Evidence In-Sight request summary:
Culturally appropriate adoption practices for First Nations children and youth
The following Evidence In-Sight report involved a non-systematic search and summary of the research and grey literature. These findings are intended to inform the requesting organization, in a timely fashion, rather than providing an exhaustive search or systematic review. This report reflects the literature and evidence available at the time of writing. As new evidence emerges, knowledge on evidence-informed practices can evolve. It may be useful to re-examine and update the evidence over time and/or as new findings emerge.

Evidence In-Sight primarily presents research findings, along with consultations with experts where feasible and constructive. Since scientific research represents only one type of evidence, we encourage you to combine these findings with the expertise of practitioners and the experiences of children, youth and families to develop the best evidence-informed practices for your setting.

While this report may describe best practices or models of evidence-informed programs, Evidence In-Sight does not include direct recommendations or endorsement of a particular practice or program.

This report was researched and written to address the following question(s):

- What does the best available research suggest are preferred practices in arranging adoption placements for First Nations children and youth?

We prepared the report given the contextual information provided in our first communications (see Overview of inquiry). We are available at any time to discuss potential next steps.

We appreciate your responding to a brief satisfaction survey that the Centre will e-mail to you within two weeks. We would also like to schedule a brief phone call to assess your satisfaction with the information provided in the report. Please let us know when you would be available to schedule a 15-minute phone conversation.

Thank you for contacting Evidence In-Sight. Please do not hesitate to follow up or contact us at evidenceinsight@cheo.on.ca or by phone at 613-737-2297.
1. Overview of inquiry
This report was developed for an agency looking for evidence informed practices to guide adoption planning for First Nations, Inuit and Métis (FNIM) children who are adopted into either FNIM or non-FNIM families. The agency provides services for clients and families from FNIM and non-FNIM communities throughout a large geographic area. They have put together an Indigenous working group to ensure that evidence-informed practices for adoption planning for FNIM children are incorporated into agency adoption guidelines to support children’s long-term health and well-being.

To maintain clarity and consistency throughout this report, the process of FNIM children being adopted by non-FNIM families is referred to as FNIM cross cultural adoption. Although there is recent research on the topic of FNIM cross cultural adoption in Canada (Carriere, 2007a; Carriere, 2007b; Carriere, 2007c; Carriere, 2007d; Carriere, 2008; Carriere & Sinclair, 2009), research involving FNIM children of one community being adopted into a different FNIM community (for example, a child from an Ojibwe community being adopted by a family in a Cree community) is absent from the literature. Also, there is a large body of research on the consequences of FNIM cross cultural adoptions, but limited literature on evidence-informed practices to help support and guide non-FNIM families that adopt FNIM children. Some of the literature found was unpublished dissertations which contain useful information, but have not been peer-reviewed.

2. Summary of findings
- Children’s identities form over time from birth through adolescence, and continually grow and change as a child interacts with family, friends and community. An FNIM child can thrive in a Western adoptive family, if their birth culture is accepted and incorporated into day-to-day life. Unstable identity formation is the result when this is not the case.
- Though not optimal, given limited resources FNIM cross cultural adoption is a common practice in Canadian child welfare agencies.
- Child welfare resources should, if possible, be directed to family preservation to keep the child with their birth family and provide necessary resources to help the family care for their children.
- Cultural planning is the process of embedding important cultural customs, events and community contacts into the adoption plan of an FNIM child. It is a practice intended to ensure that adopted children are able to maintain connections with their culture and even their birth family throughout their life.
- Policies and practices designed to support cultural planning are necessary to achieve the best outcomes for FNIM adoptees, and should be a part of training and preparing non-FNIM adoptive families for a cross cultural adoption.
- Although the preferred adoption arrangement for an FNIM child is a family in their birth community, the stability gained through adoption (regardless of the families’ culture or race) may be preferable for some FNIM children compared to foster care.
- Children and youth should be given the opportunity to participate in their own cultural planning.
- For FNIM children being adopted by non-FNIM parents, open adoption is one way to maintain contact and continuity between the child and their culture.
- For adoptees that are moving far from their home community, consistent communication is important to maintain, assuming the child is in foster care or has an open adoption.
The preference for a kinship care model began within FNIM communities, and many child welfare agencies and the ministries supporting them have incorporated this model as evidence-informed in FNIM adoption cases.

3. Answer search strategy
- Search terms: Aboriginal, cross-cultural adoption, transracial adoption, Cree adoptions, Ojibwe adoptions, Aboriginal across clan/tribe adoptions, first nation adoptions, Aboriginal adoption Ontario, child welfare
- Databases searched: EBSCO Host (Medline, PsycINFO, CINAHL, Health Business Elite, Nursing & Allied Health Connection: Comprehensive, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, Biomedical Reference Collection, Comprehensive), Google Scholar, The Cochrane Library, and the Campbell Library

4. Findings

Historical context
FNIM cross cultural adoption has been an issue of concern for decades. In the early 1960s provincial child welfare authorities were given jurisdiction on FNIM reserves and began the systematic removal of over 11,000 FNIM children from their birth families (the actual number is thought to be much higher). Of these children, 70% were adopted into non-Aboriginal homes (Bertsch & Bidgood, 2010; Snow & Covell, 2006). This era became known as the ‘sixties scoop’, and has been acknowledged by the Canadian government as a deliberate attempt to assimilate FNIM children into Western culture (Sinclair, 2007).

The impact of the sixties scoop has contributed to the loss of many FNIM adoptee’s cultural identities, which has contributed to problems with physical, emotional and mental health (Carriere, 2008). Locust (2000) maintains that many FNIM adoptees experience long term psychological issues as a result of cross cultural adoption placements. One study (Sinclair, 2007) found that 85% of FNIM cross cultural adoptions break down in the adoptee’s adolescent years. Some reasons given for the poor outcome of FNIM cross cultural adoptions were: the lack of skills non-FNIM families have in supporting their child through the discrimination and racism they encounter growing up; being subject to stereotypes they know do not affect their adoptive family; and not being prepared to cope with the drastic change in their social status outside the safety of their home (Bertsch et al., 2010). Unless they have adequately prepared to cope with the realities of living in Canada as an FNIM persons, their identity may be a source of conflict for them, henceforth contributing to the breakdown of their adoption (Sinclair, 2007).

Today the number of FNIM children in government care (in the care of a child welfare agency or foster care, waiting to be adopted) is disproportionately high compared to any other cultural group (Sinha & Kozlowski, 2013). As of May 2013 FNIM children represented 3% of Ontario’s total population, but represented over 21% of Ontario’s children in care (Sinha & Kozlowski, 2013). The disproportionate number of FNIM children in care is found in all other provinces as well. In Saskatchewan, FNIM children constitute 25% of the population under 18 but represent 80% of the children in care (Sinha & Kozlowski, 2013).

Maintaining cultural identity
All children develop a cultural identity which influences the way people live and interact. According to Hart (2002), from a tribal perspective, different experiences contribute to identity and this shapes the child spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically. For adoptees of any culture the experience of leaving their birth family and being immersed in
a different environment will undoubtedly influence their identity. For FNIM children in cross cultural adoptions, this experience includes the loss of their birth family and community and the loss of their culture, language, traditional diet and spirituality. Identity formation is an ongoing process and a child’s identity changes as she/he interacts with family, friends and community. While Western adoptive families can be very loving and supportive, if the child’s previous culture is not accepted and incorporated into her/his life, the development of her/his identity can be unstable (Carriere, 2008; Klamn, 2010).

A common theme and challenge identified in the literature is that Western assumptions and generalizations of “what is in the best interest of the child” can be problematic. The best interest of an FNIM child cannot be assumed to be the same as that of a non-FNIM child. While Canadian, Westernized culture views adoption from an individual family perspective, where the child is to be cared for within the immediate family the FNIM perspective is more collectivistic in that a child in-need should be taken care of by the community (Lazarus, 1997; Report of the working group on Customary Adoption in FNIM communities, 2012). Due to this lack of congruency between FNIM and Western cultural norms, the process of forming secure and defined identities for FNIM cross cultural adoptees may be hindered. A secure identity formation for FNIM adoptees is an important outcome for the success of their cross cultural adoption.

A lack of cultural understanding in non-FNIM adoptive families may also prevent identity development (Snow & Covell, 2007). Being exposed to one’s history and tradition through cultural activities is a way to centre the child’s indigenous culture in their life. In a qualitative study by Carrier (2008), loss of identity was a major concern for most of the participating FNIM youth who shared their foster care and adoption experiences. One of the youth adoptee participants had a cultural adoption ceremony in which both her birth and adoptive families participated. She believed that this ceremony was an important part of her cross cultural adoption experience. On the other hand, not all FNIM children want to participate in cultural activities. For example, one of the participants in the study expressed that, at that time, she/he was not interested in learning about her/his FNIM culture. It is important to provide children this choice and to be prepared, when they show interest, to introduce them to their birth culture whether this happens early or later on in life.

Dr. Carriere conducts research on cultural planning and adoption of Aboriginal children, and looks at ways to keep children connected with their communities to maintain their Indigenous identities. She has outlined a set of important recommendations for practice in cultural planning based upon a literature review as well as interviews conducted with adoptive parents and youth adoptees (Carriere, 2007b).

1. Legislation and policy changes are required to ensure that cultural plans are developed as part of a comprehensive plan of care when FNIM children come into care and prior to the adoption process.
2. Cultural brokers should be identified for First Nation, Metis and Inuit children being adopted into non FNIM homes. A list of resource persons and agencies should be provided to adoptive families.
3. Provincial child welfare and FNIM agencies need to coordinate to provide cultural outreach to non-FNIM adoptive families on a more personal basis then what currently exists. This should be delivered through face to face services and use models such as Family Group Conferencing to facilitate a process of relationship building, negotiation and establish mutual commitments with the child’s birth family and/or community members and the adoptive family.
4. Resources for cultural planning need to be identified within provincial child welfare agencies for: financial assistance to families to fully engage in maintaining a cultural plan, education and training for adoptive families, dedicated resource staff to assist in cultural planning and financial assistance to FNIM agencies that can be instrumental in assisting adoptive families to develop and maintain an appropriate cultural plan.

5. Education and training in effective cultural planning is necessary for adoption workers.

Carriere (2008) has also developed a resource sheet to help non-FNIM adoptive families support their child in their spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical development (see Appendix A). For more information and research on FNIM adoption planning and best practices, see [http://icwn.uvic.ca/2013/jeannine-carriere-on-cultural-planning-adoption-and-aboriginal-children/](http://icwn.uvic.ca/2013/jeannine-carriere-on-cultural-planning-adoption-and-aboriginal-children/).

### 4.1 Adoption within FNIM communities

In FNIM cultures, the practice of transferring the care of a child to a new family in the community averts the breakdown of the child’s identity from their community, birth family and culture. This is why there is no traditional word for “adoption” in First Nations languages (Bertsch & Bidgood, 2010). The transfer of an FNIM child into a caring FNIM family in the same community is thought to promote community strength, caring and bonding (Crichlow, 2003; Keewatin, 2004). Within community adoption is often looked upon as an act of generosity from one family to another in which honor is bestowed on all parties. While Bowlby’s attachment theory (1969) proposes that a child needs to develop a healthy relationship with one primary caregiver in order to have future healthy relationships throughout life, Neckoway, Brownlee and Castellan (2007) argue that this is an individualistic, Western viewpoint. They suggest that for FNIM communities, shared parenting styles can assist children to attach to multiple extended family members.

In FNIM adoptions it is the norm for the birth family to be acknowledged and often included in events throughout the life of the child. Children and youth are often adopted by those who do not have children or have had children pass away. Traditional FNIM adoptions involve agreements between birth families and adoptive families to maintain the child’s connection to their birth family. In these agreements and in the long-life planning for FNIM adoptions, the children are not separated from their community, birth family, extended family, culture or language (Bennett, et al, 2005, p. 24; L. Wells, personal communication, August 31, 2007).

**Kinship care**

The responsibility of finding alternatives to cross cultural adoptions is largely placed on FNIM communities. According to Wien and colleagues (2007), FNIM child welfare agencies funded by community band councils have been particularly effective at coordinating care for children in their communities. Before child welfare agencies began facilitating on-reserve adoptions, indigenous communities arranged adoptions and foster care through extended family members who played the role of caregiver. The process of FNIM community or extended family members fostering FNIM adoptees is known as kinship care, and it has been a traditional system of care in these communities for many years. Although kinship care began within FNIM communities, many child welfare agencies and the ministries supporting them have incorporated this model into FNIM adoption (Carriere, 2007; Richard, 2007; Wright, Hiebert-Murphy, Mirwaldt, & Muswaggon, 2005).
In an evaluation of a kinship care program in the Awasis Pimicikamak Cree Nation, Wright and colleagues (2005) found general community satisfaction. Children involved in the program had been living in multiple foster homes outside of their communities before they were brought into the kinship care program. Once they entered the program they began living in foster homes of extended families or other FNIM families in their home community. Children in the evaluation reported that they liked the nurturing environment that the program offered and appreciated being in care with their siblings rather than being separated. Many of the children reported that they were able to use their language, Cree. The community members, program staff and foster parents reported a feeling of connectedness between the child, the caregiver and the community. The child and adoptive caregiver formed a close emotional bond, and the child’s connection to her/his culture, language and community flourished in this environment. All of the outcomes in this evaluation were positive, for instance reduced acting out behaviour and improved school performance.

The importance of extended family caring for grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and any related child in indigenous communities is echoed in the literature specific to experiences in Ojibwe communities. In a study by Hand (2005), Ojibwe community members in Montana discussed the importance of their collective tribal responsibility to maintain the wellbeing of the children in the community. Community members stated that proper care and treatment of children in the community is of the utmost importance. They also felt that the preservation of the distinct Ojibwe culture was crucial, but it was important to develop the ability to simultaneously exist in both Western and Indigenous cultures.

Many agencies running kinship programs are challenged by a tightening of financial and other resources (Wright et al., 2005; Carriere, 2007c). For instance, Family Group Conferencing is also limited by a lack of resources. Family Group Conferencing brings children, their families and community members together to gather supports for the child in order to avoid adoption outside of the FNIM Community. The conference is conducted within the FNIM culture and language. It is a promising practice that is being used more often in child welfare agencies but it takes time for the family and community to come together and build trust for the purpose of creating the best outcomes for the child (Pennell, 2009).

**Open Custom adoption**

According to the Adoption Council of Canada (2003), most FNIM children in care are adopted by non-FNIM families in closed adoptions. This limits the opportunities the child might have to connect with their birth culture. Open custom adoption, sometimes referred to as custom adoption or open customary adoption is the practice of FNIM children in-care being adopted into FNIM families to maintain the child’s cultural identity and connection to their community. This approach ensures that FNIM children in care are raised with FNIM families whenever possible, keeping them connected with their extended family and community. These types of adoptions include cultural safety agreements, formerly called cultural plans, and are usually open for the child to maintain contact, if she chooses to, with her/his birth family (Working group on customary adoption in Aboriginal communities, 2012).

In Alberta, the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency (YTSA) has been placing FNIM Children in FNIM adoptive homes since 1999 in their Open and Customary Adoption Program (Carriere, 2007). This program involves a First Nations committee of elders who help caseworkers facilitate appropriate FNIM adoptions. The YTSA provides many services on participating reserves such as child protection, kinship care, foster care, and open custom adoption. These services include agreements to help children remain close to or with their birth families, if child protection issues can be rectified. Where cross cultural adoptions take place, open adoption (biological and adoptive families having access to varying degrees of
each other’s personal information and often an option of contact) is encouraged so that children have better access to their culture, and are able to connect with their birth and extended families (Klamn, 2010).

A working group on customary adoption for FNIM communities in Quebec wrote a report detailing the importance of recognizing FNIM customary adoption in Quebec, and in June 2012 the government of Quebec officially recognized the customary rules of adoption of the FNIM communities (Working group on customary adoption in Aboriginal communities, 2012). A bill has since been put forward to modify the Quebec Civil Code in order to recognize the legality of FNIM customary adoption (Canada Newswire, 2012).

4.2 Cultural planning support for non-FNIM adoptive parents

A common finding in the literature is that agencies should support adoptive parents with cultural planning, both for FNIM and non-FNIM families (Carriere, 2007a; Carriere, 2007b; Carriere, 2007c; Carriere, 2007d; Carriere, 2008; Carriere & Sinclair, 2009). While it can be difficult for non-FNIM parents to educate children about their birth culture, when the birth family is no longer able to care for their child, the adoptive or foster family becomes the child’s main source of knowledge (Klamn, 2010). When the adoptive family is involved in developing the cultural safety agreement, they learn the importance of incorporating the child’s birth culture into their day-to-day life and they also learn the tools for facilitating this process.

The revised editions of the Child, Family and Community Services Act (1996) and the Adoption Act (1996) recommend that cultural planning of identity and heritage be provided for all adoptions involving FNIM adoptees (Bertsch & Bidgood, 2010). In the context of cross cultural adoptions, cultural planning usually involves sharing information about the child’s birth family, community and cultural activities so that adoptive families can help their child learn about the culture that they were born into. As part of a cross cultural adoptee’s cultural safety agreement, some agencies provide training to help educate non-FNIM adoptive parents on the child’s culture. Sometimes the cultural safety agreement includes visitation and contact agreements between the birth family and the adoptive family. The cultural safety agreement is individualized to the child, and its purpose is to ensure that there are guidelines and supports in place to help the child successfully maintain cultural connections (Carriere, 2007b; Carriere, 2007c; Carriere, 2007d).

Cultural planning includes steps taken by the child welfare agency as soon as an FNIM child comes into care to ensure the child is able to maintain birth family and/or cultural connections throughout her/his life (Carriere, 2007b). This applies whether or not they are eventually adopted or fostered by an FNIM or a non-FNIM family. Agencies facilitating an adoption for a FNIM child should always try to place the child in an FNIM family, but if the agency cannot facilitate this, then appropriate actions should be taken to increase the likelihood of a successful cross cultural adoption (Carriere, 2007c).

Cultural safety agreements are a part of open adoptions. Open adoptions, unlike closed adoptions, include agreements for the birth family to maintain some type of contact and receive updates about the child throughout their life. In closed adoptions there are no expectations that the birth family and the adoptive family will be in contact after the adoption is finalized. Canadian child welfare agencies are beginning to encourage open adoptions for FNIM children who are adopted by non-FNIM parents. All open adoptions have different agreements, but in general they all allow birth families or communities to maintain some form of contact with the adopted child. Open adoption is very important to
maintaining FNIM culture because it allows for the child to explore their place within the adoptive family, while maintaining a traditional cultural identity (Carriere, 2007).

Although it would be ideal for FNIM children to be adopted into their extended family network, child welfare services in Canada today are not equipped to accommodate all FNIM adoptees a placement in an FNIM home. Provincial initiatives are underway to implement customary adoption and cultural planning programs into the practices of child welfare agencies in British Columbia, Alberta and other provinces to help ensure the best outcomes for FNIM cross cultural adoptees (Carriere, 2007b). Cultural planning is a crucial component in the process of training and preparing non-FNIM adoptive families for a cross cultural adoption, and regardless of whether the child will be in foster care or adopted, cultural planning should begin as soon as the child is in the care of a child welfare agency (Carriere, 2007c). Young people have the capacity to participate in their own cultural planning, and should be given the opportunity to be involved in the planning of their future (Carriere, 2007a; Carriere, 2007b; Carriere, 2007c).

4.3 Youth perspectives

Recommendations for cross cultural adoption from FNIM youth and their families

Carriere (2007d) interviewed eight FNIM youth with experiences living in non-FNIM adoptive or foster homes. Their recommendations were specifically directed to the British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development Adoption Services but might be applicable to other provinces.

One theme was centered on the stability of adoption compared to foster home arrangements. Several youth discussed the importance of being adopted and knowing they would never have to move again. Two of the youth had not been adopted and were still in foster homes, and they felt as if they never had an opportunity for stability. Although the preferred adoption arrangement for an FNIM child is a family in their native community, the participants in this study from their own experience suggest that being adopted - regardless of the families culture, or race - would have made them feel more stable. It is important for youth to participate in the decision making of their child welfare arrangements. If the youth feels that being adopted into a non-FNIM home is her/his preference over a non-permanent foster home arrangement with an FNIM family, this should be their choice.

A second recommendation from the youth and their families was that cultural planning be done thoroughly and consistently. Families were frustrated with the lack of training and education they received regarding cultural planning and maintaining connections with the FNIM community their child came from. One parent didn’t know whether their child was Métis or if she/he was from a different FNIM community. Keeping accurate records of the child to share with the adoptive family contributes to the success of their cultural planning and identity formation. This information should be maintained for the child to aid with making birth family connections either during their childhood or when they reach the age of majority (depending on legal arrangements in their adoption agreements) (Carriere, 2007d).

The FNIM youth in this study recommended that cultural and community connections, especially with extended family and elders be the building blocks of an FNIM adoptee’s cultural safety agreement. For adoptees that are moving far from their community, being able to communicate through email and/or Skype are important to maintain, assuming the child is in foster care or has an open adoption. These types of connections to birth families and culture were important to the majority of youth being interviewed. Some of the youth found that discovering mutual characteristics and interests with
their birth families and communities was validating. If it is not possible for the child to connect with their birth or extended family, then it is recommended that they at least maintain a connection with their broader FNIM community.

5. Other resources
Knowing what works and receiving training on an evidence-informed practice or program is not sufficient to actually achieve the outcomes that previous evaluations indicate are possible. A program that has been shown to improve mental health outcomes for children and youth but that is poorly implemented will not achieve successful outcomes (Fixsen et al, 2005). In order for a program to be evidence-informed, it needs to be applied with fidelity to the design and it needs to be implemented using supportive “drivers” related to staff competency, organizational leadership and organizational capacity. These drivers include assessing and monitoring the outcomes of your practice using evaluation or performance measurement frameworks, which are particularly important when there is insufficient evidence in the literature to guide clinical decisions. Choosing a practice is an initial step toward implementation, but the implementation drivers are essential to ensure that the program reaches appropriate clients, that outcomes are successful and that clinical staff members are successful in their work.

The Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health has a number of resources and services available to support agencies with implementation, evaluation, knowledge mobilization, youth engagement and family engagement. For more information, visit:

http://www.excellenceforchildandyouth.ca/what-we-do or check out the Centre’s resource hub at http://www.excellenceforchildandyouth.ca/resource-hub.

For general mental health information, including links to resources for families:

http://www.ementalhealth.ca
References


Minn. White Earth Band of Ojibwe Code, Tit. 4a § 11 (Final Order for Customary Adoption).


Appendix A:

The Circle of Connectedness for Aboriginal Children

**Spiritual Development**

Spiritual development is delicate and complex and it can be supported by appropriate engagement in practice settings. Working with respected local Elders is one way to help identity formation. Often the process of developing, with Elders, a basic understanding of protocols and ways of being remains a lifelong and cherished learning. Whether it is through storytelling, picking medicines, or sitting in ceremony, children can gain much knowledge and comfort from knowing that Elders are in the background of their lives to assist in their spiritual development. Through these relationships, children can also learn how their creation links them to ancestral knowledge and kinship ties. This work can be facilitated by workers who make connections for children with Elders from the child’s community and kinship circle.

**Mental Development**

Interaction and communication are mechanisms to encourage identity development. Educational tools such as books, games, drama, dance, sports activities, and audiovisual educational resources can be used. Caregivers and adoptive parents can engage in this process by networking with Aboriginal agencies and organizations as important sources of information. Subscribing to newsletters and other forms of Aboriginal media is a helpful tool in gaining this information. Participating in community groups or volunteering for community events is a means to demonstrate the value that caregivers place on maintaining their child’s Aboriginal identity.

**Emotional Development**

Identity confusion may be a strain on the emotional self for the Aboriginal child. It is important to prevent confusion by engaging children in activities where they can explore their family and community. Examples of exercises include artwork, family collages, scavenger hunts, and visits to community events and facilities. Regular contact with a child’s birth family and community will help alleviate fears about the unknown family and lessen identity confusion.

**Physical Self**

Engaging children in physical activity enhances their wellness and directly contributes to mental, emotional, and spiritual health. It is important to acknowledge that not all children have the ability to be the next star hockey player, but they can be engaged in movement in activities such as dance or nature walks to learn about their ancestors’ traditional medicines. Learning traditional tribal games from their nation is another example of learning through the physical self. An exploration of self through activity is a powerful experience.