



SOS Children's Village BC

RECONCILIATION MANIFESTO

A New Chapter at SOS Children's Village BC

There has been a bold shift at SOS Children's Village BC; over the past few years, the organization has been actively decolonizing the work we do to advance on our journey towards Reconciliation.

In May of 2021, the tragic news out of Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc about the uncovering of 215 unmarked graves at the Kamloops Indian Residential School has brought this part of Canada's history to the forefront of conversations in many non-Indigenous spaces. The part of the story that was missing from news reports is that the child welfare system in Canada is considered the new institution separating Indigenous children from their families and communities. There are more Indigenous children in 'care' today than there were at the height of Canada's Indian Residential School System.

While the grief and outrage shook Canadians and the collective belief of who we are, it should not have been a surprise. Indigenous people have been telling us about the children who didn't come home from those institutions for decades. In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its final report, which came with 94 Calls to Action. All Canadians should read that report and the Calls. Reconciliation is the work of non-Indigenous Canadians – it is not the job of Indigenous People. We, as non-Indigenous Canadians, have work to do to reconcile what our government has done and continues to do to the Indigenous Peoples of these lands we now call Canada.

Dr. Pam Palmater, a Mi'kmaw lawyer, professor, author, and activist said, "It's not reconciliation if it feels good." It follows, then, that our job as non-Indigenous Canadians is to start to dismantle the systems that cause Indigenous people harm and ensure that Indigenous children and youth have equitable access to health care, education, and the same opportunities as their non-Indigenous counterparts. We believe in equity over equality in every instance: equality is everyone getting the same thing, whereas equity is where everyone gets what they need. At the end of the day, that is what we should all want for all members of our society; everyone deserves to have their needs met.

At SOS Children's Village BC, we recognize the role that we must play in ensuring a better future for the children, youth, and families that we support. Our mandate puts children's interests at the heart of all the work we must do. We have been undergoing our own internal and personal learning to better understand the children and youth we support, how to be in true solidarity with Indigenous communities, and to start creating some tangible changes as to how Indigenous children and youth in care in BC are supported.



We invite you along on this journey with us, to be a part of this next generation of change where Indigenous communities will be better able to find meaningful, resourceful partnerships. We cannot do this work alone and ask that you believe in a way forward for all children to belong and live healthy, meaningful lives.

We have some resources available and offer these so you also can learn more about how you, too, can be a part of this incredibly important societal shift.

Current State of Affairs

Indigenous children and youth already face more obstacles and barriers than their non-Indigenous peers. The systems designed to care for, educate, and uplift children in fact harms Indigenous children and youth at alarming rates.

The graduation rate for Indigenous students in BC, although improving, is only at 69.6%, while the graduation rate for non-Indigenous students is at 86.5%. (source: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED602768.pdf>) Indigenous children and youth are overrepresented with designations and diagnoses at a much higher rate than non-Indigenous children, often having no easy access to health care and supports to manage or improve chronic health conditions. Indigenous children and youth are criminalized in the justice system at rates significantly higher than any other population. These statistics are not designed to tell the whole story. This demonstrates that there is systemic racism by deficit thinking. This is not a reflection of Indigenous children, youth, or communities' abilities, but an indication of how education, health care, child welfare and the justice system are all failing to adequately understand and support Indigenous families and communities.

There is inherent anti-Indigenous racism baked into the very crust of Canadian culture, from the Indian Act, the creation of the RCMP, Canada's Indian Residential School System, the current child welfare system, education, and health care outcomes. These are the things that non-Indigenous Canadians must start to learn about, understand, and help to stop.

Supports for Indigenous children and youth are chronically underfunded. So much so that Dr. Cindy Blackstock, Gitksan professor, tireless advocate, and Executive Director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, was successful in taking the federal government to the human rights tribunal over inequitable funding for Indigenous children and youth. The federal government appealed the 2016 decision (source: <https://decisions.chrt-tcdp.gc.ca/chrt-tcdp/decisions/en/item/470634/index.do?q=Cindy+blackstock>) which cited that the federal government "willfully and recklessly discriminated against First Nations children on reserves" under the guise of child and



family services. Dr. Blackstock also was the driver of Jordan's Principle (source: <https://fncaringsociety.com/jordans-principle>), which endeavours to make accessing health care supports equitable for Indigenous children and youth.

Our Non-profit Experience Led Us Here

We have over 20 years of experience to draw from in our family-based care model. We believe that all children and youth should know community and family, a place where they will always belong and are connected to. Our Village offers youth a soft place to land, a community of people to turn to when they need some support and guidance, as well as to celebrate with in times of joy and success.

Current statistics demonstrate that there is a growing number of children and youth who face homelessness who have also been a part of state care. We understand the challenging journey youth must face as they learn how to become young adults and live independently. We see how the many gaps in services and supports prevent youth from successful and smooth transitions into adulthood. Although the BC provincial government has committed to extending support for kids in care up to age 27, we have not seen any real change on the front lines. There have been multiple studies that have well documented the real financial and societal implications of supporting youth well past 19, with the benefit to the economy being anywhere from \$1.20-1.50 in return for each dollar spent in support. Aside from that, having young people who are contributing to society is a win-win for everyone.

In 2017, SOS BC completed its first youth housing project, Year Intensive Housing, and introduced housing services through the SOS Children's Village family-based care model. In addition to the five family homes where family-based care is provided to 30 children in state care, the SOS BC Village was now prepared to house five youth ages 16-24 in their own independent living suites. The program has now graduated 25 youth, with more than half of these individuals identifying as Indigenous, into the greater community after a year of intensive support, resources, and training to take on safe, durable, supported independence. The youth and children that we support have a higher rate of graduation, sustained housing, and employment as well as opportunities to extend their post-secondary and vocational training, giving youth a way forward and away from poverty and homelessness.

A key aspect of the village family-based model is advocacy and learning to work with the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) offices and delegated agencies to make every decision for children based on their own unique needs and best interests. We strive to be child centred in every aspect of our work and advocacy. Therefore, we are beginning to shift our focus to family strengthening, to offer supports to families and communities instead of violently apprehending children from their families of origin or their communities. Wherever and whenever possible, we are now pursuing family reunification. We want to bring children home, to their families, to their communities, where they belong.

We are acutely aware of the overrepresentation of Indigenous children and youth in care, and this must change. We believe that the apprehension of children from their



families is a practice that must end. Separating children from their families adds trauma to both child and caregiver and is often unnecessary when families simply require additional resources and supports to sustain their overall well-being and keep the health of their family stable. We look forward and work towards a day where there is no longer a majority of Indigenous children in care and where families stay together without having to break down.

We understand that change does not start with the youth and children, but with us, our community, and our commitment to advocate for sustainable government systems change. Our experience has clearly shown that this is necessary, and particularly for Indigenous youth in care.

How We Can Drive Policy Change

We hold the United Nations Rights of the Child and the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) as guiding documents in the decisions we make for the children and youth we serve. Although Canada ratified the UN Rights of the Child in 1991, the convention has not been fully implemented across the board, for all children.

In 2019, Bill C-92 was passed, granting First Nations, Inuit and Metis communities jurisdiction over child welfare. For a comprehensive analysis of this Bill and its effectiveness, take a look at this article from the Yellowhead Institute: <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/bill-c-92-analysis/#analysis1>. Indigenous communities are already leading the way, and are bringing their children home instead of them going into government care. Cowessess First Nation in Saskatchewan has implemented the Miyo Pimatisowin Act in their community: <https://www.cowessessfn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Cowessess-First-Nation-Miyo-Pimatisowin-Act.pdf>. Other communities are creating similar acts and policies. The Musqueam Indian Band and the Gitksan Nation are both asserting their jurisdiction over children from their communities, keeping them in the community for true care and connection to their cultures, as opposed to going into government care: <https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/gitksan-community-stops-b-c-social-workers-from-taking-child-back-into-care/>.

UNDRIP was adopted in 2016 in Canada but has not yet been fully implemented. Here in BC, in 2019, the Declarations of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA) was adopted but has its own flaws in implementation. These are good starts, but until these documents are fully enacted on and integrated into the laws of the provinces and territories, they cannot be effective.

There have been thousands of recommendations made in numerous reports over the last few decades, going back to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, which released its report in 1995. More recently the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) released their final report in 2015 with **94 Calls to Action**, the Murdered and



Missing Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) Inquiry's final report was released in 2019 with **231 Calls for Justice**, and closer to home, the *In Plain Sight Report: Addressing Indigenous Specific Racism and Discrimination in BC Health Care* released their comprehensive report in 2020 which came with **24 Recommendations**. Also of importance, and particularly relevant to the work we do at SOS BC, is *Skye's Legacy: A Focus on Belonging* a report released by BC's Representative for Children and Youth in June of 2021. This report comes with **three very important recommendations**, and it is imperative that they are implemented by the dates to which have been assigned to them by the Representative, Jennifer Charlesworth (source: https://rcybc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/RCY_Skyes-Legacy_REVISED-FINAL_21-June-2021.pdf).

These documents, reports and recommendations have not been actioned in a timely manner. We know that implementing many of them will solve so many of the issues that Indigenous people continue to face daily in this country. It is only lack of political will that they have not been implemented. Pressure on our elected officials at all levels of government must come from non-Indigenous people.

These recommendations are a road map to true Reconciliation. It is imperative that we keep driving that change.

Hope Through Action

SOS BC understands that it is in a pivotal position as a non-Indigenous organization supporting children and youth. Because we have witnessed the further injustices that Indigenous children and youth in care have endured for over 20 years, and because we have steadily been beside Indigenous communities and supported young people through their journey, we have invaluable expertise in this area about what must be done for kids in care.

Our experience shows us that through consistent and sustainable partnerships, a family-based model of care that is child centric, and providing support and resources in a timely manner, Indigenous communities and all children and youth can flourish. As Rhiannon Bennett, Musqueam matriarch and activist says, "What's good for Indigenous people is good for all people."

We want to continue to support the work that is necessary for Indigenous communities after Bill C-92 has been fully implemented. To do this, we must continue to engage our public and ask them, as non-Indigenous individuals, to come forward and champion a cause that allows us to provide much needed supports, driven by the unique needs and requests of each Indigenous community we endeavor to partner with. We understand that there has been a long, terrible history of injustices against Indigenous people which in turn have impacted the ability for children and youth to thrive. We must come alongside Indigenous communities and support them in their sovereignty and self determination to do the work that must be done moving forward and we must return children to their rightful place and home.



Canadians tend to forget the history of the Indigenous Peoples of these lands, or we were never fully taught the truth of what happened here. We forget that despite our governments' best efforts to eradicate them, they are still here, revitalizing languages and cultures and ceremonies, connecting to disrupted families and communities, reclaiming their cultural identities. As Kistie Singh, our Executive Director at SOS Children's Village BC said, "Let's be the difference and not forget."

What You Can Do to Help

There is no better time than right now to get involved.

We are asking our community to contribute in a meaningful way by supporting the next chapter for SOS Children's Village BC. Together, we can provide alternative solutions to close the gaps and move the mark on changing the systems that are attempting to prevent Indigenous communities from thriving in the way they deserve. It is time for a new way forward together, where we can make certain that all children have every opportunity to succeed.

Taking action and supporting us in this journey can be the difference that brings real, meaningful change to children and youth in care. It gives you an opportunity to exercise your rights as a concerned community member and citizen to make a difference for children and youth.

As non-Indigenous Canadians, it is up to us to learn about the historical and present circumstances brought upon Indigenous communities by our governments of past and present. We must organize and act to change and dismantle systems where we can so that we can create sustainable futures for youth and children so that they and future generations can thrive in a healthy, connected way.

Please consider supporting SOS BC and the work we must do to move the mark forward for all children who are in our community. Your support can go a long way in bringing children home, much like the work we did the last 2 years to mark the welcoming of child who lived at the Village to their First Nation of origin for the first time in SOS BC history. We want so much for this to be the reality of all children who have been in care or who have had care experience.

Change is taking place, but at times it can be slow and a daunting process. SOS BC wants change now, and you can be a part of this change by supporting and adopting this manifesto, so you too can say that you have been a part of the work that must be done in supporting Indigenous communities, that you too can take your concern and emotion and turn it into meaningful action.



Take some time to read the reports listed above to get a better picture of the reality many Indigenous people face: the TRC's Final Report, the MMIWG Inquiry's Final Report, Skye's Legacy, and the In Plain Sight Report. Write your elected officials, your MP, MLA, Mayor, council members, and School Trustees to hold them accountable for implementing the recommendations that have been prepared with so much labour and love from Indigenous people. Demand that changes be made to existing frameworks that are harming Indigenous people. We cannot reconcile a relationship that is still in active harm.

Join us on this journey towards making things better for all kids in state care, not just the ones in our Village and community.