

Kids These Days: Family Matters

By Dr. David Rideout

As a child, I was blessed to be part of a close knit family. My paternal grandparents lived right next door and not a day passed that I didn't pop in for a visit or a bowl of my grandmother's soup...or cooked dinner... or cake and juice. And although my maternal grandparents lived several hours away, we visited them on a regular basis, which was always a special treat because they lived in a larger town than my more remote home community of a few hundred people.

No matter where we come from, our connection to family is important. Children need this connection to help them build a healthy sense of identity. To know where they come from. To feel loved and accepted. To belong.

That truth should always be at the heart of all decisions that relate to a child's emotional, physical and social well-being. It's a truth I have come to know through my own personal and professional experience as a father, a former educator, and in my current world of children's services: Children need lasting and significant relationships to carry them throughout life.

But what happens when parents are unable to provide such stability and it becomes necessary to bring a child into care? When that happens, the need to preserve family connections is part of the planning for that child's future. A caseworker first considers a "kinship" placement--that is, an extended family member who can provide the child a safe and loving home. Loving kinship caregivers help maintain a child's connection to family and community.

North Central Alberta Child and Family Services recently celebrated a marvelous example of the power of kinship care in the close-knit community of Alexis Nakota Sioux First Nation. Many members of that community are providing kinship care to their nieces, nephews, and grandchildren. As a result, children who were unable to live with their immediate family are now living with extended family - and those important family ties are being preserved.

I've also come to the conclusion that sometimes it is less about genetics and more about love. It's about who cares about us and who helps shape our life and memories. Parents, siblings, cousins, grandparents, aunts, uncles, close friends—even pets—are part of what comprises a family. And the importance of that family to a child's healthy development cannot be overstated.

It's a concept so important that "Family Day" is officially observed in many jurisdictions across Canada as a holiday to honour and celebrate families. For us in Alberta, it's the third Monday of February—a day for setting aside some time to be with our loved ones.

On Family Day 2015, I wish you and your family—whatever its shape and size—not just a good day of memories, but a lifetime of them.

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