

Rekindled Trauma: Former Kamloops Residential School

Authors

J. Kevin Cameron, M.Sc., R.S.W., B.C.E.T.S., B.C.S.C.R.
Board Certified Expert in Traumatic Stress
Diplomate, American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress
Executive Director,
North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response

Dr. Marleen Wong
Director of Field Education at the USC School of Social Work
PhD



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E-Alert

The Unfolding Events at the Former Kamloops Residential School

On Friday May 28th the truth was revealed regarding the buried bodies of over two hundred children. My colleagues and I penned a brief E-Alert on that day through our roles with the B.C. Government ERASE Initiative. It was sent to many professionals in that province who, like us, were in awe of this reality. This E-Alert is for the entire country and every Indigenous Nation and People as well as all those who wish to help. It is more personal than any other communication I have penned.

The greatest fear for any victim of abuse is that, if they tell, they will not be believed. The other is that, even if they are believed, no one will care. How immense is it when that feeling has been the lot of an entire people?

It is clear that trauma is stored in the body and very much at the cellular level, including the burdens of intergenerational trauma. The bodies of over two hundred children found in the grounds of the former Kamloops Residential School in Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation has magnified that burden as the past and much of the unresolved present now converge.

Too many Non-Indigenous Canadians have not applied themselves to understanding the true history of Indigenous People and First Nations upon these lands. Instead many assume that residential schools were schools! But they were the great North American juxtaposition of what we hold today as the ideals of safe and caring learning environments. They were the beginning of the dissolution of the family unit and the confounding of natural law wherein a parent and a community of parents should raise a child. There was never consent!

In a way, every Indigenous person, whether they were in a residential school or not, is a residential school survivor. Why they were constructed and what happened within them is symbolic of the intense racism of “that day” and the ongoing systemic racism of “our time”. The true character of a so-called modern nation should be measured in the treatment of their Indigenous people. We cannot all move from this land, but we should be moved by the bright and penetrating light shone upon this crumbling cornerstone of Canadian society.

One of the basest comments made by some is to say to an immigrant to Canada: “go back to where you came from”. By the way, it is usually a white citizen who is making the comment with little insight into where they themselves “came from”. I have had many white people say to me “well other cultures are racist to us”. It is true that the scourge of racism throughout the world is not limited to whites as the protagonist, but in North America “white is the colour of the canvas that racism is painted upon”.

It is admirable for Canadians to keep the peace in other countries but not while failing to keep the peace and promises in this one. During this time of profound traumatic reliving for Indigenous People in every Nation in Canada surely the rest of us can be still and listen to the

cries from the dust and lift up the arms that hang down and steady the gaze of one with a broken heart with the sound of our voices that simply say “I believe you”, “I care” and “I am beginning to see these things more clearly now”.

For those of you who are Non-Indigenous professionals, we must understand that trauma does not necessarily create new dynamics in human systems, it just intensifies already existing symptoms. Therefore, this is not a time for us to seek out the positives in the hope of lessening anyone’s pain, it is a time to be present and to listen. Even for those who have not experienced it, every parent or caregiver should be able to imagine the bitterness of what it may be like to lose a child. But how bitter? Only those who have experienced it can tell.

Our foundation for providing support from a crisis and trauma response perspective should begin by ensuring physically safe environments for emotionally safe connections. Like any grieving family there needs to be a time of coming together. For many Non-Indigenous professionals, we must sometimes wait to be invited in if we have not yet proven to be an ally. Indigenous individuals and families who do reach out should be willingly wrapped around by all support services (Indigenous and Non-Indigenous) with the goal, as appropriate, to connect them with members of their families and communities.

During traumatic aftermath some people need to talk and others do not. Secure and caring attachments will lower anxiety more than any words. Be ok with intensified emotions that will build over the days to follow. The fields of Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA) and Crisis/Trauma Response are inseparably connected. From time to time there may be those who lack compassion or insight who may attempt to cause further emotional harm to those who are grieving. As such, all VTRA leads in protocol regions across the country should convene to identify any potential dynamics that are worrisome and move to intervene in a timely way to avoid any potential risk. Likewise, local crisis response teams should prepare, as necessary, for “Whole Community” interventions to support Indigenous and Non-Indigenous children, youth and families in processing the many implications and effects of the untold stories of these lost members of the human family.

However, do not expect human weakness among Indigenous Communities at this time. Expect pain, sorrow and a profound sadness but in all my life I have never seen a more powerful and resilient people than members of the First Nations of this land. I stand amazed at the unconquerable spirit of those I have grown to love. Today, be on the right side of history.

J. Kevin Cameron



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How to Talk to Your Children About the Unfolding Events at the Former Kamloops Residential School

Dr. Marleen Wong

Preface

In the 1800's and through the 1900's Indigenous children in North America were taken from their homes and forced to attend boarding schools. They were punished for speaking their native languages and deliberately stripped of engaging in or even thinking about their spiritual and cultural values and practices. Even in the face of child labor laws, they were made to work long hours in unpaid manual labor. Many of the children were badly neglected. All were emotionally abused if not physically or sexually abused.

Alive today are those who survived the experience of the residential boarding schools. From first-hand experience, they knew children who did not survive. The wounds are deep with words such as historical trauma and genocide used to describe what has occurred.

Dr. Maria Brave Heart defines historical trauma as the "cumulative... psychological wounding over the life span and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experience." She emphasized that we must be especially aware not only of the effects of multigenerational historical trauma but the ways in which each family and tribal community frames the story and meaning of their losses.

For adults, she identifies four components designed to foster healing from trauma and grief:

- 1) confronting the history;
- 2) understanding the trauma and its effects;
- 3) releasing the pain; and
- 4) transcending the trauma.

This is a difficult and heart wrenching journey for adults. How can we talk with children about this tragedy?

*Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, PhD (Hunkpapa/Oglala Lakota), Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Director of Native American and Disparities Research at the Center for Rural and Community Behavioral Health, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.

For Our Children Today

In this segment, we draw from the work of multiple expert sources: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, the American Psychological Association, and organizations that educate children about the Holocaust in which six million Jews were exterminated because of hate, bigotry and unrelenting political scapegoating and condemnation. You may recognize common elements. However, we are organizing them to align with what we know about

prevention, intervention and resilience research in child trauma, brain science and the healing power of meaningful connections and conversations between caring adults and children.

- Take a moment. Take a deep breath. Take stock of your own emotions before talking about the Kamloops tragedy with your child. The purpose of your conversation is to understand and to address your child's concerns. Your child needs you to be calm and to reassure them that their safety is of greatest important to you.
- Listen to your child's fears, questions, worries to understand what they are thinking or feeling without criticism or judgment.
- You can say something to Protect them If they ask, "How did the children die or Why did this happen?" for example, they may be wondering "Might this happen to us?" A short, honest, and reassuring answer for a young child would be something like, "This happened when children were separated from their parents for no reason except they were First Nations children. They were forced to live in residential schools where they were treated badly. We don't allow this to happen anymore. We have laws against it, and leaders who have told us how wrong it was."
- Connect with them in age appropriate ways. A child in kindergarten or early elementary grades want to know that they and their loved ones are safe. Let them know they can come to you anytime they feel worried or afraid.
- Think together about ways you and your child can reach out and make a difference. You might decide to do a good deed. There may be children in your community who can benefit from kindness and inclusion.
- Model kind and sensitive behavior. Start slowly. In the beginning, keep it brief. Your child will let you know what they are worried about which will change over time as more is known. We know that hundreds of residential schools will now be subject to the same scrutiny as the former Kamloops Residential School. Even though some of the survivors of Kamloops have said that they were not surprised by the discovery of the child graves, there is more trauma ahead if new discoveries are made about other abuses and losses.
- Model tolerance, respect, and civic engagement. The best way to make sure your child grows up to understand the lessons of the history of Indigenous people. Sponsor a family, help out at a food bank, find a way to give back and help make the world a better place for us all.

- In your actions, show that you believe in your child's resilience. Yes, it is a dangerous world, and there are reasons for fear. But they are not alone and together you can use the lessons of the past to help your child feel empowered by helping to create a world that is safer, kinder, and more loving.
- Be creative. Help your child find healing avenues of creative expression, whether musical, visual, linguistic, dance or some other culturally or spiritually relevant way.
- Teach your children how to face a crisis. Be honest and provide reliable information. If you don't know, it's o.k. to acknowledge that. You can say, 'That's a really good question, let's think about how we can find the answers. Don't overwhelm your child with more than they need to know at the time. Your child will be reassured by your honesty. Children can feel secure in a dangerous world if they feel they have a caring adult they can depend upon and trust.
- Share your belief that love is stronger than hate. Help your child move toward constructive actions that fight every kind of bigotry, and prejudice. Share stories of the courage of First Nations heroes in everyday life who have stood up to racism and discrimination. Point out ways in which you have observed your child speaking out, reaching out or helping others at home, at school, in clubs, places of worship or in other activities.

Reference Links:

<https://www.nactatr.com/files/2020NACTATR-PFA.pdf>

<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/conversations-about-historical-trauma-part-one>

<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/age-related-reactions-traumatic-event>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/going-beyond-intelligence/201811/how-should-you-talk-your-child-about-the-holocaust>

Canadian Resources Below



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Canadian Resources

24/7 Supports:

[KUU-US Crisis Line](#)

1-800-588-8717

[Indian Residential School Survivors Society](#)

1-866-925-4419

Mon-Fri, 8am-8pm PT

Weekends, 10am-2pm PT

[Tsow-Tun-Le-Lum Society](#)

1-888-403-3123

[Aboriginal Wellness Program](#)

604-675-2551 or 1-866-884-0888

[Canadian Mental Health Association - British Columbia Division](#)

1-800-555-8222

[HeretoHelp](#)

1-800-661-2121

First Nations Health Authority – Mental Health Benefit

<https://www.fnha.ca/benefits/mental-health>

Métis Nation BC – Mental Health Services

<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/mental-health-substance-use/resources/kuu-us-crisis-line>

National Crisis Hotlines

[Kids Help Phone](#)

1-800-668-6868

[Crisis Services Canada](#)

1-833-456-4566 or text 45645

[First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness Help Line](#)

1-855-242-3310