

Supporting Safety Together for Survivors and their Children Navigating Child Welfare

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West Coast LEAF

Safety together: addressing gender-based violence and the family policing system and

A Guide for Lawyers and Advocates on the Rights of Parents During Child and Family Services (CFS) Investigations





Land acknowledgement

West Coast LEAF respectfully acknowledges that our office is on traditional, ancestral, and unceded Coast Salish homelands, including the territories of the **xʷməθkʷəy̓əm** (Musqueam), **Skwxwú7mesh** (Squamish), and **səl̓ílwətaʔ** (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.



WEST COAST LEAF / Safety Together

About West Coast LEAF

In collaboration with community,
we use legal strategies to work
towards an equal and just
society for all women and
people who face gender
discrimination.



About the Family Well-being Coalition

We are building out spaces for systemic advocacy that challenges the current family policing landscape in BC and centers family well-being.

Our intentions are to uplift and amplify the wisdom and expertise of Indigenous leaders, families, Elders, and advocates to support the ongoing work to transform, re-envision, and reclaim the system from what's currently an ongoing colonial intervention system to a system in which all children, families, and communities will thrive.



Goals of this project were to:

- Learn how gender-based violence and encounters with BC's family policing system can combine to increase risk of harm for people and families.
- Explore what services and supports would prevent or decrease the harmful impacts of gender-based violence and BC's family policing system for people and families.
- Identify what changes to laws, policies, programs, and services are needed to improve the safety and wellbeing of people and families.
- Push for changes by sharing research findings with participants, communities, the public, and advocates.





Project Collaborators and Supporters





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The shared history and overlapping harms of GBV and family policing

“

So we actually have systems, especially the criminal law system, ... just heaping harm on top of harm. My brothers did not become more gentle people following periods of incarceration, they were more harmed every time they came out. And their potential to cause harm to others was so much greater.”

— COMMUNITY EXPERT



Support community-rooted care and honour self- determination



**Friends, neighbours, educators, collectives,
community leaders, and organizations can:**

Support transformative learning for all

- ☐ Normalize conversations about power and harm in families and relationships.
- ☐ Teach and learn about cycles of harm to break them.
- ☐ Reject simplistic categories of “victim” and “perpetrator.”

Build skills and knowledge to support survivors of GBV’s self-determination

- ☐ Learn, practice and implement the skills to support survivors determining what safety looks like to them and support them to make that a reality.

Build collective responsibility

- ☐ Create collective approaches to support and respond to gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence in our communities.
- ☐ Share skills and resources so that communities, families, and peers feel equipped to support their relationships, including with survivors and people that cause harm, and can support in holding institutions that create more violence and harm accountable.



UNPACKING INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN FAMILY POLICING & GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

INFO
collected
in a
Literature
Review

REPORTING



GENDER-BASED
Violence
drives reports
to the POLICING
SYSTEM

FEAR of REPORTS

isolates survivors
and weaponizes the
system as a
TACTIC of ABUSE

MANDATED
REPORTING
Co-opts
Concerns
for
Wellbeing

Using
A BLAME
oriented
Approach

FAMILY POLICING INVESTIGATIONS

SURVIVORS

OFTEN MOTHERS,
PROTECT their CHILDREN
BUT FACE STRUCTURAL
HARMS LIKE POVERTY,
PRECARIOUS STATUS,
LACK OF HOUSING



The SYSTEM uses
STEREOTYPES
of 'GOOD MOTHERS'
to shift Blame
to Survivor Mothers,
Framing them as
RISKS to their Children

The SYSTEM Treats
Fathers as 'Invisible' or
'Irredeemable' to AVOID
Engaging with them &
WORKING to REPAIR HARM

SUPPORT is
LIMITED, INAPPROPRIATE,
OR COERCED, with PATERNALISTIC
SURVEILLANCE

LEGAL SYSTEMS and COURT PROCESSES



Legal Processes

EG, FAMILY,
CRIMINAL,
IMMIGRATION

Can create
CONFLICTS & GAPS
increasing
VULNERABILITY & HARM

Criminalized SURVIVORS
FACE devastating IMPACTS
from the
FAMILY POLICING
SYSTEM



GOVERNMENT CUSTODY



CHILDREN & YOUTH
often face
GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE
IN GOVERNMENT CUSTODY

THE 'FOSTER CARE' SYSTEM
increases RISKS of
STRUCTURAL & INTERPERSONAL
GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE
IN ADULTHOOD

SYSTEMIC PATTERNS
of SURVEILLANCE
BLAME, THREATS, &
PUNISHMENT
MIRROR COERCIVE
CONTROLLING ABUSE

“

[Gaps] come with a huge price, because we've seen women just falling through the cracks, and us having to say 'this is what the system is,' and that's really hard to do.

— **Community Expert**





Resource community-based services

Funders, governments, legislators, and agencies can:



Resource upstream, holistic support for family well-being.

- Address basic needs so that all families can thrive.
- Fund wholistic, family-centred, culturally safe and trauma-and violence-informed models.
- Fund relational, peer-based models, and connections to community, land, and culture.

Increase access to inclusive community-based antiviolence services for those who have experienced harm and those who have harmed



- Fund accessible anti-violence services that meet the needs of marginalized survivors.
- Fund non-carceral anti-violence and healing supports beyond the gendered victim/ perpetrator binary and engage people who have caused harm.

Service providers and advocates can:



Prioritize self-determination

- Service providers can support survivors who are accessing supports by implementing informed choice models and helping survivors make informed choices.



Mandatory Reporting

“There was violence in my family of origin; this would have warranted intervention. But ... as a child, the knowledge that seeking institutional help would have resulted in separation from my siblings, kept me in that situation.”



Move towards supporting over reporting

Friends, neighbours, educators, collectives, community leaders, organizations, advocates and service providers can:

Uphold a commitment and practice to support and not report

- ☐ Connect survivors and families with their chosen supports.
- ☐ Support through informed choice, goal-setting, and accompaniment to minimize harms and maximize access to benefits.

Build helpers' capacities to support

- ☐ Develop resources and skill development opportunities to build helpers' capacities to support.

Service providers, advocates, governments, legislators, funders, and agencies can:

Advocate to end mandatory reporting

- ☐ Lobby for legislation to be revised and repeal mandatory reporting laws, in BC this includes Section 13 and 14 of the *CFCSA*.





Investigations and Interventions

“Some folks we work with... they just got out of an abusive situation with their child’s father, and now they have to deal with family policing. And do you know what they say? They’d rather have been in a physically abusive relationship than have to deal with the family policing system. Because in that [intimate partner violence] situation, they can yell, scream, maybe hit back, maybe set boundaries... but they can’t do any of that [in relation to the family policing system].”



Minimize family policing harms and maximize support

**Friends, neighbours, educators, collectives,
community leaders, organizations, service
providers and advocates can:**

Take an advocate stance during investigations.

- ☐ Accompany families to witness interactions and push for accountability during investigations.
- ☐ Provide ongoing support to meet parenting goals.
- ☐ Advocate to minimize harms and “hoops,” and maximize supports.

**Governments, legislators, funders, and
agencies can:**

Strengthen rights-based and accountability approaches

- ☐ Ensure all families have access to well-paid and trained advocates.
- ☐ Improve transparency, oversight, and rights-based mechanisms to hold systems accountable.





Intersecting Legal Systems

“A survivor who has had their children apprehended by the state would not have the ability to move forward in their family law claims as they are no longer the caregivers for the children. A parent who is under a deportation order could potentially lose their ability to see and care for their Canadian-born children again. A survivor facing criminal charges would have difficulties obtaining safety and protective orders for themselves and their children in the family law system.”¹⁴⁸



Implement multi-system advocacy supports and transformative alternatives to existing legal systems

Governments, legislators, funders and agencies can:

Implement multi-system navigation and advocacy supports.

- ☐ Fund childcare, translation and system navigators who work across systems.

Implement systemic changes to address discrimination, gaps, and contradictions.

- ☐ Review and revise laws that impact families and ensure consistency to be family-centred across all jurisdictions.
- ☐ Ensure all actors in the legal systems (criminal, family, child protection) are trained in cultural safety, trauma-and violence-informed practice and on the impact of stereotypes around GBV.

Enable meaningful access to Indigenous, transformative and restorative justice options.

- ☐ Provide adequate and stable funding to justice alternatives to address the harms of GBV.





Government Custody of Children and Separation of Families

“

We meet people where they're at, and work to support their goals. That could be getting their kids back in their care before their new baby arrives, [or] it's getting more access to see their kids... And we're able to see some of these families reunited. It's really special. It can take 5+ years for this to happen.”

— COMMUNITY EXPERT



Support well-being and connection to minimize harms of separation

Friends, neighbours, educators, collectives, community leaders, organizations, service providers and advocates can:

Support the well-being of parents, children, and families – even during separation.

- ☐ Support parents' goals and well-being before, during and after removal of children.
- ☐ Support the well-being children and youth before, during and after removal into government custody.
- ☐ Advocate with children, youth, parents, extended family and community to ensure their rights to access to maintain a relationship are upheld.
- ☐ Support family members to connect and heal when separated and if reunification occurs.

Governments, legislators, funders and agencies can:

Ensure resources are available for families to maintain their relationships.

- ☐ Provide adequate and sustainable funding to support community to facilitate ongoing connections.

Implement advocacy supports if access is being denied or negatively impacted.

- ☐ Ensure there are timely mechanisms to address concerns around maintaining access and connection for families.





Investigation Rights Resources

- Nested resources:
 - Anchor guide for lawyers/advocates.
 - Accessible brochure for parents.
- Goals:
 - Empower parents to make informed decisions & seek fairer investigation processes.
 - Narrow front door to ongoing state intervention & harms.



West Coast LEAF

A Guide for Lawyers and Advocates on the Rights of Parents During Child and Family Services (CFS) Investigations

JUNE 2026



What are my rights during a “child protection” investigation?



West Coast LEAF



Context for resources

- CFS agencies in BC investigate thousands of reports each year (55,000 in 2024/2025).
- Investigations are invasive, traumatizing, and stigmatizing. In BC, only half of reports are assessed as substantiated.
- Disproportionate impacts on Indigenous and other families.
- Limited oversight or accountability.
- Limited public information on investigation rights in any Canadian context.



Example rights

- Right to a lawyer.
 - Right to know the allegations against you.
 - Right to an interpreter.
 - Right to refuse home entry except in specific situations.
 - Right to not talk to a worker or answer certain questions.
 - Right to make a complaint.
-
- **NOTE: cooperation doesn't have to be either/or.**



Example scripts

- *Is this urgent? Does it have to happen now?*
- *I'd be happy to schedule another time to talk.*
- *I'm willing to meet with you outside/ at [location].*
- *I don't understand. I need an interpreter to continue.*
- *Can we take a break? My support person is on their way.*
- *I'd like talk to my lawyer before I answer your questions.
Can you write them down?*
- *I'd like to talk to my lawyer before I sign anything.*



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Women and Gender
Equality Canada

Femmes et Égalité
des genres Canada



Access the report at westcoastleaf.org/safetytogether



Mandated reporters looked away

You call it child welfare.

I call it a colonial institution
with a nicer logo.

You say the system protects kids.

I say it protects itself—
especially from accountability.

An Indigenous girl like me
was never seen as a child to
save.

I was a statistic to manage,
a file to move,
a problem to relocate
when things got uncomfortable.

Fifty-six moves.

Not because I was unsafe—
but because you couldn't stand
to look at what your own system
created.

Gender-based violence?

Mandated reporting?
You wrote those laws
yourselves,
and still you ignored me.
Still you shrugged,
still you filed it under
“unsubstantiated,”
still you told me
to behave.

Tell me—

how many times did a worker
read my file
and see the words
“suspected,” “concerning,”
“possible risk,”
and decide their paperwork
mattered more than my safety?

You trained staff to identify harm

but not to act on it
when it came from a foster home
you approved.

You taught them the signs
of abuse against girls,
but not the courage
to confront the people signing their
paycheques.

You called it oversight.

I call it complicity.

Let's talk politics, then:



Mandated reporters looked away

Your system is built on the same
bones
as residential schools—
remove the child,
erase the culture,
claim it's for their own good.
Different buildings,
same intentions.
Modern language,
same violence.

And when I spoke up,
when I said "I'm not safe,"
the system labeled me
"attention-seeking."
"Defiant."
"Difficult."
Translated, that means:
a girl they didn't believe,
in a system afraid of being
exposed.

But here's the part you didn't plan
for:

I grew up.
I learned the history.
I learned the politics.
I learned that my story
isn't an accident—

it's the outcome of policy,
of colonial design,
of intentional underfunding,
of a nation that thinks
Indigenous girls are resilient
enough
to survive anything
so it never has to protect us.

Well, here I am.

Not quiet.
Not grateful.
Not decorated for your reports.
I'm a grown Indigenous
woman
who remembers everything
you hoped I'd forget.

And now I'm telling the truth
you were mandated
to report.

By TM