

Getting It Right for All Our Children

With the release of the annual report of Alberta's Child and Youth Advocate this past week (advocate.gov.ab.ca), we are all reminded of the very significant problems faced by far too many children and youth in our province. The timing of the release—on the day following National Child Day—may have been coincidental, but it is entirely appropriate. The intent of the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate is “to be a champion for child and youth rights; to amplify child and youth voices; to enable child and youth participation.” Similarly, the purpose of National Child Day is to focus on the rights of children and our collective obligations to see that these rights are met.

Like most nations of the world, Canada recognizes the Declaration on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations in 1959, and the Convention of the Rights of the Child, adopted by the UN in 1989. Sadly, years later the idea of children's rights for many Canadians remains at best an enigma and at worse a source of discomfort and concern, another example of political correctness gone wrong or the interference of the state in family life. The truth, of course, is a rather different matter.

Through 54 articles and 2 optional protocols, the Convention sets out the responsibilities of governments, families, and caregivers in supporting children, and it details the inherent rights of children as our youngest citizens. Four principles underpin the rights presented: non-discrimination in the application of rights to children; the best interests of children as the primary consideration in all actions and decisions concerning their well-being; the child's right to survival and development; and the participation of children in matters concerning their well-being. Contrary to popular fears, the Convention does not pit children against their parents. Rather it emphasizes the foundational role of the family and the primary responsibility of parents in raising and nurturing their children.

Through a rights-based approach the Convention sets out the status of children as legal rights holders and bearers of responsibilities appropriate to their developmental level, rather than as the property of their parents, future persons in the making, or parties deserving of special charity. The Convention underscores the universal and inalienable rights of children, while recognizing their profound vulnerability, the customary ease with which their interests are discounted or overlooked, and their dependence on and integration with family, community, and culture.

The Convention remains as relevant in Canada today as it was in 1989. In the two decades since its ratification, and despite federal and provincial governments of all stripes championing the interests of children as one of their primary concerns, children across Canada face major obstacles in reaching their full potential. Too often these obstacles are linked to our failure to take children's rights as seriously as we should and could.

A recent report from the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children highlights Canada's failure to meet its obligations under the Convention. It draws attention to the need for significant improvements in how children's rights, agreed to in principle, are enacted in

practice. It also identifies areas where progress is particularly slow, including the battle against child poverty and support for early childhood development. A related report from the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society and KAIROS carefully documents our shameful level of support for children on reserves in Canada.

The struggle against child poverty in Canada has been a long one. Despite our collective wealth too many Canadian children still lack access to the basic nutrition, housing and care they need to thrive. Canada ranks amongst the bottom third of industrialized nations in terms of the proportion of children living in poverty and in any given month over 300,000 children receive food from a food bank. Daily in Edmonton schools, close to 2,100 children receive a hot lunch to ensure that their hunger does not take precedence over their learning.

Canada comes similarly close to the bottom in our support for early childhood development. We rank 24th out of 30 industrialized nations in infant mortality and at the bottom in terms of support for early childhood education and care. We have also fallen behind in providing families with equitable access to the services and supports they need to nurture their children during the critical early years. National and provincial support for early learning and care falls well short of international benchmarks, and the access that many families have to childcare is dependent on where they live and their ability to pay.

Although Canadians and Albertans care deeply about children and their well-being, this personal commitment is not sufficient, on its own, to ensure that all of our children have equitable access to basic necessities and the opportunities they need to thrive. The Convention advances a new approach that establishes the rights of children as the foundation for supporting their health and well-being, while recognizing those with the collective responsibility for ensuring that these rights are respected and realized – parents, families, communities and governments.

Understanding and respecting children's rights requires a significant shift in private, public, and professional attitudes. In his annual report the Child and Youth Advocate underscores the need to educate children and youth about their rights under Alberta law, a goal that we strongly endorse. As adults, we similarly need to educate ourselves to ensure that all our children enjoy the rights to which we have committed under the Convention.

Christopher Smith, Chair, and Jeff Bisanz, Vice-Chair, Success By 6

Success By 6 is a community initiative managed by the United Way that works to ensure that all Edmonton children 0 to 6 have the support they need for a lifetime of healthy growth and development.