

Residential schools shaped bad parents: survivors



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Many Indian residential school survivors blame the experience for making them bad parents.

As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission prepares for its first national event this week in Winnipeg, former students say they were denied parental love and role models and that has affected their own children.

"I brought them up in a pretty horrible way — didn't know how to parent, didn't know how to show love," said Peguis First Nation elder Josie Bear.

She was exposed to severe discipline as a student in residential schools. As a result, she treated her own children much the same, she said.

Daphne Thomas, an elder and healer on Peguis First Nation — Manitoba's largest reserve with about 7,200 residents — said her early days of parenting were "horrible" because of her experience in those schools.

"It has affected my life and the lives of my children and that's what I feel most guilty about still to this day, because of the way I parented my children," she said.

Taken from families

About 150,000 First Nations, Métis and Inuit children were placed in more than 130 residential schools across Canada from the late 1870s until the last school closed in 1996.

The schools were government-funded and meant to force the assimilation of young aboriginal people into European-Canadian society.

Many students were forbidden to speak their native language or otherwise engage in their culture at the schools, which were run by churches.

Some were physically, sexually and psychologically abused while at the schools.

Elders on First Nations feel that experience has contributed to the high number of children being turned over to foster care.

According to Manitoba's child-welfare system, as many as 70 per cent of children in care are aboriginal, though they make up only about 20 per cent of the province's child population.

"I have a son that is constantly in and out of jail. Why? Because I was a crappy father," said Ray Mason, a residential school survivor and president of the National Residential School Survivors' Society.

One of the goals of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is to help survivors as well as their children and grandchildren heal from the effects of residential schools.

The national event, at The Forks national historical site from June 16 to 19, is expected to bring in 5,000 to 8,000 survivors and their families, along with former school staff and others who were affected by the experience.

It will be the first of seven such events to be held across the country.

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