



## Indigenous Concerns & Issues

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### Intergenerational Trauma

My dad loved to sing and had a good baritone voice. Whether it was one of my brothers, me or one of the grandkids in his lap, he would rock and sing songs—some of which would be decidedly inappropriate today. We all remember them to this day. He and Mom taught us lots of good stuff; and most of you can attest to the same—positive memories of our upbringing.

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/intergenerational-trauma-and-residential-schools>

What is Intergenerational or Historical Trauma? “Historical trauma occurs when historical oppression is passed down through generations. For more than 100 years, the Canadian government supported residential school programs that isolated Indigenous children from their families and communities. Under the guise of educating and preparing Indigenous children for their participation in Canadian society, the federal government and administrators of the residential school system committed what has since been described as an act of cultural genocide. As generations of students left these institutions, they returned to their home communities without the knowledge, skills or tools to cope in either world. The impacts of their institutionalization continue to be felt by subsequent generations. This is called intergenerational trauma.” Research into intergenerational effects of the residential school system started in 2010.

The long-term impact of psychological, spiritual, physical and sexual abuse experienced by children in the residential school system include significant challenges ranging from anger, anxiety, low self-esteem and depression to post-traumatic stress disorder and higher rates of suicide, to name a few. First Nations communities identify managing substance abuse as the number-one challenge for community wellness.

How often have you heard something like: ‘we can only apply what we know’ or ‘if you don’t know it, how can you use it?’ Residential schools included parenting models based on punishment, abuse, coercion, manipulation and control—all of which are totally alien to the indigenous ways of parenting. With little experience or knowledge of a nurturing family environment, residential school survivors struggle with enduring trauma. Consequently, many are (were) ill-prepared to nurture their own children. If the parent or guardian was alcoholic or abusive, chances are those children will do the same with their children—parenting is learned first-hand in the home.

In a 1991 study by Maggie Hodgson (*Impact of Residential Schools and Other Root Causes of Poor Mental Health*), “If you subject one generation to that kind of parenting and they have children; those children become subjected to that (same) treatment and then you subject a third generation to a residential school system the same as the first two generations. You have a whole society affected by isolation, loneliness, sadness, anger, hopelessness and pain.” These issues and associated behaviour now become a self-fulfilling cycle. This is the foremost challenge we as non-Indigenous must confront in order to put an end to this self-destructive condition.

### Moving Forward

Any intervention/correction that doesn’t consider the cultural and social contexts of indigenous people risks contributing to their oppression. Most research focuses on the sociocultural, psychological and physiological ways that trauma is transmitted between generations. Others examine external factors: racism, cultural discrimination and economic marginalization. The latter theories describe the role society plays in perpetuating the intergenerational effects of the residential school experience — something that researchers note must be acknowledged in order to break the cycles of trauma. Strategies for moving forward with empowerment include increased self-government and self-determination; yet the obligation to identify methods for disrupting the legacy of the residential school system remains. Our task as Catholics—to paraphrase the TRC Call to Action #60—is to participate in learning the history & legacy of Indigenous spirituality & religious conflict in order to achieve the ways and means to mitigate/prevent and ultimately to eliminate the recurrence of such oppression.