



Submission  
for the  
Standing Senate Committee on  
Human Rights

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First Call, the BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, is pleased to have this opportunity to speak to this committee today on behalf of our coalition partners.

First Call is a cross-sectoral, non-partisan coalition of provincial and regional organizations, smaller groups, individuals and mobilized communities that share the common belief that children and youth should have “first call” on the resources of government and society.

In our submission we will outline primarily where we think the rights of children as asserted in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are in most need of attention. We are in agreement with the conclusion stated in your interim report that the rights-based perspective articulated in the Convention is still not fully understood or accepted in Canada or internationally.

### Child Poverty, our National Shame

The number of children living in poverty in Canada has risen by 20% since 1989, when an all-party resolution to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000 was passed in the House of Commons. According to 2003 data, 1,201,000 children still live in poverty in this country.

For nearly 30 years, we have maintained an average child and family poverty rate of one in six Canadian children. Even more shamefully, here in BC we have the distinction of having an even higher rate – almost one in four children, and of being the province with the largest increase in the incidence of child poverty since the 1989 House of Commons resolution (2003 figures). Sixty-five percent of British Columbia’s female lone-parent families are poor. Poor two-parent families in BC live on average almost \$12,000 below the poverty line, again worse than the national average depth of poverty. Subpopulations, such as children and youth in Aboriginal and new immigrant and refugee families, racialized families or families with a person with a disability, are dramatically over-represented within all of these poverty statistics.

The causes of this deplorable situation are known. Too many parents cannot find enough work in a year or full time work that pays enough to properly support their children. For the past decade at least 40% of poor children lived in families with at least one parent working all year round. Welfare rates are criminally low. We have let lone-parenthood become a social and humanitarian nightmare for women. We allow racism and other forms of discrimination to continue while we look the other way.

Given these facts, we have obviously neglected our obligations under Article 27 of the Convention. In our opinion, the fiscal capacity of Canadian society to meet these obligations through a comprehensive system of market, social and income supports is not in question. We can afford it. We can look to the public policy choices made in other countries with low child poverty rates for inspiration and guidance. Yet we have lacked the political will to act.

The positive actions we have taken, for example the establishment of the Canada Child Tax Benefit, the National Child Benefit Supplement and other income transfers, have had the effect of raising some families out of poverty, but they have obviously been too little to do the whole job.

We busy ourselves with supporting charity responses such as food banks, instead of taking responsibility for addressing the causes of poverty. And we still insist on blaming the poor for their circumstances, instead of looking at the evidence of social and market trends that put or keep them there.

We have started our presentation with this focus on poverty because it is so fundamentally linked to the denial of other rights promised in the Convention. The outcomes of poverty for children and youth are social exclusion and increased vulnerability to school failure, poor physical and mental health, and risk-taking behaviours, including involvement in crime and sexual exploitation. The right to an education, the right to play, the right to protection from harm, the right to nutritious food, the right to access to specialized services, and the right to full participation in society – all these are compromised by the social exclusion of living in poverty.

### The Rights of Young Children

A second area of concern we would like to bring to the Committee's attention is not unrelated to our concerns around poverty and income inequality. Canada has yet to commit to recognizing and meeting the needs of young children through a comprehensive child care system. We were about to make great strides across the country with the signing of the federal Provincial Territorial Early Learning and Child Care Agreements. What a disaster that those commitments were cancelled by the new government after the last federal election. Quebec's commitment to child care remains the example that families in other provinces like BC can only look to wistfully.

This failure to recognize the rights of all young children to quality, affordable, accessible care and learning environments is an important national issue for families, most of whom have two parents working outside the home. It also has significant implications for the sustainability and health of our society now and in the future.

Just as there are worthy initiatives at the provincial level, such as Children First here in BC, so too there are worthy initiatives that need to be sustained at the national level, such as Aboriginal Head Start, the Community Action Plan for Children, and the Prenatal Nutrition Program. But young children's services remain a hodgepodge of fragile, often fee-barriered programs that struggle constantly to stay afloat. This underscores our failure to see them as a right and an entitlement of all children, rather than a privilege or subject to the luck of the draw for different communities and different families.

### Need for a National Middle Years and Youth Strategy

The promise of the publication of the National Children's Agenda raised the hopes of many children's advocates across Canada that a sustained focus on children's rights was about to begin. Progress on implementation of the agenda has been disappointingly slow. Whatever its limitations, at least a start has been made on the early years. The same cannot be said for an agenda for children in the middle years and for youth. The promotion and protection of the rights of children in these older years has had little visible or coherent attention from successive federal governments, despite the best efforts of the community sector and advocates within government service agencies. While specific issues have received piecemeal funding, and there is a Centre for Excellence on Youth Engagement established, the rights of older children and youth have not received the kinds of investments and prominence necessary from government to move beyond token compliance with the commitments in the Convention.

### Corporal Punishment

Corporal punishment as "legalized" by section 43 of the Criminal Code is another stain on Canada's reputation and a denial of children's right to freedom from violence, whatever it's intended purpose. Section 43 perpetuates the belief that it is acceptable to hit children and has been used as a defense by people perpetrating child abuse. The 2004 Supreme Court decision on this issue disappointingly only narrowed the use of the defense in law to using force to correct children between the ages of 2 and 12 years. Thus children remain the only group deprived of the protection of the criminal law in relation to the use of force.

### A Healthy Environment and Protection from Toxins

Many of First Call's partner organizations have concerns about Canada's commitment to protecting our children's right to a healthy physical and natural environment, and their right to be protected from toxins or other harmful substances in their food, their schools, their homes and other environments. There is a fair amount of emerging science and research about the possible and known harms associated with exposure to toxic chemicals, or to electro-magnetic frequencies, UV rays, radiation, or genetically modified substances.

Children, youth and families are looking for the federal and provincial governments to put in place improved regulations and policies that take into account the vulnerability of smaller, growing bodies in setting safety standards for exposure limits, or restricting environmental pollutants. Greater weight must be given to using the best interests of children as a measuring stick in all these areas.

The right to information outlined in the Convention also has particular significance in this regard. Children, youth and parents have a right to be informed of the substances young people are exposed to, especially in schools, hospitals, public parks and other places they spend significant amounts of time. Examples would be the right to know what kinds of pesticides or cleaning products are used. This information is often not easily obtained.

National Children's Commissioner

It has long been a frustration in the NGO sector that there is no mechanism for holding consecutive governments to account for a sustained commitment to implementing and protecting a children's rights agenda. This committee as recommended legislation to establish an independent Children's Commissioner at the federal level. We concur with this recommendation.

In closing, we thank you for this opportunity to bring the concerns and comments of our coalition to your attention. We commend you on your continued work on the issue of children's rights. It is our hope that we can all work together across the country, rising above any partisan considerations, to improve Canada's recognition in policy and practice of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to the benefit of all of our children..

Respectfully submitted,

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