

## Executive Summary

### What is the meaning of child and youth well-being?

*“Asking the question, ‘what is well-being?’ is a very western question. When I think about the Indigenous universe, I wonder how we can respond?” - Talking Circle Participant*

**The way we define and understand child and youth well-being matters.** In the Indigenous universe, for example, well-being is a way of being and doing. It is an action intertwined with others, the land, animals, plants, and the cosmos – it is vast. As such, it is not a thing that can be easily summarized, defined, and measured. Well-being is about balance, happiness, joy, and moving forward *in a good way* learned through responsibility, reciprocity, language, and ceremony. It is about connection, belonging, and rootedness in community, land, and among other beings. According to Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers, well-being in an Indigenous universe is about moving from survival mode to a time where things can grow again for Indigenous children and their children’s children.

Government and non-governmental agencies exist in a universe parallel to the Indigenous one. They rely on a definition of well-being to direct services and programs for children, youth, and families. They also employ the definition in their assessments – to understand what is needed, what is working, and where there are opportunities for change. **To ensure programs and services are equitable and culturally responsive, it is vital we define and understand child and youth well-being based on the perspectives and values of culturally diverse communities.** That is the goal of this project.

### Defining well-being

ALIGN Association of Community Services (ALIGN) contracted us at PolicyWise for Children & Families (PolicyWise) to develop a definition of child and youth well-being for child welfare practice in Alberta to optimize well-being across the continuum of care. Our goal was a definition that resonated with diverse cultural communities across the province and prioritized Indigenous peoples’ perspectives. We undertook this task with an understanding of the challenge of developing a shared language of well-being that represented Indigenous and non-Indigenous universes. We were particularly mindful of the dominance of the non-Indigenous ‘Western’ worldview within definitions of well-being that frequently shape the health, social, and child welfare sectors. As we heard from a Talking Circle participant:

*“We didn’t have permission to talk about wellness. We had non-Indigenous doctors, nurses, teachers, and missionaries come and tell us. They used their own words and perspectives.”*

To conduct this work, we reviewed the relevant literature and interviewed thought leaders, leading practitioners in the child welfare sector, Indigenous practitioners, and wellness scholars. We contextualized what we learned by engaging members of diverse communities from across Alberta. This included ALIGN member agencies, Indigenous Knowledge Keepers and Elders, and youth. **We identified four foundational principles and seven domains of child and youth well-being relevant to the child welfare continuum in Alberta.**

## Foundational principles of child and youth well-being

We identified four principles that are foundational to the seven domains of well-being.

### *Principle 1: Multidimensional and interconnected*

Child and youth well-being is holistic. It has multiple dimensions that reflect unique meanings for people, families, and communities. Well-being is inextricably tied to cultural ways of being in and understanding the world. It is contextual, interconnected with others, the land, and the broader society. Well-being shifts in response to age and stage of development.

### *Principle 2: Ecological and relational*

Child and youth well-being is shaped by and emerges from relationships. It is embedded in families and develops in relation to natural supports, communities, institutions, and the larger social, economic, political, and natural environment. While child and youth well-being are at the centre, strengthening relationships with and supporting caregivers, families, and communities are key factors in child and youth well-being.

### *Principle 3: Equitable access and social structures*

Child and youth well-being exists within broader social structures. There are social patterns that determine access to basic needs, resources, and supports. Equitable social structures promote and ensure equitable access to basic needs, employment opportunities, education, social services and supports, health care, justice, and other social and economic determinants of health required for child, youth, family, and community well-being.

### *Principle 4: Strengths-based and trauma-informed*

Child and youth well-being is nurtured by acknowledging, celebrating, and developing strengths of children, youth, families, and communities. It is about the presence of protective factors, supportive relationships, and possibilities for growth, joy, and thriving. Recognizing and healing trauma is essential to child and youth well-being. This involves acknowledging and addressing the root causes of intergenerational trauma, structural racism, colonialism, and systemic exclusion.

## Domains of child and youth well-being

We identified seven domains of child and youth well-being. To facilitate understanding and clarity, we have presented the domains separately. In practice they are intertwined and overlapping.

## *Caring and stable relationships*

Caring relationships describe supportive, meaningful, and reciprocal relationships between children and their natural supports like family members and teachers as well as formalized supports like caseworkers. Family composition, caregiving roles, and relationships with children are culturally rooted and diverse across communities. Relationship stability is key for child and youth well-being. Children and youth need a consistent person who they can trust and on whom they can depend. Reciprocal relationships are ones where children also contribute. In this way they build healthy connections and self-esteem.

## *Supportive and safe environments*

Supportive and safe environments describe children's social and physical circumstances. They include and go beyond basic needs to provide equitable access to material goods, activities, services, and education. Safe environments include protective factors such as well-resourced and skilled caregivers, service providers, and social supports. They are underpinned by principles of equity, respect, recognition, and empowerment. Accessible, universally available, and culturally responsive services, supports, and care providers are key to supportive and safe environments.

## *Sense of identity and autonomy*

Identity describes a sense of self as well as how a person is perceived by others. It is multifaceted and fluid. Identity emerges and is dynamically shaped in relationship to others, the land, and community. Autonomy describes the ability to make choices toward self-determination and self-directed action. For children and youth, a strong identity and autonomy are reflected in confidence, belonging, and a sense of purpose. Pursuing interests and activities that bring joy can build identity among children and youth.

## *Cultural connection*

Cultural connection describes a positive relationship to cultural identity. It includes access to cultural resources and community such as language, ceremonies, teachings, and relations. Supporting well-being in newcomer and immigrant children and youth includes fostering healthy bi-cultural identities and intercultural competency. A culturally safe environment is characterized by humility, curiosity, respect, and the recognition that children may have different relationships and experiences of their culture.

## *Healthy development and growth*

Healthy development and growth encompass physical, emotional, cognitive, mental, and spiritual well-being at different ages and stages. For example, making friends, pursuing interests, getting enough sleep, learning, and regulating emotions. Children need to develop skills, play, explore interests and gifts, think critically, and be curious about the world. Healthy development is conceptualized in multiple, culturally specific ways. Indigenous perspectives highlighted a balance of physical, mental, spiritual, and

emotional realms. Child and youth development and growth is frequently marked by rites of passage that include teachings to support and prepare children and youth for roles or stages in life.

### *Connection to the land*

Connection to the land means cultivating relationships with the land, water, food sources, and the natural environment. For Indigenous communities, connection to the land and the opportunity to practice land-based activities are essential to identity. They also support living in a good way, which includes connecting with positive aspects of life and gratitude for the land. For children from immigrant, migrant, and refugee communities, connecting to the land builds a relationship and a sense of belonging to their new homeland. For all children and youth connection to land is vital for well-being and builds awareness about environmental health, which in turn is necessary for life and well-being.

### *Meaningful knowledge*

Meaningful knowledge can include formal and informal education and learning opportunities that are culturally responsive and safe. It requires a flexible approach to knowledge development that accounts for a child's unique way of learning, their life circumstances, and their needs. It can include reflective learning where children can reflect on and learn from their actions. Meaningful knowledge includes the knowledge passed from family, role models, Elders, community teachings, ceremony and the land, and life skills. It supports identity formation, pride, sense of belonging, healing, and joy.

## A summary of next steps

In the next phase of this project, we will build on what we learned to develop measurement tools that align with well-being as we have defined it. In preparation for this work, we conducted a preliminary scan of existing well-being measurement tools and approaches. Through this work, we identified five measurement principles to guide the next phase of the project:

1. **Strengths-based:** Focus on what is present rather than what is absent.
2. **Context-informed:** Recognize the unique needs and circumstances of each child and family.
3. **Qualitative:** Capture experiential information through stories, experience, and perceptions.
4. **Accountable:** Ensure children, youth, and families have opportunities to give feedback.
5. **Holistic and longitudinal:** Include all aspects of well-being and how it is influenced over time.

## Reflections on a learning journey

This report marks the end of a year-long collaborative learning journey to better understand and define well-being for use in the child welfare practice in Alberta. Our goal was to describe well-being in a way that resonated with diverse cultural communities and prioritized Indigenous peoples' perspectives. Through our engagement we learned the importance of creating a definition that was flexible, culturally

responsive, self-determined, strengths-based, meaningful, and grounded in family, community, culture, and land. We learned that child and youth well-being is not a single thing. Instead, it is an action that shifts in response to life stage, age, and community values, practices, and beliefs. What we learned is that vital to supporting the well-being of children and youth is listening with curiosity and humility.

***Our hope is that the definition of well-being that we have outlined in this report – including the four foundational principles and seven domains – sparks continued conversation and deep reflection on how child welfare practice can best support children, youth, families, and communities along their unique pathways to being well and thriving.***