

Addendum to the Alternative Report on Canada's Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Submitted by



**CHILDREN
FIRST
CANADA**

**LES ENFANTS
D'ABORD
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Since our last submission to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in March 2020, Children First Canada has remained steadfast in our mandate to be a strong, effective and independent voice for the 8 million kids living in Canada. We have a bold and ambitious vision that together we can make Canada the best place in the world for kids to grow up.©

There have been several major developments since our last submission which we wish to report on, including notable efforts at strengthening the legal protection of children's rights, as well as the federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Legislative Efforts to Protect Children's Rights

There have been two Bills submitted in the Senate that, should they be enacted, would further the rights of children in Canada.

First, the Honourable Senator Rosemary Moodie (Independent, Ontario) tabled Bill S-217: An Act to Establish a Commissioner for Children and Youth in Canada. Children First Canada welcomes the introduction of Bill S-217 in the Senate of Canada, calling for the establishment of an Office of the Commissioner for Children and Youth in Canada.

In addition, Senator Marilou McPhedran (Independent, Manitoba) tabled Bill S-219 which marks the official launch of the #Vote16 campaign, led by Senator McPhedran and her youth advisory, the Canadian Council of Young Feminists. This Bill would lower the federal voting age from 18 to 16. This is a big step in the parliamentary process that engages supporters across party lines toward a revitalized and more age-inclusive democracy in Canada. During a voting consultation completed by Children First Canada, one youth said they are "...100% on the side of this [lowering the voting age to 16]; the perception that younger people have less capacity to understand is simply incorrect. Youth are often more informed than their parents and other eligible voters."

Mitigating the Impact of COVID-19 on Children

As we noted in our prior submission, in spite of many positive steps to advance the rights of children, over the past decade, Canada has fallen from 12th to 25th place amongst OECD countries for child wellbeing according to UNICEF. The current crisis from the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the problems that previously existed and further exacerbated the problems. For 8 million kids in Canada, their childhood has been interrupted. School closures have impacted the physical and mental health of children, with short- and long-term implications.

Since the outset of the pandemic, Children First Canada and our Council of Champions have been working directly with the federal government, providing policy recommendations to senior decision-makers and to Ministers whose mandates include children to offer recommendations for action to mitigate the impact of the crisis on kids. Individually and collectively, the Council members and key partners have played an instrumental role in the national effort to mitigate the impact of the crisis on children.

We have been encouraged by initial investments made in frontline organizations like Kids Help Phone, foodbanks and emergency shelters, and by the Prime Minister's efforts to directly engage children through his press conferences and by answering questions from kids in conjunction with Dr. Theresa Tam. We also acknowledge the tremendous supports from the private sector and communities in support of children and youth. These early efforts have

brought much needed attention and resources to the plight of children and have been greatly appreciated, but **much more is needed if we are to make significant impact.**

In a Statement to the Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, Kamil Kanji, Youth Advisor said:

“As a young person, living in a low income community, I have seen the impacts that this pandemic has had on my peers first-hand. Children ARE suffering, now more than ever.

Due to the closures of recreation facilities and schools people that I have gone to school with everyday, people I have spent my whole life playing in the park with or going on bike rides with no longer have access to the breakfast programs that they relied on in the mornings and their mental health is on a downward decline as they are forced to endure endless verbal abuse from frustrated parents.

As the days drudge on, my peers become more and more isolated from their communities, lose the routines of an active and healthy lifestyle and worst of all lose hope in their futures.

In a country as great as ours this should not be a reality we accept but rather a challenge we face together.”

In the same statement, Kiah Heneke-Flindall, Youth Advisor stated:

“If we are truly looking to build a better future, we need to start with the empowerment and inclusion of our nation’s emerging leaders, children and youth. In these difficult times, any and all existing critical issues that impact young people are being amplified.

Challenges with mental health are being pressurized under these tough conditions, especially among already vulnerable youth who are lacking a safe space to learn and connect with their support systems.

Further, parents and caregivers are facing similar struggles, leaving those they are caring for exposed to increased stress, instability and abuse.

Young people have to start being included in decision-making about issues surrounding children and youth, because ourselves, our siblings, our friends, and our peers are the ones that are experiencing these challenges and can give the best insight on how to tackle them.”

With this lived experience in mind, our Council of Champions released a Joint Statement calling for a federal investment of \$250 million to be allocated in:

- Children’s physical and mental health
- Their protection from violence,
- And their resilience.

As young people have a right to express their views in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously, we have long advocated for the government to directly engage children and youth in the creation of policy and solutions to address these concerns.

To that end, Children First Canada launched the Young Canadians' Parliament (YCP) to provide a platform for children and youth to engage with their peers and with Parliamentarians to ensure the protection of their rights throughout the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.

Just days ago, YCP convened for the first time, and the children spoke with their peers and directly with Parliamentarians to address their concerns. At their first gathering, children and youth spoke about the threats to their mental health and the lack of supports available to them in the weeks and months ahead. We are also witnessing these concerns more broadly through the programs and services delivered by the children's hospitals and frontline charities and hearing directly from children about the sense of urgency with which they need help.

This week marks the end of the school year, and while most children would normally be looking forward to the summer months with hope and joy, this year many fear for their future. The closure of schools means that children will be cut off from what little support was still available to them, and very little is opening up to assist them throughout July and August.

The youth have since released a public statement calling on the Prime Minister to take urgent action.

"We have been impacted by this pandemic in so many ways. Things like activities, both inside and outside of our schools, have been cancelled. This is devastating for a lot of us, especially as the warmer weather comes around and we are forced to remain indoors, despite the urge to play outside with friends," says Sagni Kuma – a youth from Ottawa who was integral to planning and hosting the Young Canadians' Parliament.

"Outside of school, we're missing out on extracurriculars like summer camps and daycares, where we could interact with other children and youth while our parents work. Now that school has ended, we have less access to teachers and guidance counselors, and have lost yet another piece of normalcy to our daily routines. Mental health is a huge thing a lot of us struggle with, but we don't know how to identify or tackle ourselves. We need people reaching out to us, checking up on us, or giving us a way to remain engaged when we would otherwise be unstimulated."

Many children will go without access to camps and other recreational programs that are essential to their physical and mental health, those that experience family violence have limited access to a safe adult outside of their homes, and far too many will lose access to breakfast and lunch programs that they rely upon.

While it is true that the COVID-19 pandemic has largely infected the elderly, it is also true that the pandemic has largely affected children. Kids have paid a hefty toll, and the costs will be born for years to come.

In addition to the recommendations made in our submission on March 2020, we have since called on the Government of Canada to take the following steps:

1. Ensure that Bill S-217: An Act to Establish a Commissioner for Children and Youth in Canada receives full support and is quickly enacted.
2. Use the federal spending power available to act on the Joint Statement calling for an investment of \$250 million towards the physical and mental health of children, to protect children from violence, and to invest in their resilience.

3. Convene a First Ministers Meeting to urgently discuss the wellbeing of children in Canada amidst the COVID-19 recovery efforts.
4. Create a dedicated School Food Fund to support the health and wellbeing of children, families and communities, stimulating the Canadian economy during the COVID-19 recovery. This is in addition to the \$360 million that the Coalition for Healthy School recommended in their Budget 2020 submission as an initial Year 1 investment towards the establishment of a strong cost-shared, universal National School Food Program.
5. Ensure that Bill S-219 to lower the voting age receives full support and is enacted quickly.
6. Fully fund the Young Canadians' Parliament for the next 3 years to ensure young people have a platform to be educated on and exercise their rights, increase civic engagement, and gain knowledge in parliamentary process.

Investing in the health and wellbeing of children is not only the right thing to do, it is also key to Canada's economic recovery over the medium-longer term and it will yield a significant return on investment now and for years to come. According to the World Bank, investing in the early years of childhood is one of the smartest investments a country can make to break the cycle of poverty, address inequality and boost productivity later in life.

As the Government of Canada moves from crisis response to the development of its go-forward economic recovery plan, sustained and impactful investment in Canada's kids will be crucial. This will only support the government's ability to rebuild while also managing down other future expenditures and spurring productivity.

Canadians strongly support the need for action to improve the lives of all 8 million kids living in Canada. Not only do they believe we have a moral imperative, they also believe that it makes good economic sense. Nearly 9 in 10 Canadians say that investing in children will pay off and save the need for additional expenditures in the future.

Efforts to protect the rights of children in Canada must occur within the context of a nation to nation framework, respecting the rights of Indigenous peoples to self-determination and the enjoyment of their unique rights enshrined in UNDRIP.

Together, all Canadians must rise to the collective challenge to invest in Canada's children and take urgent action to close the gaps.

Children First Canada urges the federal government to seize the opportunity of the periodic review by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to closely consider the recommendations contained within this report and the views of other civil society organizations participating in this process, and most importantly, to listen to children themselves. The views of children and youth laid out in the Canadian Children's Charter are a platform for action. The children have spoken, and we urge you to listen and to act.