

Traditional Indigenous Kinship Practices at Home: Being Child-Centered During the Pandemic

By Andrea Landry (Anishinaabe from Pawgwasheeng)

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Artwork by: Chief Lady Bird
Instagram: @chiefladybird

In our traditional kinship systems, children were the at the center of the family system.

Everything we did was with, and for, the children.

Women had babies on their back, breasts, and hips while they were skinning and tanning hides, gathering water and wood, cooking, harvesting berries and medicine, and everything in between.

Older children often stayed with the kokums and moshums to provide that much needed extra support for them.

Children learned from our kinship systems. They learned from their mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, kokums, moshums, and older relatives. They learned from the Land by being fully integrated and immersed into most processes and practices.

And the idea of children being seen as a disruption to daily living was non-existent.

During this pandemic, the invitation that exists is be mindful of that, and to make these concepts a way of life.

Be mindful of any thoughts or feelings that may come up that are oriented around seeing children as a disruption, an annoyance, or an inconvenience, when they're home with you.

Because this style of thinking derived from residential schools and the forcefully implemented colonial education systems.

Due to this, our mindset from how we relate to children has also shifted dramatically.

Those systems have re-wired our brains to the point where it is seen as "abnormal" and as a "disruption" to have our children home with us, by our sides, watching, learning, living, and growing with us.

Collectively.

It is seen as an "interruption" to today's colonially-washed down version of our kinship system, to have children in our homes, and on the land, with us, all day.

It is seen as an "annoyance" to hear the voices and laughter (or tears) of children as we do our best to balance working from home in the presence of children.

I get it, it's tough. It's challenging when you have a timeline to meet, deadlines to get to, and the needs of your child(ren) are overriding those deadlines and timelines. It is something that I struggle with every day with working from home and starting to home-school our daughter.

If you are a solo parent with limited support and multiple children, it must be challenging to get that needed 10 mins of "me time," now more than ever with the pandemic and shut down of colonial education institutions. The invitation that exists is this: get creative.

If you are a disabled parent and the colonial education institutions was your respite or your much needed way to focus on what you have to do, the invitation is to build a support network, even if it's online to start.

The important thing to remember is that we must begin to find new ways to help raise our children that don't require a reliance on colonial systems.

"It's tough." "It's tiring." "It's exhausting."

Yes, it can be. Your points are valid.

And, in times of struggle, I often remind myself:

“Capitalism and colonial thinking will never super-cede the needs, wants, and interests of my child. Emotional, mentally, spiritually, and physically.”

And

“My child is not a disruption.”

Because the real disruption occurred when we began to think that sending our children to school was the better choice in the first place, rather than having them us with us, in the presence of our kinship systems, at all times.

The real disruption, that began this shift, happened when those priests and nuns stole our children away, attempting to annihilate the foundational systems we had in regards to our kinship systems.

The real disruption began when we started to see our children as “inconveniences” versus the sacred, future bearers and carriers of indigenous knowledge that had kept us alive for many generations.

And this shift, this disruption, this change, from child-centred child rearing, to adult supremacist/colonial child rearing, is what is continuing to maintain colonialism as the driving force within our kinship systems.

Capitalism and it's systems are now leading how we live with, and relate to, the children in our lives. And it's wreaking havoc on the very foundation of how we parent, how we discipline, and how we speak to, our children.

The reality is, adult supremacy and superiority believes that children in the home during work hours is an inconvenience or an annoyance.

One of the biggest misconceptions that adult supremacy and colonial parenting believes is that keeping children home from colonial, and often problematic, education systems will lead to poor socialization and isolation for the child(ren).

Yet, if you look at our traditional kinship systems, socialization was everywhere.

We had such intricately intertwined systems. These systems included kinship, socialization, love and belonging, and survival methods which encompassed, and was engrained in, our daily living.

A child involved fully with the routines of family would achieve socialization through being mentored by the adults on what their roles were, and how to fulfil them. The child would learn from older children about social games and activities which were often tied

to their own growth and development, along with survival skills. The child would gain skills of self-discipline and survival, simply by being present to the many layers of work that had to be done in our communities.

The child would learn to stay focused and follow the traditional teachings instilled within them since being in the womb, through means of commitment and dedication to their cultural practices, sacred traditions, and elaborate mother tongues.

Yet, the shift and disruption attempted to erode all of that.

Because of the disruption, we are seeing something different.

We are now seeing the elation and excitement parents have during the end of summer holidays. The photos of parents celebrating that their children are gone for a larger part of the day, in a colonial system that maintains colonialism, oppression, racism, and child inferiority, the education system.

And we are seeing the humor at the expense of the feelings of children arise again during the quarantines from the coronavirus pandemic.

“Oh no! I’m stuck at home with my kids for two weeks! Send help!”

First of all, it will probably be more than two weeks based on what we do know about this virus. And second of all, our traditional kinship systems operated from the space that it was a blessing to be in the presence of our children continuously. That was the gift. And we honoured it as such.

Our kinship systems have shifted and changed so dramatically that we have long forgotten the importance of having children present for a majority of the day in our daily lives. We have forgotten the importance of play with the children. We have forgotten the important of always including children in the skills that we practice daily for survival.

So how do we dissolve this narrative that has become to normalized in our family systems?

How do we dissolve the idea and belief that children are not supposed to be home while we work?

How do we dissolve the normalization of the idea that children are a distraction to the more important adult perceived environment?

We engage.

We communicate.

We love.

We take a moment in times of feeling out of control and frustration, and we accept. We accept that we cannot control the emotions, behaviours, ideas, and outcomes of children's behaviours. Just like they can't control ours. To think that we can instantly places us in a place of supremacy and superiority over children. And our kinship systems are not about that.

To disrupt everything that the nuns and priests taught our relatives in those schools about adult-child relationships, and to disrupt what colonialism has taught us about what "successful" indigenous kinship looks like, we must:

1. Talk about the virus. Talk about what is happening in the world to your child(ren) in age appropriate languages. Use pictures if you have to. Create space for them to ask questions. Create safe spaces for them to feel their fear. If you've felt fear during it all- chances are, so have they. Tell them "I've been afraid too, and that's ok." Empathize. Remind them that even when you're afraid, you can still be brave. And sometimes that you don't have to be brave at all.
2. Ask yourself why you feel your child(ren) is a distraction to your work. Who taught you this belief? Where did it come from? Did it come from your parents? How does it feel to think of that? Where in your body do you feel it? Create safe spaces for yourself to move through these limiting and toxic beliefs in healthy ways, and do so in front of your children if you can. Because healthy healing means doing it openly, and authentically in front of family. To show them that there are healthy ways to heal.
3. Remind yourself, and your child(ren), of sanitation and cleanliness routines if you aren't already doing that. In communities with limited access to clean drinking water, find ways to gather water from alternate methods. From the Land. Have conversations on why clean drinking water is important. Boil snow down if need be. Converse and preserve. And teach your child(ren) about protecting and honoring water.
4. Include the child(ren) in everything that you do in your daily lives, at age-appropriate levels. (ie: let your child help with dishes, even if they're two-years old and take 5 minutes to dry one spoon or take your 1.5 year old to check rabbit snares with you.
5. Let the children lead. Provide moments in the day where the child(ren) decide what to do as a collective for a period of time. Show them that their ideas are important and honour them fully.

6. Put your phone away. For an hour. Two hours. And really PLAY with your child(ren). Kids and teens love to engage in play with you. Play dolls, build the LEGO castles, and make stories up. Even if it means asking your teen “hey, can you show me how to play your video game?” It makes such a difference.
7. Come up with creative, educational activities. Science with food colouring. Music lessons. Art. Pinterest has tons of ideas.
8. Land-based learning is essential. If you live on the Rez or in wide open spaces that are safe to have a relationship with the land during the pandemic, do that. Play on the Land in a way that reminds children how to love the Land. Explore. Ask questions. Create spaces for your child(ren) to ask questions. Sit and be still with your child(ren) to observe the Land.
9. Teach your child(ren) survival skills that you know. How to make a fire. How to cook outdoors. Skin and tan a hide. Situational awareness. How to cook in general. How to build a shelter. How to plant seeds (if you have any and can start planting indoors.)
10. Show your child(ren) how to be giving during this time. Drop food off for elders or single parent families at their doorsteps (as long as you have zero risk of having the virus.) Offer home cooked meals to those who may have not had the time or money to stock up on supplies. Let your children help you make the meal or pack the bag you’re donating. Or simply show your child(ren) the importance of checking in on family members through phone calls, facetimes, and text messages,
11. Ask your child(ren) daily which relatives THEY want to FaceTime or call to check in. Show them that kinship, during times of crisis, is fundamental to our survival.
12. If conflict arises in your home while you’re stuck at home, show the child(ren) in your life how to deal with conflict in healthy ways. Deal with your shit if you have to in order to avoid toxic and destructive behaviours being projected onto your child(ren).
13. Remind your child(ren) how much you love having them home. Show them through acts of affection, and love. Remind them that their presence is important, that they are not an annoyance. That their frustrations and any emotion they may be experiencing during this time is valid. That they are just as important as the adults in the house. That they matter.
14. Do not project any of your pain, out of control feelings, or frustrations onto your child. Do not blame the child(ren) for anything. If you do, do everything you can

to make amends and apologize. And fix your behaviour. Children do not deserve to be the outlet for our fears and feelings of being out of control.

15. If your child(ren) begins to project their fears and emotions onto others, create safe spaces for children to feel. Children are not “acting up” and we don’t need to “find ways to deal with/manage our kid’s feelings.” We need to create safe spaces for children to feel. Vulnerability accepted spaces. Talk about emotions and options on what it would look like to feel those emotions in safe and healthy ways. Let the child lead the conversation and solve their own problems.
16. Teach your child(ren) life skills from healthy conflict to problem solving to healthy communication. By leading by example. Walk your talk.
17. Speak to your child(ren) as our ancestor’s spoke to their child(ren). Be mindful. Pray for your children. Pause and breathe if you’re frustrated. Mindfully respond to your child(ren) versus responding in reactionary mode. It will make all the difference.
18. If you need to, tell your child(ren) “I need space for a bit.” Give yourself that 5 minute moment to cry, breathe, and feel instead of projecting onto your child(ren). And most importantly
19. Be the parent colonialism never wanted you to be.

We must dissolve these concepts and ideas that minimize the presence and well-being of child(ren) in our lives.

Let’s undo what colonialism and residential schools have taught us about children and kinship.

Let’s revitalize what worked for generations in regards to our relationships with our children and our kinship systems.

Because that’s what indigenous kinship is really about.

By the children, for the children, and ultimately, with the children.

It’s valuable and important.

It worked for generations. So why wouldn’t it work today?

Read the article [online](#).