Systems of Care: Guiding Principles for Safeguarding Youth in Canada Programs

Introduction

The Mastercard Foundation Canada Programs team and our partners have a shared commitment to work *in a good way* on the journey to supporting Indigenous young people towards Mino-Bimaadziwin (a good life). Keeping participants safe (emotionally, mentally, physically and spiritually) is a critical piece of a holistic approach to working in a good way, and maintaining trusting relationships with youth, recognizing that protection and empowerment can co-exist.

Everyone connected with our work has the right to feel safe and respected. We are committed to prioritizing child and youth protection in all our activities and to safeguarding every individual who interacts with our organization and our partnerships from harm, abuse and exploitation. At minimum, this includes following provincial/territorial and federal laws and regulations around child and youth safety, as well as the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

It is important to note safeguarding is an essential component of human rights, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated, as are our safeguarding principles. As in all Canada Programs' work, our safeguarding approach centres the rights and priorities of Indigenous Peoples as laid out in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Calls to Action, and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) Calls for Justice.

We uphold safeguarding principles in alignment with our commitment to solutions driven by Indigenous Peoples, recognizing that many communities have their own traditional practices of safety. We recognize Canada Program partners are at various stages of implementing and/or developing policy(ies) and protocol[i] that reflect their unique organizational, programmatic, and community context.

Below are the safeguarding principles we ask partners to demonstrate alignment with across their suite of policies and protocols related to Indigenous youth safety and dignity within their programming. This includes either verifying that these principles are already reflected across their policies, protocols, and/or operational practices, or committing to incorporating them within the partnership. We recognize the diversity of partners and commit to working collaboratively to meet these principles across contexts.

Overarching Principle 1: Programs are designed and implemented centring participant safety and holistic well-being.

Principle 1.1: Cultural Safety

Cultural safety[ii] is key to creating an equitable and non-discriminatory environment for Indigenous youth. It recognizes the right of Indigenous children and youth to enjoy their culture, practise their spiritual traditions, and use their own languages. It recognizes that colonial systems have created systemic discrimination against Indigenous Peoples and made extensive attempts to erase their cultures. Cultural safety avoids any additional cultural damage, such as the propagation of pan-Indigenous cultural practices, fake cultural practices, and anything that could be seen as assimilative in nature. It respects that Indigenous Peoples have the right to control, protect, develop, and maintain intellectual property over cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions. In the context of youth programming, it is important to consider the centrality of intergenerational approaches, including being accommodating to youth with children, and the involvement of Elders in implementing cultural safety.

Principle 1.2: Anti-Racism

Racism is not only an interpersonal issue; it is embedded in mainstream institutions,[iii] policies, and systems. To uproot systemic racism and dismantle colonial systems, we must advance understanding of both individual human rights and the sovereign, inherent collective rights of Indigenous Peoples. Anti-oppression and anti-racism training can be important tools to build awareness and practical tools[iv]. Indigenous youth should receive preparation and support to navigate environments where they may be more likely to face racism, prejudice, or hostility because of their identity. This must be in tandem with institutional efforts to make these environments more inclusive, respectful, and welcoming to Indigenous Peoples.

Mainstream institutions should also be conscious of indirect forms of othering that, while not directly hostile, can make Indigenous youth feel alienated.[v] For example, tokenism — meaning inclusion for the sake of optics rather than equity —is a common practice that harms Indigenous youth. Finally, racism can manifest in only focusing on trauma or deficits. A strength-based approach recognizes that Indigenous Peoples are vital, innovative, resilient and strong, and celebrates and uplifts these strengths.

Principle 1.3: Historical Context and Trauma-Informed Approaches

The history of colonization requires a deep understanding of how colonial policies have created a legacy of intergenerational harm that is complex and ongoing for Indigenous Peoples. The effects have impacted the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual well-being of individuals, families, and communities. Anyone working with and directly engaging Indigenous youth must consider how to create environments that ensure holistic well-being and psychological safety, as well as foster positive interactions. This necessitates consideration of trauma-informed and potentially even trauma-responsive approaches[vi].

This is a practise that recognizes how trauma affects both collectives and individuals, focusing on creating a culture of safety, trustworthiness, and empowerment to avoid re-traumatization. This may include creating safe spaces, providing wraparound well-being support, ensuring a welcoming environment, addressing lateral violence, providing advanced warning of common triggers, enabling

time off or educational pauses for healing and/or ceremony, being an advocate for Indigenous youth in the wider institution or ecosystem, and incorporating harm prevention and response into program design. Being trauma-informed also includes recognizing the skills requirements and wellness needs of staff, who may be triggered and/ or experience second-hand trauma through their work.

Principle 1.4: Recognizing Indigenous Youth Diversity

Indigenous young people are diverse and have differing backgrounds, experiences, and needs. These may be influenced by distinctions (First Nations, Métis, Inuit), sexual and gender identity[vii], rural/ remote vs. urban, on reserve vs. off reserve, connection to culture or disconnection, having a neurodivergence or physical disability[viii], having been in the care system, having been involved with the criminal justice system, being a parent, and more. Many young people also have intersecting identities and related challenges, such as Afro-Indigenous youth who often face both anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism. Safeguarding practices must honour this diversity and avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. Different support must be considered to ensure fulsome participation from diverse youth (for example, childcare, safe nursing/pumping space for parents, or learning accommodations for youth with disabilities). We centring youth voices and respecting their unique contexts, we aim to create safe, empowering spaces that uphold belonging and diversity.

Principle 1.5: Preventing Identity Fraud, Pan-Indigenous or Fake Indigenous Practices

As outlined in the Canada Programs Indigenous Substantiation Principles, Indigenous identity fraud is a serious risk and harm that takes resources and opportunities away from Indigenous people and threatens to undermine Indigenous cultures and Indigenous Peoples' rights to self-determination. Robust policy and practices in this area are essential for ensuring equitable, culturally safe environments for Indigenous youth. Support and resources should be provided when verification processes are challenging for young people, for example those that may not have documentation or active family ties. Planning harm mitigation strategies, flexibility for difficult cases, and being specific about where and how such policies are enacted (for example, only in situations of material gain), can be helpful to balance risk of harm on either side.

Principle 1.6: Travel Considerations

The Mastercard Foundation and its partners have a duty of care to Indigenous youth when bringing them away from their homes, whether internationally or within Canada, between rural and urban areas, or between Northern and Southern regions. Safeguarding in these contexts means anticipating unique needs and ensuring that youth are fully prepared for the journey. This may include providing clear and accessible briefings[ix] on what to expect before and during travel, covering cultural and logistical considerations, security protocols, and potential challenges, including in multiple formats and with space for surfacing questions and concerns. These briefings should also include clear contact information and processes for addressing questions, issues, or emergencies that might occur while away. There should be a high quality of care for youth travelling, with dignified standards of accommodation, and no expectation that youth deserve or should accept less. Honoraria and/or per diem where possible should be provided prior to travel, as it may be needed during the trip. Youth travelling for the first time, as well as youth living with disabilities or special needs, may require additional preparation and support. A travel support assessment can assist in identifying young people's unique needs and aligned resources. In line with a strength-based approach, uplifting and supporting self-efficacy should be the goal of travel preparation and support to young people.

Principle 1.7: Safeguarding in Data & Communications

Harm can happen beyond direct programming, including through monitoring and evaluation or communications work. For example, individual harms can occur if data collection is overly intrusive,

triggering, sensitive, or if its use is not well understood or consented to. Data must therefore be carefully collected, stored, and used to ensure privacy protection and maintain informed consent, in alignment with local laws and guidelines. This includes communications data, such as stories, photos, videos, or art, in addition to monitoring and evaluation data. There should also be a mechanism for youth to withdraw consent for their data to be used. In addition to individual considerations, some data (such as from Indigenous knowledge, legends/stories, or community insights) cannot be collected or used without informed consent from the proper collective. Asking for permission – from individuals or collectives – can be done through photo release forms or traditional practices. For those under 18, permission would need to be obtained from a parent or guardian as well. Indigenous data sovereignty (such as the First Nations Principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession) should be understood and followed. This includes the importance of protecting Indigenous Intellectual Property[x] rights, such as traditional cultural knowledge and practices.

Principle 1.8: Centring Youth Empowerment

Safeguarding is not only about protection, but also about creating conditions where Indigenous youth can exercise agency, voice, and leadership. We commit to approaches that respect youth as decision-makers in their own lives and as partners in shaping programs and policies that affect them. Empowerment means ensuring that youth have access to information, resources, and opportunities in ways that are culturally grounded, and trauma informed. It also means that safety includes supporting youth to build confidence, skills, and networks that strengthen their ability to thrive. Culturally grounded and youth-centred spaces guided by youth are one of the ways partners have centred youth empowerment.

Principle 1.9: Land-Based Learning Safety

On-the-land learning is a vital element of Indigenous traditional teaching practices. It also brings additional safety considerations and preparation needs. Ensuring youth have the skills and tools to be safe on the land, as well as scenario planning for when the unexpected occurs, are important preventative measures. In addition to basic considerations for shelter, food, and water, this may include preparations for encountering wild animals, inclement weather, injuries, and more. Depending on the context, regular and/or wilderness first aid certification may be required for facilitators. Cultural safety and the development of self-efficacy should also be prioritized.

Overarching Principle 2: Systems are in place to prevent harm, support those who have been harmed, and ensure accountability when harm occurs.

Principle 2.1: Screening and Support for Personnel

All reasonable steps are taken to ensure staff, consultants, and volunteers are safe to work with children, youth and community members, recognizing both formal and community-based assessment measures. Staff and volunteers understand their position of power based on their role. They are provided with training, supervision, and support to ensure that they maintain a safe environment for all. Dedicated staff, such as advisors or advocates, may be required to ensure that the overarching principles in section 1 above are fully brought to life.

Principle 2.2: Safe and Accessible Ways to Report Harm

Staff, volunteers, children, and community members are encouraged to speak up if they have any safety concerns and are made aware of simple, accessible, and confidential ways to report any concerns. Individuals who speak up are protected from retaliation and their privacy is respected. Special considerations should be given to how to maintain anonymity in the context of small

communities. Also, accessibility and privacy are considered for those with disabilities or special needs. Multiple reporting channels should be made available where possible. While partner organizations should have their own reporting avenues, the Foundation also has a contact form for whistleblowing if required: https://mastercardfdn.org/en/contact/

Principle 2.3: Safety, Welfare, Agency, and Trauma-informed responses

All safeguarding concerns are taken seriously, and steps are taken to ensure the safety and welfare of those involved (including survivors, witnesses, and individuals reporting concerns). The response to concerns recognises the agency of survivors, including children, and takes their preferences, wishes and beliefs into account. In addition to legal requirements, community protocol, cultural considerations, and individual preferences, consent, and context are considered. Those involved in trauma response should be qualified and supported.

Principle 2.4: Clear Roles, Responsibilities, and Accountability

There are designated staff members, including senior leadership, with specific responsibility for ensuring those working with children, youth, or vulnerable people have access to advice and support, and that safeguarding measures are implemented. Senior leadership are aware of concerns and continually work with their team to reflect, integrate learnings, and strengthen safeguarding practices. It is recognised that personnel dealing with specific safeguarding incidents or ongoing trauma of participants may also need special support. Policies should also set out a clear duty of care, so staff understand the boundaries and scope of their responsibilities. This ensures safety for staff, some of whom are youth themselves, to not be involved in participants' lives outside of programming. It can also segment duty of care according to age (under or over 18), disability status, etc. as per legal requirements and inclusion considerations, while respecting participant agency and ensuring supports are appropriate to context.

Principle 2.5: Clear Policies and Tools to Guide Strong Practices

Measures to keep program participants safe are documented in policies and aligned protocols to guide the practice of staff, consultants, and volunteers. This should include specific guidance for activities with increased risks, such as bringing youth outside of their community for travel and/or events. Staff, consultants, and volunteers are expected to follow the policies and put the tools into practice, and foster environments that are safe, healthy, and respectful for all. Duty of care should be clearly outlined, and program participants should know of and understand the policies.

Principle 2.6: Community Co-creation & Partnerships

The uniqueness and diversity of programming and engagements delivered through partnerships means that safeguarding can look very different depending on the location and context. Rural and/or remote realities differ from urban realities. University environments will differ from land-based learning environments. Indigenous organizations and communities with lived experience in the local context will understand that safety needs and safeguarding measures should reflect that expertise. These organizations and communities may have existing safety measures that can be harnessed to inform safeguarding needs.

Principle 2.7: Transparency and Communication

The Mastercard Foundation and its partners have a shared responsibility to ensure the safety of participants. Therefore, it is essential that safeguarding issues are communicated to the Canada Programs team in a timely manner. This approach allows us to support next steps where needed and collectively learn how to strengthen our approach. This transparency also enables accountability to the Indigenous young people our partnerships serve. While reporting of safeguarding issues is

mandatory for anything that arises during or related to programming that the Foundation supports, it is appreciated in adjacent programming as well, as a collective learning and strengthening opportunity. Transparency also extends to the young people involved in programs – they should understand and be given the opportunity to contribute to any policies, systems, and practices designed to keep them safe. In addition to the lead partner, this duty of transparency includes all sub-partners within Foundation partnerships.

---

[i] We recognize some partners may be departments in a wider institution, and not have influence over organization-wide policies and procedures. In that case, we encourage discussions with the department that does create and monitor these about tailoring the wider policies to the Indigenous youth programming context, where there may be flexibility and where there are added considerations or safeguards needed.

[ii] Cultural rights are broad and expansive. Indigenous Peoples define culture very holistically, including things traditionally thought to be in the realm of culture such as art, songs and language, but also other matters such as governance structures, constitutions, world views, spirituality, legal systems, traditional territories, sacred sites, environmental beliefs, systems and practices, food systems, medicine and healing, and related intellectual property. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes that the rights of Indigenous children to enjoy their culture, practice their spiritual traditions and to use their own languages are different from other rights because "they can only be enjoyed in community with others."

[iii] In addition to education and employment systems, racism is found in the carceral system. In the context of Safeguarding for Indigenous young people, it may be appropriate to consider involvement of police as a last resort, prioritizing connection with social work and crisis intervention supports first for issues not involving acute safety risks to others.

[iv] TRC Calls to Action 27 and 42 reference the need for "skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism."

[v] Examples might include instructors continually singling out Indigenous youth to speak to Indigenous issues, or universities automatically streaming Indigenous youth into specific supports or programming without their consent.

[vi] Trauma, both individual and collective, can influence relationships, trust, and engagement. It can have emotional effects such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD; cognitive consequences such as in memory or decision-making; physical effects such as chronic pain or fight, flight, freeze or fawn response; and impacts on relationships with other people, money and even certain physical spaces. For example, financial trauma may affect how youth interact with granting or funding processes.

[vii] While colonialism, displacement, and poverty have impacted all Indigenous peoples, some impacts are differentiated, for example by gender. Currently, 85% of Indigenous post-secondary students are female, and Indigenous men are entering at extremely low rates. At the same time, Indigenous young women and 2SLGBTQ+ people face higher rates of violence, including sexualized violence, and are under-represented in decision making roles, such as positions of elected leadership.

[viii] While limited, research shows a 50% higher prevalence of disabilities among Indigenous peoples than non-Indigenous peoples. They also face inequity in access to disability supports and services due inadequate policy, structural racism in the health system, and jurisdictional conflict between provincial and federal governments.

[ix] While preparation should be context based, an excellent free repository of international travel safety and security trainings created by leading organizations and agencies in the humanitarian and development sector is available at: https://www.disasterready.org/safety-security-courses

[x] According to the World Intellectual Property Organization, "Intellectual property (IP) refers to creations of the mind such as inventions; literary and artistic works; designs; and symbols, names and images used in commerce… Traditional knowledge is a living body of knowledge that is developed, sustained and passed on from generation to generation within a community, often forming part of its cultural or spiritual identity." For more information about Indigenous IP, please see WIPO's 2020 publication "Intellectual Property and Genetic Resources, Traditional Knowledge, and Traditional Cultural Expressions": https://www.wipo.int/edocs/pubdocs/en/wipo-pub-933-2020-en-intellectual-property-and-genetic-resources-traditional-knowledge-and-traditional-cultural-expressions.pdf