

# Practise as Ceremony:

Bent Arrow's Experiences with an *Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families*



**Policy Wise**  
for Children & Families





We would like to acknowledge that this wisdom-seeking journey took place on Treaty 6 Territory and the Métis Nation of Alberta North Saskatchewan River Territory in *amiskwacîwâskahikan*, which is present-day Edmonton, Alberta. We listened, learned, connected, and shared on this land. While we are situated in Edmonton, we want to note that implementing *An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families* involves efforts and relationships across unceded and treaty territories throughout Canada.



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## Reflecting on a Wisdom-Seeking Journey



# Supporting Indigenous Children to Return Home




# Supporting Indigenous Children to Return Home

An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families (the Act, formerly Bill C-92) is the first law to recognize and affirm inherent Indigenous jurisdiction over child and family services. It was developed in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report on child welfare-related calls to action (calls 1 to 5). It is also a commitment to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The Act affirms the right of Indigenous Nations or groups to develop and enact their own child and family laws and systems based on their unique circumstances, traditions, languages, and histories. It also establishes the principles of best interest of the child, cultural continuity, and substantive equality for service provision to all First Nations, non-status, Métis, and Inuit children living on and off reserve. This involves:

- Recognizing the importance of culture to child well-being.
- Prioritizing prevention and early intervention.
- Maintaining and promoting family, territory, and community relationships.
- Respecting and revitalizing Indigenous languages, traditions, ceremonies, and knowledge.
- Reunifying Indigenous children with their families and communities.

 Watch this video by Koren Lightning-Earle and Hadley Friedland from the Wahkohtowin Law and Governance Lodge for an overview of the Act.

The Act came into force on January 1, 2020. Agencies serving Indigenous children and families must now meet the national standards outlined in the Act. This is regardless of whether Indigenous Nations or groups take over jurisdiction of their child and family services. Yet it is not that simple. Agencies are facing challenges, including:

- Understanding and ensuring legal compliance with the Act.
- Developing cultural knowledge and responsiveness.
- Building trust and partnerships with Indigenous communities.
- Reallocating resources.
- Providing trauma-informed services.

Many agencies need and want guidance on how to practice differently to support Indigenous children and families. Agencies within the child and family serving sector in Edmonton have been on this journey for some time, including the Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society. Bent Arrow is a child and family serving agency with practices grounded in Indigenous cultures, ceremonies, traditions, and worldviews. In this document, we describe how they are supporting Indigenous children to return home.



# Practicing in Ceremony: Bent Arrow's Story



## Bent Arrow's Mission and Name

Bent Arrow is an Edmonton-based Indigenous-led agency committed to supporting Indigenous children and families to grow spiritually, emotionally, physically, and mentally. They offer diverse programs and services that help Indigenous clients connect to the city around them, build skills and resilience, and proudly live in Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds. They have a history of collaborating and learning alongside other child and family serving agencies in the Edmonton area that are on their own journeys to better support Indigenous children and families.

Everything Bent Arrow does is centered in culture and ceremony. The story of Bent Arrow's name can help us understand what this means. Bent Arrow's Executive Director Cheryl Whiskeyjack shares how the founders Brad and Shauna Seneca chose the name Bent Arrow:

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- When he was a little boy, Brad's grandpa told him
- everything we did was a ceremony. Like back in the day
- and if you think about it, it could still apply today. When you make a meal for your family, that's a ceremony. You want it to nourish your children so that they can learn and grow, you want it to nourish your partner so that they can go do what they need to do throughout their day. Building your home was a ceremony. And if you didn't do that with a good heart and a good mind, and with good intention, it could take rain on or blow over in a breeze or whatever. Going on a hunt and building your weapons. That was a ceremony and that's where the name Bent Arrow came from.

They chose the name Bent Arrow because they saw our youth, which was our original client group when they started the organization, as bent arrows that someone didn't put good intention, good thought, into the raising of these youth. And that's why they weren't meeting their marks, they were bent arrows. And so our goal is to put that energy into them so that they can meet their marks.

Whenever we tell that story, it's like people kind of, well, they think that Bent Arrow's name is really cooler. They kind of know where it comes from. But it also gets them thinking about ceremony. And the way I describe it, it's like, as soon as you open your eyes, your ceremony begins for the day.

- Cheryl Whiskeyjack





## Practise As Ceremony Model

Bent Arrow uses the analogy of the sacred Sundance ceremony to describe their approach to working with children and families. They call this *Practise as Ceremony*.

The Practise as Ceremony model was inspired by stories of Indigenous families impacted by child welfare and the need to practice from an Indigenous worldview [1]. Imagining working with children and families as similar to a Sundance ceremony invites us to think differently about support and healing. In a Sundance, dancers sacrifice and pray for healing for individuals, families, and their entire community. In the Practise as Ceremony model, service users are like the dancers, coming with prayers and intentions.

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- When we think of service users as dancers, we can see
- them as folks dancing through life in both the rain and the sun. [1, p.110]

Within the model, service providers are positioned as stickmen or helpers who respect, honour, and support the service users. They aim to bring their best selves and build positive relationships with service users. This analogy acts as a contemporary interpretation of an ancient ceremony.

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- When child welfare practice is recognized as ceremony,
- we understand the work differently. Perhaps most
- importantly, we understand that our current roles are temporary, that service users are sacrificing for their families and service providers can position themselves to honour these sacrifices. [1, p.111]

To learn more about Practise as Ceremony, listen to Amber Dion in this [video](#) and read the [chapter](#) in the book, *Growing a Child*.



For many people with a Western worldview who come to work at or with Bent Arrow, the concept of practicing in ceremony is new and uncomfortable. It can be hard to understand how culture and ceremony create safety without direct experience. To use an analogy shared with us, “it’s really hard to take the pen from your right hand and use it with your left hand.” Yet, that is what is needed to practice from an Indigenous worldview and better serve Indigenous children and families.

Bent Arrow was already practicing in this way before *An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families* came into force. This presented an opportunity to learn, document, and share Bent Arrow’s experiences implementing the Act.

[1] Dion, Tyler, Pace, & Delver. (2020) *ayahpatisi / Practice as Ceremony* in L. Makokis, R. Bodor, A. Calhoun, & S. Tyler (Eds.), *ahpikinâwasowin / Growing a Child* (p.92-113). Fernwood Publishing.



# Walking Alongside Bent Arrow on a Wisdom-Seeking Journey





## Purpose and Acknowledgements

Bent Arrow partnered with PolicyWise for Children & Families (PolicyWise) on this wisdom-seeking journey. PolicyWise is a non-profit and registered charity that supports children and family serving agencies through capacity building, research, and evaluation. The purpose was to learn, document, and share Bent Arrow's experiences implementing *An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Children, Youth and Families*.

### Team Members:

**Cheryl Whiskeyjack** is the Executive Director of the Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society and has been with Bent Arrow just about since its inception 30 years ago. Now she oversees a suite of 24 different programs and services. Cheryl serves on several boards at the local and national level. She is proud of the strong partnerships she has maintained across sectors.

**Candace Cleveland** is a Senior Manager at Bent Arrow with 6 years of management experience. She supports individuals, programs, and agencies grow and thrive while honouring the uniqueness and knowledge of the demographics they serve. Candace is passionate about celebrating Indigenous culture and supporting children, youth, and families to connect to their roots and healing through ceremony.

**Maxine Myre** is a Senior Research & Policy Associate at PolicyWise. She leads several projects related to child, family, and community well-being with a focus on community engagement, knowledge mobilization, and health equity. She enjoys being outside and loves walking meetings, no matter the weather. When not working, you can find her adventuring outdoors, reading, taking care of her plants, and spending time with friends and family.

**Kayla Blackadar** is a Research & Policy Associate at PolicyWise. She supports projects aimed at improving child and family well-being, promoting positive mental health outcomes for youth, and fostering collaboration among community agencies. Outside of work, she enjoys spending time outdoors, usually accompanied by her spirited yet affectionate dog, Arlow.

**Nicole Glenn** is a Research & Policy Manager at PolicyWise with more than 20 years of research and evaluation experience. This is her first collaboration with Bent Arrow.





## Purpose and Acknowledgements

We thank the members of our advisory group for their insights and guidance on the wisdom-seeking journey.

**Elder Tom Snow** is a lethka Nakoda (Stoney, Assiniboine) from the Stoney Indian Reserve in Morley, Alberta. He has been a facilitator of traditional Nakoda teachings and ceremonies across Alberta, Saskatchewan, British Columbia, and Montana. At Bent Arrow, he is an Elder leading ceremonies and circles, educating staff, reintroducing families to their cultural practices, and teaching the Nakoda (Stoney, Assiniboine) language. He is also highly involved in the community. When not at work, Tom enjoys being with his current wife, his family from an earlier relationship, and relatives, as well as staying connected with his culture, hunting, fishing, camping, and ceremonies.

**Aubrey Watson** is an anishinaabekwe from Ketegaunseebee who has worked at The Family Centre for 12 years in various positions. Aubrey holds a Child & Youth Care degree from MacEwan University and is a graduate student in the Master of Social Work at the University of Calgary with an expected graduation date of April 2025. Aubrey's current role is Manager of Indigenous Support Services. Indigenous Support Services aims to help The Family Centre staff and Indigenous service users live the teachings. This will lead to the revitalization of ceremonies, teachings, Indigenous languages and healing for the Indigenous communities we serve. Aubrey is a life giver to two beautiful spirits named Zoe and Sadie, married and prioritizes spending time with close family and friends. Aubrey enjoys spending time outdoors at the lake whenever possible, walking the family lab and attending ceremonies

The Family Centre is a charitable organization in Edmonton that promotes healthy, safe, and economically viable communities by supporting families and children to navigate challenges, develop relationships, and heal from trauma. They generously supported Bent Arrow during the process of becoming a Collaborative Service Delivery agency by sharing resources and experiences.

We thank circle participants Erin David, Shirley West, Corrin Manolakos, and Lloyd Yellowbird.

We thank the Edmonton Community Foundation for funding this case study.

## Wisdom-Seeking Approach

The PolicyWise and Bent Arrow team began the journey in a good way in January 2023 with a pipe ceremony led by Elder Tom Snow and helper Bernard Dumas from Bent Arrow. The PolicyWise team's role in the journey was as humble learners. We sought to form strong relationships with the Bent Arrow team and committed ourselves to learning through ceremony, circle, and cultural knowledge. We did this by attending Bent Arrow orientation and culture camps, picking medicine on the land, and participating in tipi teachings, Practise as Ceremony teachings, and kinship teachings. We also attended two summits organized by [ALIGN Association of Community Services](#), called Walking the Children Home Together. The summits focused on supporting child and family serving agencies to better understand and implement the Act. We held four talking circles with advisors and Bent Arrow service providers. By beginning each circle with a smudge ceremony and prayer, the spirits of Ancestors were invited to guide the conversations. Circle participants shared their knowledge and experiences with the Act and hopes for moving forward in a good way.

We listened, came to the teachings and discussions with openness and humility, and were receptive to different ways of knowing and being. We continuously reflected on and made meaning of the stories and teachings generously shared with us. Through this wisdom-seeking approach, we began to identify relationships between ideas and build our understanding of Bent Arrow's ways of implementing the Act within their existing Practise as Ceremony model. Slowly, we became ready to share. This document reflects what we learned up to this point of the journey.







## Intention and Invitation

Engaging in ceremony requires entering with intent, humility, and an open heart and mind. In sharing what we learned in our wisdom-seeking journey, our intention is for everyone to see that supporting Indigenous children and families can and must be done differently. This document was created with children and family service providers in mind, including Indigenous and non-Indigenous providers. We must all work together in a good way to honour the purpose of the Act and support children to return home.

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- We need to acknowledge that a lot of practitioners are
- non-Indigenous and we need to call them in, otherwise
- all the work would fall on Indigenous communities.

– Cheryl Whiskeyjack

The findings we share are not meant to be a prescriptive how-to guide. They build on Bent Arrow’s Practise as Ceremony model to show how culture is essential to a good life and to highlight the importance of practicing in relationship. They also offer ways to deepen learning about the Act and Indigenous traditions, histories, ceremonies, and culture.

As we invite you to learn about Bent Arrow’s experiences and practices, we ask that you respectfully engage with their stories, authentically immerse yourself in your own learning, and intentionally walk in partnership with Indigenous communities.

In our journey, we learned that stories don’t give you the answers, but they give a way to get the answers. Once you hear them and let them resonate, you can continue your journey with courage, perseverance, and faith.

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- You need to go on your own wisdom-seeking journey.
- It’s good for people who want to know and learn, and
- who come at it with a good heart. In order for you to understand it, you still have to do your own work. It’s brave, it’s courageous to do this work, and it’s worth it. It’s for the kids.

– Aubrey Watson

# Practicing in Ceremony: Bent Arrow's Story Continues





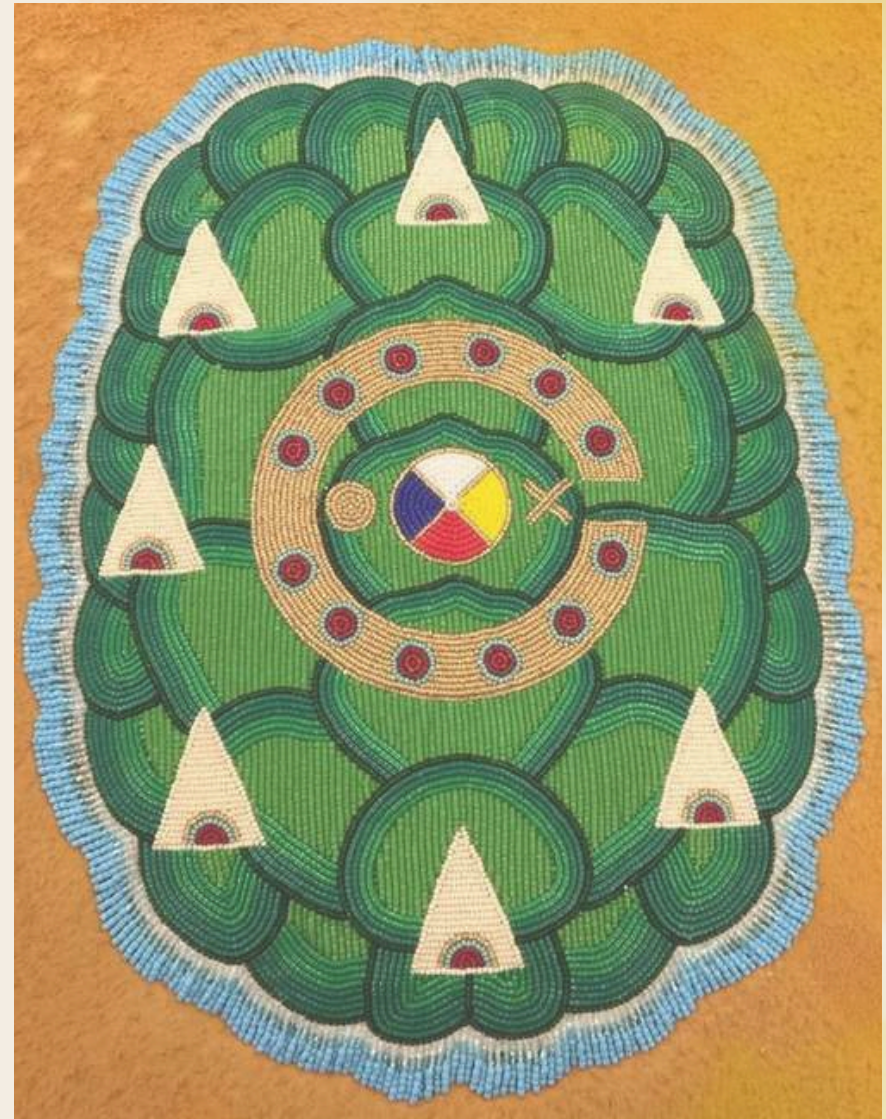
## Practicing in Ceremony: Bent Arrow's Story Continues

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- Being genuinely engaged in ceremony changes the way
- you see safety and changes the way you support people.

- Candace Cleveland

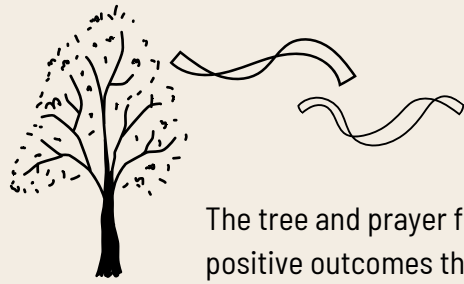
We were inspired by the beadwork that visually represents Bent Arrow's Practise as Ceremony. Using a visual map and speaking from an Indigenous worldview, we depict Bent Arrow's Practise as Ceremony in the context of *An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families*. The elements and what they represent in the Sundance analogy will shift depending on the perspective taken. In this case, we can consider Bent Arrow as the host of the ceremony. However, as Indigenous Governing Bodies representing First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities reclaim jurisdiction of their child and family serving system, they become the ceremony hosts.



Practise as Ceremony beadwork created by Tara Kappo.

# Practicing in Ceremony: Bent Arrow's Story Continues

Here we show the elements of the Practise as Ceremony map. In the following sections, we describe each element and how it relates to Bent Arrow's experiences implementing the Act.



The tree and prayer flags represent hopes for positive outcomes the Act.



The medicine wheel represents the best interest of the Indigenous child.



The dancers represent Indigenous kinship structures, including family and ceremonial roles and responsibilities.



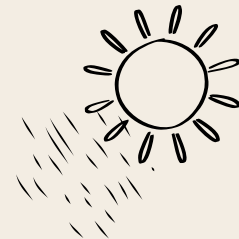
The stickman represents child and family service providers.



The tipis represent key relationships and shared understandings.



The turtle represents Turtle Island, the land on which ceremony and sacred teachings are lived and practiced.



The weather, including the storm and sun, represents contextual factors that may influence the ceremony.



# Practise as Ceremony Map



# Offering Prayers into the Universe

In a Sundance ceremony, the dancers, community members, and observers bring offerings of tobacco and cloth, which carry prayers for community healing into the universe. In the map, the prayer flags and ties on the Tree of Life represent the hopes for positive outcomes of the Act. Bent Arrow sees families coming to them with hopes and prayers. Through ceremony, they put intention and energy in to support arrows hitting their marks.

Hopes for the Act shared by the wisdom-seeking team, advisors, and participants are shown here and interwoven in the document to remind us of the purpose and potential of reuniting families and supporting children and families in culturally appropriate ways.

Children are with family.

Traditional parenting is revitalized.

Children return home.

The very last option is foster care.

Parents are supported in their healing from trauma, addiction, and houselessness.

Children are treated as gifts from the Creator.

Children's voices matter.

Creating a shared understanding.

Children thrive when connected to culture.

The cycle of intergenerational trauma is broken.

Ceremony is available and accessible to children.

Precontact teachings are fully lived.

Inherent strengths of Indigenous communities are recognized.

Children's physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being are supported.

Children don't realize they were part of the child intervention system.

Nations and children and family serving agencies develop strong relationships.

Protective factors are found through life reviews.

Non-Indigenous organizations work in a good way with Nations.

Families are continuously reassessed.

Nations voices are heard.

Children's voices and experiences are centered.

Children experience better life outcomes.

Indigenous languages are revitalized.

Precontact teachings are front and center.

Nations and children and family serving agencies create new paths of working through the new legislation.



# Centering the Best Interest of the Indigenous Child

The best interests of Indigenous children are at the center of the map, represented by the medicine wheel. In Indigenous culture, children are sacred gifts from the Creator. They are “spirits on a human journey.” There is a need to help children find their spirit, identity, pride in culture, and place within their kinship community. The Act refers to providing services that are in the “best interests of the child.” Aubrey offered a different perspective:

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- Instead of what's in the best interest of the child, what
- if we thought about what is in the best interest of the
- *spirit* of the child? And I think when you think that way, you really change the way you're thinking about that child and their family.

– Aubrey Watson

How might service provision be practiced differently by reframing this principle to the best interests of the spirit of the child? By centering the spirit of the Indigenous child, Bent Arrow service providers remember the importance of the spiritual realm, and how a child's spirit is connected to their culture, language, ancestors, and belief system.

This framing can help change previously held beliefs when working with partners working from a Western worldview. For instance, it can emphasize that culture does not fade, and cultural continuity is more important to a child's best interest than the Western concept of attachment. Rather than defaulting to foster care, this approach prioritizes transferring the children as sacred bundles back to Nations where they belong.

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- We always say, 'oh, Indigenous children are over-
- represented in child welfare.' No, no, there's an over-
- representation of the Western worldview in Indigenous lives.

– Erin David

Watch [Little Bird](#), [Frybread Face and Me](#), and [Lion](#) for stories about returning to culture, family, and home.

Children's voices matter

Children return home

Children's physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being are supported

# Healing Through Kinship

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- Finding kinship is at the core of supporting Indigenous children. It's a huge piece of the new legislation, not just for placement but for communities helping parents learn to be parents and this is within the kinship roles. All this work is grounded in kinship.

- Candace Cleveland

Continuing with the Sundance ceremony analogy, we consider the dancers in the map to represent kinship. Elder Tom Snow shared that for Indigenous peoples, kinship is medicine. Kinship creates feelings of acceptance, belonging, and unity, and ultimately supports healing. Reuniting children with their families and communities is prioritized within Bent Arrow's practices. They start by determining kinship connections. Candace shared a story about the outcomes of working in this way:

When advocating for kids who have trauma responses, we often talk about how this child has risk behaviours and needs medication. But when they are with family, they don't have these behaviours anymore. There was one child who needed double staffing at one point, but when he returned home, he was able to thrive in community, he went to school, he helped family. The difference was being home.

*Traditional parenting is revitalized*

*Children are with family*

For Indigenous communities, the concept of *family* is broad, and everyone has different roles and responsibilities within the kinship structure. Unlike the Western idea of a family that is made up of two parents and their children, attachment bonds are multi-relational. They involve many community members and kin. A story shared by Janice Makokis at an ALIGN summit resonated deeply:

When she would say that she is a 'single mom,' her parents would tell her, no, you are not a single mom. You have aunties and grandparents and others who are vital in the care of your child. The use of the term 'single mother' does not reflect Indigenous concepts of kinship.

When a kinship structure is in place, families and communities thrive. That needs to be reflected in assessments and care. An important aspect of this is listening to families when they ask for support. They are the expert in their lives.

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- I really would like people just to listen. That's all it takes
- is to listen. It's like when we do the Sundance mapping, people come in, our families. It's just listening to our families and what they need. And giving them the resources and support they need.

- Lloyd Yellowbird



## Healing Through Kinship

When families are struggling and experiencing feelings of shame, fear, and guilt, often stemming from the impacts of colonialism, addressing this through kinship and in ceremony supports healing.

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- The Western practice would speak to confidentiality and
- how a family has a right to confidentiality. But one of the reasons we are in this mess is because we don't share our struggles with each other. Like, we struggle in isolation. And this is why families are in the pickle they're in, because they don't want their aunties and kokums and cousins to know that, like, they picked the wrong guy, or they're addicted to the wrong thing, or they can't make rent, or whatever is going on. So, they struggle all by themselves. And one of the things I hear in our community, is like, I'm just gonna mind my own business. And I'm like, well, that's what's getting them in trouble. I think we need to mind each other's business, we need to have some responsibility for one another and to one another.

- Cheryl Whiskeyjack

*Parents are supported in their healing from trauma, addiction, and houselessness*



## Honouring the Dancers

In a Sundance, the stickman helps and encourages the dancers to keep dancing by reminding them why they are dancing. The stickman in the Practise as Ceremony model represents service providers. They have an important role in honouring and helping the dancers – the families being served – to continue dancing even when it is difficult. Service provision in the child and family service context often includes social workers. However, within Indigenous cultures and worldviews, the concept of social work as a profession does not exist. Instead, they may be referred to as a “person who comes to help” communities heal and live a good life [2]. Practicing in ceremony creates the opportunity for service providers to take on the role of helper to meaningfully support children and families through sacred relationships.

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- A sacred space is not a tangible physical location;
- rather, it can be created anywhere in relationship with
- other beings. Healing takes place in these sacred spaces. Healing takes place when there is honouring, validation, deep understanding, common ground, safety, support, and reciprocity. [3, p.110]

How do you keep children out of care and what does care mean? I think about the word ‘practitioner’ and what that means. It’s helper. So, we need to look at language and dismantle some of the Western systems that are in place.

– Erin David

At Bent Arrow, service providers or helpers are encouraged to prioritize their own well-being, which is seen as necessary to doing their more formal “job description.” This involves time spent restoring and renewing the spirit, such as picking medicines, being on the land, and attending ceremony.

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- Connection to culture is the key, for the folks that Bent
- Arrow serves, but also for practitioners and people who
- work in this field.

– Candace Cleveland

*Indigenous languages are revitalized*

[2] Watson (unpublished) Indigenous Practice Framework Draft – *sitôskam iyiniwatisiwin* / Supporting an Indigenous Way of Being.

[3] Dion, Tyler, Pace, & Delver. (2020) *ayahpatisi* / Practice as Ceremony in L. Makokis, R. Bodor, A. Calhoun, & S. Tyler (Eds.), *ohpikinâwasowin* / Growing a Child (p.92-113). Fernwood Publishing.



# Nurturing Relationships and Shared Understanding

Practicing in relationship and being accountable to the families they serve is foundational to Bent Arrow's ways of supporting children and families.

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- I remember when I came to Bent Arrow, as a family support worker, I was trained by people who had been around for a while. I had been in the field a bit, but I was still pretty young and hadn't done a lot of this work. But I remember, we went to this mom's home and we just sat there and the worker just gave her a smoke and I smoked at the time and we just all sat around smoking. And I was like, there is no way we're supposed to be doing this. Like, we should not be doing this. But the lady who trained me, she had amazing relationships with all of her families. Amazing. And I remember being like, this is so different. And then realizing that relationships are the foundation of the work that we do. So, you cannot build relationships without having that smoke, having that coffee, sitting down. And then after spending time going from house to house and seeing the relationships, I now train people the exact same way. And you wouldn't know that if you had no exposure to ceremony or to culture, you would never know that you're gonna have the best relationship you ever had by literally just sitting and having an authentic conversation, where you're genuinely trying to connect.

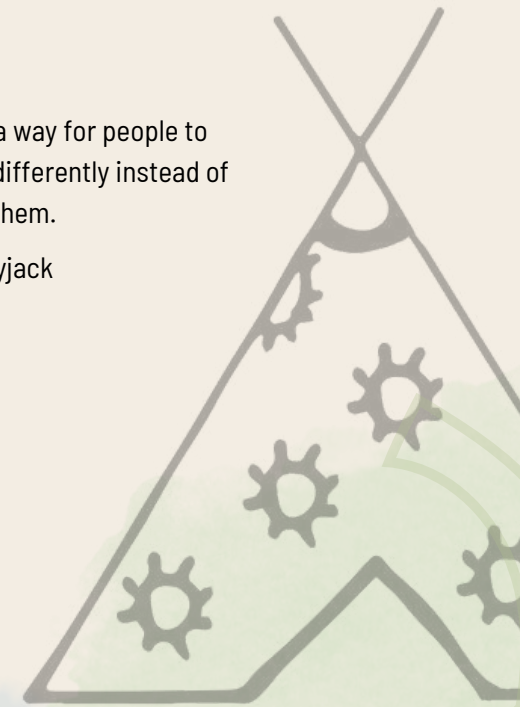
- Candace Cleveland

To implement the Act in a good way, Bent Arrow recognizes the need to nurture new and existing relationships and build shared understandings of concepts, ideas, and knowledge with their partners. The tipis that surround the dancers in the map are examples of opportunities for nurturing relationships and shared understandings that support Bent Arrow's practices implementing the Act.

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- I like the word opportunities. It is a way for people to start thinking about doing things differently instead of the way we've always been doing them.

- Cheryl Whiskeyjack



*Creating a shared understanding.*

## Understanding the Act

The national standards outlined in the Act are law and must be met regardless of who holds jurisdiction over child and family services. In other words, they are not optional. Yet, when the Act came into force, it came with limited training or resources to help child and family serving agencies understand how to apply it. Slowly, more resources and learning opportunities are available, such as this [guide](#) for social workers to assess their current practices against the national standards and the Walking the Children Home Together summits organized by ALIGN. Bent Arrow has been growing their understanding of the Act and shared that it has given them more power to advocate for families, particularly when the laws are challenged.

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- It's really provided us with language to challenge our
- partners. Like this is actually law that supersedes the
- Alberta Act.

- Candace Cleveland

With the law, there is the expectation that it doesn't matter where the child is from, which Nation, where you are, but in Children and Family Services right here, they have it wrong, because I was told that 'because your First Nation is in Ontario, we don't need to contact them.' Well, they're wrong. They're not following the law. Because they don't understand it."

- Aubrey Watson

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- We can use the language in the Act to fight against 'old'
- ways of doing things. Everyone needs to understand this. So before, in 'old' social work, if kokum wasn't appropriate two years ago, kokum was forever deemed inappropriate. But using the new legislation it says that we need to always go back to family. It says that every six months, you should essentially be reassessing. We can now challenge caseworkers and say, you must go back and see how people are doing, we can't just write people off.

- Candace Cleveland

*Very last option is foster care*

*Families are continuously reassessed*

*Children's voices and experiences are centered*



# Partnering with Nations and Indigenous Governing Bodies

Under the Act, an Indigenous Governing Body refers to a “council, government, or other entity that is authorized to act on behalf of an Indigenous group, community or people that holds rights recognized and affirmed by section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982” [4]. Indigenous Governing Bodies go through the process of reclaiming jurisdiction over an Indigenous groups’ child and family services. Over time, more Indigenous Governing Bodies will go through this process and new Indigenous laws will come into force.

See examples of Indigenous child and family service laws created since the Act was introduced: Louis Bull Tribe’s Asikiw Mostos O’pikinawasiwin (AMO) Law and Founding First Nations’ Awasi’ak Wiyasiwewin Law. Find information on the status of Indigenous child and family service laws on the Indigenous Services Canada [webpage](#).



Transfers of jurisdiction are impacting the ways Bent Arrow works with Indigenous children. They aim to ensure that a child’s care is not delayed or missed during the transfer process. With each Indigenous child, Bent Arrow learns as much as they can about their Nation and invites them to the conversation to ensure that their voices are heard. For instance, child and family services laws can extend to all Nation members no matter where they live in the country. Bent Arrow has connected children with their Nations in Ontario, Newfoundland, and other regions.

*Nations and children and family serving agencies develop strong relationships*

[4] Indigenous Services Canada (2020). [Technical Information Package](#).

“ - - - - -

- I know for myself, the biggest piece is pulling Nations in,
- pulling band designates in more and more, because as their voice is heard, that’s going to stick a little more with Children and Family Services.

- Corrin Manolakos

Nurturing trusting relationships with Nations and their Indigenous Governing Bodies is crucial to support positive jurisdictional transitions. As an urban Indigenous agency that works closely with the Ministry of Children and Family Services, Bent Arrow has experienced some mistrust from Nations. However, they would like to work in partnership with Nations and support them in navigating the process of establishing their Indigenous child and family services laws.

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- What can we do to go forward together, for a positive
- transition to Bill C-92, for us as an agency, even as a program? Because currently, we’re an extension, we’re a partner for Children and Family Services. It’d be nice to be a partner with Nations and be that the extension of Nations.

- Erin David



## Partnering with Nations and Indigenous Governing Bodies

Reclaiming jurisdiction is not a straightforward process for Nations and Indigenous Governing Bodies. Bent Arrow hopes to be known as a support and a resource that Nations can rely on. For instance, they will share resources like budgets, policies, and practice models with Nations that reach out.

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- I'm really wanting to highlight the Act and the power
  - the Nations have over jurisdiction of their own kids.
- This is what I want to be elevated in this. I want people to see that and feel that.

- Cheryl Whiskeyjack

*Nations voices are heard*

*Inherent strengths of Indigenous communities are recognized*

*Nations and children and family serving agencies create new paths of working through the new legislation*





# Bridging Worldviews with the Ministry of Children and Family Services

Through the Kahkiyaw Collaborative Service Delivery program, Bent Arrow works in partnership with Boyle Street Community Services and the Government of Alberta Ministry of Children and Family Services in Edmonton. The Kahkiyaw team actively engages children, youth, and families using a combination of Western and Indigenous approaches as part of their family wellness service delivery.

Bent Arrow recognizes that the provincial government will continue to play an important role in child welfare and enacting the national standards outlined in the Act. They see opportunities and the need to work together to gain a collective understanding of the Act while respecting and bridging diverse worldviews. This is not without challenges.

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- When I was a kinship supervisor, what I appreciated
- about our collaboration with Children and Family Services was that there were some workers that really got it. We'd be on the same page, because culture has to be part of the solution, ceremony has to be part of the healing.

- Erin David

Bridging worldviews and fostering shared understandings and respect between all child and family services providers helps achieve positive outcomes for families. Bent Arrow has found that when Children and Family Service workers engage in ceremony and circle, their work in partnership leads to more children connecting to their culture and returning home.

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- We need to incorporate medicines in practice. We often
- start with smudging to start the day in a good way with intention, and this can help us find ways through struggles. Prayer and circle help take away power imbalances, so everyone has an equal voice. Medicines work whether you believe in them or not.

- Cheryl Whiskeyjack

We actually take our Children and Family Services partners, and we go on the land, and we sweat. When we go sweat, the way we serve families after is different than the way we serve them before the sweat.

- Candace Cleveland

*Children are treated as gifts from the Creator*

# Bridging Worldviews with the Ministry of Children and Family Services

Taking a broader perspective, our circle participants talked about the need to respect and practice Indigenous cultures to prevent children from entering the Western child welfare system altogether.

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- Going forward, how do we continue to provide support collectively and to do it consistently with children? An Elder said that the child is brought up in culture, their way of life, they'll never come into care.

- Lloyd Yellowbird



*Children thrive when connected to culture*

*Children experience better life outcomes*

*Children don't realize they were part of the child intervention system*



# Learning by Doing

Understanding the Act and shifting practices to support Indigenous children and families differently involves continuous learning, which is a circular, relational, and experiential process. Each person's learning journey will be unique. Bent Arrow is committed to making learning about Indigenous culture and ceremony accessible for all, no matter where they are in their journey. This necessarily involves experiencing ceremony and teachings firsthand.

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- Experiencing it, part of that learning experience
- involves listening to it but experiencing it, I think it will reside and people slowly do shift and change and understand better.

- Corrin Manolakos

Bent Arrow fosters experiential learning within their organization by providing opportunities for their staff to participate in teachings, experience ceremony, and learn cultural knowledge. Their Practise as Ceremony team offers diverse cultural services to community members and service providers who would like to learn about practicing in ceremony and other traditional teachings. All teachings involve ceremony.

*Ceremony is available and accessible to children*

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- I worked at an Indigenous agency for like 15 years prior
- to coming here. And I never knew about the seven sacred teachings. But coming to Bent Arrow, I've been part of circle, and we learned a lot about the seven sacred teachings, and about practices. And again, I think about what I thought I knew, compared to what I learned from continuing to learn here, and it's just amazing.

- Shirley West

Bent Arrow's culture camps offer their staff, community members, and community agencies a unique opportunity to immerse themselves in Indigenous culture. This includes pipe ceremonies, tipi teachings, sweat lodge ceremonies, and traditional singing, drumming, and dancing.

*Precontact teachings are front and center*

## Learning by Doing

We also heard that any efforts to implement the Act need to involve an understanding of the historical and ongoing impacts of colonization on well-being for generations of Indigenous children and families.

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- Knowing that these youth are hard to place because
- they've been treated unjustly by the system, like flipping that paradigm. They haven't done wrong, the system has done them wrong.

- Aubrey Watson

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- To move forward, we need to understand how we got
- here. We need to learn the ongoing impacts of historical trauma to implement Bill C-92 in a good way and reaffirm rights and inherent jurisdiction.

- Elder Tom Snow



*The cycle of intergenerational trauma is broken*



# Grounding on the Land and in Sacred Teachings

The turtle on the map represents Turtle Island, in reference to the continent of North America and sacred Indigenous creation stories. Everything is grounded on the land. Connecting with the land and all beings is foundational for well-being among Indigenous communities. The land provides food, medicine, shelter, and much more. In turn Indigenous peoples respect, steward, and care for the land. Ceremonies, stories, and teachings for different Indigenous groups are directly tied to the unique characteristics of their territory on Turtle Island.

Learning and living the sacred teachings are also foundational to Bent Arrow's Practise as Ceremony. Helping families learn to live according to the natural laws and sacred teachings supports a healing journey for service users. When children experience trauma, they carry that into adulthood and the impacts can be felt across generations. Children are safer and more protected when raised with sacred teachings.

“-----

- I remember when Elder Leona Makokis came and talked about truth and reconciliation. And this will always forever stand out to me when she said that there was no word in Cree for reconciliation. She said the closest word was 'put that back.' So, when we put those teachings back, it's a step towards, like one more step towards decolonizing.

- Erin David

Important teachings include the seven sacred teachings, Indigenous and Western rites of passage, kinship teachings, medicine teachings, tipi teachings, and turtle lodge teachings. While teachings are specific to each Indigenous group, there are some parallels. Teachings must be received in ceremony, usually by an Elder or Knowledge Keeper [5]. Elders may also be learning about their culture and traditions, since colonization has impacted intergenerational sharing of Indigenous belief systems, ceremonies, traditional knowledge, and teachings.

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- There is an assumption that Indigenous Elders are traditional. But we were disrupted, and many Elders are still in a colonized confusion, especially in regards to beliefs.

- Elder Tom Snow

Service providers who embody and are dedicated to practicing the sacred teachings are better able to support families differently. For instance, circle participants spoke about how doing this kind of work takes courage and must be done with love and respect.

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- I think about the seven sacred teachings and I see it takes courage to be able to speak your truth, it takes humility, you know, those are like what you know, so part of those seven sacred teachings. And love, love being a really important one.

- Erin David

## Grounding on the Land and in Sacred Teachings

Bent Arrow creates opportunities and nurtures an environment where sacred teachings can be fully embraced and lived. In one of our circles, Aubrey shared about how creating a culturally affirming environment fosters safety:

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- Hearing from community members about what they
- needed to see in a place like an agency to feel safe from
- an Indigenous person's perspective, it was like a place where you smell medicine, where you smell smudge when you go in, where you hear drumming, where you hear singing, like all that was safety to them.

- Aubrey Watson



*Precontact teachings are fully lived*



## Dancing in all Weather

During a Sundance ceremony, the weather might be rough and unpredictable, but ceremony continues. Centering the best interests of Indigenous children means service providers can't wait for perfect conditions. Even if it feels messy, murky, and uncomfortable, the work still needs to be done to support family reunification, cultural continuity, and service provision for Indigenous children and families. Yet, change is slow, and lack of progress can leave people feeling frustrated.

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- It always feels like we're taking these little steps
- forward, and then we get knocked back down. And then
- we get up again, and we inch that little bit farther. It's going to be that whole two steps forward, five steps back, as we're moving.

- Corrin Manolakos

We heard and discussed many contextual factors that influence the implementation of the Act. Just like the weather, these factors are always evolving. These include:

- A lack of guidance, resources, and funding for Nations, their Indigenous Governing Bodies, and other child and family serving agencies to implement the Act.
- Court decisions about child and youth placements within the legal system that are not based on Indigenous worldviews.
- Stereotypes, discrimination, and assimilative policies that are prevalent within and outside the child and family service system.
- Housing shortages and conflicts over land rights influencing the capacity to welcome children home.
- The legacy of residential schools and the Sixties Scoop that has disrupted kinship structures and the transmission of cultural knowledge and practices.
- Western systems that are not set up to help families heal holistically.

## Dancing in all Weather

Bent Arrow's work supporting Indigenous children and families continues even when facing challenging conditions and systemic barriers. Thinking broadly about Practise as Ceremony and the Act, they reflected on it as a possible process through which the child and family system can change and heal.

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- The whole purpose of this work we're doing with
- PolicyWise is about looking at the Act. And how could it impact our practice with families. So then when you look at it that way, it's like literally the system that we're trying to heal. That's what we're trying to do with this Act.

- Cheryl Whiskeyjack





# Reflecting on a Wisdom-Seeking Journey





## Reflecting on a Wisdom-Seeking Journey

*An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families* came into force over four years ago. Yet there is still much to learn about the ways Nations, Indigenous Governing Bodies, provincial and federal governments, and child and family serving agencies can work together and use the Act to reunite Indigenous children with their culture, families, communities, languages, and land.

In this document, we shared about Bent Arrow's experiences with the Act using their Practise as Ceremony model to show how they serve Indigenous children and families differently. Indigenous ways of knowing and doing are circular and relational. Similarly, we see our wisdom-seeking journey as circular and relational. The story may stop now, but it isn't ending. We will continue to engage with stories and with each other, as this offers new perspectives and ways forward.

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- When you go to an Elder for help, you never walk away
- with a step-by-step plan. Later you need to interpret it.
- It feels the same way with this research project. We're not always sure how things will pan out. Within our meetings, we even get to go between worlds. It's really authentic in having to navigate these two different worlds. I'm really excited about the final project and it being a living document. So many oral truths have been shared.

- Candace Cleveland

