

**REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM:
THE SPARROW LAKE ALLIANCE
EXPERT SYMPOSIUM ON CROSSOVER KIDS
(JANUARY 16, 2004)**

On January 16, 2004 forty-six professionals from all child and youth service sectors representing organizations from Thunder Bay, Sault St. Marie, North Bay, Windsor, Hamilton, London, Ottawa and the greater Toronto area gathered to discuss the issue of “crossover kids.” During the morning session, two presentations were made: Judy Finlay, Ontario’s Child Advocate presented the results of her recent study with youth in custody followed by comments from two young people who shared their experiences as crossover youth within the local systems. Michael Ungar, Associate Professor of Social Work at Dalhousie University, and an international expert on the intersection of the child welfare and youth justice systems, presented a summary of his model for better serving these children and youth (copies of these papers are appended to this report).

The symposium was called to address concerns, expressed by members of the Sparrow Lake Alliance, that child and youth serving sectors are not meeting adequately the needs of children and youth involved with child welfare, children’s mental health and youth justice systems. Invitations to attend the day were sent to field leaders in all sectors. Participants agreed to work together to develop an informed set of policy recommendations with the goal of improving outcomes for crossover kids.

From the outset, it was acknowledged that the existing research literature shows:

- that crossover kids have an historical trajectory of moving from residential settings in children’s mental health or child welfare into young offender custody;
- that multiple placements in the children’s service sector are associated with poorer outcomes (e.g. academic) and increased probability of involvement with the youth justice system;
- that involvement with the youth justice system increases the probability of future involvement in the justice system; and
- that the youth justice system is poorly equipped to address the mental health, family, and educational problems that initially bring children into the child and youth service system.

Underlying our approach to the day were the shared beliefs that:

- our common goal is to produce a more coherent and effective system that better serves crossover kids and leads to more successful young adults;
- such a system must be informed by a clear vision and a common set of values, principles, rights and entitlements;
- all parts of the system should treat the “whole” child and that children youth and families must have a voice in all decisions that impact on their lives;
- there are critical times and circumstances where different approaches, strategies or community supports can make important differences in the long-term outcomes of children and youth;
- there is the potential to change the policies, attitudes, and practices of organizations across sectors that will dramatically improve outcomes for children and youth; and
- the language and terminology we use to describe children, youth, families, and system processes affects our attitudes and behaviours. Therefore, we need to reexamine our terminology with this impact in mind (e.g. “take into care” as opposed to “apprehend”).

The following principles and recommendations are those the assembled group directed us to bring forward to the Ministry of Children's Services:

PRINCIPLE: Prevent and/or reduce the numbers of Ontario children entering the child welfare system

Recommendations:

- a) More extensive negotiation and mediation processes are needed preceding decisions to remove children from the home; the same assistance should be available for children and families wishing to attempt reconciliation.
- b) Short-term respite care is needed for children and families in order to provide opportunities to negotiate, reconcile, and identify a community support plan will prevent breakdowns in placements.
- c) Enhanced cultural and racial sensitivity training is needed on issues relating to parenting, child and family relationships.

PRINCIPLE: Prevent and/or reduce the number of children moving from the child welfare to the youth justice system.

Recommendations:

- d) Reduce the practice of facility staff or professional caregiver initiated charges against children and youth in residential or group home settings (including schools), leaving discretion to charge in emergency situations to authorities.
- e) Mediation and negotiation processes should precede any changes to a residential placement to reduce the need for removal and promote placement continuity wherever possible.
- f) Provide short-term respite support for children and youth in all systems where it will help support and/or sustain an existing placement or school setting.

PRINCIPLE: Provide greater continuity of care and relationship permanency for children that enter the child welfare and/or youth justice systems.

Recommendations:

- g) Establish a single system worker ("system navigator") who will serve as a designated advocate for the child or youth, with permanent responsibility for negotiating on their behalf across all service sectors.
- h) Change policy and practices to minimize the number of staff that are assigned to a child over time.
- i) Mediation and negotiation processes involving both the child and service provider should precede any decisions to move the child to another facility or location.
- j) Provide short-term respite support for children where it will help support and sustain an existing placement.
- k) Change the restrictions that prevent adoption in cases where parents and families wish to remain involved with the child.

In addition to the three principles listed above, there were several additional suggestions for changes that would improve outcomes for children and youth:

- 1) Extend the child welfare system to the age of 18 years (to harmonize with other systems).
- 2) Consider the concept of system-owned foster homes in order to provide placement continuity.
- 3) Coordinate Education and Children's in order to improve educational outcomes for youth, and to prevent them from entering the youth justice system.
- 4) Develop funding policies that reinforce system integration and continuity of care for children and youth.
- 5) Develop policies and procedures to keep children (in an age appropriate manner) in care and custody aware of their "life path" and the factual reasons for the decisions made about placement at each point.
- 6) Provide training for staff in both systems to support the shifts in policy and practices described above.

The Sparrow Lake Alliance, together with the participants in the expert symposium would like to thank the Ministry of Children's Services for allowing us the opportunity to bring these recommendations forward and to share our vision of a system that will address the needs of crossover children and youth.

We believe this is an opportune time to begin a dialogue around such issues and to begin a process of change that will improve outcomes for our children and youth. We look forward to establishing an ongoing dialogue and to meeting on a regular basis around these issues.