

KEEWATINOHK IN NI NU WAK DENE AN NI SO WAY WIN (FAMILY LAW)

MINISIWIN MINO AYAWIN MODEL — A FAMILY WELLNESS
APPROACH INCLUDING THE FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE
MODEL



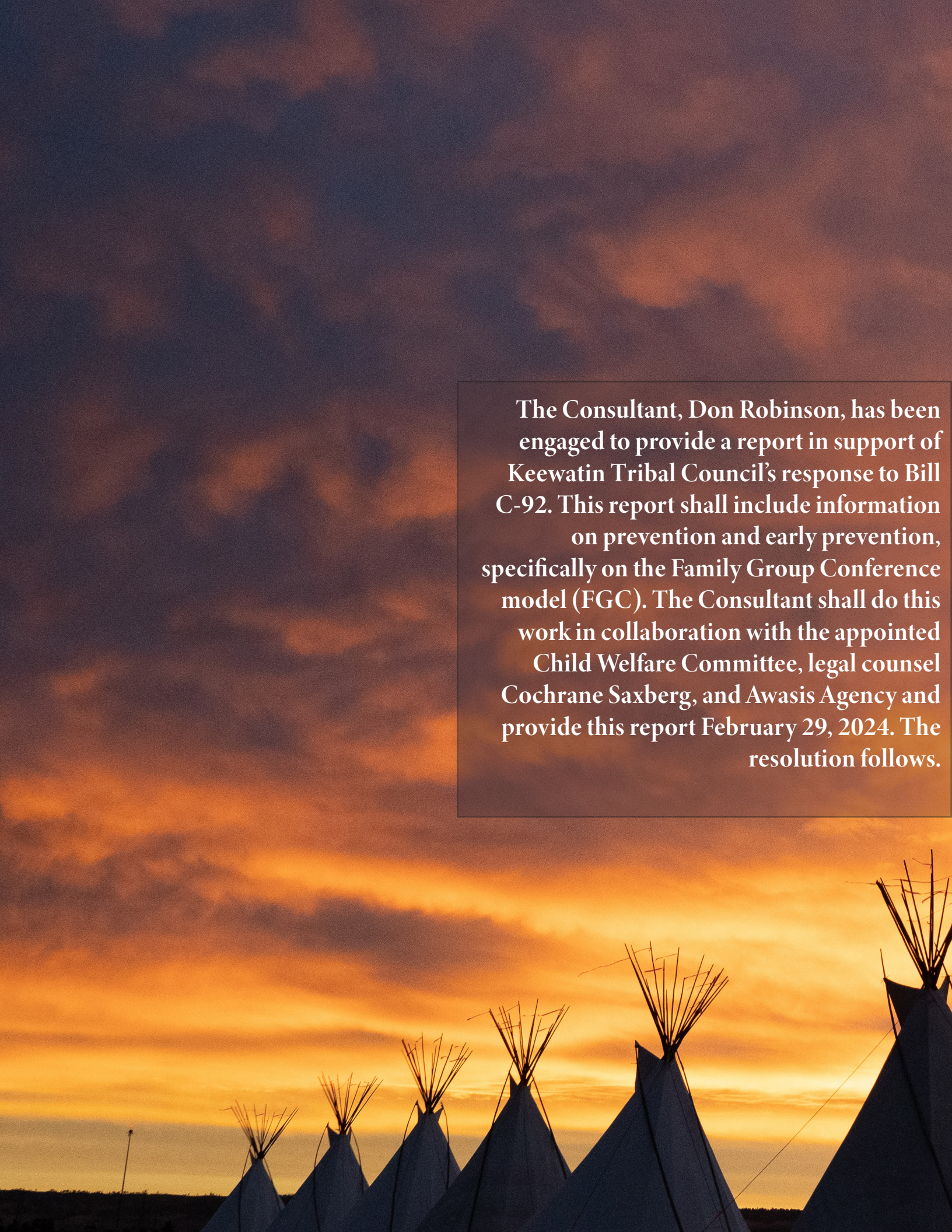
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Innnew Consulting



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The background of the entire page is a photograph of a sunset. The sky is filled with soft, orange and yellow clouds, transitioning to a darker blue at the top. In the foreground, the silhouettes of several tipis are visible, their pointed tops and wooden poles creating a rhythmic pattern against the bright sky. The overall mood is serene and traditional.

The Consultant, Don Robinson, has been engaged to provide a report in support of Keewatin Tribal Council's response to Bill C-92. This report shall include information on prevention and early prevention, specifically on the Family Group Conference model (FGC). The Consultant shall do this work in collaboration with the appointed Child Welfare Committee, legal counsel Cochrane Saxberg, and Awasis Agency and provide this report February 29, 2024. The resolution follows.

Acknowledgements

I have examined works that have already been completed. I am thankful that I don't have to re-invent the wheel so to speak. In stating that, I referenced the impressive work done by Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug — Big Trout Lake — and thank Samuel McKay who shared freely what they learned. I must also mention the Opaskweyak Cree Nation for sharing their model with the committee. I must not forget the attendees of the three KTC conferences held in Winnipeg where participants shared their hopes, visions for reclaiming our inherent rights, and laws. Lastly, I acknowledge my community Bunibonibee First Nation, my parents, and my ancestors who walked before me.

I thank In Ni Nu Wak and Dene fluent language keepers for keeping them alive.

Thanks to Michael MacPherson for the editing and type-setting of this document.

Resolution supporting Keewatin Tribal Council's C-92 Response (April 22, 2021)

Whereas, the Keewatin Tribal Council Chiefs held a virtual meeting to discuss an appropriate response to C-92 on April 21 and 22, 2021.

Whereas, the Keewatin Tribal Council wish to reaffirm Resolution #6, as passed at the Semi-Annual General Assembly held August 11 to 13, 2020.

Therefore be it Resolved, that the Chiefs of Keewatin Tribal Council support our Tribal Council in submitting a proposal to Canada to:

- » Develop a child and family services law;
- » Determine the scope of the child and family services law;
- » Define how services will be delivered and by whom;
- » Authorize an Indigenous governing body to act on behalf of the Keewatin Tribal Council First Nations children, youth, and families;
- » Confirm the mandate of the Indigenous governing body.

Be it further Resolved, that the Keewatin Tribal Council begin the recruitment and selection process to hire staff to implement C-92 within our First Nations utilizing the existing funding commitment from Canada.

Be it further Resolved, that the C-92 Project Staff secure Band Council Resolutions from each First Nation to support the Keewatin Tribal Council C-92 process.

Be it further Resolved, that the Keewatin Tribal Council shall retain Cochrane Saxberg as legal counsel to the project and continue to engage Awasis Agency of Northern Manitoba to draw on their expertise in fulfilling this mandate.

Moved by: Chief Leroy Constant

Seconded by: Chief Morris Beardy

All in favor. Carried.

Further to this resolution, Keewatin Tribal Council (KTC) hereby recognizes Awasis Child and Family Service as its child and family services agency, to assist in the provision of specialized services to its awasisak, oskatisak, and minisowin in the Northern Authority region.

Definition of Terms

The following Inninew (Cree) words are only a few of the terms that need to be considered for inclusion in the family laws. The Dene have their own terms in their language that need to be included in the family laws.

The Inninew and Dene lived by values and beliefs that helped them to survive for millenia.

KIS EN TO WINA — values

TA PE WA TA MO WINA — beliefs

AYAMIIHAAWIN — religion

AYAMIIHAAWAATISOWIN — religious

WAH KO TO WIN — we are related to each other, we are related to the waters, the plants, the animals, the moon, sun, and stars

NI WAH KO MOW ANA — I am related to her/him — human relationships.

IN NI NU — the human being

IN NI NU WAK — all the people in the

Seven Natural Laws

1. **NA HI TAM OWIN** — obedience
2. **TA PA KEN NI TAM OWIN** — faith in Kitchi Manitou
3. **KIS TEN NI TA MO WIN** — respect
4. **KIS WE WA TI SIN** — kindness
5. **SAKIHITOWIN** — love
6. **WI CHI IT OWIN** — Sharing and Caring by helping one another (caring); sharing what you can (resources, time)
7. **TABWE WIN** — honesty

community and the Nation as a whole

NE NO WE IN NU (SINGULAR) (PLURAL WAK) — the one speaks to the four directions (ne-hwo = four is the root word) aspects; mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual.

MI NI SO WIN — family — place of beauty

IN NI SO WIN — wisdom — connected to the word “in ni nu” implies that wisdom is within every human being.

TABWE — say things right — speak to what you know to be true — not absolute truth.

O TO TEM IT OWN — community or social grouping

MINO AYAWIN — state of good health or harmony

MI NO PA NOWIN — in harmony

MIN NO WE CHE WI TO OWIN — walking (living) together in harmony

MIN AH SO WIN — means beautiful or good

MINO PIMA TI SOWIN — Katayak (FLCN 2012) stated that living the good life is connected to the water, animals, and the natural environment.

**SPIRITUAL LAWS OF
OOCHINEWIN AND PAS TA**

MOWIN — Katayak (FLCN 2012) stated that “oochinewin is the belief that a negative action against an animal, a person or the land could negatively impact the fate of a person, family members, or the next generation. Other behaviors that could result in oochinewin include being disrespectful, being mean to orphans, or other forms of discrimination. The idea of pas ta mowin places the responsibility for decision making and learning from the consequences of those decisions with the person.”

I have heard these teachings from many Katayak from the In Ni Nu Wak, Dene, Anishinaabe, Anishinaabe Innuwag.

PIMA TI SO WIN — your life

KA ISI WAHP TAMON — your world or point of view that is developed through your ki pima ti so win

MIH KI WAHP — tipi or lodge that families used for living on the land. The mih ki wahp could be set up quickly during travel, hunting, fishing, and trapping. Today it is used for land based teachings, learning, and temporary shelter.

PIMOOTAY WIN (WANDERING STAGE) — learning about one’s identity and life’s purpose

KA NA WA PA MI SOO PI TA MA — look at yourself first — introspection.

MI NO AW YAW IN — state of well being or good health.

AH CHI MO WIN — story telling — The



Land based Learning, Kawachikimach Cree Nation – Northern Quebec

elders and knowledge keepers often tell stories while engaging community members in land-based activities forms part of the cultural continuity ways that elders passed down history, language, and traditions.

PI MA CHI IS SO WIN — (life style) way of providing for and supporting the family. Traditionally, the In Ni Nu and Dene hunted, fished, and trapped (even before the fur trade).

ASOTAMATOWINA — rights of every awasis, osktasis, and adult member of the Nation.

WI CHI IT OWIN KA PE MA CHI PUN IHK — helping in times of crisis.

WI CHI IT OWIN — helping one another whenever a need is identified.

PA HI MI SO WIN — to take care of one self (physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually).

MEE NI IK OZ OWIN — Inherent self-government of the First Nation based upon

their connections to the land, the waters, and the natural resources of their territory. This self-government has been practiced for millennia with the faith given us by Kitchi Manitou.

AN NI MI SOWIN ANI SO WAY WIN — Family Law

TI PE NI MI SO WIN — this speaks to individual self-determination, also the self-determination of the member First Nation. At the individual level, this speaks to the freedom of choice that a human being makes. She or he doesn't always make positive choices and makes mistakes. But more important, the human being can decide how she or he wants to live. In Bunibonibee, my old female grandmother (90 years old+) didn't want to be placed in the senior's care home, she decided that she wanted to remain in her home. My sister and my nieces supported her to remain at home until her death in 2016. The leadership was aware of her decision and supported the family in whatever way (in home support, finances).

MA MIN OH TIN TAH MOWIN — to think mindfully or deeply.

MA MAWI APINANO WIN — the family sat in circle with Okatayatisak and leadership to discuss matters and come up with solutions.

OSKABAWAYAWISAK — (this term needs clarification by language speakers) the natural helpers in the community. The non-Indigenous society call them "volunteers" which is a totally different concept for Indigenous people. The Oskabawayawisak or natural helpers step in when there is a need (a crisis situation or for community events). Following the Seven Natural Laws, the young Oskatisak — young females and males are usually the ones who fulfill this role.

Parenting concepts in the language

AWASIS — a child, awasisak — legal definition is children under the age of 18 however In Ni Nu Wak and Dene have traditional definitions including youth who are oskatisak (young men and women).

OSKATISAK — youth members (male and female) — Keewatinok In Ni Nu Dene Ani Soway Wina (Northern Cree Dene Laws) will need to make determination of the age for extension of care (18–24 years of age?)

OPIHKOWAWASOWIN — raising a child or children

OPIHKEWOWIN — the parenting of children

MAMAWI OPIHKOWAWASOWIN — everyone in the community was responsible to care for children — today this is still a value and practice

NOHKOMIS — grandmother

NINOMOSOOM — grandfather

NO SI SIM — grandchild, no si Simak — plural grandchildren

KISENOWAK — the male elders

NOTISKOWAK — female elders

KATAYAK OR OKATAYATISK (SWAMPY CREE) — the Elders of the community

In Ni Nu Wak and Dene concepts on disharmony in the family and the community

MI STA HI KE WON AN OCTH KA WA NA HI KWO YAHK — there are many distractions today in the modern world distracting us — television, internet, social media.

MI NO STAH TAN — let us set things right

KA TI PE NI MI MI KOHT — addictions to

drugs, gambling, or any other compulsive habit that causes disharmony to self, family, or the member First Nation. This means that he or she is not in control — is owned by the behavior.

MI NI HKEWIIH KA TI PE NI MI KOHT — alcoholism

KA WON NI TO CHI KEHT — one who commits offences in the community.

MI NI SI SO WIN MAA NE NI MI TA MO WIN — or “family or domestic violence” is violence or abuse by one person against another member of their family, a person with whom they have in intimate relationship, or awasisak or oskatisak.

Preamble

The Mi Ni So Win Mi No Ayawin model is proposed within this document as a family wellness model for the KTC Indigenous Governing Body. This model is based on In Ni Nu Dene An Ni Mi Sowin Ani So Way Win — Family Law. Guiding principles of the Mi Ni So Win Mi No Ay Win program including the family group conference (FGC) is to acknowledge and respect the Chiefs and Councils of the Keewatin Tribal (KTC) member communities. FGC also respects the rights of awasisak, oskatisak, and affirms the roles of Mi Ni So Win, the parents and extended family members, respecting their rights as the decision makers. Finally, the Role of the Katayatisak (Elders) is acknowledged as they are responsible for cultural continuity and the passing on of knowledge to the generations.

Role of the Chief and Council — Elected Leadership

Okimaw and Onishinwi iniwak — chief and council — This section needs to be developed because it is an important section of the Keewatin In Ni Nu Dene Ani Saway Wina Laws. Chief and Council are the ultimate authority with respect to all matters related to awasisak, oskatisak, and minisiwin. This authority extends to:

- » All awasisak, oskatisak and minisowin who are residents and who reside in the KTC member communities.
- » Any awasis or oskatisak who is a member of a KTC community or who is entitled to be a member regardless of residence.
- » Any awasis or oskatis who is not a member of a KTC community but who has one oniikihiikomaa who is a member of a KTC community.
- » Any awasis or oskatis who is descended from a member and who identifies as being part of a member KTC community through minisiwin relationships.

To accomplish this, Chief and Council shall:

- » maintain the vision and mission of a happy, healthy community, including education, child welfare, health care, housing, social and cultural development, land and resource use, economic development, justice and law enforcement, and intergovernmental relations;
- » provide good programs for prevention and minisiwin support;
- » establish working relationships with all social services agencies located in the community;

- » hold workers accountable for their work;
- » provide programs for the teaching and retention of language and promote its use in the community;
- » treat all community members with respect;
- » appoint the Keewatinohk In Ni Nu Dene Mi Ni So Win An Ni Mi Sowin Ani So Way Win — Family Law Governance Structure and ensure it is running effectively;
- » identify and appoint No Komi Asak, Ni Misoomak and Katayatisak (grandmothers, grandfathers, and Elders) to assist minisiwin and resolve disputes.

The Chief and Council has developed Mee ni ik oz owin (self-government) mechanisms that may vary among the KTC member communities. These mechanisms include councillors with portfolios and working relationships with community leaders.

The Keewatinohk In Ni Nu Wak Dene An Ni So Way Win (Family Law) governing body mandate is to:

- » Develop the overall mission and vision of member In No Nu Wak Dene communities.
- » Develop a territorial governance body composed of Chiefs, KTC leadership, Awasis Agency, Elders, and Youth Leaders
- » Develop a local governance body in each community composed of councillors with portfolios related to family health and well being. This local governance body should have an office with administrative support, filing systems, and data management connected with the territorial body.
- » Develop a system of having all social

service providers involved in the community. The objectives of this system is to develop cooperative and collaborative working relationship on behalf of all members of the community. This system will prevent a siloed approach and promote more holistic integrated services. The local governance body shall provide an opportunity for a solid partnership with the Chief and Council.

Recognizing and respecting the role of parents

Every parent and every person raising a child has a sacred duty to care for the awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak).

Every parent and every person raising a child must hold themselves accountable for raising the awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak) properly.

Every parent and every person raising a child will:

- » Show love and respect for their awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak);
- » Provide the awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak) with a healthy and safe environment, free of physical, sexual, emotional, and verbal abuse, and physical danger, and the effects of alcohol & drug abuse, gambling, and other addictions;
- » Provide the awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak) with:
 - nutritious food, home-cooked meals
 - clean water to drink
 - a clean, warm, and safe home, including fire safety
 - a proper night's sleep in a warm bed with sheets and blankets
 - medical care, including emotional, mental health care and counselling

- appropriate clothing and footwear
 - regular bathing to ensure good hygiene
- » Provide for their awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak), if financially able to do so, or provide in kind services (e.g. wood, traditional food, groceries, clothing).
- » Teach the awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak) their culture, customs, language, provide spiritual guidance at home starting when the child is born.
- » Ensure that the awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak) are taught:
- Honesty
 - Respect
 - Responsibility
 - Kindness
 - Sharing and caring
 - Obedience
 - Responsibility (helping others)
 - Faith and Humility
 - Their kinship relationships
 - Their community history
- » Be available/accessible to the awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak).
- » Spend quality time with the awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak).
- » Communicate with and listen to the awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak).
- » Be at home to care for, and to provide guidance unless there is a valid reason to be absent (employment, medical, educational, etc.) and arrange for appropriate child minding when absent.
- » Be aware of the awasis(ak) and

oskatis(ak) activities and monitor their use of TV, video games, the internet and other technology.

» Encourage the awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak) self—esteem:

- Accept their awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak) uniqueness;
 - Encourage their awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak) participation at home, at school, and in the community;
 - Not belittle or threaten the awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak);
 - Ensure the awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak) mental health by promoting their psychological, emotional and spiritual wellbeing;
 - Find a way to provide each awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak) with space and privacy even in a small or overcrowded home;
 - Be involved in the awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak) education;
 - Communicate with teachers;
 - Assist with homework;
 - Talk to awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak) about school;
 - Recognize achievements;
 - Visit the school and attend school event;
- » Ensure that the awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak) with special needs can reach their full potential by providing the necessary services to the awasis(ak) or oskatis(ak);
- » Not exploit the awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak) by involving them in illegal or immoral activity.

Discipline of awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak)

The values, principles, customs, and language of the In Ni Nu and Dene do not support parents or any person raising a child pushing, grabbing, hitting, swearing at, threatening or yelling at awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak). These behaviours are harmful to awasis(ak) and oskatis(ak).

Physical discipline may be used only if it meets the following conditions:

- » only if it is done by parents or the person raising a child;
- » not to be done in anger;
- » the parent or person raising the child provides an explanation to the awasis(ak) or oskatis(ak) of the reason for the discipline;
- » the parent or person raising the child reaffirms their love for the awasis(ak) or oskatis(ak) after administering the discipline;
- » not against children under two, as they are unable to benefit from it;
- » not against oskatisak, even though they can understand it, they are at a vulnerable age and other methods should be used;
- » if it is not degrading or humiliating;
- » if it does not involve the use of objects or blows to the head;
- » if it is for the purpose of correction;
- » if it is reasonable in the circumstances and not excessive;
- » if it is not routine.

Role of the extended family

The extended family (maternal and paternal; grandparents, uncles, aunties, and other

individuals related by custom adoption or community custom) play an important role to support parents or those raising a child.

The extended family may provide in-home supports, lifeskills teachings, respite child care, or extended child care when the parents or those raising the child(ren) are unable. The extended family is essential to creating mi ni sowin mi no ayawin (family plans) in the FGC model. The role of the family will be expanded upon in the description of the FGC process.

Role of Katayak

The In Ni Nu waka and Dene elders (community leadership) have always been part of all matters relating to awasisak, oskatisak, mi ni sowin, and the community. They are often consulted by the elected leadership and are included in issues that affect the health and wellbeing of the community. The FGC model acknowledges the importance of the Elders and that they are essential to cultural continuity and the passing of knowledge to the younger generations. Conference participants (June 2022) in their vision of a healthy community stated that we need to know our history, culture, language, and traditions.

The family group conference model is an opportunity to decolonize our worldviews of the In Ni Nu (individual), minisiwin, our community, and our Nations. Colonization has impacted all our In Ni Nu Wak and Dene Nations in many profound ways so decolonization has to take place at four levels; the individual, the family, the community, and the Nation. The following cultural continuity model is presented:

NATION — Nation includes In Ni Nu Wak, Dene, and mixed ancestry relatives

COMMUNITY — Communities of the KTC region

FAMILY — Minisiwin (families)

INDIVIDUALS — In Ni Nu and Dene males and females

Decolonization of mind and of actions is important in the healing process. Waziyatawin and Yellowbird, M., (2012) describe decolonization as both an event and a process.

As an event, decolonization concerns reaching a level of critical consciousness, an active understanding of that you are (or have been) colonized and are thus responding to life circumstances in ways that are limited, destructive, and externally controlled. As a process, decolonizing means engaging in the activities of creating, restoring, and rebirthing... it means restoring cultural practices, thinking, beliefs, and values that were taken away or abandoned but are still relevant and necessary for survival (pg. 3)

Katayak (Fox Lake Cree Nation Environmental Report, 2012) spoke about the impact of colonization on identity of oskatisak. They noticed that oskatisak are disconnected from the larger In Ni Nu Wak (Nation). These young ones only think of their connection to their local community. Katayak expressed their concern in relation to identity. I agree with their observations because oskatisak don't become conscious of their Nation's

history and place in the modern world. I have heard the Dene speak about the same disconnection. The June 2022 participants spoke about the importance of learning from the past and from the Elders.

Innnew Seven Natural Laws

I have learned about the seven natural laws of Obedience, Faith, Respect, Kindness, Love, Sharing and Caring, and Honesty. I knew the old man, late Wellington Spence and his wife Madeline who are from Nisichawayasihk —

Nelson House First Nation. He learned these natural laws from his katayak (Elders) and practiced them to recover from Mi ni hkewih ka ti pe ni mi koht (alcoholism). I didn't have the opportunity to participate in ceremonies with him but did learn his teachings from his Oskabawayawisak (helpers). He is also featured in a video developed by the University College of the North.¹ I will also add the teachings learned during my childhood that relate to these natural laws.

NA HI TAM OWIN — Obedience is the first natural law that ensured our survival as we were growing up. Children needed to heed their family and community members because of dangers in the environment (wild animals, weather conditions, waterways during the seasons).

These natural laws also applied to the environment because nature can be a severe teacher if you violate these laws.

My late father taught me about the wolverine saying that we rarely see this animal. He was teaching hunting skills and said that this animal is to be feared and to never ever shoot it. I was about 12 years old, hunting with my 22 rifle when a wolverine stepped onto the path about 25 feet in from me. The wolverine was startled and rose on its hind quarters ready to attack. I remembered my father's words, slowly lowering my rifle, and backing away. Thankfully the wolverine lowered to the ground and continued on his or her way. My father taught me to greatly respect this animal, a teaching which no doubt saved my life. My father also taught me to respect the power and limitations of the rifle. The 22 rifle can only irritate big game like wolverines, wolves, bears and such so should only be used for small game.

¹ Interview with Elder Wellington Spence, May 10, 2003. <https://guides.ucn.ca>

TA PA KE NI TAM OWIN — Faith is the second natural law honouring our connections to animals, the medicines, the universe. He was referring to belief in a higher power Innineew call Kichi Manitou. This belief is centered on our connection to the land, the waters, animals, and plant life.

KIS TEN NI TA MO WIN OR MANA CHI OWIN — Respect is the third natural law that I learned and observed in my childhood. Mana chi ihk Oskatisak means respect your elders. As children, we were taught to sit still and listen when the elders spoke at community gatherings. Elders would begin the gatherings and feasts with lengthy orations and story telling speaking in the language about our values, history, and traditions. We also learned to obey and respect our elders in the community. The old women and men would reprimand us young ones if we were misbehaving or getting in danger (playing too close to the lake). When reprimanded, I would pay attention and respect the reprimands given.

KIS WE WA TI SIN — Kindness is another law along with sharing and caring. As I was growing up in Bunibonibee, the people always provided for those who couldn't hunt, fish, or trap. These were the disabled, the widows, and the old people. They were provided the first portions of fish and moose when it became available. I also remember these values being practiced in Thicket Portage, the Metis community where I grew up for a decade.

SA KI IT OWIN — Love is another Wellington speaks about and how important it was to keeping children at the centre of the family. He went to residential school and experienced the harshness of that environment where his culture/language was not respected. He

lived on the land away from the community teaching the young ones these laws and ceremonies.

WI CHI IT OWIN — Sharing and Caring was expressed through helping one another during good times or whenever someone was needing assistance and support. Indigenous people have responded in times of crisis (health, death, natural disasters, and tragedies) to help the family in need. Often extended family and other community members would assume care of children orphaned by sudden death and other tragedies). I recall being in care of another family for an extended period when my mother was seriously ill and my father went to the hospital with her. The customary care tradition of waking relatives happened upon a death in the family to support family members during their period of mourning. These customary care practices exist for generations and are still maintained in some communities.

DA BWE WIN — Honesty is the final law he refers to and is related to communication. Honesty is important for conflict resolution and healthy adult relationships. Family and community members need to speak their truth when living their lives. The family and community experienced trials and tribulations that needed to be faced and addressed.

In ni nu Wak Seven Stages of Life

Happy life — good life

The human being begins to develop in the womb during nine months before birth. The good and happy life begins because the parents and extended family await this

beautiful child. When the child is born, the parents, grandparents, maternal and paternal relatives welcome the baby into the world. Everyone is happy to receive the long-awaited baby into the world.

There is a teaching for the belly button that I observed in my childhood when I accompanied my father to the forest to hang up the belly button when it falls away. My father usually tied the cloth covered belly-button high on a tree. The happy life continues until the baby grows and begins to walk. He or she is learning a language which started in the womb. Parents and grandparents often talk and sing to the baby while cradling them. In my childhood, I remember my father making a swing for the baby in a corner. The baby would be placed in the swing and rocked gently to sleep. Other people use a tikinagon in which the child is placed as the parent went about their daily activities. The child begins to see, listen, use their senses, and learn from continued stimulation.

The Fast Life

This child then begins the fast life, full of energy and curiosity about the world. He or she wants to explore every object and doesn't know about dangerous items or activities. The parents and care providers have to really pay attention to this child and put into place boundaries for safety's sake. The child minders ensure sharp objects, boiling pots, and cooking pans are safe from exploring hands. The fast life is intense for those who are caring for the child and demands much energy and working together.

Os Ka Ti Sak — young women and young men

The child begins to experience the change of life stage called puberty. This biological process begins for both male and female children usually starting about the ages of 9 years to 15 years of age. The growing child experiences physical pain because their bones are growing fast as well as going through physical changes. The child's voice begins to change, body hair is growing, and is experiencing sexual feelings more intensely. The girls also experience bodily changes as she begins to develop breasts, and is getting ready for her first menstrual cycle. It is important to mention that some children have sexual wonderings and may be attracted to the same sex. I have to honour these children, to support, and encourage their sexual development in this regard. I met a young one in therapy who was going through puberty with these questions that he was afraid to ask. A psychologist was trying to force the question with him but he wasn't ready and dropped out of their sessions. I honoured his questions in sessions supporting this important stage of his life. Parents and care providers must be aware of these important issues that children in care could bring with them and honour the young men and women.

The child in traditional times would have other ceremonies called rites of passage to help them with the changes. Grandparents, uncles, aunties, Elders, and knowledge keepers would support the child transitioning to young adulthood. I have heard that young women go through a berry fast and young boys would go for their first fast. I know of families who continue this ceremony for their young ones. I witnessed a oskatis (12 year old boy) in a northern



Young boy's first kill, Kawachikimach Cree Nation – Northern Quebec

Quebec Cree community make his first kill of a porcupine. The community honoured him as this animal is a delicacy among their Nation as he was helped by his knowledge keepers to harvest the animal and begin cooking it. I was witness to a proud Oskatis, proud family, and community. I remember the experience of bringing home my harvest of rabbits, partridges from my nikawi (my mom). I know some communities do this in their land based activities.

The Pi Moo Tay In Ni Nu (the human being is in the wandering stage)

In traditional times, the young men and women would be learning from other adults besides the parents; grandparents, uncles, aunts, other extended family members.

The young adult continues in the wandering life searching for answers to questions of identity. In traditional times, the young adult's gifts were identified by spiritual leaders who recognized his or her abilities and was encouraged and mentored by the appropriate people. Therefore, the wondering life wasn't

so prolonged as it is today with all the modern complexities and the many distractions today (mi sta hi ke won an octh ka wa na hi kwo yahk).

Family life — choosing a life mate and starting a family

This stage leads to the mi ni sowin (family) life; choosing a mate, starting a family, and the beginning of the doing stage; much harder work. The man and woman in traditional times had a large extended family and community to support their

choices. I often observed my father

sitting with his tea looking out the window. I used to wonder what is he thinking about? Once I had children, I knew that there are responsibilities you carry alone and you share with your mate, but you keep such weight from your children.

Noh ko mis — Ni mi shoom — grandmother and grandfather stage

This stage of life is marked by the physical changes — for the women, the menstrual cycle ends, for the men, they also experience physical changes. These ones support their children through teaching their grandchildren. The attachment and bonding developed during this stage is strong for children, parents, and the grandparents.

Kay Tayak — Elder stage

Elder stage is a time when the old ones begin to share their knowledge and wisdom with others in the community. The old ones begin to lose physical abilities but gain in spiritual wisdom. It is a time of pondering the final

journey of the circle of life. Katayak often serve as teachers and community leaders helping others as best they can.

Minisiwin Mino Ayawin (family wellness) across the family life stages

Home visiting is an essential prevention service — elders can be part of this support team in supporting mothers to be in prevention — first time mothers can benefit from preparation of the mind (parenting teachings). Experienced mothers, aunts, and grandmothers can provide these supports when children are born (what type of parents need — respite, teachings on breast feeding, caring and attending to baby, teething, colic, and attending to the mothers involving fathers in parenting). First Nations of Northern Manitoba Child and Family Services Authority report on customary care quotes:

I was raised in a positive way and every relative at that time could take the role of parenting me. Extended family were always willing to take care of the children if the parents needed to attend to other matters away from the settlement.

- Charles Michell, Barren Land First Nation

FAST LIFE — parenting children who are moving fast, learning, and are energetic. Parents need to learn how to parent these children and learn appropriate positive discipline strategies. Parents need to teach children values and behaviours that will help them in life.

OSKATISAK — young men and women are growing fast in this stage as they learn about life, sexuality, peer relationships, and identity expanding beyond the family. Extended

family, elders, teachers, and community members can help with land based activities.

Background to the Family Group Conference Model

The family group conference model became widely known through its origin with the Māori Nation in New Zealand. The Māori people were alarmed at the high numbers of their children and families involved in the care of the mainstream child welfare and justice institutions. They successfully lobbied for recognition of their inherent rights to their own traditions laws. The Māori were able to have legislation passed with the Oranga Tamacki (1989) Child, Youth, and Families Wellbeing Act. This legislation enacted Māori traditional decision-making processes within child welfare and youth justice. This model came to be known as the family group conference (FGC) and is also widely known as family group decision making.

Currently the FGC model is being utilized in over 32 countries, including Australia, England, Holland, New Zealand, Sweden, United States of America, and Canada. In Canada, the model was utilized in Newfoundland, Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, New Brunswick, and Manitoba. I know it still is being used in Ontario, New Brunswick, and Manitoba. The Mi'gmaq Child and Family Services is using the model with the six communities in their territory. In Manitoba, Mamawi Wi Chi Itata Centre began working with FGC in 1998 and continues to the present. The organization partnered with the New Zealand Māori on the program to ensure program fidelity. I was the original FGC coordinator hired in 1998 and have remained involved as a trainer/consultant.

Background to traditional kinship systems and customary adoption

First Nations have always had traditional kinship systems in place to provide care for children, families and elders in their communities (Robinson, 2012). Kayas (long ago) In Ni Nu Wak and Dene families responded to health crises, death and dying, and the problems of aging with immediate care and concern for the children, youth, parents and elders. Our families and communities through the practice of kinship care had a natural child welfare system, health care, care for the elderly and social assistance for families in crisis (the whole life cycle). Families responded by gathering together in a meeting (Ma Mawi Apinano Win), often consulting with elders and the leadership of the community about the challenges facing them. Families would then decide how to meet the needs of their relatives and implement their plans. I remember (Ni ki si sin) two stories about these traditional kinship systems.

I remember when one of my relatives passed away during the winter when I was young. I think I was 6 years old because I was going to school. This old couple lived nearby our home. Both were in their sixties or seventies. He was a hard-working man who still hunted, fished, trapped, supporting his wife in their one log cabin. My mother told me he had a massive heart attack and passed away. The extended family (her children I'm thinking) wanted her to come and live with them. She refused to leave the home where she and the old man had lived. The extended family disagreed with her decision and had a meeting including okayatisak including the leadership. The family decision was to

respect her will to remain in her home (Ah ki ti pe Nu mi si oot).

I remember my late mother and I would attend to her needs once every few days. I remember my late father chopping wood and hauling water. I accompanied my mother before school to make her morning fire, breakfast, and help her plan her meals for the day. I remember attending her needs again after school to make sure she had supper, had her tea, was warm and cozy for the night. My mother told me that another family of our relatives would be responsible to attend to her. I don't remember all the details but I know this was a customary care tradition to make family decisions. I realized later that this was family group conferencing (Robinson, D., 2012).

I remember when my family was leaving Bunibonibee (1957) and moving to Thicket Portage. My late father like many young men was being hired to develop the township that would become Thompson, Manitoba. A mining company discovered nickel in the area and needed workers. At that time, my maternal grandmother was losing her vision due to cataracts. I understand that my maternal grandparents and parents discussed leaving my 6 year old sister behind. I know that my grandparents were devastated by our whole family leaving and the old ones wanted the youngest child. My late grandmother was definitely not an invalid due to her loss of vision but was mourning our departure and wanted her granddaughter to remain. My parents left her in our grandparents' customary care with the blessing of the okayatisak and leadership. I do not remember feeling grief because I adored my grandparents and knew she would be loved unconditionally. I suppose my parents grieved but respected my grandparents

wishes.

As the Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry (1999) had determined, powerful mainstream institutions colonized these traditional kinship systems with the implementation of the Indian Act, residential schools, and the child welfare response of the 60's Scoop. The First Nations child welfare authorities in Manitoba have been striving to reform the system to create a differential response model that will better serve children and families.

Bill C-92 offers an opportunity to include In Ni Nu wak and Dene Ani so way wina (family laws) as the model. The family group conference model, implemented in New Zealand where it has become an integral component of their entire child welfare system, offers a different way of working with families and their communities. This model known as family group decision making internationally, resonates with the values and practices of the traditional kinship systems. This model, if properly implemented in Manitoba, could play a role in healing and decolonization, as it restores power to the most important institution in the Aboriginal community, the family.

Minisowin Mino Ayawin Model — family wellness model

It is recommended that the Keewatinohk In Ni Nu Dene Mi Ni So Win Anisaway win (Family Law) Governance Structure established consider the following ideas for capacity building in communities. I stress the importance of developing capacity otherwise it will be ma ma cees. The katayak talked about doing things with great effort and not in a sloppy half-hearted way (ma ma cees).

Capacity building needed for the effective implementation of FGC includes:

1. Family Space (separate from Awasis Agency offices) is crucial for gatherings. In my experience as FGC Coordinator in the city, family space is often available through community partnerships. FGC gatherings were not held in CFS offices and were often held in city owned community centres, organizations, and churches. It isn't recommended that families use their own homes because they often need space for their children's childcare. Plus families will feel obligated to be the host to everyone. In the First Nation communities, there is the reality of limited space for family gatherings and healing activities. Families during FGC need kitchen space, childcare space on site (infants need to be fed), and separate rooms for workers or family members to de-escalate when tensions arise.

2. The building for the Family Space can be utilized for family get-togethers, socializing, supporting each other, cultural activities and teachings, and involvement with the Elders. This space can also be used by the community for other groups (women, men, youth, and Elders).

3. Supportive services available for family planning. In the urban setting, FGC has access to many counseling, respite, in home supports, therapy, group healing options for addictions, abuse, violence prevention, and grief and loss circles. These types of social supports are not available to the same extent rurally so effective collaboration of available services is vital to FGC families.

4. The FGC team members hired may not be from the community and be part of a mobile team, thus these individuals will be needing accommodations. Families

impacted by intergenerational trauma, residential schools, 60's Scoop experiences, and a distrust of child welfare may not be amenable to FGC workers from outside the community.

5. Need for land based cultural space for families. This addresses the need to learn from the Elders and knowledge keepers for cultural continuity activities as well as for recreational family time. In Bunibonibee, Jackson Bay is such a space with another site near the high school. Tommy Weenusk has been working on the building that is being designed for youth, women, men, and Elders. Other KTC communities will have natural spaces for these important activities.

6. There is a great need for a Minisowin Healing Lodge in the KTC territory. This lodge could be used for live-in space for families to heal together in 3-5 day retreats. Topics could include grieving and loss, healing from addictions, healing from domestic/family violence, and intergenerational trauma. The lodge could be available for all member communities.

7. Kookum homes — Each community should have kookum homes available for short term safe places for awasisak and oskatisak. These homes can be developed in consultation with the community, Elders, and leadership. The concept has been implemented with Blue Thunderbird Family Care, Inc. in Winnipeg. This innovative program was developed with the idea that parents need respite at times and family support. Blue Thunderbird Family Care provides short term care for children up to age 18. Jose Hill, the founder, explained that in the past children could always go to granny's home when the parents were struggling or drinking. The parents weren't

bad people but did make bad decisions that didn't necessitate child welfare intervention. She experienced granny's home in her childhood and established these homes. These homes are unlicensed and work in collaboration with Emergency Placement Resources of All Nations Child and Family Resource Network. The homes are staffed with kookums, aunties, and uncles. Emergency Placement Resources provides the liability insurance for the homes which are unlicensed.

8. The FGC program should be well funded — The FGC model being offered to First Nations people living in the north in isolated communities have fewer opportunities than others in society. Substantive equality is a principle that acknowledges this reality so FGC must be well funded in order to be effective. Even before Bill C-92, child welfare funding has been historically underfunded. The Indigenous Governing Body in acknowledging this reality has the opportunity to address the inequalities that families face. It is recommended that FGC be funded to \$5,000 per family for creating wellness plans.

9. The model should be based on a harm reduction approach. When our people use and misuse alcohol and drugs, they need to learn how to lessen harms from their behaviours. We use kisewatisin (kindness), wichitowin (helping them), kistenitamowin (respect), and to have faith (tapokenihtamowin) that they can heal.

10. Trauma informed approach. Many of our community members are impacted by alcohol and drug misuse/abuse that leads to family breakdown, violence, legal involvement, and child welfare involvement. Awasisak and oskatisak witness intimate

partner violence which had traumatic impacts. These behaviours are symptoms of historical trauma: Indian residential schools, 60's Scoop, and forced relocations (Bussidor and Reinhart, 1997, Beardy and Coutte, 2007). Our community members requested community support and interventions that support healing to address the underlying roots of the trauma (June 2022 Conference).

11. FGC is an approach that involves home visiting. The office visit paradigm is a western model quite foreign to our people. Based on my experience, people feel more comfortable in their home and are more open to sharing information. I have met other family members who would not attend an office visit. I recall a specific situation where other workers had worked with this one family and never met the grandmother who often sat in another room the entire time. Being a proactive approach, FGC required I ask for extended family members and met this grandmother. Once family members realize they are included and respected for their knowledge, they often agree to the FGC meeting at an agreed-upon location in the community. Trust building is a key element in the FGC preparation stage.

12. Awasis Agency (1997) has developed best practices that can be included in the Minisiwin Mino Ayawin model. I will mention several best practices: organizational structure with job descriptions and personnel policies, a training and learning institute, a local decentralized presence, a leadership training approach, a learning conference model, child development educational videos and materials, new-born baby packages, caring for children with special needs programs, and various programs aimed at oskatisak, the family justice model Mee Noo Stah Tan Min Ni Si Win learnings.

These are only a few best practices with more to be added. Awasis Agency incorporated in 1983 has over forty years of experience that can part of Minsiwin Mino Aya Win family wellness.

The Awasis Agency is a training and learning organization that can provide an intensive orientation for the entire team involved in FGC and for the communities. This training is vital for the successful implementation of the model.

Family Group Conference Training

It is important to know the principles of the family group conference process and understand the model. The recommended training includes:

- » Learning about the historical origins of family group conferencing (FGC).
- » Learning about FGC as currently practiced in Canada and the world.
- » Exploring Indigenous concepts of kinship, custom adoption, caring traditions of the family group.
- » Develop a working knowledge of the FGC model, including understanding the skills in preparing for and participation, and the process that follows.
- » Explore the role of the FGC coordinator and team.
- » Explore the role of Awasis Agency in the FGC process.
- » Explore the role of community (organizations, service providers, leadership) in supporting family decision making.
- » Explore the roles and responsibilities of family.

» Equip participants with the practical skills and knowledge to utilize the FGC model in their work with children, young people, and their families.

» Learn about the skills involved in supporting children's participation.

» Recognize the complexities of family led decision making and learn skills in managing conflicts in families.

FGC team and staffing complement

The person in this position should be of In Ni Nu Wak or Dene descent or have connections to a member or members of the KTC territory. She or he should ideally be fluent in either language, and respectful of the culture and history of the Nations. It is important that the person hired be kind-hearted, compassionate and trauma-informed. The person should be flexible to travel to the communities and know about the FGC model. He or she should be willing to work with awasisak, oskatisak, nimisowin, and katayak.

The FGC staffing complement should include a coordinator with 12 family mentors, administrative support in every community, and a person to do logistics coordination. The logistics coordinator organizes the intakes/referrals, community team visits, and handles the financial details needed for the FGC work. The Coordinator works with the elected and community leadership contacts, local Awasis Agency workers, and community service providers.

The team members will be assigned in pairs with two communities with visits scheduled to begin working relationships with families in preparation for the FGCs. These home

visits can potentially include katayak from the community.

FGC timeline

A REFERRAL IS RECEIVED — outreach and contact with referring agent and clarification of roles of CFS and FGC.

WITHIN THE WEEK OF RECEIVING REFERRAL — contact is made with the parent(s) explaining the FGC model and expectations. The team members begin developing the list of extended family members.

WEEKS 2-5 — the team members visit each person listed enrolling them in FGC. This includes providing information on the nature of CFS involvement and obtaining their ideas for a wellness plan. In this time period, a date for the FGC is set.

WEEK 5 — the FGC is held, a wellness plan developed. The plan becomes the agreement between Awasis Agency and the family group. The FGC continues to provide ongoing support to the family.

3 MONTHS POST FGC — the family group holds a review meeting to discuss progress and/or challenges. The wellness plan may be reviewed and revised at this meeting or sooner if needed.

The family is supported for up to one year after the FGC or as determined by the family group

Closing can include a feast and celebration depending on the family's wishes.

The FGC process begins with a referral from a child welfare agency, or a community organization, or a parent who has heard about this service which facilitates a connection with FGC.

The FGC program is a prevention service that

connects them with the community, keeps children with their families, and promotes kinship care.

The Mandate of Awasis Agency

Awasis Agency of Northern Manitoba is the mandated agency responsible to provide child welfare services to member First Nations in the KTC region. Awasis Agency provides services to the KTC member in their communities and off reserve. The agency following criteria determines to protection concerns based on these criteria:

» **HIGH RISK** — A child is likely to be seriously harmed or injured, subjected to immediate and ongoing neglect, abuse, or be permanently disabled or die if left in his or her present circumstances without protective intervention.

» **MEDIUM RISK** — A child is likely to suffer some degree of harm if he or she remains in the home without an effective protective intervention plan. Intervention is warranted. However, there is no evidence that the child is at risk of imminent serious injury or death.

» **LOW RISK** — The home is safe for children. However, there are concerns about the potential for a child to be at risk if services are not provided to prevent the need for protective intervention.

It is understood that the child welfare mandate is to provide protection services for children in high-risk situations that require immediate intervention. The agency provides intervention services to address the levels of need. Awasis Agency immediately responds to high risk situations where children are in danger. The interventions may include

placement in care, with relatives, foster homes in the community, In Ni Nu homes outside the community, group homes, and finally stranger placements (non-Indigenous foster homes).

Awasis Agency provides intervention services where there are medium risk situations and has some flexibility in decision-making on how to help the family.

Awasis doesn't need to open a file in situations assessed as low risk. In working with low- to medium-risk situations. However, under Bill C-92, Awasis Agency does need to re-examine its mandate with respect to prevention services for families identified as low risk. Bill C-92 identifies a shift of child and family services programming to focus on prevention and early intervention. Awasis Agency can adopt the FGC as part of their prevention services to families and communities as per Bill C-92 and the proposed In Ni Nu Wak Dene Anisinowin Family Law.

The Act sets out National Standards as follows:

» Prioritizing prevention and early intervention over apprehension whenever possible;

» Maintaining and promoting Indigenous children's relationships with family, community, and territory;

» Valuing and promoting culture, including community, language, and territory;

» Reunifying Indigenous children, families, and communities whenever possible;

» Substantive equality.

Role of Minisiwin (the parents and extended family)

Mi Ni Ni So Win determine who their family members are but essentially means the people who are related to the Awasisak and Oskatisak and can be any of the following:

- a) Nuclear family — mother, father and children
- b) Single parent family — single parent with children
- c) Grandparent (maternal and paternal) — grandparents who are looking after their grandchildren
- d) Extended family — close relatives that take over to look after children or youth
- e) Blended family — family where one or both partners have children from another relationship
- f) Church family — members of the same church
- g) Community family — everyone is related in the In Ni Nu and Dene community.
- h) Inter-Nation families — family who belong to more than one First Nation and of mixed ancestry.² This is true of our communities where families may be related to members of other communities or Nations (In Ni Nu Wak Dene, Metis,³ Anishinaabe, Anishinaabe-in Ni Nu Wak (Oji-Cree)

² Gladys Rowe from Fox Lake in her thesis (2013) describes herself as Muskego-In In Nu with mixed blood ancestry ties to Ireland, England, Ukraine, and Norway.

³ The Manitoba Metis Federation has a definition for inclusion related to French, Cree, kinship to Louis Riel and the Red River — Metis are mentioned here because many families moved north for various reasons.

- i) Same sex family — family with two of the same sex
- j) Childless family — couple without children
- I) Widowed family — family headed by a widow/widower
- m) Foster families — family who care for awasisak or oskatisak under Awasis Child and Family Services
- n) Multi-generational Family — more than 2 generations of the same family

Role of grandparents or chapán, great grandparents

They are involved in caring (sakihtowin, love) and raising of grandchildren. They offer life skills teachings, land based education, and support parents. They share their knowledge, wisdom of kinship, and language. Grandparents promote the values and beliefs; respect, love, family, wahkotowin, and wicheitowin) and teach history of kinship networks, culture, and language. Grandparents guide in spiritual ways (faith and respect for land, animals) and in religious practices. They support parents in teaching about behavioural consequences when the children misbehave (reinforcing parents' role).

The FGC model has four stages (Hart, et.al., 2021, Robinson, D., 2012)

1. Assessment
2. Preparation
3. Family Group Conference
4. Review and Monitoring

Role of extended family members

Wichitowin means helping each other, sharing resources and caring for one another. The extended family acknowledge each other's shared values across Nations. The kinship network may include members living in the same community or in other areas. These relatives may include In Ni Nu Wak, Anishinaabeg-In Ni Nu Wak, Metis, and non-Indigenous Nations. Extended family may support parents by watching children and/or in practical ways (shopping, wood, water, shovelling snow, etc.). The extended family also teach values and life skills supporting parents.

Family Group Conferencing: Principle and Process — At os ke win (how it works)

The family group conference model follows a specific process to facilitate autonomous decision making for minisiwin with four stages: assessment, preparation, the family group conference, review and monitoring.

Assessment stage

The team will be receiving referrals that will include all KTC member communities. When a FGC referral is received, an assessment is begun with the referral agent to begin a working relationship and to determine eligibility in terms of risk levels. The mentor will meet with the agency worker to obtain information with care to ensure that the family is aware of the referral. The mentor then begins to meet with the family referred to begin a

holistic assessment and to fully explain the FGC program. The family members need to be fully informed about the FGC process and what is expected of them, what Awasis Agency's role is, and the role of the FGC team. The family may make an informed decision to consent to participate in the FGC or not. Family can decide to work with Awasis Agency in the case management approach. This is an important decision that is within their rights as a community member.

FGC Practice holds that all families have unique strengths and decision-making powers. Families who come to the attention of child welfare often present with a laundry list of problems and few solutions. Sometimes people become discouraged with life's struggles and maybe have tried many different solutions.

Preparation stage

The FGC mentors enter the family circle with the presupposition that they have wisdom inherent in their own unique world view, strengths, and ways of making decisions. From first contact, mentors begin to assess the family's strengths, quality of relationships, and must be proactive in seeking out members of the family, friends and other significant people identified by the family. It may be important to have significant family members who live outside the community attend the family group conference. These family members may need financial support to travel to the community (airplane fares or vehicle mileage). FGC often provide financial support for lost wages if they have to leave a job. This acknowledges substantive equality and the fact that people

“FGC Practice holds that all families have unique strengths and decision-making powers”

can't leave jobs without economic consequences. The family may need support with concrete issues of childcare and providing for Elder involvement.

The family members are invited to participate due to sakihitowin (the love) they have for a loved one who needs their support

It is from the larger family group that this information is obtained. Everyone, the parents, paternal and maternal grandparents and kin, is included to the fullest extent to learn about these strengths as well as more about their weaknesses. This assessment includes discussions with the family group about their safety concerns. It is important to speak with Tab we win (honesty) in order to discuss issues of family violence, addictions, and unhealthy family dynamics. The FGC team needs to know what the family needs to be safe for individual members. Based on my experience, the family has members who are easy to anger for many reasons and some who are struggling with addictions. The FGC team can develop strategies with them to help when tensions arise and a break is planned. In many situations, family members identify someone who can support them when they feel out of control. It is at this point that the family member can call for a timed break to allow for calming down. Those struggling with addictions are asked to remain clean and sober for the day when they meet in conference.

The FGC team includes an awasisak minoyawin facilitator to ensure the voices of the young family members are included. This team member works with the children younger than 12 who may not be able to express their fears, hopes, and dreams for

“FGC holds the value position holds that families are the most knowledgeable about their history and family dynamics.”

their family. These younger ones are usually not included in the FGC because they can't be expected to sit still for 6–8 hours. Plus they can't express their voices due to their child development stage when children can't verbally express their thoughts, emotions, fears, and hopes.

The child facilitator sits with the child using drawings, a written story, or video or audio expressing their hopes and fears that express visually what they think and feel in a powerful way. The children's facilitator works to ensure these children's voices are prepared in the preparation stage. These drawings are shared with the family group. In my experience, family members are powerfully impacted by their children. Older children can create a tipi showing the same issues in the drawings on the frame. The FGC team does an assessment of oskatisak to determine if they feel safe and supported to say what they need to say. Oskatisak can request a support person (a friend or other significant person) to sit beside them as they sit in circle.

Their voices are presented during the FGC stage to the family group. Older children (12 years or older) may participate in the FGC and request their own support network.

FGC holds the value position that families are the most knowledgeable about their history and family dynamics. Child welfare workers and other professionals are only involved with families for a brief time and are limited in their knowledge of the family's culture, dynamics, and history, whereas

family members have known each other for many years and have intense relationships. With respectful curiosity, by creating trust relationships, mentors can learn this information from the family group.

Mentors find out about the strengths, values, and beliefs that can help the family group in creating their plans. The family group is prepared for the Minisiwin Apinanowak (family group conference).

Minisiwin Apinanowak: Family Group Conference Stage

The important value of self-determination inherent in the FGC process speaks to the empowerment when families create their own safety and wellness plans. The family group conference is the stage where the family group gathers together in the Family Group Conference ceremony that is conducted in accordance with their cultural beliefs and practices. FGC respects the family's faith and spiritual belief system. As the team meets family members, they may ascribe to a religious faith and have a desire to invite their faith leaders to say opening prayers or provide some teachings at the start of the day. Alternatively the family may follow traditional spirituality and may have their own spiritual leaders. They may request a smudge or pipe ceremony and some teachings before the FGC starts. These individuals typically stay for opening the day in a sacred way and leave the family to their private deliberations. Sometimes the family may request their faith or spiritual leaders stay for the day. The family's wishes are respected.

The role of Awasis Agency during this stage. As mentioned previously, CFS becomes involved when an issue or concern

The important value of ti pe ni mi so win (self-determination) is inherent in the FGC process. It speaks to the empowerment when families create their own mino ayawin (safety and wellness plans).

arises around safety and risk. The agency investigates and makes a determination of risk levels and actions to undertake. In many instances, the extended families often do not know what happened and may have only heard second hand information. The Awasis worker is prepared to present on the nature of their involvement and present factual information to the whole family group in assembly. The worker usually provides details on flip chart paper to refer to and leave for family to view and reflect upon. Family members may ask for clarification on the information presented. CFS workers are sometimes accompanied by a supervisor. Once they complete their presentation, they will leave the circle.

The FGC follows a process of information presentation by child welfare, resource presentations, and any relevant service that can help the family with their safety and wellness plans.

Minisiwin, Private Family Time

The family group then has an opportunity to meet in private to discuss all the information to develop their plan. The family has been prepared to take notes (flip chart recordings) of their decisions to ensure all views are included. They can take a few hours in private and may have a lunch break in between. It is important to ensure that the space is kept for

them for as long as they need. FGC holds the value position that Families are more likely to implement their mino aya win (wellness) plans that they have devised on their own. When people create these plans, they have a sense of ownership and pride to be able to reclaim their power.

In this FGC process, the family are assured that the family plan decisions will be respected and honored. It would be true to state that many families have much to fear from mandated agencies so will have a low level of trust in the FGC process. The relationship building with the families will promote this central message that the agency believes in the strengths and wisdom of the family throughout the whole process. It is understood that families need the appropriate resources in order to implement plans so the agency has dedicated financial resources to help facilitate family group conferences. It is ideal when the family uses their own capabilities and resources, however they may need other resources to successfully implement their plans. The mentors need to advocate with families for any other resources to facilitate their plan. Once the family plan is developed, the FGC mentor will be invited to sit with the family to review their plan. The FGC mentor will then invite the CFS worker(s) for the family to present their minisowin mino ayawin family plan. CFS may ask for clarification on aspects of the plan. Once the family plan is presented, the CFS agrees to work toward implementation of their decisions. The child welfare agency accepts this as their commitment to working through the review and monitoring stage.

Review and Monitoring Stage

The review meeting is held usually three

months after the FGC and is held with family members, the child welfare worker, and the FGC mentor. These review meetings are with a smaller family group with the intention to monitor how the plan is working. The family group in reviewing their plan may revise and adjust components of their work when necessary. The review and monitoring process continues with mentors maintain connections for up to a year depending on need. The family may decide to conclude their involvement with the FGC program before the year which is entirely within their power.

Benefits and Advantages of FGC

In the years I have worked with FGC, I have met many families, many child welfare workers and agencies, and did training with many organizations interested in this work. The work is rewarding and empowering as I have seen families reclaim their culture, their history, and their identity. I have developed great respect for the work that child welfare workers do and realize the inherent challenges. I also present this work with the knowledge that FGC is not the panacea for all the challenges In Ni Nu Wak and Dene face. It is but one possible solution and share some feedback obtained in my research.

Janick Godin provided the following feedback based upon her work using the FGC model with Mi'gmaq Child and Family Services of New Brunswick Inc.

Yes I do work within 6 first Nation Communities. I can gladly send you my observation on the many ways I feel utilizing FGC to make plans for children and their family is greatly beneficial.

This first thing is the feeling of love that the

children feels from their family when they all come together to discuss their future. I have seen family who had not seen each other in years and the children felt proud that the family member cared enough for them to show up.

The plan that is created by the family, is mostly more respected by family members because they only put the things that are realistic for them to do and they do not make false promises.

The sense of empowerment that the family have after this meeting is real and it makes them be more implicated with the plan.

In smaller communities, we also implicate members of council in our FGC, so if there are services that they can offer, we are aware of it right away

We also have Knowledge keepers and elders in Each community that can participate if the family chooses to have ceremonies during their FGC. I find for families this is very reassuring for them. They have someone they know and trust to join in the planning for their children.

I have [found] over the years that we are utilizing the court system less and less in part because of FGC. Because we are able to bring families together to plan for their children. We have more kinships and less children in care.

- Janick Godin, BSW/RSW, Director of Oinpegitjoig's Child and Family Services, Mi'gmaq Child and Family Services of New Brunswick Inc., Pabineau First Nation, New Brunswick

Family feedback from FGC participants

The family group conference itself creates a dynamic where parents come to realize the strengths that they did not know they had but were always present. Mentors focused on supporting the family group to honour their

strengths and decision-making power to create strong plans. Family members come to realize and appreciate their knowledge. A family member stated "FGC got the family involved with activities like traditional feasts, doing crafts, and learning traditional teachings." She shared that she grew up traditional, used to dance and sing. "Now I want to teach my kids our ways and our language. My uncle stays with us, and he speaks fluently to me all the time." She states that the FGC is the traditional way and fits her values.

The FGC participants had an opportunity to create their own community in the space (called the Bear's Den at Mamaw Wi Chi Itata Centre) where they could drop in for coffee, healing and teaching circles, recreation and cultural activities as well as land based outings.

FGC participants learn about their culture and their own Nation's Elders and knowledge keepers that they then can connect with on their own. The Elders and knowledge keepers who share their Nation's teachings invite the participants to their land, their community spaces, and to their ceremonies for longer term healing.

Feedback from Child & Family Services

The FGC created collaborative space with child welfare agencies who participated. Family members and child welfare workers reported improved relationships as the FGC work progressed. The mentors noted that there is much distrust, fear, and reluctance to cooperate with the agency that apprehended or could apprehend their children. A mentor explained that there will always be challenges in this environment, but the focus

is on making the relationship with child welfare agencies smoother. The mentors also stressed that child welfare workers have to do their own development work to realize that families do have decision-making capacities.

The FGC program has been effective in working with families identified as low to moderate risk demonstrating that families can develop plans for reunification and kinship care. These strategies positively impact the child welfare system reducing the time in care when children are returned to their families and communities.

The FGC process created a positive collaborative relationship when the parents requested the attendance of a non-Indigenous foster parent at the FGC. The foster parent was seen as a caring ally who was trusted with their children. They did not want their children to be moved to another home as it creates more trauma for them.

FGC has a welcoming home reunification ceremony when the children are returned home. This ceremony includes Elder participation, family members, and the child welfare worker to welcome the children home. The child welfare worker, who usually is involved in the traumatic process of apprehension, is involved in a spiritual healing ceremony gifting star blanket for the children. There have been many welcoming home reunification ceremonies in the FGC program. This writer was honoured to participate in two of these events witnessing the power of the family.

Based on my experience, child welfare workers have developed strong relationships with extended family members and maintain that trust throughout the FGC process.

Indigenous Evaluation

Outcomes

The Indigenous evaluation (Hart, et.al, 2021) provided some important teachings for everyone in the helping field.

The first teaching is that the FGC program is highly successful, and that this success is attributed to the fact that it is grounded in Indigenous ways of helping.

The second teaching is that culturally based programming has been effective when working with families who have or are facing the effects of trauma.

The third teaching is that a non-mandated Indigenous organization supports the mentors to address the effects of trauma based in Indigenous worldviews, values, and practices.

The fourth teaching is that FGC positively impacts society and particularly the child welfare system. This voluntary service results in family reunification and child welfare involvement is significantly reduced. Mentors advocate for family centered plans that focus on their needs, cultural values, and beliefs.

The fifth teaching is that families' involvement in child welfare is greatly reduced as they stay out of the system. A total of 225 families with 635 children were involved in the FGC program and 258 children were returned to their families, 95 children were placed in kinship care, and 41 children were prevented from coming into care.

Based on my work in FGC and more recently as a research interviewer (Robinson, 2012, Hart, et.al, 2021), I can add another teaching. The FGC process is inclusive as it empowers families to identify their significant members to help them in this circle of support. The process is definitely a decolonization practice that creates critical consciousness of their own mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual powers. The FGC process creates awareness of complex trauma and the traditional ways of healing using their own values, beliefs, and traditional intergenerational trauma that took generations to take root requires resilience, long—term visioning, and commitment.

Ekosani, ni totemak

Don Robinson

Inninetw Consulting

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Josie Hill — founder of Blue Thunderbird Family Services, Inc.

Wanda Sanderson — Blue Thunderbird Family Services, Inc.

Ed Azure — In Ni Nu Elder from the University of Manitoba

Janick Godin — Director of Oinpegitjoig's Child and Family Services

Mi'gmaq Child and Family Services of New Brunswick Inc.

Jackie Anderson and Christine Dumaine — Jackie was the FGC Coordinator and Christine was a FGC Mentor with Mamawi Wi Chi Itata Centre.

About the Consultant — Don Robinson, B.S.W., M.S.W

I am originally from Bunibonibee (Oxford House) First Nation, born at the Norway House hospital in 1951, and currently living in Winnipeg. After contracting rheumatoid arthritis at the age of 16 and due to a lack of specialized health care in the north, I was sent to Winnipeg ultimately becoming a permanent resident. I am a husband, father of two adult children and an adult step-son.

I started in the helping field with a certificate in community economic development (1985) and worked for Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre for many years. I continued with my education graduating from the University of Manitoba with a Bachelor of Social Work (1991) and a Master of Social Work (2001). I worked for mainstream organizations, Health Science Centre, Manitoba Adolescent Treatment Centre, Health Canada, All Nations Child & Family Network, and Dakota Ojibway Child and Family Services. I was a faculty instructor with the University of Manitoba for twenty years (1996—2016) and enjoyed teaching courses in Winnipeg, Thompson, Dauphin, Garden Hill, St. Theresa Point, and LaRonge, Saskatchewan. I have travelled extensively throughout Manitoba (probably 75% of the



First Nations) and across Canada delivering professional development training and healing workshops.

I have been in the helping field for close to forty years. I have done play therapy work, individual and family therapy, group therapy sessions, healing, and sharing circles. I have worked extensively with individuals who experienced complex trauma in residential schools, in the Sixties Scoop, and in their childhood. I have struggled with alcoholism but thankfully have been sober since 1984. I remember the teachings of my In Ni Nu elders, so I have always continued to listen to the Elders' teachings. Having learned from Elders and knowledge keepers about the traditional ways through participating in ceremonies, fasting, sweat lodge, and the Sundance, I have blended the traditional ways with the Western university education to the best of my knowledge.

I have also been a helper "oskabayis" in the traditional ways and am honored to be conduct some ceremonies that I have given to carry. I bring a unique cultural perspective on healing, intergeneration trauma, cross cultural awareness, family therapy with Indigenous families, training and learning, traditional ways of healing, and family group conferencing. I am seventy-two years old, in retirement, but still busy doing some paid and unpaid work.

