



*Figure 1.* Steel sculpture that honors residential school survivors, featuring an elder to symbolize the passing of knowledge, and a drum to symbolize resilience. From “Seven Generations” by Smoker Marchand, 2013, <https://www.wfn.ca/docs/public-art-heritage-brochure.pdf>

# How Literature on Family Preservation can Inform the Child Protection and Early Years’ Service Lines

A report for the Ministry of Children and Family Development

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In collaboration with

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Executive Summary .....	4
Background.....	9
History of family preservation in Canada.....	9
Child protection in British Columbia.....	10
Methods.....	12
Search methods .....	12
Aboriginal Policy and Practice Framework.....	13
Findings.....	14
Conceptualization of family preservation.....	14
A service or a philosophy?.....	14
Components of family preservation services .....	15
The narrative of families .....	17
Focus on children.....	17
The Early Years' Service Line.....	18
Investment in early childhood.....	18
Relational approaches .....	19
Child protection .....	20
Social worker experience/caseloads .....	20
Intersectoral care .....	21
Relationship building.....	22
Recommendations.....	23
Conclusive remarks.....	24
References.....	25

## Acknowledgements

This report is written within the complexities of my positionality being an urban, mixed-Indigenous, cis-gendered, hard of hearing, and heterosexual woman. My matrilineal ties are to Fort McMurray First Nations and my patrilineal ties are of Irish and Scottish descent. I now reside as a guest on the unceded ancestral lands of the Syilx and Okanagan peoples, specifically the Westbank First Nations reserve land. Included in this project are several photos of Indigenous artwork. The steel sculptures and murals are by Okanagan Nation artists, Virgil “Smoker” Marchand, and Sheldon Pierre Louis, respectively, and are showcased throughout the community.

I would also like to acknowledge and bring forward my personal ties that inspire this work. I work as a contracted care provider for the Ministry of Children and Family Development in Kelowna. I have two very special young girls in my home, whom I will always be there for as a lifelong connection and whom I work with every day to support their ties to family. I would also like to acknowledge Wesley (a pseudonym), an Indigenous boy from Nak’azdli Whut’en who challenged me, laughed with me, and showed me the importance of connection. Wesley passed away in the care of a contracted residential agency over 1000 km away from his home community and was very loved by those who worked with him. I do this research project knowing Wesley was a youth yearning for connection to family, community, and culture.



*Figure 2.* Three person figures. From “International Women's Day Single Element” by sunnyrabbit, n.d., <https://www.canva.com>



*Figure 3.* Two figures. From “Valentine's Day Single Element” by sunnyrabbit, n.d., <https://www.canva.com>



I would also like to thank my sponsor within the Ministry of Children and Family Development, Bonnie Pattyn, the GS505 course coordinator, Thais Amorim, and the instructor for this course at the University of Victoria, Dr. Alison Gerlach. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge the University of Victoria's Community-Engaged Learning Office and Research Partnerships and Knowledge Mobilization for their support in carrying out this research through the *Students in Community: Engaging Meaningfully* program.

## Executive Summary

Child welfare services in British Columbia (BC) have shifted over time to (and from) supporting family preservation work at the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). Changes in the Child, Family, and Community Services Act reflected these shifts by centering families wholistically in the implementation of the act, then child protection was the paramount concern in policy after the Gove Report in 1996, and recently, policy has shifted back to preserving families and highlighting removal as a last resort.<sup>1</sup> The government of BC has committed to addressing the overinvolvement of social workers with Indigenous families through increased collaboration with Indigenous communities and organizations and greater efforts to support Indigenous families and preserve their cultural connections.<sup>2</sup> These changes reflect the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP); the federal act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families; the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action; and the Indigenous Self-Government in Child and Family Services Amendment Act that recognize the inherent right for Indigenous Peoples in BC to assume jurisdiction over child and family services in their communities.<sup>18</sup>

Based on the 2022/23-2024/25 service plan and the ministers mandate to “support families involved with the child welfare system by focusing on family preservation and keeping children and youth connected to their communities and culture...” MCFD is interested in developing a Prevention and Family Support Service Framework.<sup>2</sup> In an effort to better understand the provision of prevention and family support and how to best support this mandate in MCFD's service delivery lines, Bonnie Pattyn, Director of Operations at the Kootenays branch proposed a literature review on family preservation to be done through a collaboration between MCFD and the University of Victoria.

This report seeks to improve service delivery by generating themes and recommendations by exploring the following research questions in relation to the reviewed literature:

-  **How is 'family preservation' conceptualized in the literature?**
-  **How can the current literature on family preservation inform the early years and child protection service lines in the Ministry of Children and Family Development?**

To undertake this literature search, I used the University of Victoria's online library databases & google scholar. I set the search criteria to include all articles published from 2013 to 2023 that included "family preservation" in the title. I then refined my search with the peer-reviewed and English filters. In March of 2023, this yielded 32 articles. To access gray literature, I used google and found publicly accessible reports on family preservation. Seminal works were also included to provide background on the theory and practice of family preservation. Consultation with the Ministry sponsor, Bonnie Pattyn, occurred on a biweekly basis and through email, to ensure the research questions and directives were accurate, and to share progress of the findings.

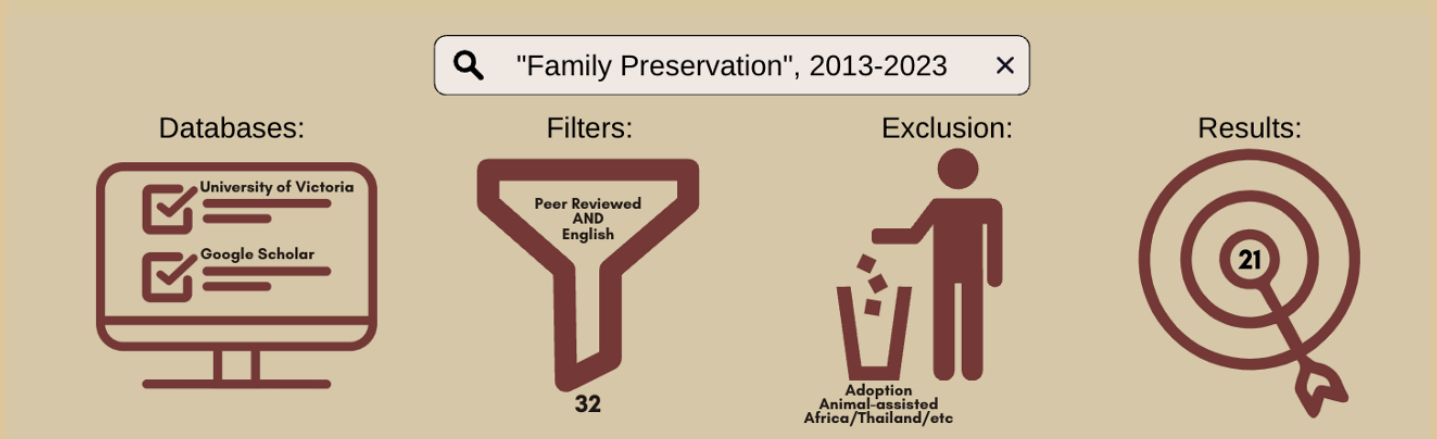


Figure 4. Search Summary by S. Laboucane, 2023, unpublished infographic

Several themes were identified in this literature review in relation to the conceptualization of family preservation and its role in child protection and early years' service lines. Family preservation was recognized as both a service model and a philosophy, though most service delivery models did not demonstrate the values that exist in the philosophy, being family-centered and strength-based.<sup>4</sup> There seemed to be a tendency for programs to focus on child-centered practice.<sup>10,11,12,13</sup> Also, a deficit-based narrative of families being "at risk" and "vulnerable" was evident in many articles.<sup>9, 11,12</sup> Applicable to the child protection service line, were recurring findings emphasizing the need for relational and intersectoral care, and the impact of social worker caseload on family preservation success rates.<sup>4,5,6,8,13,15</sup> Providing early interventions in accessible community spaces and specific preventative supports were also identified as pertinent to the delivery of early years services.<sup>8,9,10</sup>

Based on the analysis of the literature, several possible recommendations are provided for the Ministry.

## Recommendations

1. **Strengthen intersectoral collaborations** with the Ministries of housing and poverty reduction and social development to address and mitigate the prevailing and underlying causes of structural neglect and keep families together. <sup>8,13,15.</sup>
2. **Redistribute budget** to ensure family preservation strategies during childhood and adolescence are well funded, i.e., early years. <sup>6,7,8.</sup>
3. **Avoid using occurrences of child removal** as a measure of failed family preservation strategies, being mindful that temporary placements may support long-term family preservation success. <sup>3,4,9,10.</sup>
4. **Separate branches or service lines** deliver preservation and protection services, to foster safety for families seeking family preservation support. Preservations workers must be transparent about the potential child protection report in case they identify support needs beyond their scope of practice. <sup>14,16,17.</sup>
5. **Investigate possible measures** of successful family preservation according to service users (child, youth, parents, extended family), preservation workers, social service agencies, Indigenous communities, etc. <sup>14.</sup>
6. **Support the use of strengths-based language** when referring to equity-seeking families. <sup>9,11,12</sup>
7. **Provide periodic trauma-informed, relational care, and cultural safety mentorship** and training to new family preservation workers. <sup>4,5.</sup>
8. **Communicate with colleges and universities** delivering human and social services programs about the relationship between child protection to family preservation service lines. <sup>4,5.</sup>
9. **Reduce caseloads** for frontline family preservation workers to support relationally based care and encourage decisions that are family specific. <sup>4,5,6,8.</sup>

The Ministry's development of the Prevention and Family Support Service Framework suggests a shift in practice that has significant potential to change the landscape of service delivery in BC. As this Framework is implemented, children need not to be treated exclusive of their families and communities, but instead, as part and within the context of these beings and structures. The newly piloted Family Connection Centers provides support for children and youth with support needs in a community-based facility; and the Specialized Home and Support Services program, offering respite, emergency care, long-



term care, and short-term stabilization to families are indicative of MCFD's willingness and desire to develop accessible and outcome-based family preservation services to better support the unique needs of communities.<sup>2</sup>

I recommend that future research should specifically assess the desired outcomes of family preservation services, according to families and their children. The impact of jurisdiction over child and family services returning to Indigenous communities should be explored by the respective communities in a way that that communities feel is appropriate and meaningful. Additionally, research should evaluate the Specialized Home and Support Services and Family Connection Centers to evaluate the impact of the program on preserving families.

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## Background

### History of family preservation in Canada

In Canada, the history of family preservation can be traced back to the 1970s, when concerns about the over-representation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system led to the development of community-based approaches to child welfare (Trocmé et al., 2016). One of the earliest family preservation programs in Canada was the Homebuilders program, originally founded in the United States (Schmidt & Zajac, 2018). Homebuilders was a short-term, intensive family preservation program that



*Figure 5.* Steel sculpture that symbolizes the history, culture and *cəpəptikʷəl* (legends) that are the foundation of the Okanagan/Syilx peoples' ways of being. From "For the Peoples" by Smoker Marchand, 2015, <https://www.wfn.ca/docs/public-art-heritage-brochure.pdf>

focused on providing crisis intervention and support services to families at risk of having their children placed in care. The program was based on the belief that with the right support, families could be empowered to address their own problems and prevent the need for out-of-home placement. Homebuilders was successful in reducing the number of children placed in care and was eventually replicated in other provinces across Canada (Schmidt & Zajac, 2018). These approaches emphasized the importance of working with families to address the underlying causes of child welfare involvement rather than simply removing children from their homes. In the 1980s, federal funding for family preservation programs was introduced in Canada, which helped to further promote the development of these approaches (Sinha, 2016). The programs were based on the belief that with the right supports and services, families could be helped to address the challenges they faced and keep their children at home.

In the 1990s, there was a shift in the child welfare field towards a more family-centered approach to service delivery, which emphasized the importance of working with families to address the underlying

issues that led to child welfare involvement. This led to the development of a range of family preservation programs in Canada, including intensive family preservation services, family support services, and parent education programs. These programs were aimed at providing families with the skills and resources they needed to improve their parenting and caregiving abilities, address substance abuse or mental health issues, and access community resources (Lum, 2005). By the end of the 1990's family preservation had become a widely accepted approach to child welfare in Canada (Blackstock et al., 2005).

In recent years, there have been Indigenous-led family preservation programs, which incorporate traditional healing and cultural practices (Bennett et al., 2019). These programs reflect a growing understanding of the importance of cultural continuity and self-determination in promoting the well-being of Indigenous children and families. Under Bill C-92, *An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Metis Children*, Indigenous communities are given the authority to design and deliver child and family services that are rooted in their cultures, traditions, and languages (Government of Canada, 2019). The legislation represents a significant shift in the way that child welfare services are provided in Indigenous communities throughout Canada. It recognizes that Indigenous communities are best equipped to provide culturally appropriate care for Indigenous children and families and aims to support them in doing so (Government of Canada, 2019). This legislation aims to reduce the over-representation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system and promote the well-being of Indigenous children and families (Yellowhead Institute, 2020).

### **Child protection in British Columbia**

In BC, there have been several reports and changes to legislation that have impacted the provision of family preservation practices. In 1992, 5-year-old Matthew Vaudreuil was killed by his mother despite extensive involvement with the Ministry that indicated abuse and neglect (Cools, 1996). More than 21 Ministry social workers had been involved in providing services to Vaudreuil, and over 60 child protection reports were documented over the duration of his short life (Cools, 1996). At the time, Judge Thomas Gove was appointed Commissioner for the inquiry into child protection in the province in relation to Vaudreuil's death (Wanamaker, 2017).

Meanwhile, in 1994, The Child, Family and Community Services Act (CFCSA) was introduced into the legislature. Its guiding principles supported family preservation, highlighting the family home as the preferred environment for children, supporting the family as a whole, using least intrusive measures, and involving family and community in the planning and delivery of services (Armitage, 1998). On the day that the CFCSA was tabled in the legislature, the interim report by Gove was publicized. Gove's inquiry focused heavily on the ministry's failure to protect Matthew and recommended that the CFCSA be



Figure 6. Mural of Indigenous artwork. By Sheldon Pierre Louis, n.d., <https://boundbyafeather.wixsite.com/boundbyafeather/gallery>

amended to prioritize the safety of the individual child in the provision of child protection services (Armitage, 1998). In June 1995 the CFCSA was amended with the suggestions that Gove provided. Just 5 months later, in November 1995, a completed version of “The Report of the Gove Inquiry into Child Protection in British Columbia,” otherwise known as the Gove Report, was published, and called for an overhaul of BC’s child welfare system along with 118 recommendations (Cools, 1996). The number of children and youth in care skyrocketed in the following 5 years (Wanamaker, 2017). Numbers this high had not been seen since the height of the 60s scoop (Wanamaker, 2017).

In 2003, The Family Development Response (FDR) model was developed to provide early intervention and family-centered support to families in crisis (Wanamaker, 2017). The FDR model was developed as a response to concerns about the effectiveness of traditional child protection approaches, which were seen as reactive and punitive rather than proactive and supportive (MCFD, 2005). Under the FDR model, families are offered a range of supports and services tailored to their individual needs, including counseling, parenting programs, and financial assistance. The goal of the model is to empower families to make positive changes and to provide the support they need to keep their children safe and healthy at home (MCFD, 2005). In the following years, a significant reduction of youth in care was reported.

In 2005, the honorable Ted Hughes, was appointed to review the child protection system in BC. “Children and Youth Review: An Independent Review of BC’s Child Protection System” was published with 62 recommendations around the provision of child protection services (Wanamaker, 2017). Notable was the recommendation for a private agency to provide advocacy, resulting in the creation of the Representative of Children and Youth (RCY) and the recommendation to implement a new system to review child deaths (Wanamaker, 2017). MCFD has made several developments since this report that



dissolve the implementation of the Gove report recommendations and instead supports collaborative practice with families and promotes family preservation (Wanamaker, 2017).

From here onward, several reports and changes to legislation have contributed to the reduction of children and youth in care (Wanamaker, 2017). Bill C-92 *An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Metis Children* and the Truth and Reconciliations (TRC) *Calls to Action* lead the need to address family preservation practices. On October 26, 2022, a news release by the BC Government - *Historic changes to B.C. child-welfare laws lay path to upholding Indigenous jurisdiction*, highlighted that “modernized legislation will support Indigenous peoples to re-establish, develop and exercise child-welfare laws for their community members and to recreate their own models for child and family service delivery, including family support, child protection and adoption services” (Office of the Premier, 2022). Four Indigenous governing bodies have already begun the process of exercising their jurisdiction to carry out child protection practices (Office of the Premier, 2022). The implementation of C-92 is in progress across the country to return jurisdiction of child welfare to Indigenous peoples. BC continues to be a leader in the implementation of the act.

Today, MCFD is developing a prevention and family supports service framework based on the Minister's mandate to “support families involved with the child welfare system by focusing on family preservation and keeping children and youth connected to their communities and culture...” The current service plan indicates that the development of the Prevention and Family Supports Service Framework is to be informed by children and families served by MCFD, and by Bill C-92, as it prioritizes preventive care (MCFD, 2023). Current developments, such as the pilot of the Family Connection Centers and the new Specialized Home and Support Services model reflect the direction MCFD is moving toward and make this research both relevant and timely.

## **Methods**

### **Search methods**

This literature review aims to identify and synthesize relevant literature on family preservation. Using the University of Victoria's online library, I set the search criteria to include all articles published from 2013 to 2023 that included family preservation in the title. I then refined my search with the peer-reviewed and English filters. In March of 2023, this yielded 35 articles in the database. I omitted articles focused on adoption, the role of animal-assisted therapy in family preservation, and articles that were situated in countries with political climates that were incomparable to Canada. I limited the scope to articles based in Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. To access additional academic

resources and gray literature, I used the first 10 pages of google and I used google scholar with the same search criteria indicated above. Seminal works were included to provide historical background on the theory and practice of family preservation. This method is limited to the University of Victoria's online library and google and will not include every published article that exists in databases available in Canada.

The nature of literature reviews is not exhaustive of all existing scholarly material and databases; therefore, the themes and recommendations are only conclusive from the material that resulted from my search. The majority of the literature was based on countries outside of Canada, and although some connections can be made to the socio-political climate and/or practices of child welfare, generalizability cannot be presumed. Lastly, the methodological rigor and quality of evidence is not extensively assessed in this literature review due to the scope of work and time constraints.

### Aboriginal Policy and Practice Framework

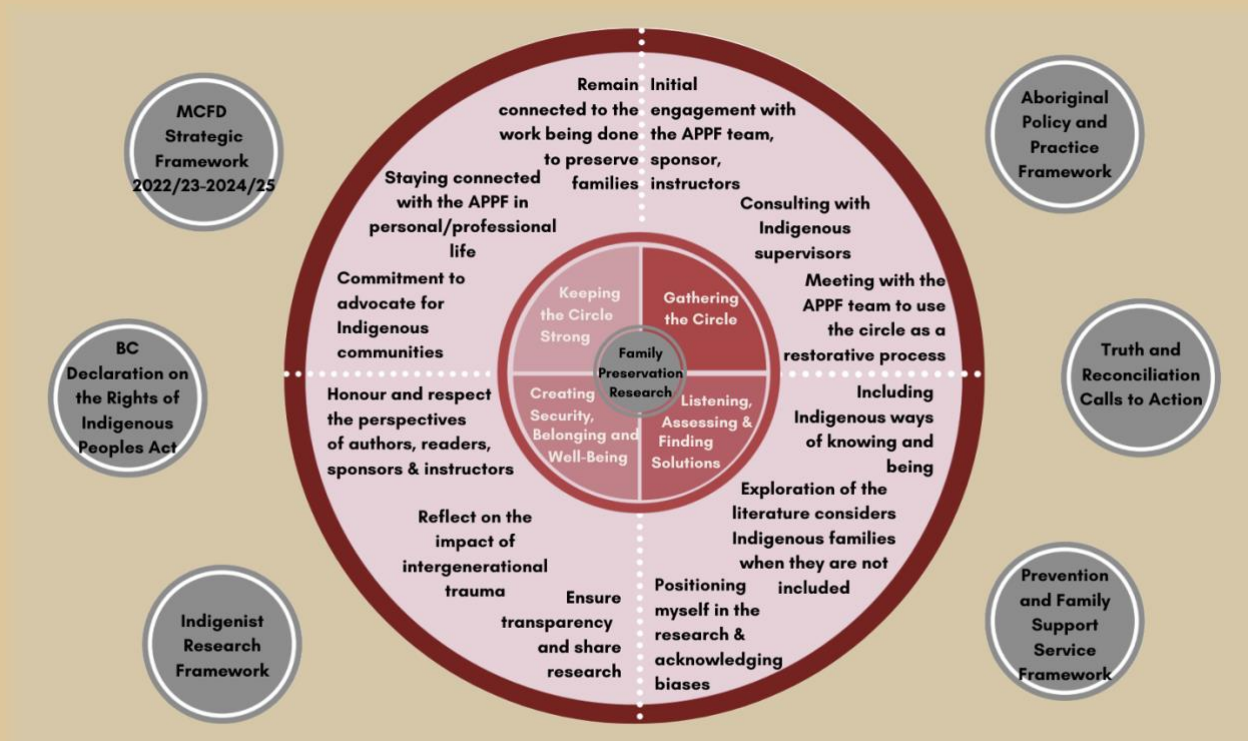


Figure 7. An overview of the APPF circle as it relates to this project. S. Laboucane, 2023.

The framework that guided this research process is the Aboriginal Policy and Practice Framework (APPF). The APPF can be used to provide guidance for research involving Indigenous children and families in child welfare settings. The framework is based on the principles of cultural safety, humility, and collaboration, and emphasizes the importance of respecting Indigenous cultures and communities and

recognizing the ongoing impacts of colonization (MCFD, 2019). Research that aligns with the principles and standards of the APPF is intended to be respectful, culturally safe, and beneficial to Indigenous communities. It is also expected to contribute to a better understanding of the experiences and needs of Indigenous children and families in the child welfare system, and to inform the development of more effective policies and services (MCFD, 2019).

To **gather the circle**, I met with the APPF team and consulted with Indigenous supervisors. To **listen, assess and find solutions**, I positioned myself within the research, included Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and considered the applicability of research to Indigenous families when they were not included. To **create security, belonging and well-being**, I honored the perspectives of authors, was reflective on intergenerational traumas, and make this research publicly accessible through the University of Victoria library, and to MCFD's internal database. To **keep the circle strong**, I am committed to advocating for Indigenous communities, remaining connected to the work being done to preserve families, and using this framework- as it is essential in practice when I work with children, youth, families, and communities.

## Findings

### Conceptualization of family preservation

#### *A service or a philosophy?*

Family preservation has been represented throughout the literature as both a philosophy and a specific support service provided to families involved with child welfare systems. **As a philosophy**, family preservation refers to the belief that families should be given every opportunity to remain intact. This philosophy is based on the belief that the best place for a child to grow up is in the context of their family, community, and culture (Cameron, 1999) and its rationale is related closely to family-centered social services (Tracy, 2017). **As a service**, family preservation provides short-term interventions to assist families to access appropriate community resources, resolve safety concerns, strengthen family functioning, and enhance parenting skills (Cameron, 1999). In this literature review, all but two articles described family preservation as a service; however, it is acknowledged that there is no consensus on the nature, delivery, and name of the services- yet the popularity is increasing (Tracy, 2017).

Vischer and colleagues (2020) stray away from these common perspectives and instead describe family preservation as **a decision-making process**. The decision-making process involves considering whether to provide intensive support services to families experiencing multi-problems to prevent the out-of-home placement of their children. The focus is on determining whether the family's problems are



severe enough to warrant the intervention of child welfare services and, if so, what type of services are most appropriate to address the family's needs. They highlight the importance of involving families in the decision-making process and in determining what services are most helpful to them (Vischer et al., 2020).

### *Components of family preservation services*

The components of family preservation vary significantly across the literature. Tracy (2017) describes family preservation as a highly intensive, brief service that occurs in a client's home and is based on the following goals: to protect children, to maintain/strengthen family bonds, to stabilize crisis situations, to increase the family's skills and competencies and to facilitate the family's use of informal and formal resources. Long and Frederico (2014), add that family preservation is for families who are at risk of having their children removed from their care due to abuse, neglect, or other issues. They highlight that the program is designed to help families address the underlying problems that put their children at risk while keeping them together in their home environment. Similarly, Morris and colleagues (2022) and Patwardhan and colleagues (2017) describe family preservation as a program designed to prevent the out-of-home placement of children by providing intensive and targeted in-home services to 'vulnerable families at risk of child maltreatment.' They emphasize the importance of maintaining the family unit whenever possible and keeping children connected to their families and communities. (Morris et al.,



*Figure 8.* Mural of Indigenous artwork. By Sheldon Pierre Louis, n.d., <https://boundbyafeather.wixsite.com/boundbyafeather/gallery>

2021). Patwardhan and colleagues (2017) add that the service is crisis-oriented and for families who are at ‘imminent risk’ of having a child placed in out-of-home care.

In the article by Fluke and colleagues (2016), family preservation is seen as a preventive approach that seeks to address the root causes of families' challenges rather than solely focusing on the safety of the child. The authors note that family preservation programs often involve a range of services such as counseling, parent training, and financial assistance, among others (Fluke et al., 2016). Cheng (2010) and Cheng and Lo (2012) found that families who received financial assistance and housing services were more likely to reunify. They add that there is a “false dichotomy between child safety and family preservation” and that it should be viewed as a spectrum (Fluke et al., 2016, p. 210). Lin and Lee (2016) suggest that family preservation programs are designed to help families overcome challenges and maintain their stability. According to these authors, the goal of family preservation is to promote positive outcomes for both children and families by addressing the root causes of the family's difficulties and providing them with the resources they need to overcome them. Steens, Hermans, and van Regenmortel (2018) describe family preservation as a service delivery approach that seeks to prevent the removal of children from their families by providing support, resources, and interventions that address the underlying issues that put children at risk.

Family preservation can be delivered as an inpatient intervention program that is aimed at preventing out-of-home placement by supporting parents and children in the context of a single residential home (Rapsey & Rolston, 2020; Deane et al., 2018). The Live-In Family Enhancement (LIFE) program is led by the Metis Child, Family, and Community Services in Manitoba. The model includes providing a wide range of resources to families on a 24-hour basis for 8-to-12-month periods, including individual and family therapy, cultural and spiritual activities, and life skills training (Deane et al., 2018). It is based on a strength-based and trauma-informed approach that emphasizes cultural identity, family engagement, and community involvement. The program's aim is to address the ‘root causes of family dysfunction’ and to support families in achieving long-term healing and stability. The authors stress the importance of the program being rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing and emphasize that it is an Indigenous-led initiative. The LIFE program also emphasizes the importance of incorporating cultural practices and community involvement into family interventions, which is especially relevant for Indigenous families who have experienced intergenerational traumas and disconnection from their cultural heritage and lands. The program also prioritizes the healing and well-being of both the child and the family as a whole, recognizing that family preservation requires addressing underlying issues and strengthening relationships. Overall, this article highlights the importance of taking a family-centered and culturally responsive approach to social work (Deane et al., 2018).

Another residential family preservation program based out of New Zealand provides intensive support and services to mothers and their children, for 6–12 months while simultaneously providing a parenting skills focused program aimed to reduce the protection concerns (Rapsey & Rolston, 2020). The program focuses on addressing the underlying issues that may be contributing to family stress and conflict, such as mental health and substance abuse problems, and provides families with the resources and support they need to address these issues and build stronger relationships. The effectiveness to reduce risk of future out-of-home placements in this program still needs to be researched (Rapsey & Rolston, 2020).

### ***The narrative of families***

Throughout the literature, the narratives about families are not strengths-based nor are they reflective of the structural factors that challenge child welfare. Deficit-based terms such as “high risk” “at risk” and “vulnerable” are used to describe families. Notable were the articles titled *MacKillop Family Services’ Family Preservation and Reunification Response for Vulnerable Families-Protocol for an Effectiveness-Implementation Study* and *Reaching high-risk families: Intensive family preservation in human services- Modern applications of social work*. All but five articles included these narratives of families, though family preservation as a philosophy was regarded to be strengths based and a supportive model. This deficit-based narrative results in families internalizing their circumstances as part of who they are and “other” the families involved. Desai (2022) shares that deficit-based language communicates the idea that these descriptive terms are “inherent characteristics of a person/people rather the result of circumstances. For the person or group being talked about, it can have a stigmatizing effect and impact identity or behavior” (para. 3).

“to strengthen early intervention for disadvantaged families”  
(Morris et al., 2021, p. 2)

“high-risk and complex families” (Morris et al., 2021, p.4)

“targeted at high-risk families” (Lin & Lee, 2016, p. 1)

“This study examined child maltreatment as a function of cumulative family risk in a sample of at-risk families”  
(Patwardhan et al., 2017, p. 2)

“targeted service provision to provide support to vulnerable families” (Morris et al., 2022, p. 1)

### ***Focus on children***

Literature in this review tends to focus on children, specifically the safety of children, as the reason for family preservation services (Long & Fredrico, 2014; Morris et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2022; Patwardhan et al., 2017). Child safety is often challenged by circumstances such as poverty, single parenting, inadequate housing, and caregiver mental health, and substance abuse (Rapsey & Rolston,

2020). The safety of children is inextricable from the safety of families and if interventions focus on solely the children, how can families be successful in unity? The rationale and philosophy of family preservation is related closely to “family-centered social services” (as cited in Tracy, 2017) but it appears

“Keeping children safe is the core function of child and family practice...” (Long & Frederico, 2014, p. 74)

that in practice, family preservation tends to be child-centered with the goal of children being safe in their home environment (Morris et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2022). The rationale of family preservation programming rarely centers families or addresses the barriers that families face. At the core of keeping children safe is keeping parents/caregivers safe. Services must adequately support

parents/caregivers in order to care for children and youth.

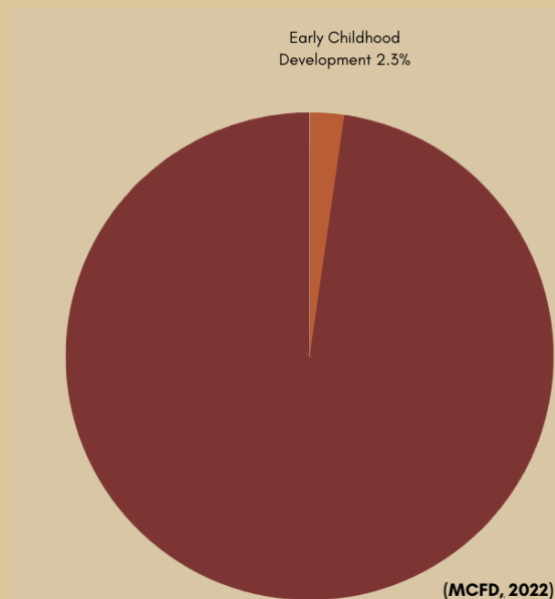
### **The Early Years’ Service Line**

The early years’ service line is unique in that it provides support to children and families in BC entirely through contracted services/agencies. The system of early years services in the province shares roles and responsibilities with other government ministries, health authorities, school districts, Indigenous governments, and community organizations such as the Boys and Girls clubs’ and friendship centers (MCFD, 2018). The underlying hypothesis for family preservation services is that many more children could remain with their families if services were provided earlier and more intensively (Tracy, 2017). This raises questions about how the early years’ service line can further contribute towards keeping families together.

“Early childhood [is] a period of both opportunity and vulnerability, with big payoffs for wise investment of resources at this stage” (Hughes, 2013, p. 30)

### ***Investment in early childhood***

To support family preservation, there must be greater investment in the early years’ service line, specifically for early childhood programs (Gerlach, 2017). The literature highlighted the need for accessible services, as outcomes are enhanced if quality low-cost childcare and other early learning environments are made accessible- specifically when supports are integrated within communities (Hughes, 2013). Hughes (2013) suggests that the outcome for children will be enhanced if quality low-cost childcare and other early learning environments are made accessible. Additional prevention strategies should focus on circumstances that indicate support will be necessary, such as women with pregnancy



complications and known substance use, and for youth use substances (Hughes, 2013). As noted in the figure above, early child development takes up only 2.3% of MCFDs financial summary. This funding stream has not changed substantially for many years and will not change based on the newest service plan. It should be noted that in 2022, the provincial government announced that childcare would be moving to the Ministry of Education with the goal of implementing \$10-a-day childcare as a form of integrated early learning and care (Early Childhood Educators of BC, 2022). At the time of this report, there are 132 providers of \$10-a-day spaces in British

Columbia (Government of British Columbia, n.d.). Where this becomes problematic is that the underlying hypothesis for family preservation services is that many more children could remain with their families if services were provided earlier and more intensively, including for young children with support needs.

### ***Relational approaches***

According to Hughes (2013), early childhood centers offering a range of services can reduce the need to remove children from their homes. In addition, a shift from addressing parental shortcomings to enhancing the family's strengths can better protect children and serve to keep families together (Hughes, 2013). Aboriginal Infant Development Programs (AIDP) are well regarded for their relational approaches toward family well-being (Gerlach et al., 2017). AIDP workers consider the broader structural factors that heavily influence a family's life circumstances (Gerlach et al., 2017). Families can be reluctant to ask for help and a relational approach can support families through this fear by fostering a sense of safety for families who are raising young children. Overall and most concerning, is that there are few apparent interactions between family preservation and the early years' service lines or systems. This may be the service line that needs the interaction the most as the quality of attachment of children with their primary caregivers has a significant impact on their developmental outcome (Vischer et al., 2020).

Women reported a need to defend their parenting against service providers or hide any vulnerabilities for fear that this would result in their children not being returned (Rapsey & Rolston, 2020)



## Child protection

### *Social worker experience/caseloads*

According to Fluke et al., (2016), child welfare workers with less experience are more likely to prioritize child safety over family preservation, while workers in supervisory positions are more likely to prioritize family preservation. This is not to say that supervisors lack care, but rather that their experience in practicing social work may result in family-centered care and the value for family preservation is heightened. As these authors noted, front line social workers “interpret and apply agency directives in a manner that best aligns with their world views” (p. 210). The extent to which positionality, biases, personal and professional beliefs, and work environment may impact decision-making and outcomes for families is not well studied (Fluke et al., 2017).

“Placing a child in out-of-home care is one of the most extreme child protection measures available to ensure a child’s safety” (Vischer et al., 2020, p.7)

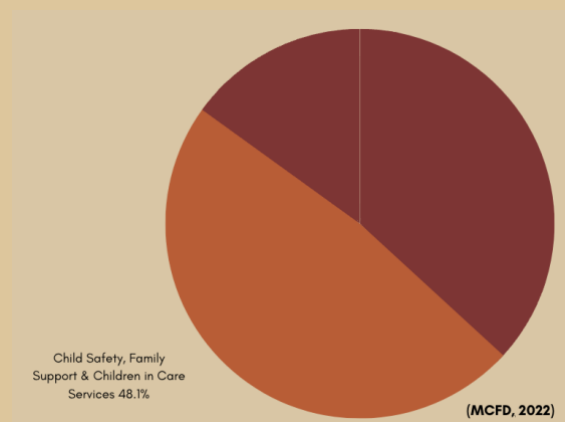
The authors emphasize the need for ongoing training and support for front-line social workers to ensure that they have the knowledge and skills necessary to make informed decisions that

prioritize the well-being of families (Fluke et al., 2016). This perspective may allude to shortcomings in social work programs in universities or may be motivated by new social workers hoping to support young people independent of their families. Additionally, social workers with smaller caseloads were found to have better reunification rates (40%) compared to those with higher caseloads (16%) (as cited in Deane et al., 2017). This discrepancy was not explicitly studied; however, reasons such as time for relational care, and less crisis-based responses were noted. Child protection social workers at MCFD are not tasked with supporting the families when a child is on a custody order (TCO, CCO, etc.) therefore, their files require attention to be made for the child only. With that, there is still responsibility put on social workers to explore permanency in family and extended kin. Though, case management is not required.

“Removing children from adverse home environments and placing them in out-of-home care (foster care) should improve outcomes for these children. However, when children are removed from parental care due to maltreatment, they remain at increased risk of experiencing a number of poor outcomes including mental and physical illness, poorer educational outcomes, and greater contact with justice and child protection services” (Rapsey & Rolston, 2020, p. 1)

The figure below portrays the funding, as indicated in the 2023-2025 service plan, that will be going toward child safety, family support, and CIC services in the year 2024. This funding stream is the largest stream that the ministry offers and has grown by 44 million since 2021 (MCFD, 2022). It is assumed that this funding stream will be managing any new family preservation programming and the

provision of the Specialized Home and Support Services program. The funding increase indicates MCFD's commitment to the implementation of the Ministers mandate.



### ***Intersectoral care***

Intersectoral care is a collaborative approach to service delivery that involves multiple sectors working together to provide comprehensive support to families. This approach recognizes that families may have complex needs that cannot be fully addressed by a single service sector, and that a coordinated effort is necessary to ensure that families receive the support they need to stay together. In the context of family preservation, intersectoral care involves working with families to identify their needs and connect them with the appropriate services and resources across sectors, such as health, education, social services, and housing. Families with these social needs were found to be more likely to have contact with child protection services (Simon et al., 2021).

A significant amount of research connects poverty and child welfare concerns (Simon et al., 2021) and “to not address underlying socioeconomic structural inequities means that poverty... will continue to be misconstrued within the child welfare system as willful parental neglect” (Sinha et al., 2013, as cited in Gerlach, 2017, p. 11). There is growing recognition of the importance of intersectoral care in family preservation, particularly in the Canadian context. For example, the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services has highlighted the need for a coordinated approach to family preservation that involves multiple service sectors, stating that “to achieve the best outcomes for children and families, we must ensure that all sectors work together to address the multiple needs of families” (Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2014, p. 10). A study by the Children's Aid Society of Toronto found that a collaborative, intersectoral approach to service delivery resulted in improved outcomes for families, including a decrease in the number of children placed in care and an increase in family stability (Children's Aid Society of Toronto, 2013).



Intersectoral care is an important aspect of family preservation by allowing service sectors to provide comprehensive support to families. By working together, service providers can ensure that families receive the support they need to address their complex needs and stay together.

### ***Relationship building***

A strong working alliance- defined as a collaborative partnership between professionals and families that is characterized by trust, mutual respect, and shared decision-making- is crucial for successful family preservation, as it allows professionals to better understand the needs and goals of the family and to tailor interventions to meet those needs (Steens et al., 2018). Trusting relationships between families and social workers allow for families to safely develop insight into their needs as parents (Rapsey & Rolston, 2020). This allows for an environment where parents do not need to hide their struggles, and instead can access support (Rapsey & Rolston, 2020). The quality of the relationship between service providers and families is a critical factor in the success of family preservation interventions. A study by Walrath et al. (2015) found that the quality of the working alliance between service providers and families was positively associated with family preservation outcomes, such as improved family functioning and a decrease in the number of children placed in out-of-home care.

The authors also note the importance of cultural competence in building a working alliance, as it allows professionals to understand and respect the cultural backgrounds of the families they work with (Steens et al., 2018). Cultural competence in family preservation involves developing knowledge and skills to effectively work with families from diverse backgrounds, and to ensure that services and interventions are culturally appropriate and sensitive. A study by the University of Toronto found that cultural competence was associated with better outcomes for families, including improved engagement, retention, and satisfaction with services (George et al., 2014). In addition, a study by the Children's Aid Society of Toronto found that culturally competent service delivery was associated with increased family stability and a lower likelihood of children being placed in care (Children's Aid Society of Toronto, 2013). Factors such as intergenerational trauma and negative system experiences impact both the families trust and engagement in services (Morris et al., 2022). The approaches and program resources must be conducive to the development of safety and connection to best support families.

## **Recommendations**

Strengthen intersectoral collaborations with the ministries of housing and poverty reduction and social development to address and mitigate the prevailing causes of structural neglect and keep families together (Hughes, 2013; Patwardhan et al., 2017; Simon et al., 2021).

Redistribute budget to ensure family preservation strategies during childhood and adolescence are well funded, i.e., early years (Gerlach et al., 2017, Grand Chief Ed John, 2016; Hughes, 2013).

Avoid using occurrences of child removal as a measure of failed family preservation strategies, being mindful that temporary placements may support long-term family preservation success (Bezeczky et al., 2020; Deane et al., 2018; Lin & Lee, 2016; Long & Frederico, 2014).

Separate branches or service lines deliver preservation and protection services, in order to foster safety for families seeking family preservation support. Preservation workers must be transparent about the potential child protection report in case they identify support needs beyond their scope of practice (Rapsey & Rolston, 2020, Steens et al., 2018; Tambling & Johnson, 2021).

Investigate possible measures of successful family preservation according to service users (child, youth, parents, extended family), preservation workers, social service agencies, Indigenous communities, etc. (Rapsey & Rolston, 2020).

Support the use of strengths-based language when referring to equity-seeking families (Lin & Lee, 2016; Morris et al., 2022, Morris et al., 2021).

Provide periodic trauma-informed, relational care, and cultural safety mentorship and training to new family preservation workers (Deane et al., 2018; Fluke et al., 2016).

Communicate with colleges and universities delivering human and social services programs about the relationship between child protection to family preservation service lines (Deane et al., 2018; Fluke et al., 2016).

Reduce caseloads for frontline family preservation workers to support relationally based care and encourage decisions that are family specific (Deane et al., 2018; Fluke et al., 2016; Gerlach et al., 2017; Hughes, 2013).

### **Conclusive remarks**

I would like to acknowledge the Ministry of Children and Family Development for their long history and continuation of actions that demonstrates desire to improve the child welfare system. It is no secret that families, some disproportionately higher than others, have faced immense difficulties with the existing system. As family preservation work pushes its way to the forefront of Ministry practice, I have great faith that families will have better support. This literature consolidates a small fraction of the academic material that can inform practice, and although there are compelling themes, the barriers of time and resources must be acknowledged.

### **Future areas to research**

- The role of the education system in family preservation
- Measures of successful family preservation, according to service users
- The role of social locations and biases in decision-making
- how respite impacts family preservation

In the coming months, the Ministry of Children and Family Development will be publishing the ‘What We Heard’ report, based on the findings of extensive engagements with services users, and agencies on prevention and family support services. This research will continue to inform the development of the Prevention and Family Support Service Framework and serve as a knowledge product with similar purpose to this report.

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