

FACT SHEET

PARENTING CAPACITY ASSESSMENTS AND INDIGENOUS PARENTS IN CANADA



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

POLICY BENCH
Fraser Mustard Institute for
Human Development

January 2022

Recommended Citation:

Sistovaris, M., Fallon, B., Sajedinejad, S., & Sansone, G. (2022). *Parenting Capacity Assessments and Indigenous Parents in Canada: Fact Sheet*. Toronto, Ontario: Policy Bench, Fraser Mustard Institute for Human Development, University of Toronto.

Companion document:

Sistovaris, M., Fallon, B., Sajedinejad, S. (2021). *Parenting Capacity Assessments and Indigenous Parents in Canada: Policy Brief*. Toronto, Ontario: Policy Bench, Fraser Mustard Institute for Human Development, University of Toronto.

Introduction

A central concern for child welfare professionals in Canada is the determination of a parent's capacity to care for his or her children when the child is at risk of harm.¹⁻² The immediate and life-long implications of parental neglect and abuse on children are well documented in empirical studies showing the breadth of developmental issues—physical, emotional, cognitive, social and various forms of psychopathology—children are at risk of when exposed to ineffective parenting and/or child neglect. **Parenting Capacity Assessments (PCAs)** are an integral component of a child welfare practitioner's toolkit for evaluating parenting competence. They are utilized at various phases of child welfare cases and presented in court as part of expert testimony.³⁻⁷

What is "Parenting Capacity"?

Simply defined, parenting capacity refers to "the ability to parent in a good enough manner in long term".² It differs from "parenting ability" where an individual may be able to effectively parent for a short period of time under special circumstances, but lacks the capacity to parent effectively in the long term.² Some researchers suggest that the definition is largely a clinical judgement, open to interpretation.^{7,8} For instance, a "good enough" parent may signify that a child is receiving a consistent and optimal level of care or it may signify that a child is receiving the minimal amount of care to meet his or her needs.⁷ Research suggests² that the term "lacks any formal, cohesive or commonly accepted definition or understanding about what it fully means" which is problematic because it has become a widely accepted standard for the evaluation of parenting competence.⁹

What is a Parenting Capacity Assessment (PCA)?

PCAs involve the investigation and preparation of a **report evaluating a parent's ability to care for their child(ren)**.⁶ PCAs are considered comprehensive evaluations in that they clearly identify a parent's ability to adequately care for children and include an objective measurement of the adult's parenting skills. Table 1 describes the functions of a PCA according to what they can and cannot do.

Table 1: Functions of a PCA¹⁰

What can PCAs do?	What can PCAs not do?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • describe characteristics and patterns of a parent’s functioning in adult and child rearing roles • explain possible reasons for abnormal or problematic behaviour, and the potential for change • identify person-based and environmental conditions likely to positively or negatively influence the behavior • describe children’s functioning, needs and risks in relation to the parent’s skills and deficits • provide directions for intervention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • compare an individual’s parenting • draw conclusions about parenting adequacy based on indirect measures • predict parenting capacity from mental health diagnoses • rule out effects of situational influences (e.g. time limitations, demand characteristics, current stressors, cultural issues) on the assessment process • predict future behaviour with certainty • answer questions not articulated by the referral source

Rationale for a PCA

Requests for PCAs are governed by provincial/territorial legislative frameworks.⁶ In Ontario, a PCA is typically ordered by the Court at the request of a Children’s Aid Society to determine the capacity or measure of competency of a parent to implement certain parenting skills or abilities with such consistency on an ongoing basis as to optimally raise a child into a capable and autonomous adult.^{5-7,11} Requests for PCAs are made in instances when there are issues surrounding parenting characteristics such as emotional, cognitive, psychosocial, social and psychiatric functioning of parents with histories of maltreating children.²

Canada’s Indigenous Children and Foster Care

Indigenous children are **overrepresented** at every stage of the child welfare system, and the rate of Indigenous overrepresentation in foster care continues to grow each year.¹⁴

⇒ Data from the 2016 Census showed that Indigenous children continued to be overrepresented in foster care relative to Canada’s child population, accounting for only 8% of Canada’s population but 52 % of children in foster care. This means 14,970 out of 28,665 foster children in private homes under the age of 15 are Indigenous.¹³

In many cases, once in foster care, Aboriginal children **remain in care longer** (often remaining in permanent care) and are **less likely to be returned to their families** compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts.^{15,16}

Although there has been some success in placing Indigenous children within their own community with extended family, a family with shared ethno-cultural background, or foster care that is connected to the family unit, the majority of Indigenous children continue to be placed in non-Indigenous care resources.¹⁶



Who are the Assessors?

Typically, mental health professionals— psychologists, social workers and psychiatrists—conduct PCAs.^{5-7,11} A professional designation, however, does not ensure that an individual is qualified to carry out the work involved in an assessment. Research¹ suggests that “understanding child development, the role of parents in the life of a child, the impact of mental illness, inter-personal violence and addictions are all areas of specialist knowledge” for which there are no specialist licenses. In such cases, an “expert” develops his/her capacity in the area through training and supervision in addition to their professional qualifications; however, given the complexity of child protection matters, even experienced assessors are confronted by issues that may challenge their abilities to adequately carry out a PCA.¹

Exclusion of Indigenous Culture

Existing PCAs are based on a Euro-centric approach to understanding the family^{17-21, 5-6} and are not rooted in culturally relevant science with any consideration to Indigenous knowledge, culture and practices. This is problematic because PCAs use an incorrect standard by which the parenting capacity of an Indigenous parent is assessed.^{17,22-23} In assessing parenting capacity, cultural differences in child-rearing practices can be ignored or misconstrued as risk factors. Protective factors, such as connection to culture and community, are not sufficiently appreciated.²⁴



Definition of Family



The assessment of parenting capacity in child protection matters is based on a Euro-centric definition of family as nuclear units consisting of parent(s) and children.^{18,20-21,25,26} The family structures of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples are often extended, with a shared collective responsibility, known as customary care towards children. Families may be related by blood, but can also be tied by clan or other social structures.^{17, 25}

If a mother and father are not able to care for their child, another family or community member will often raise the child as a family member even if the intention is to return the child to parental care in future.²⁶⁻²⁷

Variations in Western and Indigenous Philosophies of Child-Rearing

PCAs are based on Western philosophies of child-rearing which are different from those of Indigenous peoples.^{19,27-30} Table 2 provides some examples of the variations between Western and Indigenous philosophies of child-rearing.

Table 2: Comparison of Western vs. Indigenous philosophies and/or principles of child-rearing³¹

Western Philosophies	Indigenous Philosophies
Patriarchal organization of the family unit.	Matriarchal organization of the family unit.
Children viewed as possessions and seen as playing a primarily economic function in the household and in society.	Children are sacred beings and must be given the support and tools to carry out their higher purpose.
Father plays the lead role in discipline of the children; while the mother is responsible for nurturing.	Entire family equally responsible for discipline of the children including extended family; both women and men play important roles as nurturers.
The nuclear family is the primary unit that raises the children.	The extended family system is the primary unit that raises the children. The clan system plays a key role in forming the sense of belonging of the child to the community and nation.
Parents instilled with the sole responsibilities to raise their children.	The entire community and especially grandparents are highly valued in traditional child-rearing and education.
Emphasis on giving children physical and material security.	Teach children how to develop their character and inwardness so that they can be a “good human being.”
Church and state play a significant role in the parenting foundation in western culture.	The parenting foundation is spiritual in nature and this forms the basis for the foundation for the teachings that guide the indigenous child-rearing way.
Disconnection of children from natural world.	Encouragement of children to learn and bond with the natural world.
Corporal punishment model acceptable. Disapproval shown by threats, punishment, sometimes violence or guilt.	Hitting children shunned by the community. Discipline practiced through history telling and teasing.
Children were to be seen and not heard.	Children were involved in the entire function of the community and were a part of every social gathering.
Emphasis on the institutional care and education of children. Removal of children from the home and community for education.	Children were placed at the center of the community within a child centric societal model.
Must control and direct the child’s behavior in order to create obedience and conformity; secure control by regulation habits and early training to accept authority and discipline.	Principle of non-interference in the sacred path of each child. Children need the freedom and autonomy to learn from the natural consequences of their actions.



Assessment Methods

Four of the most common assessment methods used in the collection of data for a PCA are: checklists, observation, interviews and psychological tests. Of the four methods, psychological tests, or more specifically psychometrics which have become an integral part of PCAs, elicit the greatest criticism.^{3,18,20} Psychometric assessments involve the collection of data concerning personality, parenting knowledge, mental health and addiction issues using a number of standardized quantitative tests.³

Critics advise against using these tools in PCAs involving Indigenous peoples because they are grounded on White, Western, Christian notions of child rearing; are normed on non-Indigenous populations; and yield categories that do not reflect Indigenous perspectives of parenting.^{3,32,33} For these as well as other reasons, critics advise against the use of psychometrics in PCAs involving Indigenous parents because they may result in incorrect assumptions about the level of risk to which children are exposed.¹⁹

Racial Bias

Racial biases linked to child welfare have a spillover effect by influencing policy, decision making about placement in out-of-home care, and ultimately, contributing to the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care.^{19, 33,34} Many of the structural biases that contributed to the Indian Residential Schools and Sixties Scoop are still being incorporated, and to some extent enhanced with child welfare decision making tools such as PCAs.¹⁹ The Ontario Human Rights Commission noted that child welfare authorities can misinterpret poverty or cultural differences as neglect, and therefore refer members of racialized populations to child welfare services more often.³³ If practitioners and assessors are not sufficiently trained in cultural differences in child-rearing, Western parenting models could be particularly troubling, given that practitioners may hold stereotyped views of Indigenous families.²⁴

The Legacy of Colonialism

Substantial pain, rage and grief from unresolved trauma resulting from Canada's history of Indigenous child protection have left many Aboriginal adults unable to deal with the complex demands of parenting and family life, without the necessary experience or adequate preparation for its demands – a fact that is overlooked by Canada's child welfare system. Assessments of Indigenous populations have—and continue to—reinforce the colonial position of child protection in relation to Aboriginal populations, yet they fail to capture the complexity between PCAs with Indigenous parents.^{17,19,35,36} This will require redefining how child protection is conducted, the framework in which it is conducted and modifications to the assessment tools, methodologies and definitions being used.^{17, 37}



Summary and Recommendations

In summary, existing PCAs are ineffective tools for the assessment of the parenting capacity of Indigenous parents. This is attributed to a number of factors: the absence of Indigenous cultural consideration; definitions of family and child-rearing that are based on Western, Euro-centric views; the use of culturally inappropriate psychometrics in the assessment process; inherit biases; and the continuation of a colonial child protection narrative that ignores intergenerational trauma and its impact on Indigenous peoples.

Recommendations to address the limitations of PCAs include:



- Modify existing PCA methodologies and tools to be more culturally appropriate for Indigenous parents.



- Include Indigenous peoples in the assessment conversation, including participation in revising the assessment tools and conducting the assessment.



- Explore other alternative Indigenous-led assessment methods to PCAs based on the best practices of other countries with significant Indigenous populations.



- Improve the collection and preservation of data on Indigenous children in care, including reasons for their apprehension, spending on preventive and care services by child welfare agencies, and analyze the effectiveness of various interventions.



- Expand the knowledge of social work students on Indigenous worldviews, history and cultural practices and engage Indigenous people in this process.

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