

Canada must do better on caring for its children ^[1]

Opinion

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EXCERPTS

It has been said that the measure of any society is found in how it treats its children. If Canada were being tested, today would be judgment day.

Three years ago, when UNICEF measured the overall well-being of children living in wealthy countries Canada was in the middle – ranking 17 out of 29 countries. This was concerning for many Canadians who perceive Canada to be a great place to grow up and believe that our children should have everything they need to be healthy and happy so they can pursue their dreams.

If Canada's overall middle ranking for child well-being was concerning three years ago, the results of a new UNICEF report, *Fairness for Children: Canada's Challenge*, are alarming. In this report UNICEF takes an innovative approach to data analysis in the service of children. Instead of looking at the gap between Canada's wealthiest and poorest or between those doing best and those at the bottom, we looked at the gap between those children at the very bottom and those in the middle – the "average" experience of children in Canada.

Measured against these inequality gaps, Canada is at the back of the pack – ranking 26 out of 35 rich countries. This is alarming for a nation that prides itself on being a great place to grow up and one where children can achieve their biggest ambitions.

But the truth is too many of our children are unhappy and unhealthy. They don't have a fair shot in life.

In fact, we have one of the highest proportions of children who report very low life satisfaction. That's because nearly one quarter of Canadian children report having poor health symptoms on a daily basis. The same amount of older youth have diagnosable mental health problems. Levels of obesity have not changed. Child poverty remains high. Most areas that were assessed showed little or no improvement over the last decade.

This report shows us that Canada is one of a handful of countries, along with France, Iceland and Sweden, where inequality among children has increased markedly in recent years. When we compare ourselves to other countries with similar economies and similar resources, it becomes clear that we can do better. Canada's children are paying the price for our inaction.

But while some of the findings are jolting, let them be a jolt in the right direction, a jolt towards greater investment in children's early years, a jolt towards stronger monitoring and data collection to better inform policy, and a jolt towards more equitable services.

Those countries doing the best overall have the smallest gaps between their kids in the middle and those at the bottom – giving us a roadmap for how to do better for Canada's children. There is a direct relationship between the size of the inequality gap and how well all of a country's children are doing.

Canada has taken steps in the right direction. The recently proposed Canada Child Benefit, a commitment to curbing the marketing of unhealthy food and drinks to children, the development of a national early years' strategy to support child care and learning and a commitment to greater flexibility for parental leave are all signs of hope for Canada's children. They are working well in countries at the top of UNICEF's Index of Child Well-being. These investments would bring Canada up to par with what the best performing countries do for their children.

Disadvantages start early in life – and they tend to accumulate. By investing more, and earlier on, to make sure children get a good start in life, we'll be ensuring they finish childhood ready to make a strong entrance into adulthood. We'll be equipping them with the confidence and skills they need to become happy and productive members of their communities. We'll reduce the need to respond to the negative consequences of an unequal society. And, we'll have more resources to spend on positive development opportunities for all.

Let's be the nation we imagine ourselves to be. Let's be champions for our children. They deserve nothing less.

-reprinted from Toronto Star

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