

## Pathways to Parity: Transformative Strategies in Child Welfare

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As an Indigenous scholar/artist, I originally viewed the pursuit of parity in child welfare as akin to the figure of a bear, a metaphor that deeply resonates with the values and attributes necessary for equitable child welfare practices. Here's how I interpret this metaphor, integrating the critical aspects of prevention, community-based services, and the importance of spirit:



- 1. Strength and Presence:** In many Indigenous cultures, the bear symbolizes strength and leadership. Achieving parity in child welfare demands a robust and undeniable commitment, requiring strong leadership and advocacy to ensure equal treatment and opportunities for all children and families within the system. This includes proactive measures in prevention, focusing on early intervention to support families before crises occur, and fostering an understanding of one's own spirit to better connect and work with others.
- 2. Protection and Care:** Traditionally, bears are protectors, especially of their young, mirroring the core mission of child welfare—to safeguard and nurture children. For Indigenous communities, where children are often viewed as sacred, equitable care and protection are paramount. This extends to community-based prevention services that are culturally tailored, supporting families within their communities and preventing the trauma associated with separation, while fostering a deep spiritual connection that respects the sacredness of each individual's spirit.
- 3. Resource Needs:** Just as a bear requires sufficient resources to survive, our child welfare systems must be well-equipped to support all families effectively. This means not only financial investment but also access to community-based services that are culturally appropriate and incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems, ensuring that support is both relevant and respectful. Emphasizing the spiritual needs alongside the physical and emotional, these resources help individuals and communities maintain their spiritual health and integrity.

4. **Adaptability and Resilience:** The ability of a bear to adapt to various environments highlights the need for our child welfare policies to be flexible and responsive. Systems must adapt to the diverse needs of the families they serve, particularly in Indigenous communities, which may face unique challenges. Community-based prevention services play a crucial role here, offering adaptable and locally informed solutions that help families thrive in a multitude of circumstances, all while respecting and nurturing the spirit of each community and individual.
5. **The Danger of Neglect:** Neglecting the needs of any group within the child welfare system can lead to significant harm. Inequities in child welfare can result in systemic failures disproportionately affecting Indigenous families, often manifesting as higher rates of child removal and less access to supportive services. Effective prevention strategies and strong community-based programs are essential to mitigate these risks, embodying a precautionary approach that prevents crises before they escalate, and maintaining a focus on the spiritual well-being that is crucial to the holistic health of individuals and communities.

Through this narrative, I advocate for a child welfare system that not only embodies the bear's strength, protection, resourcefulness, adaptability, and caution but also respects and nurtures the spiritual connections that are essential to Indigenous ways of knowing and being. This holistic approach ensures that all children, especially those from Indigenous communities, are treated with the dignity and care they deserve, grounding support in a deep understanding of spirit and community.

Incorporating the imagery of the moon and Métis flower art emerging from the bear's figure into the metaphor of achieving parity in child welfare enriches the narrative with deeper cultural and spiritual meanings, particularly from an Indigenous perspective. Here's how these elements can be woven into the interpretation:

1. **The Moon:** In many Indigenous cultures, the moon is a symbol of guidance, change, and renewal. It influences the natural rhythms of the earth and is often associated with feminine energy, which ties closely to notions of nurturing and protection in child welfare. The presence of the moon in the background of this metaphorical bear suggests oversight and guidance, illuminating paths forward in dark times and providing a consistent presence that helps regulate and renew the spirits and well-being of the community. It emphasizes the cyclical nature of life and systems, reminding us that just as the moon waxes and wanes, so too do the needs and strengths of families, requiring a responsive and adaptive child welfare system.

2. **Métis Flower Art:** The Métis are known for their distinctive floral beadwork, which is rich in symbolism and history. Flowers in Métis art often represent the connection to nature and the land, as well as resilience and beauty. When imagined as emerging from the bear's figure in our metaphor, these flowers can symbolize the growth and flourishing of communities when they are nurtured correctly. This art speaks to the cultural heritage and identity that are essential components of effective child welfare systems, particularly those serving Indigenous populations. It underscores the importance of culturally grounded practices that respect and integrate the unique traditions and histories of the communities they serve.

By integrating these elements into the metaphor of the bear in child welfare, I think the image of the narrative deepens:

- **Strength and Guidance:** The moon provides a steady, guiding light for the bear, representing how child welfare systems must be guided by consistent principles of equity and justice, illuminated by the wisdom of ancestral and cultural knowledge.
- **Cultural Integrity and Flourishing:** The emergence of Métis flower art from the bear underscores the importance of cultural integrity in child welfare practices. Just as the bear supports the growth of these flowers, so too should child welfare systems support the flourishing of children's cultural identities, ensuring they grow up with a strong sense of belonging and self-worth.
- **Renewal and Adaptation:** The cyclical nature of the moon's phases reminds us that child welfare systems must be capable of renewal and adaptation, responsive to the changing needs and circumstances of the families they serve, while always maintaining a focus on spiritual and cultural continuity.

This enriched metaphor not only advocates for a robust and culturally responsive child welfare system but also highlights the essential roles of spiritual guidance, cultural heritage, and adaptive renewal in achieving true parity and holistic well-being for all children, especially those from Indigenous communities.