

Indigenous Peoples of Canada

History - Residential Schools

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The residential school system in Canada lasted over 100 years, and over 300,000 students were taken from their homes and put into these institutions. Oftentimes what it encompassed was a child being taken from their family for, it could be 12 months a year, but oftentimes it was 10 months a year - taken from the only culture, the only family, the only language that they'd ever known - taken to institutions where the goal of that institution, that school, was to really erase and - erase indigenous culture, language, identity; and assimilate First Nations students into the broader Canadian public. So what we're talking about is the goal of the system being to - to really disconnect these students from their indigenous culture, from their language, and physically from their families. What ended up happening was there was a lot of abuse in these schools, so there was physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse. There was shaming around the speaking of indigenous languages, and we're finding now with the work that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission did, that there were even more extreme cases of abuse: things like nutrition experiments where children were denied food, denied water. We're finding out that along with widespread sexual abuse that things like an electric chair were used at the St. Anne's Residential School in - you know, on the west coast of James Bay.

So very extreme circumstances for kids. Sometimes these kids were there - from the age of four; they could have been taken that early - to graduating. And what that's left is a legacy that indigenous people and the broader Canadian public all have to deal with and reconcile. It's work that's started and has to continue, because the intergenerational impacts in some families - you have three or four generations of people going to these schools - has impacted them. If you were taken from your parents, and put into something completely sort of alien to you, abused there, shamed there, then when it comes to you parenting your children, how do you - how does that happen? If you were never parented how do you learn how to be a parent? And those are things that our communities have to deal with, as well as the emotional trauma - there is a lot of trauma in our communities due to the residential schools.

So although the last residential school closed in the nineties, we still have the lasting impacts of those things, and things that we see daily in our communities, and it can all be linked back to that.

The other thing that I would say is that I don't know an indigenous person in Canada who hasn't been affected in some way. So my grandfather went to a residential school. He was only educated to the age of eight years old because he ran away from the school because he was abused there. My family was able - my great-grandparents were able to take him very far into the bush where he wouldn't be found by the Indian Agent who would take kids to school, but the impact of that is not only was my grandfather abused there but he only had an education eight years old and it affected him for the rest of his life. So that's just my personal connection to it. I have uncles who also attended residential schools, so I don't know a person in Canada who's indigenous who isn't affected by it to this day. So to that end I think it's important that anyone interacting or wanting to develop relationships with indigenous people understand in a very real way how residential schools impacted our communities and our nations.