

Child Rights in the Community Context

FRP Canada



www.frp.ca

2015 | Issue 2

Maximizing the Capacity of Family Resource Centres and Staff

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*Created in partnership
with the Landon Pearson
Resource Centre for the*

*Study of Childhood and Children's
Rights at Carleton University:
www.carleton.ca/landonpearson.*

Family support practitioners have an important role to play in promoting children's rights and ensuring the well-being of Canada's next generation. To help family support practitioners uphold these rights, this newsletter highlights important children's rights developments and information of relevance to practitioners as defined by academics, advocates, community organizations and children themselves in the *Canadian Journal of Children's Rights*.

This issue features: the results of a study, guided by article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, in which children identified qualities of their ideal learning spaces so that decision makers could take their views into account; a summary of Tara Collins' highly successful presentation at the FRP Canada 2015 conference, which identified how children's rights can support and guide community work; and a youth reflection piece by Maddie Fairweather on the importance of children's rights in the context of indigenous experiences.



Child Rights Facts

1. Canada ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on December 13, 1991.
2. The CRC is an international human rights treaty that recognizes specific rights for children.
3. The CRC defines a "child" as anyone under 18.
4. Children's rights focus on the relationships between individuals.
5. Children's rights do not undermine the authority of parents; they exist to ensure children's healthy development.

Child Rights Myths *Prepared by Tara Collins, Ph.D.*

1. Children's rights are "not my responsibility," "not my job," and are "not relevant." Reality: If you are concerned about children and families, they are significant.
2. Children's rights are too complicated and only concern legal professionals. Reality: Children's rights relate to all of our efforts with children and their families.
3. Community workers have no control over families' situations. Reality: Children's rights challenge this conclusion about roles and responsibilities. We all have roles to play.

The Other End of the System: Children's Views on Early Childhood Education

Involving children in decisions that affect them and taking into account their views is the core concept of Article 12 of the CRC. In accordance with this article, researchers asked Italian schoolchildren aged 4-7 to imagine their ideal school in guided conversations, drawings, and drawing descriptions so that policy-makers could take their views into consideration.¹ The children's responses identified qualities of their ideal learning spaces, the purpose of early childhood education, and activities they wanted in their school curriculum.

Due to the common intent of educational spaces in schools and community centres, many of the children's ideas are applicable to family resource centres. Keeping their ideas in mind when operating early childhood education programs or designing new learning spaces in your community is a great way to be a champion of children's rights!

Designing Learning Spaces

Children identified big windows and large spaces for moving around and playing as important factors in learning environments. They also indicated that large spaces not only define the quality of a learning space, but make it possible to spend time with other children and make friends. Holding group activities in large rooms can help facilitate the social function of early childhood education.

Colourful rooms were also a central aspect of learning space quality, especially for the younger children (aged 4 to 5). If it is not feasible to paint the walls or doors of your family resource centre, then hanging flags, posters and children's drawings is an easy way to make rooms more colourful.

The children also identified the presence of nature and nearby green spaces as important to their ideal learning spaces. If your center is located in a dense urban area, consider taking children to nearby parks for learning activities. Providing children with ample

space to play with other children, colourful environments, and access to large outdoor spaces will ensure that children's opinions are taken into account.



*"The school must be big, because the more we are,
the more friends we can make."*

"Plenty of colours make the school prettier."

"I love grass and trees!"

- Study participants

The Purpose of Early Childhood Education

The children participating in the study thought that early childhood education should promote happiness, create supportive learning environments, and facilitate the creation of friendships. Most of the children considered children's well-being as a priority that schools should strive for and associated the concept of happiness to comfort and security. Adopting measures to make children feel more comfortable and secure in family resource centres can help create the kind of learning environment children want.

Children also attributed their relationships with their teachers and parents as crucial to a supportive learning environment and expressed interest in having their parents come to school to meet their friends. Organizing family events or programs that promote contact between parents and their children's friends can help foster a supportive learning environment.

Finally, children stressed the importance of inclusion and being able to work on projects that help other children. For example, one child suggested using recycled materials to create toys for less fortunate children. Facilitating projects that let children work together to address needs in their community that are important to them is just one way that early childhood education can live up to the expectations of its most important stakeholders.

Learning Activities

When asked which activities they would include in their school curriculum, children talked extensively about outdoor activities, arts and crafts, playing, and sciences. Many children described their ideal learning environment as one that was farm-like with animals and vegetable gardens. See the Resources section of this newsletter for suggestions on how even small, urban centres can implement mess-free indoor plant-growing projects.

The children emphasized that they could make arts and crafts projects out of recycled materials: an idea which is kind to any organization's budget. The children also considered play important, especially outdoors where they have plenty of room to run. Finally, children expressed interest in the sciences and activities related to reading and visiting museums. The study participants reported that they liked to read children's literature, comic books, books with cartoon characters, and illustrated books. If your centre has a book corner or lending library, consider asking the children at your centre what kind of books they like so that your library is stocked with their recommendations.

Conclusion

Because children have the right to participate in decisions concerning their wellbeing and because it is important to use methodologies appropriate for their participation, this study fulfills an important function of identifying children's views on early childhood education. The results of this study can assist in designing educational spaces, shape community programming, and allow community leaders to implement article 12 of the CRC by building their centre's capacity to respect the rights of children.

"I'm fine in any school where I can make friends."

"If we have small pieces of fabric, we can make clothes for dolls; with bigger pieces of fabric we could make clothes for the children who do not have any."

"I would like a reading corner."

– Study participants

A Child Rights-Based Approach in Practice at the Community Level

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Why and how are children's rights pertinent to serving children, their families and your community-based work? As originally presented at the FRP Canada 2015 conference session, this article provides some answers to these questions, identifies how children's rights can support your work, and suggests how you can promote and protect these rights in your community

The CRBA Approach

Children's rights can inform your work through a child rights-based approach (CRBA). This approach is founded on international human rights treaties which assert that there are rights-holders and duty-bearers; and human rights involve three types of obligations: they should be respected, protected, and fulfilled.² This distinction is important because, as one young person highlighted: "It teaches us about what we should be receiving, but not necessarily what we are receiving."³ In essence, a CRBA means that child rights should be implemented and the status of these rights should be regularly monitored in order to assess the situation and ensure progress of child rights.⁴

How to Practice a CRBA at the Community Level

A CRBA means that children's rights inform *why* we are concerned with young people and *how* we address issues in communities. Regardless of what type of community work you do, children's rights are relevant. In our collective efforts, we are all dedicated to supporting and advancing the development of healthy generations. There are several ways that you can practice a CRBA at the community level. Some areas include:

Personal orientation:

The rationale and commitment required of a CRBA inform the why and how of what you are doing in the community.

Interpersonal communications:

In your words and attitudes, how do you relate to others about young people? Do you use child rights-based language in practice?

Writing Funding Proposals:

When identifying your priorities and requests, how do children's rights guide your efforts? For instance, while it is common to write "children are our future" in proposal rationales, using this language may result in your proposed activity being passed over in preference for projects that explicitly address the more urgent demands of the present. Using child rights-based language will emphasize that children are human beings whose requirements for development and support cannot and should not be postponed by government or others. In addition, do your proposals highlight the role and importance of monitoring and evaluating efforts to ensure progress not only of your specific project or program but also for the rights of children, with consideration to various groups and individuals who may be marginalized, over time in the community?

Programming:

A CRBA influences not only project objectives but the process of developing, implementing, and assessing work. For instance, do young people have a role in program dimensions such as project administrative structure, processes, and results?

Awareness-raising efforts:

How do your efforts highlight your work and the importance of children's rights?

In relation to these and other community-based efforts, it is important to give attention to children; their families; systemic issues and the context; rights-holders; and duty-bearers.

*"I think that young people in Canada do not have enough rights because everything seems to be spoken for us and not having anything to do with us."*⁵

*"Childhood is a big step in a person's life. If they don't feel important, that's what they will carry with them for the rest of their life."*⁶

*"I have the right... to be treated like a human."*⁷

- Youth perspectives
on the importance of children's rights

Some Considerations for Practicing a CRBA

As highlighted in the previous *Child Rights in the Community Context* newsletter, the general principles of the CRC, namely non-discrimination, best interests of the child, maximum survival and development, and view of the child (articles 2, 3, 6, and 12 respectively), can provide a valuable framework to support a CRBA in community-based work. As described below, CRC provisions can be useful to community work.

Non-discrimination:

Community work must address the needs of marginalized and vulnerable individuals and groups. When consulted, young people outline: "Inclusivity is about recognizing that each individual is a person, no less, no more than anyone else;" and "You can't be engaged when you are excluded."⁸ For instance, how do your community-based efforts concern First Nations children living on or off Aboriginal reserves, or new immigrant families?

It is important that we critically examine how we define program success. For example, programs that incorporate play in natural settings or peer mentors

have not been found to engage marginalized populations. From a rights-based perspective, we can only have true success when 100% of the population can benefit from our community efforts. We should not be satisfied with less. Narrow program outcomes are not the only markers of success, nor should they be viewed in isolation.

You can rely on other CRC provisions to support your understanding, demands for support, and your CRBA work. For example, articles 22 and 23 on the rights of refugee children and children with disabilities respectively can be helpful to elaborate how and why we should respond to the particular issues faced by these populations of children and their families.

Best Interests of the Child:

The principle of the best interests in a CRBA does not mean that adults only decide what is best for a child. Instead, it means that our community-based efforts should focus on the child rather than the problem or issue of concern. For example, it is all too common in Canadian policy and program efforts to focus on the problem of obesity, on “the poor” or poverty, or on illiteracy. But this approach is limited, disguising who should be the focus of our efforts. The person or people who are affected by the particular issue and their human rights should inform our understanding of their realities and their priorities. Children and their families should be understood and referred to as participants not “victims,” “recipients,” or file numbers. In addition, one conference participant identified that the best interests of children are not served when they are suspended or expelled from school. It is important to change peoples’ perceptions of children and advocate against the administration. Young people who were consulted are very clear:

“We are focusing too much on the wrongs, on punishments and consequences, and not enough on the rights.”⁹

Maximum Survival and Development:

The principle of maximum survival and development requires duty-bearers to foster development over time and not view young people as static. For example,

community kitchens advocate nutrition and skills development where participants can learn to cook. As one FRP Canada conference participant identified, it means ensuring children with disabilities (such as Down’s syndrome) have opportunities to reach their full potential in addition to their right to non-discrimination. It requires parenting programs for young parents in high school and trainings like *Nobody’s Perfect* to ensure the development of young parents and their children.



Child Participation:

Child participation requires respect for child and youth participation/engagement in community work. For example, youth can be involved in project management and evaluation by being trained to be peer mentors or project implementers. There are numerous ways that young people can and should be meaningfully involved in community-based work.

Conclusion

It is important to realize that we all have a part to play in promoting child rights! Child rights and a CRBA are relevant and important to community work and to your efforts because, as one young person explained, “When you learn about rights, you learn that they apply outside of school as well, in the home or on the street.”¹⁰ A CRBA should be explored, developed, and advanced in order to influence all community work related to children.

When considering the essential question—what relationship does the community and its members want with children?—it is important to remember, as one young person expressed, “The way a child is treated by a society is an indication of what that society is all about.”¹¹

Youth Perspective

In the 2013-2014 school year, Grade 8 students in Barbara Brockmann's class at Glashan Public School in Ottawa, Ontario were asked to give their perspectives on indigenous experiences in spoken word poems. The poem *Differences* is Maddy Fairweather's response. More spoken word poems and other youth reflection pieces can be found in the *Canadian Journal of Children's Rights*.

Differences

By: Maddy Fairweather

Whatever your colour,
black, white, red, yellow.
we're all the same inside.
No matter the religion you practice,
no matter the ways you live.
last I checked,
we all have bones and skin.
There can be a certain beauty in our divergence,
and its time we accept those differences.

Maybe I like ice cream and you don't,
nobody discriminates the non ice cream lovers.
So why don't we act the same when religion is the difference?
Why is it different when compared to how we live?
Why don't we accept our differences?

You can't just place someone in a category,
we're all so complex and different,
some of us still don't even know who we are!
People fear who they are and hide it,
nobody should have to hide themselves,
so why, why don't we just accept
that everyone's different?
It's been years and years now?
Now it's time we accept our differences.



Acknowledgements

This special edition newsletter was made possible due to the generous assistance of Dr. Virginia Caputo, Tara Collins Ph.D., the Honourable Landon Pearson O.C., and the authors who contributed to the inaugural *Canadian Journal of Children's Rights*. Thank you.

Resources

Report: Right in Principle, Right in Practice

The Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children has released a strategic review of children's rights in Canada. This report assesses how well Canada implements the CRC and makes recommendations for major changes. You can find the report on their website: <http://rightsofchildren.ca/wp-content/uploads/CCRC-report-on-rights-of-children-in-Canada.pdf>.



Further reading: UNESCO's report

This year, UNESCO published a report on the global state of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). It covers topics related to understanding ECCE as a right and development imperative, meeting the challenges of inequality in and through ECCE, and ensuring quality ECCE through contextually relevant provisions. It is excellent further reading for anyone interested in learning more about children's rights. It can be downloaded from their website:

<http://www.ibe.unesco.org/en/services/online-materials/publications.html>.

National Child Day

National Child Day is celebrated in Canada on November 20 in recognition of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of

the Child and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Public Health Agency of Canada has child rights resources for children, parents, caregivers, and educators available year round on their website: <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncd-jne/index-eng.php>. You can also follow FRP Canada on Twitter and like our Facebook page for more child rights resources leading up to and on National Child Day.

Infographic: Bullying and Child Rights

PREVnet has developed a sharable, downloadable, printable infographic that explains to children why bullying is a violation of their rights and who is obligated to ensure their safety. Print off copies for your centre! Available at: <http://www.prevnet.ca/research/bullying-statistics>.



Activity: Growing Plants

As described in the article "The Other End of the System: Children's Views on Early Childhood Education," even small, urban centres can implement mess-free indoor plant growing projects. Check out <http://homeguides.sfgate.com/grow-lima-bean-bag-49019.html> for simple, step-by-step instructions on how children can grow their own plants in a plastic bag. You can tape the bags to a sunny window or pin them onto a pin board so that they don't take up space!

Notes

The *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: <http://journals.carleton.ca/cjcr/index.php/cjcr>.

References

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- ⁴ T.M. Collins and L. Wolff. "Canada's Next Steps for Children's Rights? Building the Architecture for Accountability through the General Measures of Implementation of the CRC." In *Children Matter – Exploring Child and Youth Human Rights Issues in Canada*, edited by Ellen Murray, 14-40. Calgary: Mount Royal University, 2012, 5.
- ⁵ Quoted in Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children, *Right in Principle, Right in Practice: Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Canada*, edited by K. Vandergrift, L. Wolff & T. Collins (Ottawa: Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children, 2011), www.rightsofchildren.ca, (accessed November 11, 2015), 26-7.
- ⁶ Quoted in Landon Pearson Resource Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children's Rights. *Shaking the Movers III – Child Rights in Education: CRC Articles 28, 29, and 42*. Final Report (Ottawa: Landon Pearson Resource Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children's Rights, 2009), 24.
- ⁷ Quoted in A. Del Monte and L. Akbar. *Shaking the Movers V – Divided We're Silent: United We Speak, Standing up for Youth Justice: CRC Articles 37 and 40*. Final Report (Ottawa: Landon Pearson Resource Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children's Rights, 2012), 19.
- ⁸ Quoted in Landon Pearson Resource Centre, *Shaking the Movers III*, 16, 19 respectively.
- ⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 20.
- ¹⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, 24.
- ¹¹ Quoted in Landon Pearson Resource Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children's Rights. *Shaking the Movers – Speaking truth to power: Civil and political rights of children*, Final Report (Ottawa: Landon Pearson Resource Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children's Rights, 2007), 11.

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