



Briefing Paper: What is a Healthy Family? Guidance from Youth and Elders

In order to move beyond discriminatory and colonial concepts of ‘neglect’, we must first and foremost listen to the voices of young people and Elders on how they define a healthy family. During the webinar panel on this topic as part of the *Beyond Neglect* series, we will learn from expert panelists comprised of an Indigenous youth and Elder, racialized youth and former youth in care. One of our expert panelists, Chevon Cadigan, is a UNICEF Canada U-Ambassador and a Grade 10 student from Downeyville, Ontario. Chevon shares her reflections on what constitutes a healthy family, based on her own experiences and her involvement with UNICEF Canada.

What IS a healthy family?

Healthy families vary from home to home, with various guiding principles, ethics, and beliefs. Three key features influence the environment of healthy families, including their ability to communicate needs, understanding each other's differences, and the respect that family members give each other.

Members of the family must speak and listen to one another in order to effectively communicate. Not only should one member listen to another, but they should listen to understand. Listening to understand helps family members express themselves without feeling concerned about judgement. Furthermore, family members should discuss boundaries with one another. Healthy boundaries are made on the basis that each member of the family is an individual with their own preferences, thoughts, and feelings. Most importantly, discussions with family members should take place in a healthy environment with lots of support. This can take the form of having supportive people in the same room while discussing heavy topics that are significant to building a healthy family.

Healthy families acknowledge and accept differences. It is critical that families respect each other's varying opinions and beliefs, including religious, gender, and sexual diversity; this helps all members of the family develop and maintain trust in one another. For instance, there are cases where young people are ostracized from their families for coming out, converting religions, and simply having different beliefs/opinions than their parents. Although family members may not agree with one another, it is important they understand and support each other to foster mutual respect.

Respect, a concept that ties everything together, is a basic principle in a healthy family and covers a variety of topics. Respecting one's boundaries and individuality is

incredibly important to building a basis of trust and understanding in healthy families. Therefore, when a family is faced with a challenge, their previous experience in working together and respecting each other is crucial to maintaining that healthy relationship.

Taking everything into consideration, healthy families often prioritize what contributes to making their relationship with one another healthy. Three examples of what these principles may be are communication, consideration, and respect. Each of these guidelines can be acknowledged in the various kinds of relationships that members may have with one another and are vital in fostering healthy families.

Additional resources:

UNICEF One Youth Canada: <https://oneyouth.unicef.ca/en>

UNICEF One Youth Canada Youth-Centered Design Toolkit: <https://oneyouth.unicef.ca/en/youth-centred-design-toolkit>

Project Outsiders: <https://www.projectoutsiders.com/>

The Foster Care Experience Podcast Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=65XZ5XQzacc&t=129s>

Ontario Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth (2012). *My real life book: Report from the Youth Leaving Care Hearings*. https://ocaarchives.files.wordpress.com/2019/01/ylc_report_eng.pdf

Dr. Gabor Mate, "What Kids Need Most" Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPGYMwnuihw>

Brene Browne, "Finding Our Way To True Belonging": <https://ideas.ted.com/finding-our-way-to-true-belonging/>

Relationships Matter for Youth in Care (2018) Project Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lmPDZ360ow>

Relationships Matter for Youth in Care (2018) Project Photo E-Book: <https://www.yumpu.com/document/view/59918518/relationships-matter-e-book>

Kyrstin Dumont on wanting to change the world for Indigenous youth and child welfare involvement: <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1691764291821>

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