

Child Rights in the Community Context

FRP Canada



www.frp.ca

2015 | Issue 1

Supporting Families by Promoting Children's Rights

Edited by Rebecca Balcerzak

Family support program practitioners work to ensure that children's basic needs are met, especially as families negotiate challenges such as poverty, family crisis, adjusting to life in Canada or just transitioning to parenthood. However, a children's rights-based approach to these issues goes much further than meeting children's needs.

When you put children's rights into practice in your community, you help increase the visibility of children as individuals and you encourage shared accountability for their well-being. Additionally, without child participation community-level projects and initiatives, no matter how well-designed, will lack an essential component: the voices for whom they are intended.

This special edition newsletter highlights some challenges and successes of a children's rights approach to issues at the community level as defined by academics, advocates, community organizations and children themselves in the inaugural *Canadian Journal of Child Rights*¹.

Here, you can learn about adopting a rights framework for action, how to incorporate meaningful child participation into your organization's practices, and some "dos" and "don'ts" for supporting new Canadian families whose children may have been traumatized by war. Finally, we are pleased to include a poem on the importance of children's rights, authored by a young person.



What are Child Rights?

Children's rights do not undermine the authority of parents; they exist to ensure children's healthy development. They are described in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which is an international treaty ratified by Canada in 1991. It recognizes that children's needs and interests are different than those of adults and that their best interest must be respected when making decisions affecting their lives. The CRC defines a "child" as anyone under 18, although many countries apply CRC concepts to young adults who still need support. This newsletter will also refer to those under 18 using the same term.

“Children's rights do not undermine the authority of parents; they exist to ensure children's healthy development”

The CRC's articles are interpreted in accordance with four guiding principles: non-discrimination; best interests of the child; the rights to life, survival and development; and the right to participation. When these principles become part of organizational culture and practice and are woven into interactions with families, a culture of respect is created for children as right-holders.



Created in partnership with the Landon Pearson Resource Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children's Rights at Carleton University: carleton.ca/landonpearson

A Children’s Rights Framework for Community Organizations

Family support organizations are in an excellent position to promote children’s rights given their working relationships with parents and children. The Society for Children and Youth of BC (SCY)², early in its 40 year history, approached issues affecting child well-being through a lens of equality, protection and self-worth – a precursor to child rights. SCY shifted its project emphasis towards the four CRC guiding principles as the UN codified standards of behaviour to represent consensus on what “childhood” ought to be.

Using a rights-centric approach, SCY has become more successful in highlighting important issues such as poverty and early childhood education and in advocating for child and youth friendly communities, demonstrably improving the lives of BC children.

Non-discrimination

The first guiding principle, non-discrimination, states that the CRC applies to all children equally. This principle influences SCY’s project work promoting inclusion and equality of opportunity. Referencing the CRC’s articles concerning non-discrimination, such as the special rights for children with disabilities, in their publications is just one way SCY has advocated for non-discriminatory practices. In your community, identifying disadvantaged populations and using the CRC to guide projects or funding requests promoting equal opportunity, can have a profound effect on the creation of a more rights-respecting environment for the families with whom you work.

The best interests of the child

The second guiding principle states that children must be the primary concern in making decisions that may affect them. This principle is particularly applicable to budget, policy and law. If your organization recommends legislative change, the CRC is a key reference document to ensure children are always a first priority. For example, SCY rated the degree to

which relevant BC laws complied with the CRC. This type of comparative information, contrasting Canada’s goals with where we really stand, is invaluable when advocating for legislative change.

The right to life, survival and development

Children’s rights to life, survival and development encompass everything from social security, health, protection, identity, family contact, culture and religion to the right to play. Identifying rights that align with your organization’s core projects and embracing rights-centric discussions can help your projects prosper and affect real-world change. For example, SCY broadened their child abuse newsletter’s readership and lobbied for legislative change by situating child abuse discussions in the context of violations of children’s rights. By referencing right to play articles in conjunction with the guiding principles, SCY’s free play projects have likewise benefitted from shifting to a rights-based approach.

The right to participation

The final guiding principle, participation, states that children have the right to be heard and their views considered in all matters

affecting them. To incorporate child participation in their projects SCY promotes children teaching children about their rights, includes the views of children in their projects, and supports other organizations to engage with children to express themselves and have their views heard. Consulting children in matters affecting them and taking their opinions into account is necessary to create meaningful change.

Conclusion

SCY’s method of implementing the four guiding principles is by no means exhaustive. Their practices may be transferable to some community organizations, but other organizations may need to apply the principles in different, equally creative ways. Each organization is unique. However, the benefits of a rights-based approach to issues affecting children, their families and community organizations are limitless. Taking the time and making the effort to

“Children have the right to be heard and their views considered in all matters affecting them”

consider children’s rights when working with families can help ensure that all children in Canada can develop to their fullest potential.



Look for this publication in the **Resources** section for more ways community organizations can support children’s rights!

Child Participation

As previously stated, one of the CRC’s most important concepts is child participation. The concept affords children the opportunity to express their views on all matters concerning them and have their views taken seriously. This does not mean that children should get whatever they want, but space must be made to ensure that they are heard and their opinions should not be disregarded.

To examine the continuing challenges in putting child participation in practice, Gerison Lansdown, an international children’s rights advocate, has written an article outlining how community organizations, and

other sectors of society, can engage children on a more meaningful level.



Consider employing these three approaches to child participation in your work with children and their families.

Consultative participation

When developing services or guiding parents as they make decisions affecting their child’s well-being, a consultative style may be appropriate. Asking children adult-created yet age-appropriate questions demonstrates respect for children’s contributions and recognizes that their views are necessary to make informed and appropriate decisions affecting their lives. This also acknowledges that a commitment to

ensuring the best interests of the child needs to be informed by the child him or herself. However, consultative participation restricts children to an adult-defined agenda: children should also have the opportunity to identify issues of concern to them.

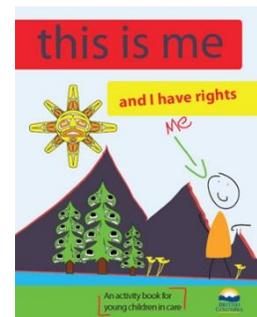
Collaborative participation

This happens when adults, having identified an issue, involve children in working out what needs to be done and how. You can use this approach when supporting parents as they make family decisions or consider health care treatments. Research has demonstrated sick children prefer a collaborative approach when difficult health decisions need to be made; they want to be directly involved in discussion while being supported by their parents.

Child-led participation

When children identify issues in their own lives, initiate their own activities, create child organizations and carry out advocacy to address these issues, this is child-led participation. Children can also initiate action as individuals in choosing a school, for example, or seeking medical advice, pressing for the realization of their rights through the courts, or utilizing complaints mechanisms. Encourage the children you work with to identify issues in their lives and consider how you can support them as they take action to address these

Children need to know their rights before they can address rights issues in their own lives. Check out the **Resources** section for activity books like this one that can help you start conversations with children about their rights!



issues. You could act as a facilitator by providing information, advice and support. It may be appropriate to help them undertake research or

engage in advocacy and awareness-raising with leaders in your community.

Each different level of participation will be appropriate in different contexts. However, it is vital to recognize that if it remains exclusively at the consultative level, very limited opportunities will be created for children to have significant influence over the decisions and actions that impact their lives. Choosing an appropriate approach to child participation can make family support program practitioners children's rights enablers and champions!

Working with War-Affected Children

Each year, thousands of children enter Canada, fleeing from countries where there has been armed conflict and arriving in unfamiliar communities. Studies on war-affected children in the United States have found that post-migration, these children continue to experience anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress.

However, research on populations in Canada remains in its infancy. To begin filling this gap, Québec based scholars recently conducted a study using in-depth interviews with children and youth arriving from war-affected countries to settle in Québec. The authors discuss how helping professionals can better meet the needs and rights of these children and youth.

The “dos” and “don'ts” outlined by this study can help you better support war-affected children in your community. Transitioning to life in a new country is wrought with challenges but with challenges come possibilities for new beginnings.

1 DO be informed Many study participants noted that while practitioners were well-intentioned, they were often ill-informed and unaware of the impact and realities of war. For example, when encountering situations in which war-affected children's painful memories are unintentionally triggered, while well meaning, practitioner responses can be inadequate.

Youth have highlighted the need for practitioners to not only address the triggering of situations at the time of their occurrence but also to follow-up with the child at a later date. Support may need to be quite specialized.

2 DON'T normalize their problems Think of a time when someone, anyone, has confided in you how they were feeling and you did not know how to react. Did you think about saying “that's normal” to validate what they were feeling?

“They'll say, ‘Yes, that's normal, that's normal’ but what's normal?”
- Alina, study participant

Some study participants reported that psychologists told them their reactions to their experiences were “normal”. Children found this response unhelpful and felt like they were being told there was not a problem at all. They said that it made them feel as though they were not being heard.

3 DO listen Participants in the study were adamant that more psycho-social support was essential to help them deal with traumatic events in their pasts and to assist them to fully integrate in a new society. They described the need for someone to give them moral support and talk to them.

Moreover, some youth noted that while they may look like they are functioning well on the outside, on the inside, they may have repressed feelings. These youth would benefit from practitioners just talking to them to get to know what they've experienced prior to arriving in Canada. This would also help practitioners assess the types of assistance or specialized support they may need.

“Just sit down and let us make sure that everything is fine, you know?”
- Andy, study participant

4 DO be calm Many war-affected children report negative experiences after sharing their stories with psychologists including inappropriate responses to them and their often emotional stories. Children

found practitioner responses to their stories such as frequent crying to be exhausting and inappropriate.

5 DON'T underestimate the value of your community centre

Where *formal* methods of support in schools and with psychologists failed, study participants said that they found support in *informal* networks. Young people identified community centres, other refugees and/or asylum-seekers, their peers, surrogate families and churches as sources of psycho-social support, information and resources. Think about how you might connect young people with others who are facing similar challenges at your family support organization or other community settings for youth. Finding people with whom they can share their stories, and who may understand the challenges they face, can contribute to the healthy development and healing of young people affected by war and other traumatic situations.

6 DO offer your assistance

When they arrive in Canada from war-affected areas of the world, many young people do not know what documents they need, how to access services and how to use the public transportation

system. By offering your time and assistance, you can help them find their way and deal with the longer-term realities of resettlement.

“Through the church I found lots of people who helped me out of the goodness of their hearts, who really supported me in the process, who showed me the city, explained to me how things work in Québec.”

- Ronaldo, study participant

Moving forward

Children displaced from war zones have often endured trauma and adversity that can have long-term psycho-social impacts. Under the CRC, provincial and federal governments have an obligation to promote the physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of children who have been affected by war, once they have resettled in Canada. However, until what works in the *informal* system is integrated into the *formal* system, community organizations and their staff will remain an irreplaceable hub of support for these young people.



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Un-limit my Potential

By Robin Corey Forbell Ramsay

I ask you just to listen
Sit back with open ears.
My experiences are important
Even though I am younger in years.

I ask you, please to hear me
So that you can understand
My ideas and thoughts about the world
Could change the problems at hand.

I ask you to pay attention
So that you can fully see
The potential that young people have
In this community.

I ask you to do nothing more
Than to recognize my rights
And I will help to make decisions
So our future can be bright.

If you treat me like I have no say
And think you have all the power
You are limiting our ability
To improve on what is ours.



Notes

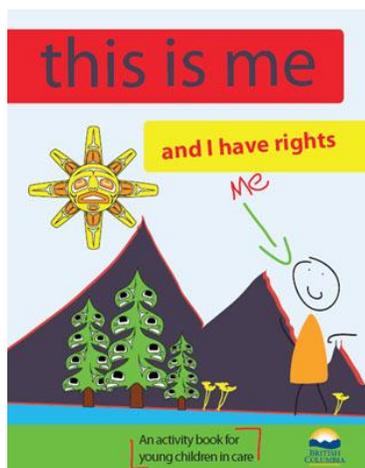
¹The Canadian Journal of Children’s Rights is an academic, peer-reviewed journal which aims to encourage a deeper understanding of the rights of children. You can access the journal at <https://journals.carleton.ca/cjcr/index.php/cjcr>.

²The Society for Children and Youth of BC is a unique provincial organization dedicated to improving the well-being of children and youth. Please visit their website for more information <http://www.scyofbc.org>.

Acknowledgements

This special edition newsletter was made possible due to the generous assistance of Kelly Stone, Dr. Virginia Caputo, the authors who contributed to the inaugural Canadian Journal of Children’s Rights and the Advisory Board Members of Carleton University’s Landon Pearson Resource Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children’s Rights. Thank you.

Resources



Children's Rights Activity Books

Do you work with children living in care? This free, downloadable and printable activity book is for children 3-8 years old, living in care to learn about their rights through a creative, supportive and fun approach! It is designed for children and adults to do together and provides the opportunity to start a conversation with children about their rights. Available for download at http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/foster/pdf/this_is_me.pdf.

Monitoring Children's Rights: A Toolkit for Community-Based Organizations

This toolkit focuses on practical steps that small to medium-sized community-based groups can take using their existing knowledge and strengths to develop effective CRC monitoring practices in their communities. This toolkit provides an introduction to children's rights, explains how you can monitor CRC compliance in your community and even provides an evaluative four-star compliance rating system. Download it for free at http://rightsofchildren.ca/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/english_toolkit.pdf.

Refugees, Know Your Rights

Are any members of your local family resource program refugees? The Department of Citizenship and Immigration Canada's website outlines refugee rights and which Canadian services they may have access to, such as health coverage for refugee children. <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/outside/arriving-rights.asp>.

CRC in Child Friendly-Language

Help children you work with understand their rights with this small, printable take-home flyer created by UNICEF. It describes each CRC article in child-friendly language. Print off several for your family support resource centre! Available for free download at http://www.unicef.org/magic/media/documents/what_rights_flyer_english.pdf.

Posters, Brochures and Publications!

The Society for Children and Youth of BC's website houses impressive children's rights publications. Find: bright and colourful children's rights posters appropriate for a variety of ages to hang in your workspaces; multilingual brochures on children's rights advocacy; multilingual posters on the CRC's four guiding principles; and publications on youth in care, children with disabilities and policy compliance. Most of the publications are available for free download. <http://www.scyofbc.org/#!/child-rights-publications/c11rx>.

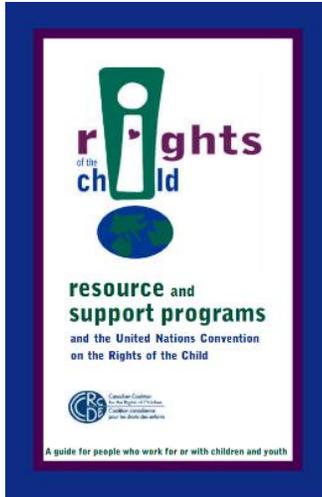


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Children's Rights Cartoons

The "Your Rights In Pictures" child-friendly cartoons may make it easier to show the children you work with how their rights impact their day to day lives. The cartoons were produced by Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People and are available at <http://www.sccyp.org.uk/rights/picture>.

Booklet: Resource and Support Programs and the CRC

This free, downloadable booklet from the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children answers common questions about the role of resource and support programs in supporting children's rights. Learn what the CRC says about parent education, how to respond to parents who feel children's rights undermine parental authority, and special considerations you should keep in mind when working with children who are refugees or immigrants. Access it here <http://rightsofchildren.ca/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/resource.pdf>.

CRC Youth-Friendly Backgrounder

The Public Health Agency of Canada's youth-friendly backgrounder answers common questions children may have when learning about the CRC. It is available online and in PDF format at <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncd-jne/convention-eng.php>.

Children's Rights Booklets and Fact Sheets

Want even more information? Visit <http://rightsofchildren.ca/resource> for fact sheets on the convention; publications on the meaning and application of the "best interest" of the child in Canada; and booklets on children's rights in respect to child care, education, health care, justice, protection and recreation.

Children's Rights Guide for Social Workers

This webpage for social workers offers advice on how to respect and implement children's rights in their daily work. It links to resources such as: training manuals; articles on child-harming practices based on tradition, culture, religion or superstition; websites about corporal punishment; information on children's rights in relation to drug use; and how to look out for rights violations in mental health institutions. <https://www.crin.org/en/guides/users-guides/guides-users/guide-social-workers>

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