

Working to Break the Cycle

Residential schools have had an impact on First Nations people in many ways. There, they learned to use violence to get their way or to use violence as a form of discipline. Many reported being abused in residential schools for not doing as they were told. During residential school the First Nations people were not taught how to nurture, care, love or resolve conflict. They only saw and learned violence as a way to solve situations. This is one way that residential schools have impacted First Nations people. Now as a Child and Youth Counsellor in my community at Ganohkwasra Family Assault Support Services, I work toward breaking the cycle of violence. This cycle has been taught to generations before me and passed down generationally. I talk to the children and the youth to teach them that family violence is not our way, nor is it a way to solve problems.

As a Child & Youth Counsellor in the Gaq̓dwiyaːnq̓h (Cayuga language phrase meaning They Take Care of Children) I find ways to make learning fun and healing a little easier. When discussing issues like family violence with children and youth it can be somewhat difficult. However, using art and play techniques, the topic feels a little less intrusive. When the client can externalize the information he/she is more open to discuss through art work or as a character in play. We start out by discussing what they think family violence is and what it means. Next the client draws a picture of what their family looks like. I let them draw whatever they think their family is. Some draw just their immediate family; some draw their step family; others may include aunts, uncles, cousins, and so on. Some even draw their pets. I do not interfere with their drawing. The client may put so much detail in their drawings while another may put very little into their picture. This helps me to get their image of their family because some do not consider some members of their family as family. Once the client has completed a picture they then explain their picture to me. Younger clients enjoy this part. Most like to show off their pictures and explain every detail and why they drew what they did.

Next the client and I have a discussion on the types of abuse and violence. With youth I have them categorize the abuse and violence into the areas of mental, physical, emotional and spiritual. This provides another avenue of education for children and youth to understand themselves as holistic beings. The spiritual element is usually not recognized by the child or youth. Most had trouble but with a little assistance they are able to identify the impact of abuse on all four aspects as of their well-being.

Upon discussion of the effects of abuse on a person and a family, the client reflects on their own situation. They usually have become comfortable talking about the topic by this time and we are able to brainstorm the effects that they feel abuse has on children and youth. The holistic wheel is utilized, again to show the effects abuse has on a child or youth whether in the home, school and community. Bristol board for this part is used mostly. The client helps me read some of the effects which are a way to keep the client engaged in the topic. Engagement is so important to keep the client involved in the discussion and ensure that they understand the effects of abuse. It is also stressed the client not assume that because someone at school may show some of these characteristics, it does not mean that they are being abused at home.

After learning about family violence and the various types of abuse including the effects, the client is now ready to learn about the cycle of violence. Bristol boards are used with older clients. However, with younger clients, I teach them about the cycle of violence using dolls and art material. Youth clients are provided information of each phase/stage in the cycle and it is explained what it looks like, such as, what others might see or how a couple may behave. After going through each phase/stage the client is instructed to draw an example of each stage by utilizing their experiences with the cycle and family violence. Some have just drawn the examples we had gone through when discussing the cycle. With the younger client I use the dolls to demonstrate what each phase/stage would look like. They then go through the cycle as well with the dolls. At times the client will copy

the same thing I did and if so they are asked to draw each phase/stage of cycle out using different examples. This assists me to know if the child understands the information. I also go through the cycles of abuse for children with the client. With older clients the tension, explosion and honeymoon phase/stage in the cycle are named and then they are asked what they think the child would be doing. The older clients are usually good at identifying characteristics and actions a child might be displaying when caught in the cycle of violence. With younger clients I use the dolls again and will go through each phase/stage of the cycle of violence for children and then have the clients do the same.

Once they have completed both of the cycles, through discussion, younger clients can think of so many ways to break the cycle. They tell me about safe places they can turn to. They suggest calling the police, and that the family may separate. They know also that CAS (Children's Aid Society) becomes involved. They also make reference to the death of a victim and so much more is shared. The older clients usually do not know how to break the cycle or mention going to a shelter. This seems to be a result of the youth not knowing safer alternatives instead, believing the cycle of violence is normal. I talk with the clients about the importance of self-love as well as knowing what is healthy and unhealthy relationships and safety planning. We discuss the difficulty of leaving an abusive situation, the importance of leaving, how to leave safely as well as ways to seek help. We talk about learned behaviours and how abuse can be carried on within a family and passed down from generation to generation if the family does not find healing. By the fourth or fifth session it opens the door for the client to discuss what it is they want to cover in their healing journey.

In the counselling process with children and youth it is very important to provide education on what family violence is and how it impacts them and others, as well as how to end the cycle of violence. This knowledge is shared early in their healing journey with hopes that this knowledge will assist them in moving toward a violence free life. The art and play techniques are important tools to use to provide a non-intrusive, safe environment for the children and youth to explore and understand

the dynamics of family violence. Children and youth are our future. They need to have so much knowledge and respect modelled for them especially since one day they will be the caregivers who will hopefully share the same teachings with their younger generation.

Ashley Maracle-Hill
Ganohkwasra-Child & Youth Counsellor

