their practice as related to the FGC process. Amongst them was the financial restraints workers face, caseload size, and the protection mandate that influence their ability to engage in the FGC process. A worker stated that they “do not have time to provide the support to families, you are not able to because you have a heavy caseload.” She also noted, “related to this are the financial constraints too—as an agency, there are so many dollars for kids in care, but there are very few dollars for prevention or family enhancement. There are more resources for kids in care than there are for kids not in care.” Several workers also identified that they have to enforce the child welfare legislation and the protection mandate in their work with families. This requirement impacts how they were able to participate in the FGC process and the decisions they had to make.

Another challenge that the workers expressed was their concern about the intake process that families go through in order to access the FGC service. A worker in one of the circles stated, “One of the frustrations is that the family is required to go through the Community Care sites in order to be referred to the program. Sometimes time constraints make that difficult. You can see that something is going to happen. You want to get them referred as quick as possible, and there’s a lot of hoops to jump through before that happens.” Another worker in the circle expressed concerns about how the intake process at the sites is not trauma-informed and that the staff at intake sites do not have the skills or knowledge of FGC. She stated, “They [the family] have to go through one of the Community Care sites and they have to go through an intake process. The staff at the sites aren’t knowledgeable enough about FGC or trauma. These families are required to tell their story and the person receiving the story isn’t skilled. So, the person walking out of there is feeling raw and open. They’ve told their story

to us, to the mentors, now to the intake worker who isn't even the person who will be assigned to them. They relive the trauma over and over."

The final challenge for the FGC program mentioned by the workers was the six-month time frame for reunification. They stated how that is not achievable for some families.

8.5 CFS Workers' Recommendations for Strengthening the FGC Program

The CFS workers provided several recommendations. They suggested that the FGC mentors should become part of the intake process at the sites so they could introduce themselves and explain more about the FGC processes. While the workers identified that the mentors were supportive of foster parent involvement, another recommendation by one worker was around the inclusion of foster parents. This worker noted, "Not all foster parents are willing to do that, but I think for those who are, we should put value on that relationship."

Another CFS worker suggested that more education around the CFS program would be beneficial for the mentors. She stated, "Maybe some of the FGC mentors don't have a solid understanding of CFS workers roles, the constraints of their roles, the pressure to have the plan work within three months ideally and six months at the most, and the legalities of what CFS workers deal with. FGC mentors would benefit from knowledge, education in those areas."

On the other hand, a worker recommended that the FGC team make more presentations to child welfare teams because there is still a lack of awareness about the program. This worker has been promoting the FGC program to her team and other child welfare workers. Since FGC team members have all the program materials and can answer questions, educating the CFS workers directly would also create the

opportunity to build relationships. Another worker stated, "I think the education piece of what FGC is and where it adds value is really crucial to the relationship between the agency and the FGC program. In talking to workers from other agencies, if they don't understand the value, they are resistant to it because it is a lot more work, a lot more paperwork to fill out, more meetings to attend. People need to understand where the value is and how much FGC brings to the table in order to buy into it, and I think education is key."

Similarly, there was talk about reunification programs and how workers lack knowledge about reunification. One worker noted she was making the most referrals in their unit because she knew what reunification is about. She suggested that more education and understanding about reunification, particularly the FGC program, is needed. Other workers agreed with her, identifying that education about reunification is the big piece that is missing in their agency. They went on to suggest that Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata could provide media releases on social media about the FGC program and reunification.

Another worker wondered, "How can we have more intensive involvement in the home to do life skills training, homemaker-type things; but more—like a parenting coach to teach basic fundamentals missing due to intergenerational CFS involvement, residential schools, and addictions...how to keep a routine for kids, keep a clean home." There was also recognition that youth need help navigating the system and the FGC mentors could help them to get identification when they become of age, such as their driver's licences and treaty cards.

One worker noted the importance of Indigenous languages. He made a point that the FGC program should arrange for translation services for those families who speak fluently in their language. Although he has been able to interpret for the family, he pointed out that he can be misinterpreted by family members, or he can misrepresent what

Ma Mawi is almost like an extension of our program. We meet halfway. We don't have the time, the manpower to be specific with this specific client. We want to spend time with them, to help them as much as possible, and Ma Mawi is an extension of our hand. Ma Mawi helps us with everything. -CFS WORKER



is being said. He also is representing the agency so he could be in a conflicted ethical position. He suggested arranging for external translators.

A worker also commented on families who are not quite ready to be referred and/or make a commitment. The worker suggested that FGC program could consider outreach to these families. She explained, “If there was a proactive approach where Ma Mawi reached out to them a little bit more. I have this one mom I really want to get involved with FGC. Every time I bring it up, she says she wants to, but she has difficulty following through. I know Ma Mawi would get her the resources and supports she needs. So, if Ma Mawi did some outreach work, it would be beneficial.” Another worker stated, “I know that it’s a voluntary program and usually self-referred, and for the families that I’ve been working with, it took about a year for one family to actually come here. She was very vulnerable and struggled with her self-esteem, so she wasn’t able to come to Ma Mawi and follow through with the self-referral process. I think that if there was a way that agency workers could refer them and help them connect that way. If the agency referred and connected with Ma Mawi and the mom didn’t want to go further, that’s up to her, but the agency could say that they tried. I notice with the families that are resisting, they simply say, ‘no, I’m not attending,’ and then that’s it. I just think the self-referrals make it a little bit more difficult to get connected.”

Another worker made a suggestion to address situations where more than one agency is involved. She noted that the FGC process may stall due to competing demands between agencies. This worker gave an example: “I have a mom who self-referred, but we haven’t been able to get into the FGC because she has children, but one [child] is in another community so there is a different worker. So just trying to line everybody up together has been very difficult...If things stall the way they have, maybe FGC [could] pull us both in and [tell] us what we

can do to help...Sometimes I find that if you’re sitting at a table like this together, it’s easier to find and fix the roadblock.”

Workers commented on the possible expansion of FGC into work with families where there are moderate risk situations that might lead to an apprehension. The family may benefit from having FGC involved to prevent an escalation of risk factors. A worker said, “A protection file means there’s a red flag and I think it would be a benefit to have FGC involved at that point, to skip the whole process. As a worker, we can see on the horizon when an apprehension is coming, so to have FGC involved prior to that, could stop it [the apprehension] on its tracks.” Another worker gave an example by stating, “I have a current protection file and she has a four-year-old, a three-year-old and a baby and she would benefit from having an FGC worker—she needs someone to be there more often to support and mentor and guide her and keep her kids out of care.”

Another recommendation made was to extend the FGC program into rural areas. One worker explained that there is lack of proper funding for supportive work out in the rural communities and that those are some of the families who need it the most. The worker suggested, “Apprehensions could be prevented if more support for FGC was there.”

Overall, the CFS workers reported positive outcomes for the families on several domains. The agency workers mentioned improved working relationship between their respective agencies and the FGC team, improved communication and relationship between CFS and families, and enhanced connection to community and culture. While they noted some challenges, the number identified was small. Finally, the workers made recommendations that addressed these challenges and shared ideas on ways to add to the program.

9.0 THE QUANTITATIVE STORY

9.1 First Period of the Expanded FGC Program: 2017-2018

The expanded program was to have started April 1, 2017. However, the funding for the FGC program did not come until November of 2017, which delayed the expansion of program. Following the expected start date, the first statistics were gathered for the full 2017-2018 fiscal year. The statistics are lower overall for this year since the expansion of the program was initiated later in the year. There was a total of 38 families involved in the program with a total of 89 children in these families. The FGC program was able to support families preventing 14 of these children from coming into care, reunify 63 children with their parent(s), and support 12 children to be placed in kinship care. See Table 1.

9.2 Second Period of the Expanded FGC Program: 2018-2019

Over the second period of implementation, the program had more than doubled its statistics when compared to the first period. With a full complement of mentors on board for the year, 80 families engaged in the FGC program with a total of 241 children involved. Of these children, 63 were prevented from coming into care and remained with their families, 125 children were reunified with their parent(s), and 41 were placed in kinship care. The mentors continue to work with families in this period, hence the numbers of reunifications, kinship care placements, and number children prevented from coming into care is lower than the total number of children who have or are engaged in the FGC program. See Table 2

9.3 Third Period of the Expanded FGC Program: April 1, 2019—January 31, 2020

The third period for this report is shorter due to the evaluation time frame. While the first two periods cover 12 months each, the third period covers 10 months. The period is on track to doubling the number of families and children supported through the FGC program when compared to the second period. There were 108 families with a total of 282 children engaged with the FGC program. Of these children, the program supported 58 children who were prevented from coming into care and able to remain with their families. Another 52 children have been reunified with their parent(s) and 2 were placed in kinship care. The mentors continue to work with families in this period, hence the numbers of reunifications, kinship care placements, and number of children prevented from coming into care is lower than the total number of children who have or are engaged in the FGC program. See Table 3

9.4 Overall Picture

During the overall period from April 1, 2017 to January 31, 2020, the FGC program supported 225 families with 638 children. Of these children, 141 children have been prevented from coming into care, and 258 have been reunified with their parent(s). An additional 95 children have been placed in kinship care. So far, there has been 41 families with a total of 104 children who have completed one year of reunification without CFS involvement. The mentors continue to work with families in this period, hence the numbers of reunifications, kinship care placements, and number of

children prevented from coming into care is lower than the total number of children who have or are engaged in the FGC program.

Based on the assumption that the number of children (104) who have been reunified with their families through the FGC program and remained out of care for one year would have been in care during this same period if their families did not participate in the FGC program, an estimated cost saving can be determined. Using a typical rate of

\$65 per day for a child in care, a cost saving of up to \$2,467,349.00 (58 children x 365 days x \$65.00 per day) is estimated. See Table 4

9.5 Additional Statistical Descriptions

Based on these records, the average caseload of the mentors is 20 to 21 (20.45) families with two to three children per family (2.9). See Tables 5 and 6

10.0 THE TEACHINGS

SEVERAL TEACHINGS, OR POINTS OF LEARNINGS, ARISE from this evaluation. These teachings are related to the full scope of the program. Of these teachings there are five that are most prominent.

THE FIRST TEACHING is the importance of Indigenous cultural values, beliefs, perspectives and practices to the well-being and security of Indigenous peoples and families. The program overall is directly based in values and practices broadly held by Indigenous peoples, including extended family involvement, self-determination, and focusing on positives as they develop. In addition, relationship-based and culturally grounded practices ensure that the benefits of family reunification extend beyond a moment or one person, but to the whole of the family unit, therefore recovering vital knowledge and connection.

Further, by including practices that are based in the cultures of this territory, such as circles, smudging, sweat lodges, and sharing by and guidance of Elders, the FGC program has a strong foundation for supporting Indigenous families to make the necessary changes for their own well-being as individuals and as a family and to support them to restore the family's strength, resilience and sense of

safety. The cultural basis of the program supports individuals to move forward in a new way where there is a consistency with their surroundings and experiences as Indigenous peoples. The inclusion of ceremonies and other cultural practices provide the foundation for families to positively re-affirm their identity and counter the imposed colonial narrative that undermines Indigenous well-being. The offering of culturally based practice by Indigenous mentors working in an Indigenous-based organization further supports and affirms the strengths and abilities of families involved in the program.

This teaching was recognized by individuals who reflected on the program from various perspectives. These individuals included the families who called for a greater amount of cultural practices to be included in the program, and the mentors who facilitated some of the cultural practices, implemented the cultural values, and supported the Elders and other cultural knowledge keepers as they shared their knowledge with the families. The individuals also included the other staff from within Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata, the CFS workers, and the community members who all identified the importance of the cultural foundation and its support

They explained that addressing such impacts through teaching about the colonial oppression and its impacts on individual, families and communities helps those impacted to reduce the internalized trauma and counter the imposed story that they are incompetent or dysfunctional parents, children or communities.



of the families. It is evident from the story of the program that the key component to FGC program's success is its grounding in Indigenous cultural values and practices.


THE SECOND TEACHING is related to the impacts of intergenerational traumas that families are experiencing and addressing, including the trauma related to the current involvement of CFS. Specifically, the cultural programming is effectively supporting families to address the multi-faceted, intergenerational traumas that stems from historical and current colonial oppression. While the evaluation focused on the benefits of the program and how to strengthen it, family members who participated in the evaluation still raised the impacts of trauma, including anger, sadness, distrust, self-isolation, and numbing through substances misuse.

Traumas such as residential schools, gang violence, overt racist actions, untimely death of loved ones, and the removal of family members, particularly the children, are some of the traumas identified by these families. O'Neill, Fraser, Kitchenham and McDonald (2018) explained that the impacts of traumatic events are directly and indirectly passed between family members and in turn impacts such matters as parenting, self-esteem, and attachment and result in such consequences as isolation, distrust, fear, anger and conflict in basic relationships. They explained that addressing such impacts through teaching about the colonial oppression and its impacts on individual, families and communities helps those impacted to reduce the internalized trauma and counter the imposed story that they are incompetent or dysfunctional parents, children or communities. In addition, there is evidence that the inclusion of cultural practices enhances the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples with intergenerational trauma (Marsh, Marsh, Ozawagosh, & Ozawagosh, 2018).

These means of addressing the trauma are part of the FGC program. Family members outlined how mentors were able to connect with them, establish trusting relationships, respond positively to their efforts to address the impacts stemming from these traumas, and model positive ways of moving forward. The mentors identified how they were able to support family members to incorporate culturally based practices to address the traumas and their impacts. These practices included sharing circles, focusing on their own gifts, traditional teachings, and cultural ceremonies such as the sweat lodge and Sundance. These supports were made available through the program directly, as well as the mentors supporting family members to connect with traditional teachers and ceremonies like medicine picking, Sundances, and sweat lodges in the Indigenous communities. The workers from CFS, community members, and the other workers in Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata noted how the families were able to participate in the traditional activities and how they were responding positively as they participated.

THE THIRD TEACHING that emerged is the importance of the services being delivered through a non-mandated agency. Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata, and in turn the Family Group Conference program, deliver services to families upon the families' request. By being a non-mandated service, the FGC program is readily able to rely on the cultural values, perspectives, and practices of Indigenous peoples, as well as to respond to the needs of families in the best way possible.

While it is possible that culturally-based programming can be delivered through mandated agencies or programs, there is an inherent contradiction between the values and cultural practices (self-determination, moving forward at one's own pace, healing with extended family and community, and contributing back to community) and the values that lead mandated services (such as power



over service recipients, forced treatments, and the focus on individuals with neglect of extended family and community). As such, culturally based services are best offered through a voluntary program. Values central to FGC, such as trust, are much easier to establish when one person, a mentor, does not hold power over another, the family member. It was clear from the families and others involved with the FGC program that Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata was already trusted overall. More specifically, the mentors were able to quickly establish a trusting relationship with the families by demonstrating their support for the families and focusing on the positive aspects of the family. This quick connection also developed because they understood the families' experiences firsthand, could share perspectives that the families held, and created an environment where the families felt and believed they were understood and accepted by the mentors.

A key aspect that facilitated this quick connection was the FGC program's expectation that the families had to be the ones to make the request for services. By being a voluntary service, the FGC program was able to move away from the power dynamics of a family being forced by the program to follow what it expected in order for reunification to take place. Instead, families were taught how and supported to develop their own FGC plan of action to make positive changes in their families. The power to determine how to make changes rested with the families. This empowerment encouraged the families to act in their own best interest, as opposed to navigating the interest of the mandated services. Thus, on many levels and throughout the FGC process it was clear that by focusing on supporting families as opposed to forcing families to act in prescribed ways, families were able to focus on and rediscover their gifts and abilities, reaffirm their extended family relationships, and act in their own self-interest.

THE FOURTH TEACHING that emerged through the culturally based evaluation was the effectiveness of FGC in terms of societal impact. The program has clearly demonstrated that through participating in the FGC, families are maintained or reunited. The reunification of families has meant that CFS agencies involvement is significantly reduced for most families. Matters that seemed long term were resolved more quickly. Other matters that likely should not have been a CFS matter were recognized sooner and addressed more swiftly. Families were focused more on attending to their plan as opposed to worrying about how they had to avoid the CFS workers. Indeed, many situations changed where families and the mentors were giving significant effort to get the CFS workers involved or to move faster to address the situation. By having the mentors advocate on the families' behalf, a more effective service is being offered. Indeed, even CFS workers noted that the mentors were better suited to advocate for other resources, such as housing, than they were. Families unfamiliar with the larger social services system had an advocate to help them access the resources needed to address their situation, and to learn about navigating the system effectively. This advocacy and learning reduced the length of time families are involved with the CFS system, and the amount of time children are forced to be in care for reasons beyond the issues at hand.

THE FIFTH TEACHING relates to the effectiveness and efficiency of the program in relation to concerns that the government and CFS systems are trying to address. The FGC program is able to support families to address concerns in highly supportive, positive and effective ways. The means to address these concerns, which reflect concerns of low to moderate risk identified by the CFS system, are clearly effective in that the families are able to successfully address the concerns and have their children returned back in care of the family

caregivers. The mentors are positively impacting the CFS system by providing supports that ensure families are not requiring extended CFS service. The number of families that have their children returned to family caregivers and staying out of CFS care is highly significant where potential savings is in the millions of dollars (currently estimated to be \$2,467,349.00). In addition, the overall amount of time that CFS agencies have to focus on these families is significantly reduced. The mentors are able to give the families concentrated time and energy in a way that CFS workers are not able to do. As such, mentors are better positioned to support families' positive changes. Currently there are 225 families and more than 630 children who are receiving effective, empowering services from the FGC program and avoiding a fall under a hierarchical system that is primarily focused on their deficits.

Thus, the FGC program is not only a fiscally efficient program, it is a culturally effective one that strengthens families and children, so they no longer feel trapped in the CFS system.

While these five teachings were the dominant ones that emerged from the evaluation, there were additional ones. Two of these teachings relate to manner of interacting with the families: the importance of a personable and positive approach, and the empowerment of the families and their voices. Highlighted by family members interviewed was their appreciation of how the mentors supported them. The mentors were described in very personable terms and characterized as people who were ultimately trustworthy and relatable. Several families described how they were initially distrusting and skeptical of the mentors and their intentions as they were already cautious of any services providers from any social services agency. They then described how their orientation quickly changed with the mentors' positive and support approach. The mentors spoke of receiving training on the positive focus, and how they maintained such a

focus throughout their work. Some even outlined the deep personal commitment they felt towards the families. Families spoke of feeling like the mentors were always available for support and how they focused on the strengths of family members. This support and focus were the root to the families' empowerment. With their role modelling and advocacy work on behalf of the family, the mentors were able to transfer impactful skills to the families. The families' empowerment and ability to voice their views are highly significant contributors in the advancement of each family's self-determination and ability to meet their own goals and aspirations. Clearly, with positive supports from the FGC program families, were able to demonstrate their resilience and strengths despite the larger impinging context.

While this dynamic of positive support, empowerment, family self-determination, and success of the program was generally recognized as important by those beyond the mentors and families, there were organizations and individuals that took more time to get involved with program and recognize the benefits. However, despite their reluctance, with greater understanding of the program and witnessing its benefits, these other individuals usually became more involved and supportive. Hence, another teaching of the program is that it takes time and effort to educate other community members of the benefits of the program. There is additional work that needs to take place to expand the circle of support around the program and families. This work includes educating other service organizations and workers about the alternative, supportive way of connecting with Indigenous families and communities, and seeing the families from contextualized perspectives.

The empowerment of families and hearing of their voices has to come from more than the mentors; it must include these other individuals and organizations who are directly and indirectly involved with the families.

TABLE 1: FGC STATISTICS FOR REPORTING PERIOD OF APRIL 1, 2017—MARCH 31, 2018 (12 MONTHS)

TOTAL NUMBER OF FAMILIES ENGAGED IN FGC PROGRAM	38
TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN ENGAGED IN FGC PROGRAM	89
TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN REUNIFIED TO PARENT(S)	63
TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN PLACED IN KINSHIP CARE	12
TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN PREVENTED FROM COMING INTO CARE	14

TABLE 2: FGC STATISTICS FOR REPORTING PERIOD APRIL 1, 2018—MARCH 31, 2019 (12 MONTHS)

TOTAL NUMBER OF FAMILIES ENGAGED IN FGC PROGRAM	80
TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN ENGAGED IN FGC PROGRAM	241
TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN REUNIFIED TO PARENT(S)	125
TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN PLACED IN KINSHIP CARE	41
TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN PREVENTED FROM COMING INTO CARE	63

TABLE 3: FGC STATISTICS FOR REPORTING PERIOD APRIL 1, 2019 – JANUARY 31, 2020 (10 MONTHS)

TOTAL NUMBER OF FAMILIES WHO HAVE OR ARE ENGAGED IN THE FGC PROGRAM	108
TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN WHO HAVE OR ARE ENGAGED IN THE FGC PROGRAM	282
TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN REUNIFIED TO PARENT(S)	52
TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN PLACED IN KINSHIP CARE	2
TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN PREVENTED FROM COMING INTO CARE	53

TABLE 4: FGC STATISTICS FOR REPORTING PERIOD OF APRIL 1, 2017 – JANUARY 31, 2020

TOTAL NUMBER OF FAMILIES WHO HAVE OR ARE ENGAGED IN THE FGC PROGRAM	225
TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN WHO HAVE OR ARE ENGAGED IN THE FGC PROGRAM	638
TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN REUNIFIED TO PARENT(S)	258
TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN PLACED IN KINSHIP CARE	95
TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN PREVENTED FROM COMING INTO CARE	141
TOTAL NUMBER OF FAMILIES CLOSED AFTER ONE YEAR OF REUNIFICATION *	41
TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN WHO WERE REUNIFIED WITH THEIR FAMILIES AND HAD THEIR FGC FILES CLOSED AFTER ONE YEAR	104
COST SAVINGS OF THIS NUMBER OF CHILDREN THAT WERE REUNIFIED AND DID NOT COME BACK INTO CARE OF CFS WITHIN ONE YEAR (104 CHILDREN X 365 DAYS AT A \$65 PER DAY RATE)	\$2,467,349.00

* Definition of “completion of plan” is the one-year anniversary closure once kids are reunified. Currently there are 41 families with a total of 104 children who have successfully had their children home without further CFS involvement. As the program is only 2.5 years, this number is reflecting families who participated in the first and second period of the program.

TABLE 5: FGC PROGRAM ADDITIONAL STATISTICS

TOTAL NUMBER OF FEDERAL REFERRALS (CHILDREN APPREHENDED ON RESERVE)	31
TOTAL NUMBER OF PROVINCIAL REFERRALS (CHILDREN APPREHENDED OFF RESERVE)	525
TYPICAL LENGTH OF TIME FROM SITE ASSESSMENT TO FGC WORKER MEETING FAMILY	3-5 DAYS
TYPICAL LENGTH OF TIME AFTER FIRST FGC-PARENTS MEETING TO SECURE A MEETING WITH THE CFS WORKER	1-2 WEEKS
TYPICAL LENGTH OF TIME FOR SOCIAL WORKER TO SUBMIT REFERRAL AFTER FIRST MEETING WITH FGC MENTOR AND FAMILY	2-3 WEEKS
TYPICAL LENGTH OF TIME FROM REFERRAL TO REUNIFICATION	3 TO 6 MONTHS
FUNDS SPENT ON EACH FAMILY DURING ENTIRE FGC PLAN	\$4500.00
NUMBER OF FAMILIES/CHILDREN WHO HAVE UTILIZED BEAR’S DEN	225/638
FREQUENCY OF USE OF BEAR’S DEN BY FAMILIES	DAILY TO WEEKLY
EARLY TERMINATION OF PROGRAM PRIOR TO FGC **	0
CHILDREN PLACED BACK INTO CARE AFTER FGC †	10

** Each of the families that entered the program have completed a family plan.

† Some families who completed the family plan were returned to the family by the CFS worker after the FGC ceremony and prior to the coming home ceremony. These families and children were reunited without a transition plan in place. Of these 10 families, nine were placed in kinship care identified in the FGC plan and one was placed in a specialized foster care placement.

TABLE 5: FGC PROGRAM AVERAGE NUMBER FAMILIES/CHILDREN PER MENTOR

TOTAL FAMILIES/NUMBER OF MENTORS	225/11
AVERAGE NO. OF FAMILIES PER MENTOR	20.5
TOTAL CHILDREN/NUMBER OF MENTORS	638/11
AVERAGE NO. OF CHILDREN PER MENTOR	58

11.0 MOVING FORWARD

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' HISTORICAL AND CURRENT EXPERIENCES ARE inundated by a context of colonial oppression. From a history of more than a hundred years of separating children from their families as a means to “assimilate” Indigenous peoples, to the current acts of punishing families for the impacts of the ongoing oppression they face, those involved with Child and Family Services are struggling to cope with the intergenerational trauma and the current imposition of laws, policies and practices that run counter to Indigenous ways of being.

A different path forward is needed to escape the current trajectory that is seeing a constant increase of children taking from their families. To change the trajectory will require significant commitment, generally, to create new relationships based on a respect and appreciation for Indigenous self-determination and more specifically, to address matters such as trauma reactions, governance, housing, poverty, education and employment through programs designed by and run by Indigenous peoples. In particular, the area of family and child well-being requires a substantive redirection of energy away from deficit-based policies and programs,

and a shift to meaningful support of strength-based Indigenous practices by all involved in the system.

The experiences and histories of Indigenous peoples offer important insight into responsive and effective services for the path forward. These include an emphasis on Indigenous ways of understanding and knowing the world, each other, and oneself. Indigenous ancestors were devalued, dehumanized and denied—but their teachings and stories survive due to the cultural strength and resilience of the people who have carried these traditions forward, and who have survived the oppression. In turn, the strength and power behind these practices can animate new strengths and safety for Indigenous children, and for Indigenous families.

The Family Group Conference program is contributing significantly to a new way forward for Indigenous peoples in Manitoba. FGC directly reflects Indigenous ways, values, beliefs, and practices based on strength and on safety; FGC is relevant and meaningful as a service for Indigenous peoples. Based on its successful contributions, several recommendations would support and potentially enhance the program.

11.1 Recommendations

1. Support the program in its current format as a non-mandated Indigenous service delivered by an Indigenous organization.

By maintaining a non-mandate position, the program will continue to reflect the positive, empowering focus. Mentors will continue to connect with families based on developing supportive relationships that are deemed safe by families.

2. Support the program with sustainable funding that addressing the increased demands to access the program by families.

While the success of the program will continue, it will likely be impacted by its success. There are more and more families stepping forward requesting services. The mentors are working at their limits. To ensure the demand is addressed without a compromise to the effective delivery of support, ongoing sustainable funding is required.

3. To ensure that the time dedicated to each family remains impactful, it should be recognized that the mentors should not be assigned a higher workload.

It is clear the caseloads are at capacity. Considering the extended commitment by the mentors where, at times, they are working into the late evening and weekends, caseloads may be at over capacity. When considering the mentors carry an approximate average of 20 families, families are receiving an average of less than two hours per week based on a 37.5 hours of work per week. It is recognized that families are at different stages of the FGC program processes and thus require different amounts of attention based upon what stage they are in. Any expansion of the program will require additional mentors.

4. While the program should be non-mandated, there should be policies put in place that focus on CFS workers making referral to the program.

This policy should require workers to review fit of particular families with the FGC program, but it should not require families to participate in the program. The program should remain a voluntary service available to families.

5. Maintain, if not enhance, the traditional components of the program by ensuring involvement of Elders and ceremonies.

The program should be supported to include Elders and/or knowledge keepers as part of the program. The Elders available and involved in the program should include those of genders preferred by the families. Hence, a larger pool of Elders and knowledge keepers should be supported. Support of Elders, knowledge keepers and ceremonies should include financial support for honoraria of Elders brought in from outside the organization to lead the ceremonies, and/or employing individuals in these roles as part of the FGC program.

6. Provide financial support for team training of the mentors in the traditional practices of the nations in the region.

One of the strengths of the program has been the team training and peer learning. Such group training should be taking place at least annually to enhance the team's learning and support any new team members. Ideally, it should be land-based training. There should be additional training for new team members. This training should include attention to traditional practices of the Anishinaabe, Cree, Dakota, and other nations. Such training should be able to acknowledge the contributions of specific nations so that mentors will be prepared to clearly present the background on the practices when needed.

The FGC program can reach Indigenous families and children in a positive and highly significant manner. It is an effective means of maintaining and reunifying Indigenous families and strengthening Indigenous communities through relationships, support, guidance, challenge, and advocacy.



7. Expand the Bear's Den in the current building.

More space will provide more opportunities for families to be present at the Bear's Den without concern of overcrowding and more opportunities for mentors to connect with families in private when needed. It is important to recognize that a larger space could also mean that greater coordinating efforts may be needed as more families utilize the space at the same time.

8. In light of its initial success, expansion of the program should be considered.

Related to point three, any expansion will require additional mentors and space. The time and attention needed to train new mentors should be considered, including time to bring the whole team together for team building and training.

9. There should be dedicated time and resources to educate workers and supervisors in CFS and other organizations about the program, its strengths and culturally-based focus.

This education should also outline how the FGC program is addressing the colonial context and deficit perspective of Indigenous families. One of the goals of such education is to encourage and support these organizations to work in a cooperative manner and help them to see the benefits the FGC program has for families and these organizations. In light of the mentors' and coordinator's workload being at capacity, the dedicated time and resources should either create opportunities for the mentors to provide the education by reducing their current workload or support the employment of additional mentor(s) or support person(s) to complete this ongoing task.

10. Develop and provide education resources (pamphlets, videos) for the larger community, including workers at CFS agencies and other organizations around the importance cultural programs and traditional means of helping offered by Elders and knowledge keepers.

The purpose would be to honour and validate such programming in a parallel manner as other service programs offered in the community.

11. The program requires an administrative assistance position.

This position would be responsible for supporting mentors to complete records, maintain overall records of the program, provide coordination of space, receive families attending Bear's Den, and provide supports to the coordinator.

12. Maintain financial supports for families that are currently in place. Financial barriers have negatively impacted families from reuniting.

By supporting families to, for example, gain basic necessities, access transportation, participate in the program as an extended family, and engage in family strengthening activities, these barriers are reduced.

13. Incorporate additional programming for families on colonial oppression, intergenerational trauma, impacts of trauma, lateral and gendered violence, and how traditional cultural perspectives and teachings address these impacts.

All mentors should be thoroughly trained in these topics.

14. Support families to participate in outings as a means of building community.

Continue to encourage families to engage as volunteers in activities hosted by Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata. Such participation supports the families to gain a sense of community belonging and strengthens their confidence in their gifts.

15. Maintain connections to non-culturally-based organizations offered in the surrounding community, such as couples counselling and family therapy.

There are families who may choose to not utilize culturally based practices and should have access to services from other organizations. These other organizations and their employees should be able to demonstrate their knowledge of colonization, the colonial context families are facing, and how to work with families who hold negative perceptions of Indigenous peoples and cultures. The organizations' services should be based in such practices as cultural humility, cultural safety, and cultural proficiency. These organizations should be assessed and/or monitored by the FGC program for how effectively they are able to counter the colonial narrative and work with the FGC program.

11.2 Summary Comments

Indigenous families continue to face the impacts of colonial oppression and systems that have not effectively moved away from reflecting such structures. These systems, coupled with institutional racism, conscious and unconscious biases, and Eurocentric programs have created disempowered and vulnerable placements of families. The FGC program has intervened in this structural story and is implementing a way forward that is new to these systems. The Indigenous ways of being in the world

and the specific teachings that stem from these ways are carried within the FGC program, by the mentors and coordinators. From the perspective of shared responsibility for Indigenous children and families, the staff are fulfilling their roles of mentoring families by bringing Indigenous knowledge and teachings into their support of Indigenous families and teaching them about their strengths in their identities and cultures that resides within them. The FGC program is able to bring forth Indigenous ways of being in a manner that the CFS system cannot. It can also reach families in ways that the CFS system cannot.

The Family Group Conference program can reach Indigenous families and children in a positive and highly significant manner. It is an effective means of maintaining and reunifying Indigenous families and strengthening Indigenous communities through relationships, support, guidance, challenge, and advocacy. The program should be supported with ongoing sustainable funding and resources. Indeed, it should be supported to grow with the increasing outreach demonstrated by Indigenous families.

On many levels and throughout the FGC process it was clear that by focusing on supporting families as opposed to forcing families to act in prescribed ways, families were able to focus on and rediscover their gifts and abilities, reaffirm their extended family relationships, and act in their own self-interest.





APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND CIRCLE PROTOCOLS

Family Questions

1. Can you recall and share the Family Group Conference activities you participated in?
2. Can you tell me how the FGC process supported your family?
3. How has this process contributed to strengthening of your family? (examples: active support for caring for the children, concern expressed for one another, positive comments to one another, helping one another meet goals)
4. Can you tell me how the FGC process supported the care of your children?
5. Can you share what you liked about the FGC process?
6. If the program has gifts or talents (strengths, things to offer others) what do you think they are?
7. What contributed to the success of the FGC?
8. Can you share what you disliked about the FGC process?
9. If you could make the FGC process different, what would you do?

Historical Staff Questions

1. Can you tell me about the development of FGC service delivery at Ma Mawi?
2. Who was involved in FGC?
3. What did they do?
4. What were some key events that took place?
5. What paper work (forms) do you recall?
6. How did families become involved with FGC?
7. What impact on the families did you see?
8. What impact did FGC have on the Indigenous community? Wider community?
9. What were the strengths of FGC?
10. What were some challenges that FGC faced?
11. How did these challenges impact the delivery of FGCs?
12. If you could identify a legacy for the early years of FGC, what would you say was that legacy?

Mentor Questions- First Round

1. Can you tell me about your experiences learning about FGC?
2. Can you tell me about your experiences in providing FGC services? (For example: What was it like when you first started? What was it like after delivering FGC to a few families/now?)
3. How has FGC impacted you?
4. Has the program been successful in strengthening families through prevention and family programs?
5. Has the program been successful in building community capacity through collaboration and partnership? (For example: What organizations have you worked with? What organizations have called on you to provide services? How has your relationships with collateral service providers changed, if at all? What do you think the reason is for this change?)
6. What has worked well and why?
7. What could have worked better? What would have been needed for it to work better?
8. How has FGC impacted the Indigenous community? The full community in Winnipeg? Manitoba? *(For example: Impact on the community members generally? Have community people been talking about the program? Have you had any requests for the program from the general community?)*

Mentors Questions- Second Round

1. What is the process you follow to implement FGC with families?
2. Experience with other supports?
3. Any challenges implementing?
4. Any things you decide you cannot implement?
5. Can you tell me about your experiences learning about FGC?
6. Can you tell me about your experiences in providing FGC services? (For example: What was it like when you first started? What was it like after delivering FGC to a few families/now?)
7. How has FGC impacted you?
8. Has the program been successful in strengthening families through prevention and family programs?
9. How has FGC impacted the Indigenous community(ies)? The full community in Winnipeg? Manitoba? *(For example: Impact on the community members generally? Have community people been talking about the program? Have you had any requests for the program from the general community?)*
10. Has the program been successful in building community capacity through collaboration and partnership? (For example: What organizations have you worked with? What organizations have called on you to provide services? How have your relationships with collateral service providers changed, if at all? What do you think the reason is for this change?)
11. What has worked well and why?
12. What could have work better? What would have been needed for it to work better?
13. Can you tell me your thoughts about Bear's Den?
14. Can you tell me about connecting with families?



Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Staff Members Questions

1. Can you tell me about your experiences learning about FGC?
2. Can you tell me about what you think about the provision of FGC services by Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata?
3. How has FGC impacted you?
4. Has the program been successful in strengthening families through prevention and family programs?
5. Has the program been successful in building community capacity through collaboration and partnership?
6. What has worked well and why?
7. What could have worked better? What would have been needed for it to work better?
8. How has FGC impacted the Indigenous community? The full community in Winnipeg? Manitoba? (examples: Impact on the community members generally? Have community people been talking about the program? Have you had any requests for the program from the general community?)

Community Circle Protocol

Leading explanation of the circles: “Ma Mawi has been offering Family Group Conferences for several years, and recently has increased FGC services. We are interested in hearing what impact FGC services have had on the community. We would like to know such things as what FGC contributes to

the Indigenous community, how it strengthens the sense of community, how it reflects Indigenous cultures, what it does to support the continuing development of community identity, and any other contribution that comes to mind.”

CFS Workers Circle Protocol

Leading explanation of the circles: “Ma Mawi has been offering Family Group Conferences for several years, and recently has increased FGC services. We are interested in hearing what impact FGC services have had on the community. We would like to know such things as what FGC contributes to the Indigenous community, how it strengthens and supports families, how it strengthens the sense of

community, how it reflects Indigenous cultures, what it does to support the continuing development of community identity, and any other contribution that comes to mind. We are also interested in how FGC supports the relationship between CFS and the FGC.”

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

Evaluation of the Mamawiwichiitata's Family Group Conferencing Program

Informed Consent for Individual Participation

Research Team:

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This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what this evaluation is about and what your participation will involve. **Participation is voluntary and declining to participate will have no negative results.** Please feel free to take your time to read or have this information read to you carefully so that all the information is clear. If you would like more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, please feel free to ask.

Purpose of the Evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation is to review Mamawi's Family Group Conferencing program. ***The intent is to discover how the Family Group Conferencing process supports families to make positive changes for themselves.*** The evaluation is focused on family group conferencing (FGC) and not particular people using the services. If you agree to participate in this study, we are interested in having you tell us what was important to you with respect to how the FGC program has strengthened or impacted you and/or family.

Handling the information you share

If you participate, we are committed to the following points:

- 1) ***you own of the information you share***—we will only use it with your agreement.
- 2) ***you have control over how the information you shared will be used***—if we use the information only for this evaluation. If another reason comes forward, we will ask your permission to use what you have shared.
- 3) you can ***access the information you share at any time.***
- 4) It is with your agreement that we ***hold this information.*** If at any time you decide you do not want to participate, we will pass the information back to you, or destroy it upon your direction to do so.

Benefits

While recognizing the importance of giving and receiving in Indigenous communities, the purpose of this evaluation is not based on the intent to provide you with direct benefit. This evaluation is the first step towards determining how well FGC works for Indigenous families in this territory (Winnipeg and surrounding Indigenous communities). ***It will help us determine how to better support families who may partake in Family Group Conferencing in the future.***

Comfort and Discomfort

While ***we intend to address only topics that you are comfortable addressing***, in the event that you find any aspect of the study upsetting, during or after our conversations, we will provide you with contact information for relevant services, such as counseling services available in the community, or assist you to find another Elder with whom you can connect for support.

Confidentiality

Unless otherwise indicated by you, your responses in this study will be held as confidential by the researchers. No one beside the two researchers and the assistant typing out the interviews will have access to the digital recordings. Digitally recorded conversation will be stored on a computer requiring a password for access. This recording will be summarized in writing and the electronic copy of the transcriptions will be

stored on a computer requiring a password for access to the files. The computer will be stored in a locked location. Any paper copies of the summaries will be kept in lock location(s). The digital recordings and transcripts will be identified by an arbitrary number. Unless otherwise directed by you, this identifying information and any confidential data will be stored until the evaluation report is completed and accepted by Mamawiwichiitata as completed. It will not be stored at Mamawiwichiitata. At any time you can access the material related to you, or request that any material related to you be destroyed.

If you wish to be identified as a participant in this study and would like to have your responses noted as coming from you, then we will follow your preference to identify you as the person speaking.

Sharing the Results

Results from this study will be shared through reports and presentations to people working and overseeing Mamawiwichiitata, the program funders, and the general community. We will also share the results with any other individual(s) or groups you identify. At no time will we share any individual responses that could identify you as a participant unless you direct us to make your identity known.

Providing Consent

Your signature on this form or your verbal consent indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in this evaluation of the FGC program and agree to participate in the manner described. **You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and/or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification of new information throughout your participation.**

Questions

If you have any questions about this research, feel free to phone or email either of us (see above).

If you consent to participate, please sign on the following line or provide verbal consent that will be recorded.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher and/or Delegate's Signature

Date

☐ Written Consent

☐ Verbal Consent

If you wish to be identified as a participant and have your responses attributed to you, please sign here or indicate this preference at the beginning of the interview.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher and/or Delegate's Signature

Date

AUTHORS

Micheal Anthony Hart

Michael Anthony Hart, Ph.D., is a citizen of Fisher River Cree Nation residing in Cochrane, Alberta, and proud father of two teenage young men. He has been actively supporting and advancing Indigenous ways of knowing, being, doing, connecting through his work as a social worker, professor, administrator, researcher and evaluator.

Elisa Lacerda-Vandenborn

Dr. Elisa Lacerda-Vandenborn was born and grew up in Curitiba, Brazil, in the unceded and unsurrendered territory of the *Guarani*, *Xetá*, and *Kaingang* Peoples. In 2004, she made Turtle Island, Canada, home. As a critical and interdisciplinary theoretical psychologist, her research and community engagement focus on how psychological ideas, concepts, and methods are interpreted and translated into social institutional practices, especially in child welfare. As a settler scholar, she works alongside multiple Indigenous scholars and community members in Canada and Brazil.

Don Robinson

Originally from Bunibonibee (Oxford House) First Nation, Don Robinson has been a long time Winnipeg resident. He is married with two adult children and one step-son. He graduated from the University of Manitoba with a Bachelor of Social Work (1991) and a Master of Social Work (2001). He has over 30 years of experience in the social work field and has travelled extensively throughout Manitoba and across Canada delivering training workshops through Inninew Consulting.



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