



Cultural Connections for Youth in Care

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**FEDERATION
OF BC YOUTH
IN CARE
NETWORKS**

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Note: All quotes within this report are from participants of the cultural connections survey.

Thank you to all the youth in and from care who took the time to share their experiences and ideas in the cultural connections survey. We are so grateful for your insight and are committed to making sure your feedback is heard!

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The Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks (FBCYICN) is a youth-driven, provincial, non-profit organization dedicated to improving the lives of young people in and from government care in BC, between the ages of 14 and 28.

Introduction

Culture is a broad concept that includes collective beliefs, values, arts, languages, clothing, food, practices, ceremonies, traditions, and ways of life. Many of us are influenced quite significantly by our cultures, whether we are aware of it or not.

Research shows that culture acts as a protective factor¹. When individuals have strong ties to their culture, it helps develop resilience and can buffer against the impacts of trauma. When youth are brought into government care, they are separated not only from family, but often also from their cultural practices, traditions, and ways of life. As clearly outlined in Section 70 of the *BC Child, Family and Community Service Act*, children and youth in care have the right to “receive guidance and encouragement to maintain their cultural heritage.”² But what does this look like in practice?



In an effort to understand how cultural connections are preserved while in government care, we conducted a survey with young people in and from care from across BC. We were curious about whether youth were supported and encouraged to access culture, what cultural practices they were able to maintain, and what barriers they faced. Quite overwhelmingly, survey participants shared a strong interest in cultural connections and exploring their cultural identity. However, many young people did not have the opportunity or support to do so, with 74% of youth reporting that they would have liked to connect with their culture more often while in care.



The results of this survey clearly indicate that there is great work to be done to support young people’s ties to their cultural identity. Building greater cultural connections within the care system will have significant benefits for young people and is an important step in addressing the generational impacts of colonization.

- 1 Child Welfare Information Gateway (2024, July 11) Culture as a Protective Factor. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/prevention/culture-protective-factor/?top=58>
- 2 Queens Printer (2024, July 11) CHILD, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SERVICE ACT [RSBC 1996] CHAPTER 46. https://free.bcpublications.ca/civix/document/id/rs/rs/96046_01#section070

Executive Summary

Key Themes

In addition to challenges and recommendations for cultural connection in care, some key themes emerged through the data.

First and foremost, culture is a priority for youth in care. Young people want to maintain connection to their culture and want support to explore it further. While some young people come into government care with strong cultural ties, others have no idea about their cultural heritage and may not even know what the concept of culture can include. While many youth need support to maintain cultural connections, others also need guidance to understand and explore what their cultural heritage and identity is, or rather, could be. If young people don't have a strong connection to their culture, it doesn't mean they aren't curious or wouldn't benefit from the opportunity to learn more.



Culture is a priority for youth in care.

Secondly, relationships are key to cultural connections. Largely, culture lives and is passed on through our interactions with others. We experience culture naturally through conversations, shared meals, collective ceremonies, and language. To maintain and build culture, we must invest in relationships, including ties

to family and community, cultural mentors and knowledge keepers, and culturally competent care workers.



Relationships are key to cultural connections.

Summary of Challenges and Recommendations

Challenges to cultural connections

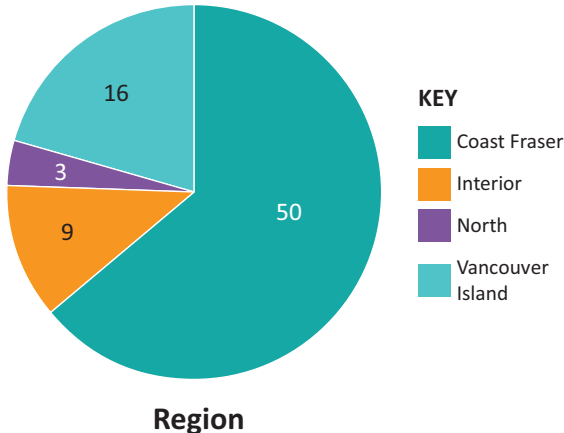
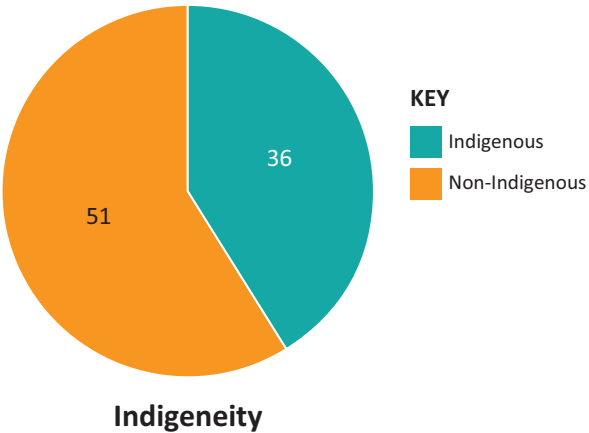
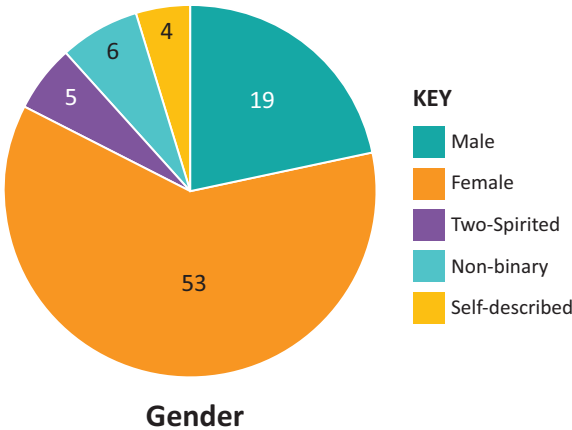
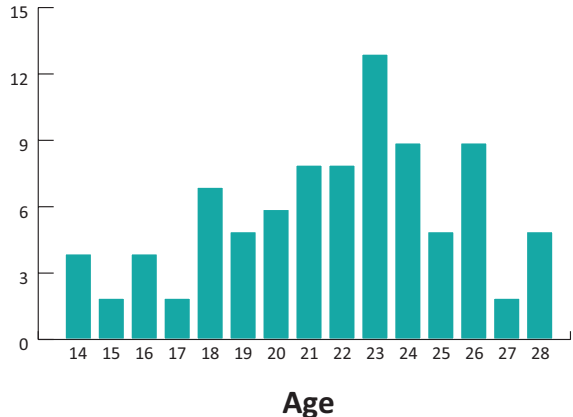
- Disconnect from family/relationships/community
- Lack of support from care providers and adult supports
- Don't know where to start/don't know much about culture
- Lack of opportunities/activities/resources
- Lack of funding to support cultural connections
- Restrictions/system barriers
- Mental health, triggers, self-esteem, no sense of belonging
- Racism/discrimination/stigma
- More pressing priorities (work, school, housing, etc.)

Recommendations for cultural connections

- Meet youths' basic needs, so culture can be a priority
- Be curious, ask youth, listen, and provide autonomy
- Offer encouragement, support, and guidance
- Do research with youth about their culture
- Facilitate cultural connections, don't just share opportunities
- Help youth understand what culture is and the benefits of cultural connections
- Provide relational supports/guides/cultural mentors (i.e., Elder, Roots Worker, Peer Leaders)
- Offer more cultural opportunities while in care (i.e., food, activities, programs, camps, language classes, workshops, cultural exchanges, ancestry tests)
- Reduce barriers to participation (permission forms, wait times, transportation, funding, status cards, not being registered with an Indigenous nation)
- Maintain/build family and community connections
- Match youth with care providers of the same culture
- Provide culturally-relevant services
- Develop cultural competence of adult supports/workers
- Protect youth from racism and discrimination
- Offer mental health supports alongside cultural opportunities

Demographics

The cultural survey received responses from 87 young people in and from care between the ages of 14 and 28 from across British Columbia (BC). The majority of participants were in their early 20s, identified as female, and lived in the Coast Fraser region of BC.



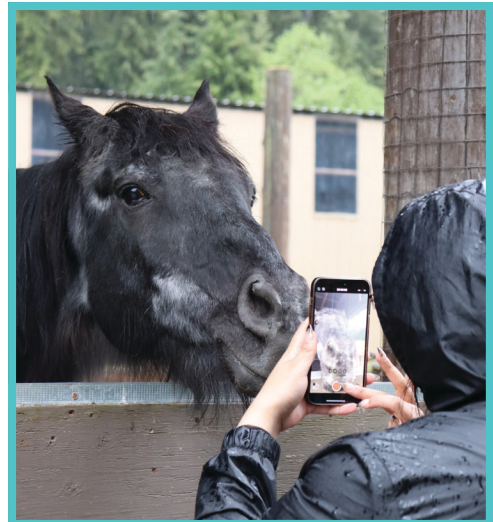
One of my favourite things about my cultural background is the Sweat Lodge.

I am Pakistani and Afghan.

In an open-ended question, survey participants were asked to share their cultural background. The varied answers reflect a broad notion of culture including nationality, ethnicity, language, practices, religion, and more. Of the 87 respondents, 37 identified as Indigenous.

My mum is English and Irish. My biological father who I've never met is Lebanese. I was raised under the false pretences that I was El Salvadoran and was raised as such during my childhood.

I'm not sure. I don't know my ancestry.



I am indigenous and grew up on a reservation in the NWT. I moved to BC in 2014 and have been pretty removed from my cultural since.

I don't really think I have one. My mom and dad were both white atheists. I just see my culture as a non-religious Canadian.

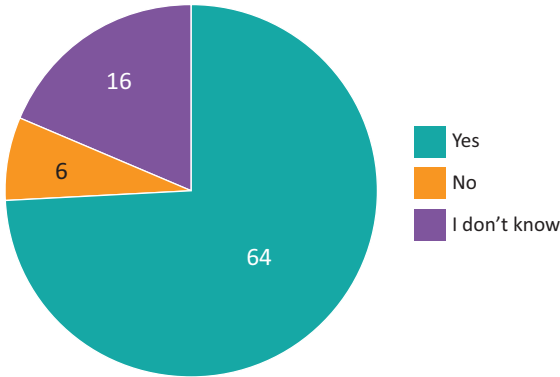
Ukrainian and German,
Christian roots.

Findings

Cultural Connections for Youth in Care

Responses from the cultural survey clearly highlight that youth in care want and need more support to explore and maintain connection to their culture. 74% of participants indicated that they would have liked to connect with their culture more while they were in care. Young people are curious about where they come from and want to learn about their history, ethnicity, traditional foods, clothing, practices, languages, etc.

Would you have liked to connect with your culture more often while in care?



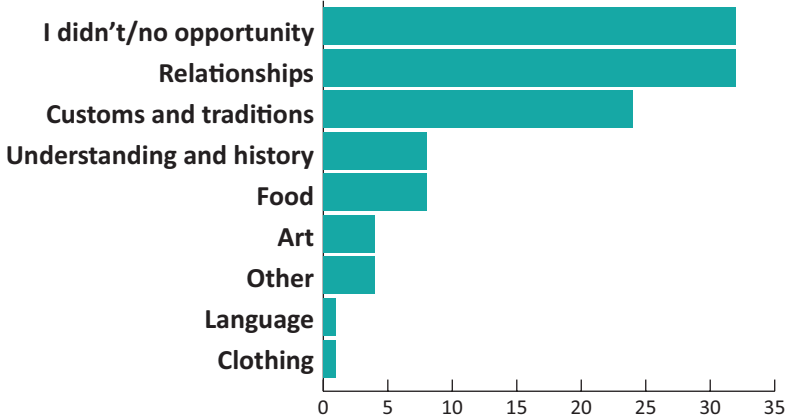
When asked how youth connected to their culture while in care, the most common answer was through relationships, including relationships with individuals and organizations. Many youth spoke about maintaining a connection to their family or home community, meeting friends with shared cultural backgrounds, connecting with an Elder or cultural mentor, or attending programming offered by a community organization. These relational connections help youth learn about and navigate the different elements of culture in an informal way.

Youth should be offered an opportunity to be assisted in exploring their culture rather than being left to ask on their own, as most don't even realize that's an option.

After you leave family you don't get the chance to connect with that side of yourself anymore.

My primary link to my Punjabi and Sikh heritage was through my parents, and at times, our relationship was difficult to navigate. When I didn't have regular contact with them, I felt a sense of disconnect from my cultural identity.

How did you connect with your culture while in care?



I found people living in the lower mainland who shared my culture and language

Met some Ghanaian people through church who shared some cultural similarities to mine and helped me learn a little about theirs and my own.

Another way that youth connect to their culture while in care is by participating in cultural customs and traditions. This includes attending holidays, events and celebrations, visiting places of worship, and incorporating personal cultural practices into everyday life (i.e., smudging). For some young people these activities were sporadic (i.e., just celebrating holidays), and for others these customs were part of their regular routines.

We celebrated Chinese New Year.

Participating in events like Holi and Diwali.

Going to the mosque.

Smudging and cedar brushing, as well as cultural ceremonies after achieving milestones.

Young people also enjoy their culture through food, art, and language. Some of the examples they shared included seeking out culturally-specific grocery stores, cooking traditional meals, making clothing and jewellery, and learning how to make significant artifacts through cultural programs and teachings (i.e., drum, smudges, baskets). Additionally, some individuals connected to their culture by doing research, watching culturally-specific media, and trying to build an understanding of their roots.

Made ribbon skirts and shirts, beaded earrings, learnt how to make a drum, learnt about smudging with medicines.

It's just the food and festivities that I take part in. My foster mom cooked and allowed me to cook Indian and Afghan foods.



I would teach French to my peers sometimes, mainly to help me with my French skills but also to help others learn too.

While many examples of cultural connections were shared through the survey, over a third of participants said they didn't connect with their culture while in care. Not all responses gave a reason, but many said they weren't given the opportunity.

Challenges and Recommendations

Key themes

- Disconnect from family/relationships/community
- Lack of support from care providers
- Lack of funding to support cultural connections
- Restrictions/system barriers
- Lack of opportunities/activities/resources
- Don't know where to start/don't know much about culture
- Mental health, triggers, self-esteem, no sense of belonging
- Racism/discrimination/stigma
- More pressing priorities (work, school, housing, etc.)

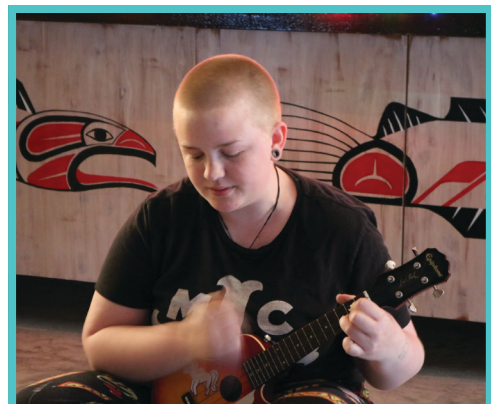
Relational Support

Survey participants shared a number of challenges related to connecting to and exploring their culture while in care. One of the key barriers they described was being geographically separated from the family, friends, and community with shared cultural backgrounds. Stories, teachings, food, history, and practices are passed down through these relationships in an effortless way through conversations, sharing, and modeling. Without these relationships, accessing culture requires more effort and can seem more formal. When you grow up in a household where culture is a part of everyday life, it's a big change to have to "seek out" culture through specialized programs and activities.

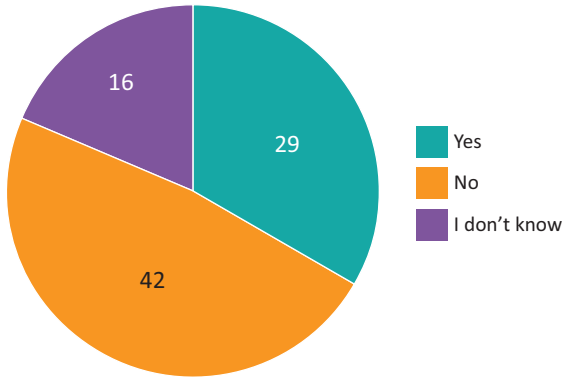
Many youth described navigating their culture alone as intimidating or difficult, and some shared that they didn't know where to start. Despite the important role that relationships play, close to half of participants did not feel that adult caregivers or supports in their life helped them explore or stay connected to their culture while in care.

Being placed with foster family from a different culture and having other kids in the home who are from different cultures makes it hard to stay connected to your own

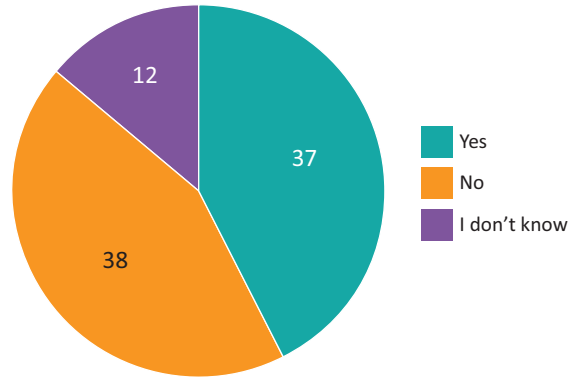
Living in the city with no knowledge of cultural background can be scary and overwhelming.



Were you supported by your social worker, care giver, or supportive adult to EXPLORE your culture?



Were you supported by your social worker, care giver, or supportive adult to STAY CONNECTED to your culture?



Young people want relational support to maintain connections to their cultural heritage and to learn about their culture if they have not yet had the chance. They want their care workers to be curious, ask them questions, and encourage them to explore their culture, even if it has not yet been a big part of their life. This curiosity can help young people feel their culture is important and understand that there are benefits to cultural connections. This must be done with care and respect for young people’s wishes. As one youth shared, “Be aware of the complicated feeling that can come up through this exploration—help facilitate conversations.”

Ask youth questions about their culture, about what they enjoy about it/do not enjoy, about what they wish they could do more of, etc. I think that young people often don’t even think about these things until they are prompted — don’t expect young people to bring these things up themselves. Curious care teams are so powerful!

I was not supported at all while in care to connect with my culture and therefore did not connect with it.

TALK TO US- engage in conversations about how confusing culture can be when you feel lost, provide compassion.

This survey made me understand what culture could mean, prior i thought i didn’t have one since i wasn’t religious (culture isn’t based solely on religion?!)

One of the key recommendations youth had for adult supports and workers was to be in this journey with them. Do research with young people about their culture. Explore cultural foods, restaurants, and cooking together. Don’t just share information and opportunities—actually facilitate connections to people, communities, and programs by making introductions, attending with youth, being interested, etc.

Additionally, young people want access to specialized cultural mentors and workers. Some of the examples they shared were Roots Workers, Elders, and Peer Mentors. These knowledge keepers are key to building young people's understanding of their culture and offer an opportunity to experience culture relationally.

Having an Indigenous Youth Mentor.

More staffing for this purpose (e.g. Roots Workers, Youth Advisors, FCCWs).

Finally, because relationships are such a big part of culture, young people want greater support to maintain family and community connections, or to build/rebuild them where needed. Some youth shared stories of being registered with the wrong Indigenous Nation, not having the opportunity to visit family, or missing important community celebrations. Young people want support and opportunities to maintain these connections.

Help youth locate relatives they may have lost contact with. Help youth create a family tree. Inform youth on events happening within their community. Maybe attend with them so they feel comfortable.

Opportunities should be available for youth to not only connect culturally with their immediate family but their community as well.

Stay connected with cultural friends and family.

Cultural Opportunities and Programs

Youth want more opportunities to engage with their culture while in care. Many said there just weren't a lot of chances to participate in cultural activities, or that opportunities were not shared with them. They want access to cultural activities, events and celebrations, community programs, and cultural camps. Some of the interests they shared included:

- Language classes
- Making traditional art, jewellery, and clothing
- Learning and participating in dance and music
- Foraging traditional medicines, ingredients, and materials
- Learning history, stories, and teachings
- Cooking classes and learning to make traditional foods
- Cultural and land-based camps
- Attending places of worship and connecting with religious communities and teachers
- Participating in ceremonies, holidays, and celebrations
- Connecting with Elders, mentors, and cultural workers
- Cultural affinity groups
- Access to ancestry tests



Providing more activities etc. that are cultural related. Ex. Sweat lodge, smudging, shawl/drum/rattle making, cedar weaving.

Language lessons and fun activities that involve our cultures traditions.

In addition to these more structured activities, some youth simply want access to culturally-relevant foods, clothing, and materials to enjoy in their day-to-day life.

Helping someone embrace their culture through food, expression through clothing etc.

Being able to learn how to powwow dance. Receiving help so I can buy materials needed to make cultural garments.

Social workers to be prepared with opportunities in the community for youth to participate in.

Structural and Administrative Barriers

One of the challenges that youth spoke of was the structural and administrative barriers they experienced while trying to access culture within care. Unfortunately, some youth said they missed out on cultural opportunities because of:

- Difficulties getting permission forms signed
- Lack of transportation
- Lack of funding to participate in opportunities
- Not being registered with their nation
- Not having a status card
- Wait times to receive support, funding, and approvals
- Regulations related to transportation/chaperoning youth



These barriers kept youth from attending cultural activities they were interested in, which can discourage future attempts. Youth recommend reducing administrative barriers so that accessing culture is more accessible and not such an effort.

I tried to do a school exchange to connect with my culture, however lack of communication with my SW and lack of approval in a timely fashion made me miss the deadlines.

Make it available and make it a priority, because right now, the bureaucracy makes impossible for that priority to be realized by young people.

Having transportation and money to use to go to cultural events.

Cultural Competence

Young people need to experience equity and inclusion in their community, but in particular, they need cultural competence from the adult supports in their lives. However, some youth shared that they continue to experience racism, discrimination, and a lack of cultural awareness/understanding from within the care system. Of those who mentioned experiencing racism and discrimination, 83% were Indigenous. Clearly, these experiences can be a significant deterrent from engaging in cultural activities and practices. Multiple youth spoke of the stigma they feel about their culture.

I faced racism and stereotyped labels that were put on me which made it challenging to explore my culture.

Indigenous children should have a place of belonging instead of being outcasts of society.

Youth want foster parents, social workers, and other service providers to be more knowledgeable, respectful, and inclusive, and suggested that better or additional training was needed. They need protection from racism and discrimination so that they can feel proud of who they are and their cultural heritage. As one youth reminded, care workers need to ask questions and be interested so that they feel that their culture matters.

I grew up in a white home, not thoroughly engaged with my own culture. Much of the families prejudice and bias influenced how I negatively viewed myself and my entire culture.

Youth also highlighted the desire for more culturally-appropriate supports and services. One survey participant recommended matching youth and care providers of the same cultural background (wherever possible). Better matched placements would increase the likelihood of having culturally-knowledgeable care providers.

A perfect cultural match is not likely, but speaking from the perspective of a black woman, I have a plethora of cultural insecurities because I was almost always the only minority in each home I lived in.

Maybe hosting informative sessions where foster families can better understand the diversity that exists among foster children/youth.



Mental Health

An additional theme that came through, particularly among Indigenous responses, was the reminder that exploring culture can be mentally draining or even triggering for a variety of reasons. Culture is often experienced through family, which can be complicated for youth from care and may be a source of trauma. Being disconnected from or unfamiliar with one’s culture can also be a reminder of the harmful

impacts of colonization and generational trauma. And sometimes young people are going through so much turmoil in their life that trying to learn about their culture is just too much to process on top of everything else.



Wanting to know yourself Indigenously / culturally when you have no connection to it is a very challenging thing to do.

It is a very emotional process and having the appropriate skills to manage one’s own wellbeing/mental health would be a lot to expect of someone at this age. Having supports for mental health and wellbeing simultaneously as a person is reconnecting with their culture, I, personally, think is vital.

Don’t make them feel trapped, ask questions about how they feel with their relationship with their culture.



Young people cautioned care workers to be supportive, patient, and not too pushy about engaging with culture. They also suggested providing mental health supports alongside cultural exploration, and encouraged adult supports to sit in those complex feelings towards their culture with them.

Prioritizing Culture

Finally, the need to prioritize culture within the care system was an overall theme in the survey responses. While most youth expressed interest in learning about their culture, many felt that it wasn't prioritized by their care team or couldn't be prioritized because there was always more urgent needs to be addressed.

It would help if culture was something that was truly prioritized by way of continuously offering youth opportunities to engage with cultural supports.

A few participants explained that there wasn't time or opportunity to explore their culture because they were too focussed on having their basic needs met. If young people are worried about having a safe place to sleep and food to eat, participating in cultural activities may not be something they can even consider. They recommend addressing young people's basic needs so that exploring culture is truly an option for youth in care—an option they both want and need.

But above all, youth want to feel like their cultural connections is a priority to their care workers and not just an afterthought. They want culture to be a meaningful part of their care plan, and want to feel that their culture is valued by their care team.



If social workers talked with us & visited us more.

To have basic needs met first.

Incorporating cultural teachings into their care plans.

Conclusion

Culture is an integral part of many people’s identity. It ties them to community, shapes their values, and informs their daily food and practices. For youth from care who have been removed from their family, culture can be a great benefit and a protective factor. It can help them maintain a sense of self in a new environment and stay connected to a community and way of life that is familiar and nourishing.

While some youth in care have access to cultural opportunities and relationships, many survey participants shared that culture wasn’t very available to them, despite their interest. There wasn’t enough support, encouragement, and knowledge from their care team; there wasn’t enough cultural opportunities to participate in; and they faced barriers and racism when trying to maintain cultural connections.

Culture can be a great benefit and a protective factor for youth from care that have been removed from their family.



Access to culture is a right protected under the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*, and *Section 70 Rights for Youth in Care*. Young people are curious about their culture and want support to explore it on their own terms. Let’s use the experiences and ideas that youth were brave enough to share as a call to action. Let’s build greater and more diverse opportunities for youth to engage in culture while in care.



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