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Promising Futures:
Envisioning a Brighter Tomorrow
for Children's Social Services

Introduction

When children and families need the support of children's social services, the way the systems respond—and the experiences children have—will shape their trajectories for better or worse. It will have ripple effects on their lives. The “systems” we are referring to extend beyond what is often referred to as child and family services, rather they span the entire human services ecosystem, including education, health, and justice as well as community organizations and communities themselves.

The stakes couldn't be higher.

The history of children's social services systems across the world is diverse, but in most Western countries they have developed with a focus on child protection, often with a highly interventionist approach that addresses neglect, abuse, and exploitation. Over time, Western philosophies have shifted to take a much broader view, that of the best interest of the child and family—including rights and well-being and a broader concept of the systems needed to support them.

Children's social services systems—roles, accountabilities, services, and responses—are moving to better deliver on those aspirations. The people working to help children and their families thrive are doing their best—frequently with constrained resources and authority. Despite their efforts and commitments, they're operating within systems that are often reactive instead of preventative and transactional instead of relational. The systems tend to focus on what's wrong and needs to be “fixed,” and not enough on the strengths that children and those around them can build upon. The system is changing, but not quickly enough.

Our children, our families, and the people who support them, require and deserve a system that works better. The time has come to chart a new way forward.

Leading systems share common features

Countries are experiencing similar challenges in delivering effective children's social services. Some are systemic, such as poverty, housing deficits, unemployment, and the rising cost of living. Families—and children—have increasingly complex requirements, including substance abuse and mental health needs. In many jurisdictions there's also an overrepresentation of certain communities in child protection and a growing recognition of some of the root causes of this phenomenon.

As these challenges converge, many children's social services organizations are also facing difficulties with recruiting and retaining staff. While these organizations are stretched—and experiencing public funding constraints—they must meet rising expectations among the public. That includes demands for more proactive, inclusive, integrated, and human-centered service delivery in general and certainly in social services.

All of these factors are compelling system reform. Change is inevitable and feasible. It's already well underway in many jurisdictions. We've studied the recent transformation of significant child and family service organizations and have established a perspective on promising practices. We've also identified where child and family services organizations that are seeing results are focusing their efforts and will share more about this over the series.

Upcoming topics will delve into a system response to child and family well-being, what constitutes an enabled workforce, evidence-based responses, and what needs to be done to drive bold change.



Let's start the series with some promising trends.

Several features are common to leading child and family services organizations. Here are six:

1. Taking a whole-of-system approach to supporting children. Thriving families can't be the sole responsibility of children's social services organizations. The whole system—not just children's services—must be child-centered. Services and support need to follow and be integrated around the child. Broader systems, resources, and communities also need to be engaged. Partnered approaches—delivered by organizations that families and communities trust—are better placed to build capability and intervene early. Everything from education to housing to health care should be geared to enable better outcomes for children.
2. Using a whole-of-family approach that emphasizes early intervention and prevention-based services. The goals should be:
 - Strengthening families so they can thrive and keep their children safe
 - Continuing to include parents and caregivers in their journey where out-of-home support may be required; and
 - Actively supporting parents and caregivers to develop the skills and tools to meet their child's needs when they return home.
3. Centering the voices of lived experience in policy and program design and at the individual case level. This will help ensure that children and their natural networks of support are able to influence the decisions that impact their lives. The role of dedicated children's advocates and monitoring organizations also needs to be grounded in the real experiences of children and young people to hold the system to account.
4. Ensuring evidence-based responses, grounded in what has been shown to work for children. There's a growing body of knowledge of what's effective and leads to the best outcomes, including Indigenous knowledge embedded in the traditions, experience, and culture of first nations communities. Care and protection responses, services, and settings are being redesigned to respond better to the holistic needs of children, to increase stability and maintain connection, and to respond earlier and more effectively when needs arise.

5. Focusing on strength-based, relational practices. That means recognizing what's already working and how additional supports can add to resilience. It's about putting the assets of children, families, and communities at the center instead of their deficits. It's also about investing in the practice—and capacity—of social workers and wider support workers to keep children safe, uphold their rights, and empower children and their families to achieve their outcomes.
6. Better using data to understand the needs and experiences of children and families. Through understanding the long-term well-being outcomes of children, organizations can meaningfully assess the impact and effectiveness of service models and embed practices for continuous improvements. Data and reporting also have a critical role to play in holding the system to account for delivering to and for children and families.

Children's Social Services are Evolving

Throughout children's social services, leaders are eager to improve their systems. They can learn from others that are on an ambitious course. The trends we've observed have translated into solid action across jurisdictions. In this series we will be featuring tactical examples and strong use cases from child and family services organizations globally.

Envisioning a Brighter Tomorrow

Imagine the impact if a community's child and family services organizations can work more collaboratively, providing comprehensive services that keep issues from escalating and reduce interventions in the first place.

Picture the difference if we can consistently prioritize family and cultural connections for children's well-being. Or if programs can enhance their capabilities through robust investments in research and staff development.

Consider how much better young people can fare if we better manage their transitions out of government care and into adulthood, with appropriate resources and support.

Think of the results if we focus even more on outcomes—and if we underpin that with the investments and accountabilities to support children and families in achieving their aspirations and long-term well-being.

What will success look like for the children's social services system?

From a broader societal viewpoint, it's about children flourishing in their families and communities, so fewer will need services at all. That's ideal. But needs and challenges won't disappear. When they do arise, the system should aspire to nurture children and families that are thriving and resilient, providing the support they need at the earliest opportunity.

Government can't provide children with the love only a family can provide. Government can commit to leading practices that enable the care and stability that can alter a child's life path.

Transforming how we think about and deliver services for children and families is possible—and it can improve safety, security, and outcomes for generations, creating a brighter tomorrow.

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