



Beyond Deficit: Rethinking Disability and Difference in Indigenous Early Learning

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What stories do we tell about children with disabilities? What other stories might be possible?



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What is Disability?

Our understanding of disability profoundly shapes how we approach early learning and support for children.

The Medical Model

Traditionally views disability as an individual impairment or deficit, a "problem" residing within the child. The focus is on diagnosis, treatment, and normalization.

The Social Model

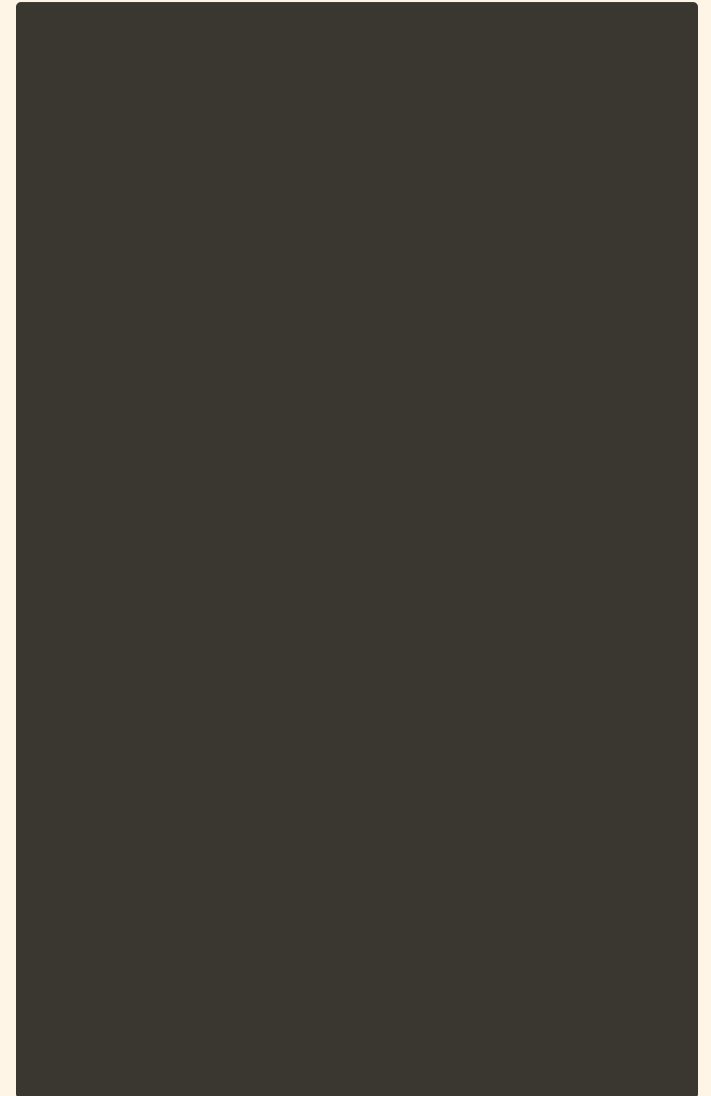
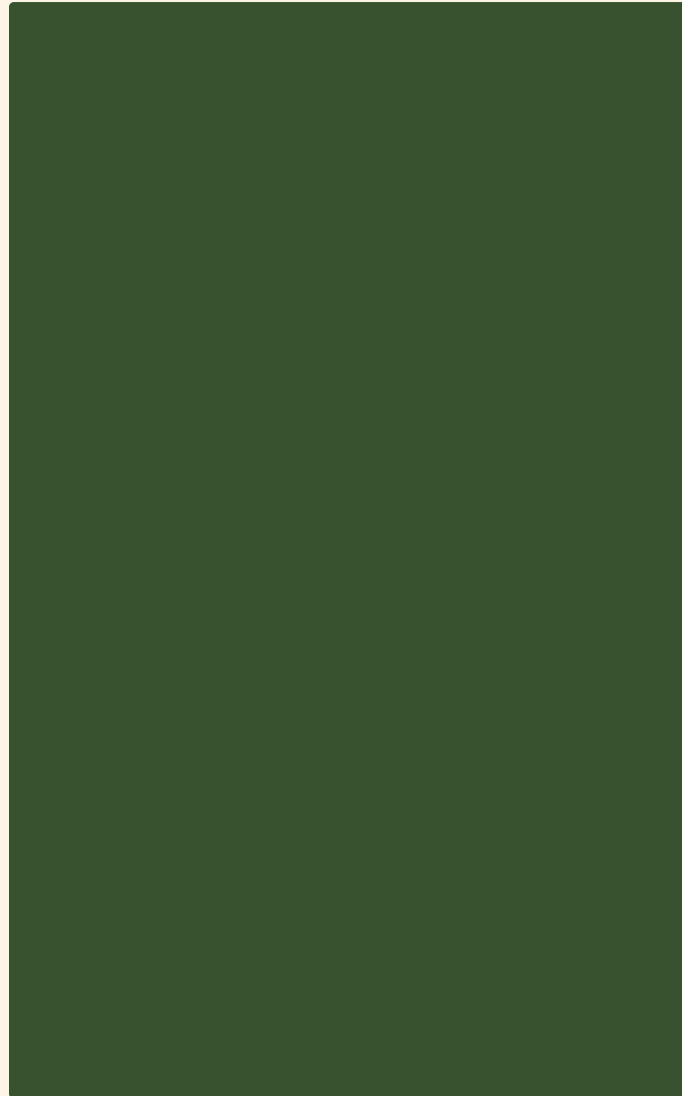
Contends that disability is primarily created by societal barriers and inaccessible environments, not by individual limitations. It emphasizes systemic change and inclusion.

Indigenous Perspectives

Often embraces a holistic view, where differences in abilities are seen as natural variations and contributions to the collective.

Disability results from the *interaction* between individuals with personal and environmental factors (including negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social support). Difference is not disabling in all contexts.

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This however
does not mean
that our children
do not
experience
disablement...

What Produces Disablement?



Attitudinal Barriers



**Systemic & Environmental
Barriers**



Communication Barriers

Development vs. Developmentalism

Development

Refers to the natural, unique process of growth and change an individual experiences over time. It acknowledges varied pathways and celebrates individual pace.

Developmentalism

Is a framework that posits universal, standardized stages and milestones for development. Deviations from these prescribed norms often lead to children being identified or labeled with a 'disability'.

How Indigenous Children Experience Disablement

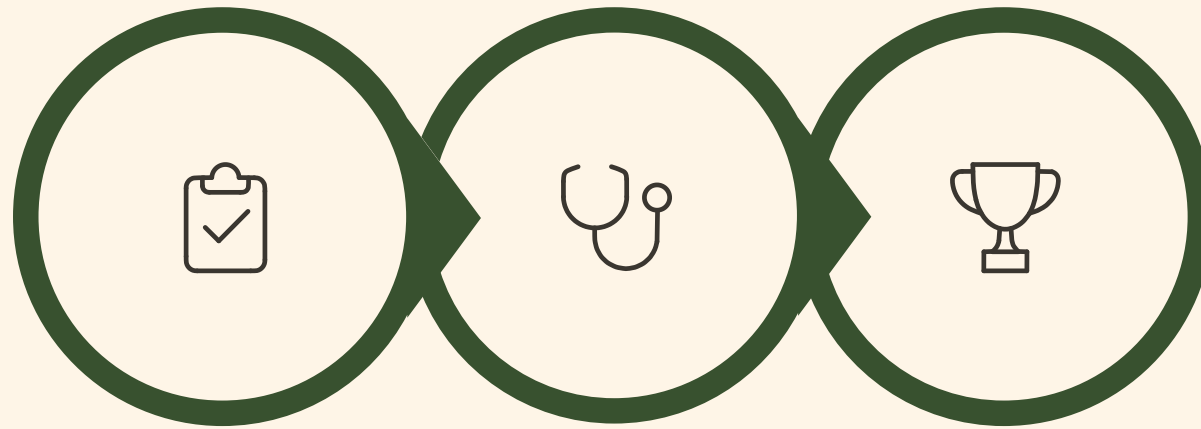
Our research findings shed light on the unique ways Indigenous children experience disablement within current systems:

Systemic Disablement

**Disproportionate
Diagnoses**

Subjective Concerns

What we think the system looks like...

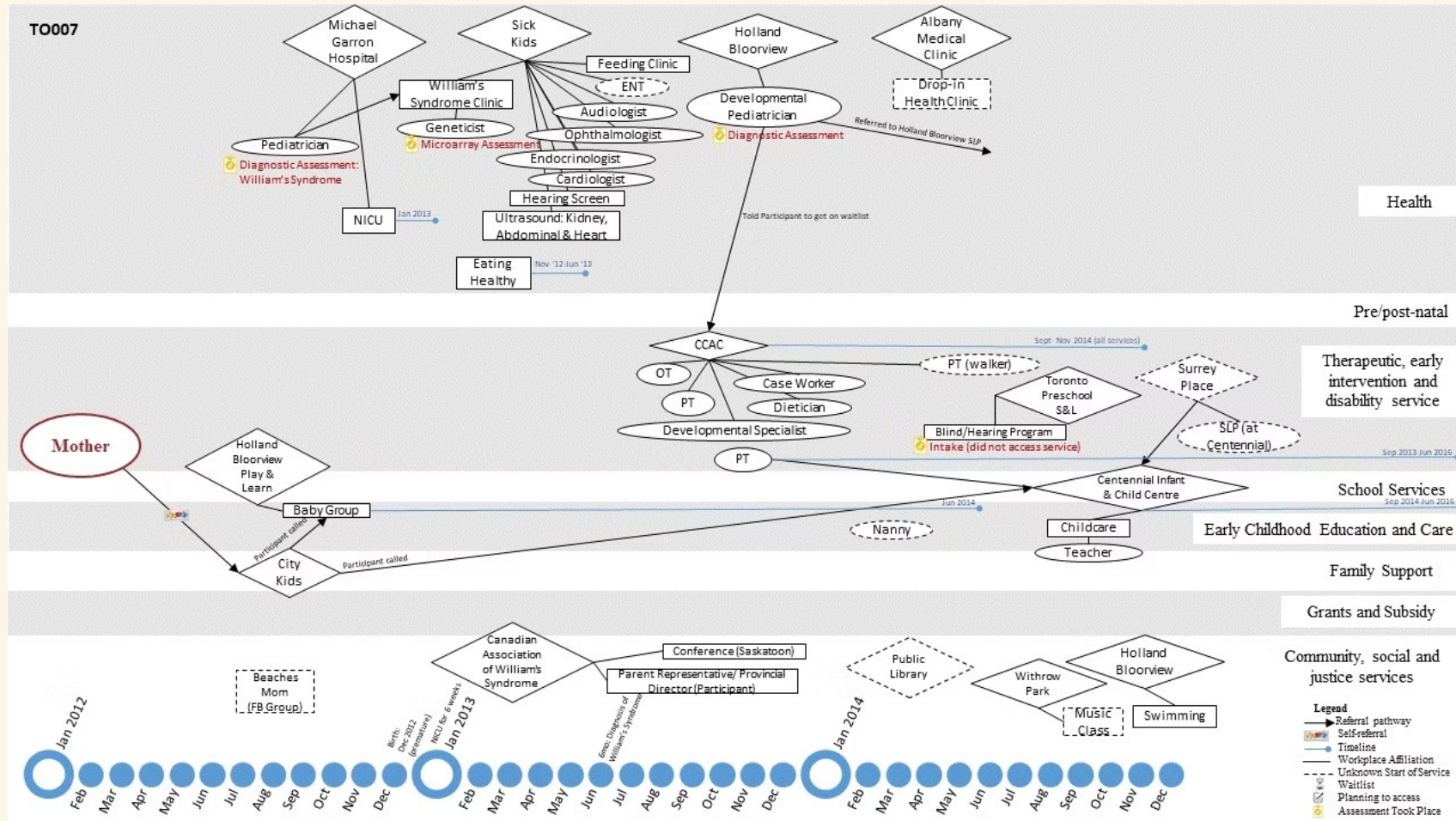


Assessment

Treatment

Success

What it actually looks like...



Accessing Support: The Challenges

The Inclusive Early Childhood Service Systems project has documented family experiences across Canada, with a third of participants being Indigenous. We've heard consistent themes:

High Effort for Families

Families report needing to invest significant time and effort to make the system work for them, often feeling like they are battling against the very structures meant to provide aid.

Limited Service Availability

Services are scarce, particularly in remote, rural, and reserve contexts, creating vast geographical gaps in support for children and families.

Complex & Ineffective Pathways

Even in metropolitan areas, services often hinge on specific referral pathways and diagnoses, are difficult to navigate, and frequently fall short in terms of specificity or frequency to meet actual needs.

Lack of Indigenous Perspectives

There are few to no services that genuinely incorporate an Indigenous perspective on childhood development, disability, or wellness, leading to culturally irrelevant or inappropriate support.

Indigenous Approaches

Indigenous worldviews offer distinct and powerful approaches to understanding children, difference, and community well-being:



Children are seen as gifts from the Creator, unique beings holding inherent gifts that benefit the entire community.



Difference is not inherently negative; it is viewed as a natural variation that can be neutral and even desirable, enriching the collective.



Each child is recognized as a valued member of families, communities, and Nations, possessing inherent rights and responsibilities within these interconnected relationships.



When healing or support is needed, a holistic approach is embraced, addressing all aspects of an individual's well-being: spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental.

Not Just a "Nice" Thing to do: The Legal & Policy Landscape

Our commitment to affirming difference is not just ethical; it's deeply rooted in legal frameworks and Indigenous philosophies.



Human Rights Law

The Ontario Human Rights Code protects children from discrimination based on disability, culture, and family status. The "Duty to Accommodate" means services must adapt to meet the child's needs, not force the child to fit the service.



Children's Rights

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) affirms a child's right to participate, culture, and development. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) reinforces Indigenous children's rights to language, culture, and community care.



Indigenous Law & Teachings

Rights also flow from Indigenous law and teachings. Many Nations teach that each child arrives with unique gifts and responsibilities, affirming that difference is sacred and vital to community well-being.

Accommodation as a Right

Understanding accommodation not as an act of charity, but as a fundamental human right, shifts the paradigm from goodwill to legal obligation and systemic responsibility in early learning settings.



A Legal Imperative

Accommodation is enshrined in human rights legislation, requiring organizations and institutions to adapt practices and environments to ensure equitable access and participation for all individuals, including children with diverse needs.



Ensuring Equitable Participation

The purpose of accommodation is to remove barriers that prevent children from fully engaging in early learning programs, curriculum, and social activities, ensuring they receive the same opportunities as their peers.



Proactive Duty, Not Reactive Request

Organizations have a duty to proactively identify and implement accommodations, rather than waiting for individual requests. This anticipatory approach is key to creating truly inclusive environments from the outset.



Undue Hardship Threshold

While there are limits to accommodation (e.g., "undue hardship"), the legal threshold for this is very high. It generally requires demonstrating significant cost, health, or safety risks, not mere inconvenience.

Accommodating difference is not enough.

We must affirm, validate, and celebrate diversity
in order to be truly inclusive.

Addressing The Attitudinal Problem: Deficit Thinking in Early Learning

Research reveals how early childhood systems often operate from deficit-based frameworks that pathologize difference and undermine family trust.

Labeling Difference as Disorder

Cultural ways of being are misinterpreted as developmental delays or behavioral problems

- Quiet children labeled as "behind" in language
- Kinesthetic learners seen as "hyperactive"
- Spiritual sensitivity called "unusual behaviors"

Framing Families as Lacking

Indigenous families positioned as needing education rather than as knowledge holders

- "Non-compliant" when following cultural practices
- Parenting approaches questioned or dismissed
- Traditional healing practices seen as barriers

System-Centered vs. Child-Centered

Services designed for system efficiency rather than child and family wellbeing

- One-size-fits-all assessments
- Standardized interventions
- Limited cultural adaptations

Deficit Glasses On vs. Gift Glasses On

How we perceive a child's behavior significantly impacts our response.

Deficit Glasses (problem view)	Gift Glasses (strength view)
“That child is defiant.”	“That child is a leader.”
“That child never listens.”	“That child listens in their own way.”
“That child is lazy.”	“That child is thoughtful and careful.”
“That child is attention-seeking.”	“That child is connection-seeking.”
“That child is disruptive.”	“That child is energetic and creative.”
“That child is hyper.”	“That child is full of vitality.”
“That child has tantrums.”	“That child feels deeply.”
“That child is clingy.”	“That child is connected.”
“That child can’t sit still.”	“That child is a mover and explorer.”
"That child can't do it"	"That child can do it in their own way"

Shifting our perspective is an important first step, but it must also result in tangible changes in how we approach relationships, teaching, and the design of our environments.

How to Reduce Disabling Impacts

Shifting our approach to inclusion requires intentional design grounded in core principles:



Expect Difference

Design spaces where variation is normal, not exceptional, understanding that difference is the rule in human experience.



Change the Environment, Not the Child

Adjust routines, physical spaces, and learning tools, honoring our legal and ethical duty to accommodate diverse needs.



Offer Multiple Ways to Participate

Provide diverse avenues for engagement, expression, and representation, whether through speaking, drawing, movement, or technology.



Build Collective Access

Recognize that access is everyone's responsibility, not solely that of the child or family, embodying the principle "nothing about us without us."



Partner with Families + Communities

Collaborate with families and community members, who are invaluable knowledge holders on what works best for their children.



Disability-Affirming Support Strategies for Young Children

Neurodiversity

For children with Autism, ADHD, FASD, or learning differences:

- Use visual supports and predictable routines.
- Allow movement and sensory breaks.
- Offer multiple modes of participation.
- Build on special interests for engagement.

Physical & Sensory Disabilities

For children with mobility or sensory challenges:

- Ensure physical accessibility (ramps, adaptive seating).
- Use multi-sensory materials.
- Integrate assistive devices naturally.
- Provide alternative ways to participate.

Emotional & Behavioral Differences

For children expressing emotional or behavioral needs:

- Recognize behavior as communication.
- Practice co-regulation and offer comfort.
- Create safe, quiet spaces for retreat.
- Teach emotional skills with visual tools.

Communication & Language Differences

For children with diverse communication styles:

- Combine spoken words with visuals, gestures, and signs.
- Allow extra processing time.
- Use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC).
- Value all languages and dialects.

Cognitive & Learning Differences

For children who learn in unique ways:

- Break tasks into small, manageable steps.
- Use repetition and hands-on learning.
- Celebrate small progress.
- Scaffold new learning from existing strengths.

Universal Practices

Strategies beneficial for all, essential for some:

- Anticipate variability from the start.
- Adapt the environment, not the child.
- Offer choices to empower children.
- Incorporate sensory tools (fidgets, flexible seating).
- Partner with families for personalized support.

Getting Started

Reflection questions to guide your practice toward affirming Indigenous children with disabilities:

Daily Reflection Questions

- Am I looking for problems or possibilities in this child?
- What gifts does this child bring that I can celebrate?
- How can I learn from this family's cultural wisdom?
- What does belonging look like for this child?

Immediate Implementation Strategies

- Start conversations with family strengths
- Ask families about their hopes and dreams for their child
- Include Indigenous perspectives in all planning
- Document children's gifts alongside challenges

Program-Level Changes

- Review materials for Indigenous representation
- Invite community Elders and Knowledge Keepers
- Adapt assessment tools for cultural relevance
- Create spaces for traditional practices and languages

Difference itself is not disabling.

Disability is produced when social, attitudinal, and environmental barriers turn difference into deficit.

We have the power to move beyond deficit — to recognize the inherent gifts our children carry, and to embrace our role as partners in nurturing those gifts for the good of our communities.

Miigwetch (Thank You)

Continue the conversation:

Email: Nicole.ineesenash@torontomu.ca

Organization: Info@findingourpowerttogether.com

Resources: Learn more about the IECSS project at inclusiveearlychildhood.ca

Let's continue building early learning spaces where every Indigenous child knows they are a sacred gift.

