

Center Children in Recovery

Throne Speech, September 2020

Introduction

There will be no recovery for Canada without a recovery for children. Our well-being now and in the future depends on creating conditions that allow all children to develop their full potential.

Protecting children dominated public discourse during the emergency phase of the pandemic. Realizing children's rights to develop their potential and contribute to society is essential for recovery.

While many children showed resilience in dealing with Covid-19, it exposed gaps in the way we support children. Canadians are more aware of the connections between the conditions that make a difference for resilience or vulnerability. Multiple factors lead to the current high rates of anxiety among young people and allow too many children to fall through the cracks of fragmented support services.

There is also heightened awareness that coherent public policy and equitable access to public services benefit everyone. For a successful recovery, we need to close the gaps that leave some children behind and support every child to realize the rights Canada ratified thirty years ago this year.

The main problem is poor governance for children and youth. Covid-19 shows again that our current approach to the way we support children and families, under Canada's federalist system of government, is not working well for children and youth. Existing inequities, uneven access to child care and other services, unacceptably high rates of violence against children, and high rates of mental health issues - all point to the need for new ways of working together to support our youngest citizens. The core but unaddressed issue in the WE controversy is the lack of a coherent youth policy and governing body that could address the challenges for adolescents created by Covid-19.

Young people are not well served by jurisdictional and partisan political blame games; they expect better. They need to see governments working together in a coherent way to realize their rights. Taking the Convention on the Rights of the Child seriously in Canada provides tools for improving how federalism works for children.

Other countries also show the need to do better. As highlighted in UNICEF's latest report, Canada falls in the bottom third of comparable countries on most indicators of child well-being. We can and need to do better in the way we govern for our children in order to be a leading global player.

We can build back better. The following five steps can close gaps and provide a strong foundation for recovery:



Five Step Plan for Better Governance for Children Across Canada

I. Child-Centered Coherence: Council of Ministers for Children with Targets and Timelines

Convene a Council of Ministers for Children and Youth, facilitated by the federal Minister for Children and Families, to provide coherent leadership and concrete action plans in the following areas. Regular meetings of federal and provincial ministers, starting immediately, and regular public reporting on targets and progress in achieving them will restore public confidence for children and parents that was eroded during Covid-19 by big gaps and conflicting policies.

All major areas of children's policy include both federal and provincial duties. By working together, Canada will have, for the first time, an achievable, coherent plan to support children through all stages of development. This will also fulfill Canada's duties under the Convention on the Rights of the Child by paying attention to specific provisions, past recommendations to Canada, and the integration of its central principles in those plans.

Fulfilling children's rights will make Canada work better for children.

Equitable Access to Early Childhood Education and Care

Take a child-centered approach to implementing and expanding the existing framework agreement between provinces and the federal government, with adequate resourcing. Economic analysis shows a child-centered approach will return benefits for children, women, and society. (Article 18)

Right to Education Across Canada

Work with the Council of Ministers of Education to develop a framework that ensures children's right to education is met, including:

A. Equitable Access to Education (Article 28)

B. Programs that Develop Full Potential for All Areas of Life (Article 29)

C. Teaching Children About Their Rights and How to Exercise Them (Article 12 and 42)

Evidence shows that children who learn about their rights are less vulnerable, more resilient, and more able to contribute to their own development.

Coherent Youth Policy

Build on the current narrow youth policy to have an integrated approach to the multiple factors that affect the ability of adolescents to flourish in Canada. Effective strategies to support the transition from adolescence to adulthood will include pathways from school to work, equitable access to post-secondary education, social supports, and effective prevention of youth homelessness.

Canadian governments would do well to use the guidance in *General Comment 20 on Implementing the Rights of the Child during Adolescence* to develop a more effective approach to youth policy in Canada.

Access to Adequate Resources

Coordinate the child-focused elements of federal and provincial poverty reduction strategies to meet children's right of access to resources for healthy development. Report regularly on multiple indicators of poverty for children and remove all barriers that prevent some children from access to the Canada Child Benefit and other income support programs. (Article 24)

Integrated into these strategies will be:

Public health approach to **mental health**, which focuses on prevention first by paying attention to mental health in homes, schools, and community programs. Access to early community-based interventions when needed and reducing delays in response to requests for more intensive treatment require improved coordination. (Article 24)

National pathway to **end violence against children**:

Canada claims to be a Pathfinder country but the current pathway is not a national plan and it is piece-meal – full of holes. Covid alerted us to the need for a more comprehensive approach that addresses all forms of violence, from domestic violence to bullying and on-line sexual exploitation rather than the current piece-meal approach that is not effective (Article 19)

Incorporation of **anti-racism analysis and strategies** will ensure inclusiveness and result in more equitable outcomes across the lifespan for all Canadians. Systemic racism affects children's health and well-being in a multitude of ways. (Article 2).

Targets, timelines, and regular reporting are helpful rights-based accountability tools that ensure the best interests of children are given top priority and that policies produce outcomes that benefit all Canadians. These tools are missing in most areas of children's policy in Canada; that contributes to gaps and poor outcomes by global comparisons.

II. Accountability that Shows the Best Interests of Children are Given Top Priority

Establish an accountability mechanism through a National Children's Commissioner, with a mandate to:

- **Work with provincial advocates for children;**
- **Hear from children directly and investigate complaints of violations of their rights (Article 12)**
- **Audit the plans from the perspective of children, with particular attention to the duty to support measures "to the maximum extent of available resources (Article 4)**
- **Work with civil society partners to ensure full implementation and regular monitoring of Canada's progress in realizing the rights of children. (Article 3)**

III. Deadline for Compliance on Actions to Fulfill the Rights of Indigenous Children

Set a firm deadline for resolution of long-standing issues relating to First Nations, Metis, and Inuit child welfare and support for children who fall under federal jurisdiction.

A comprehensive approach will include, among others:

- **Compliance with the Human Rights tribunal rulings,**
- **Equitable access to culturally respectful education,**
- **Provision of clean water,**
- **Full implementation of Jordan's Principle,**
- **A coherent plan to end violence, especially for women and girls.**

Frequent promises to First Nations, Metis, and Inuit children have not been kept. The deadline will include implementation of the Calls to Action in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Report on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

IV. Right to Healthy Environment: Youth Impacts Centered in Climate Change Policy

International evidence shows that children will bear greater impacts from climate change. Inter-generational fairness requires fulfilling the duty to protect children's right to a healthy environment by putting that at the center of climate change policies (Article 24).

V. Lower the Voting Age

Young people need and are capable of having a direct voice in the selection of the people who set the policies that affect their lives. Lowering the voting age to 16 is a logical next step to unaccountable youth advisory councils and youth wings of every political party. Youth aged 16 work, pay taxes, have a vested interest in our economy, and are eligible to join the military to defend Canada. Research shows they as capable as those over 18 to make the kind of decisions involved in voting. Experience in other countries shows that engaging them at age 16, before they leave secondary school leads to regular voting as young adults, which is a major gap in Canada.

In parts of the country with an aging population, including 16 and 17 year olds is important to ensure that the issues affecting youth are on the political agenda. In some parts of the country, such as northern communities, young people make up a significant portion of the population that should not be ignored in elections.

Budget for Children

The next budget should include a funding strategy to implement this plan. It should be based on closing the gap between the percentage of GDP that Canada spends on children and youth with what comparable countries spend. This is essential for the future of Canada, in light of our aging population and the need to empower our young people to meet the global challenges facing them.

Ambitious? Yes. Doable? Yes. Necessary? Yes. Will anything less do justice for children? No.

