

A Canada fit for children 2015: Identity, rights and belonging^[1]

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Preface

A Canada fit for children 2015 is my third and final attempt to draft an action plan for Canada's children. The first two were official. This one is not; rather, it is a testament for and a tribute to all the young people to whom I have been listening for so many years and a show of confidence in their capacity to make a difference for themselves and for the rest of us.

For Canada's children: A national agenda for action was the first attempt with which I was involved. It was the official report of the Canadian Commission for the International Year of the Child. My role was to guide the Commission's considerations, encourage and organize consultations with children and edit the ensuing report. Many of the Commission's resolutions eventually found their way into public policy, with one notable exception. Although, since 1979, children's advocates have been established in virtually every province and territory there is still no children's commissioner at the federal level of government to focus attention on our youngest citizens.

For Canada's Children was framed by the United Nations 1959 Declaration on the Rights of the Child. My second attempt, A Canada Fit for Children 2004, was Canada's response to the report of the 2002 UN Special Session on Children entitled A World Fit for Children. This final proposal, A Canada Fit for Children 2015, blends the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) with the voices of children and youth into a renewed call for action.

The concept of children as persons with rights was introduced into the official international discourse on human rights by Eglantyne Jebb who founded Save the Children as a result of the suffering of children that she had witnessed during and after the First World War. In 1924 she persuaded the League of Nations to adopt the first Declaration on the Rights of the Child. Out of the ashes of the Second World War arose a new league of nations now known as the United Nations committed to preventing a third world war through the promotion of the human rights of all members of the human family, including children. In 1948 the UN issued the Universal Declaration of Human Rights following which a whole slew of international covenants and treaties with respect to human rights were negotiated and agreed to under the sponsorship of the UN, including the CRC in 1989.

Since then and in association with the processes established by the UN to hold countries responsible for implementing the treaties they have ratified a substantial body of jurisprudence and commentary about children's rights has evolved and the discourse about children's rights has expanded. Millions of children have benefited from this new approach. However, what countries say they will do and what they actually do are not always the same. Those of us who have worked with the CRC over many years can no longer think of children any other way than as persons with articulated rights. But this is clearly not the case for everyone. The purpose of the following document is to look at the situation of children and youth in Canada through the lens that they, themselves, have crafted for us, the lens of identity, rights and belonging, and to spur everyone who can make a positive difference into action.

Issues facing Canada's children and adolescents

Affordable and high-quality early childhood education and care

20. Another significant stress factor for families is the lack of affordable child care. Article 18 of the CRC calls on states to "render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services in the care of children." Even when one parent is able to stay at home, their children could benefit from some access to early childhood care and education. All the research on early childhood supports the enrichment of children's lives through various opportunities outside the home. Still, venturing outside the family can put a child's sense of belonging and identity at risk if he or she finds himself or herself in a setting of questionable quality. Youth, looking back, have stated that "when you are young, having people love you is very important" and "childhood is a big step in a person's life and if they don't feel important, that's what they will carry with them for the rest of their life." Parents who cannot be with their children for most of the day certainly do not intend to send a message of neglect when their only choice is to place their child in an inadequate setting; nevertheless, their children may feel that they are not worthy of attention and care.

21. While there are effective models of child care all over the world, families in Canada still struggle to find and pay for quality child care.

Only 22 per cent of children under the age of five are in licensed daycare, and even if there were more spaces available, affordable child care is out of the question in most of Canada. Without a national child care policy, costs for child care range widely, quality and availability are not ensured, and mothers and fathers are left to try and provide the best possible environment for their children while juggling work and home. The absence of full supports in early childhood has immediate ramifications for the strength of a child's identity building blocks. Quality early childhood education also has an important role to play in children's lives in order for a seamless later transition into formal education. In Canada too many children are still arriving at school not yet ready to learn, even though most children have accepted the idea that education is important and that they belong in school. If we understand that 27 percent of children across Canada are already struggling or vulnerable in one or more areas of "physical, social, emotional or cognitive" development by the time they start kindergarten, it is clear that more must be invested in those early years before formal schooling begins.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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