

Thank you again for supporting the event on August 27, 2020 for the Young Canadians' Parliament (YCP) hosted by Children First Canada (CFC)!

There will be one digital forum each month until November 2020. The objectives of the digital forums are to educate children about their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), to educate them on their options to take action, advise on the impacts of COVID-19, and to provide a platform to exercise their rights, including having direct access to parliamentarians and decision makers to share their recommendations and perspective.

Each month, this program was co-designed with CFC Youth Ambassadors to contribute to the vision and outcomes of the YCP:

- A coordinated response by federal government and civil society organizations that responds to the priorities of children and youth impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Public policies intended to improve the lives of children will be reflective of the interests and concerns of young Canadians.
- Improved outcomes for the health and wellbeing of all 8 million children in Canada.
- Increased political will to address the urgent threats to childhood.
- A coherent policy framework to improve children's wellbeing.

# A COMMISSIONER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH-Why is an independent advocate for kids important and what difference will it make?

This topic relates to three rights under the UNCRC:

## Article 3: Best interests of the Child

All adults should do what is best for you. When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect children.

## Article 4: Making Rights Real

The government has a responsibility to make sure your rights are protected. They must help your family protect your rights and create an environment where you can grow and reach your potential.

## Article 12: Respect for the Views of the Child

Children have the right to give their opinion, and for adults to listen and take it seriously.

## Introduction

Senator Rosemary Moodie introduced the idea of a Children's Commissioner and explained the Bill that she has proposed. She spoke of the need to have a Commissioner now to ensure Covid 19 recovery takes into account children's rights and to ensure kids who are too young to participate directly in discussions or decisions would still have their rights safeguarded. In addition, the Commissioner needs to be able to advocate on behalf of children who are part of different communities. This person would be elected and accountable to Parliament but remain independent. In a review of other models, it seemed that a single Commissioner (rather than a Commission of multiple leaders for instance) works better. Lastly, we learned that the Commissioner would have a team and the resources to address children's rights. For example, Deputy Commissioners may be assigned to specific issues.

## More than anything else, we want you to know:

- The government should be paying more attention to children's rights.
- The government could improve on how they are handling children's rights by helping implement things that will benefit the youth of Canada such as a Children's Commissioner.
- We want a Commissioner that can monitor our rights to education and health. For example, a challenge that cuts across these two rights is that families face barriers to ensuring neurodiverse children have a full assessment to support their education.
- There is a high rate of youth mental health concerns and a lack of access to services. Kids also have eco-anxiety about the state of our environment.
- Food security is a major issue. Without school, we need a Commissioner to ensure kids are getting the food they need and safe spaces no matter if it's summer or during an emergency

## How we would like decision makers to address our rights under articles 3 & 4 :

- The Government of Canada needs to pass the bill to have a National Commissioner for Children and Youth
- The Commissioner needs to have a youth advisory council, and also needs to be able to travel across Canada to raise awareness and understand what is happening across the country for kids.
- The government needs to support us during the pandemic. The government also needs to make sure that all kids in Canada have access to quality education.
- Enable a Children's Commissioner to represent children's values and concerns, especially children who do not have the resources to always have their voices heard such as BIPOC youth, 2SLGBTQ+ youth, neurodivergent and disabled youth, and other marginalized communities.

# EQUITY: What systemic barriers do you face when trying to get what you need?

This topic relates to two rights under the UNCRC:

## Article 2: Non-discrimination

All children have these rights, no matter who they are, where they live, what their parents do, what language they speak, what their religion is, whether they are a boy or girl, what their culture is, whether they have a disability, or whether they are rich or poor. No child should be treated unfairly on any basis.

## Article 12: Respect for the Views of the Child

Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously. This right applies at all times, for example during immigration proceedings, housing decisions or the child's day-to-day home life.

## Introduction

We are concerned about issues of equity and justice, and we want ways to make sure our rights are respected. We know that living in a public health crisis has deepened inequity for many kids and that all of government policies do not always consider children's rights. Through our discussions, we want to amplify current government and community action. Below you will find an overview of what we said about all issues, including priority issues and recommendations to government.

## More than anything else, we want you to know:

- The differences between equality, equity and justice are important:
- Equality is everyone having the same
- Equity is being fair, and supporting different people in different ways
- Justice, which is creating change and changing systems.
- "Equality means all kids get the same. But in Canada, if we gave all kids the same there would still be kids that have more since some kids are discriminated against..."
- " We should promote our equity between kids by representing our minority communities in our leadership positions, media, conversation. This will empower youth that they are included and have a voice that matters too."
- Gender remains a source of inequality for kids in Canada, based on stereotypes and prejudice.
- Equity has been negatively impacted during the Covid-19 pandemic period, through issues such as:
  - Lack of access to services, e.g. mobility and movement therapy sessions that have greatly decreased
  - Lack of public spaces with Wi-Fi (e.g. libraries have been closed); many kids did not have the resources to be successful at online school and with online activities
  - Loss of school and activities that are free
  - Lack of access to food through school and other places

## There have been some opportunities during COVID such as:

- There has been a lot of funding opportunities from organizations to support youth and communities to undertake projects, and these seem to have been particularly focused on equity

## How we would like decision makers to address our rights under article 2:

- Change begins with the school system. Education for young and old is important. We need to increase competence of teachers and others in school to address issues of discrimination and exclusion.
- We want an improved inclusive school curriculum that discusses discrimination and inequality as a current event, not as part of history.
- Resources should be provided to students to help them combat discriminatory behaviour on part of teachers.
- Kids need to feel support in the school environment. Teachers do not always listen to the concerns of youth when they try “something you need to get through” or “be strong in the face of adversity”. If we are discouraged at school, it can have a major influence on us, and we may not speak out as much in future.
- We need chances to talk to people and inform people about the way children and youth feel about discrimination.
- We need to have courage and one of the main ways we are showing it is speaking up for others.
- We need clear opportunities for youth to reflect on their experiences of discrimination and support self-care.
- Need to provide access to technology required for education and employment, including required devices and access to the Internet.
- Ensure continued and consistent access to services in Covid-19 and other emergencies, important for long-term accessibility and health and education outcomes.

## Conclusion

Our concerns about equity and experiences of discrimination are closely linked to our passion for making sustainable changes. A Children’s’ Commissioner for Canada would be one way to ensure the government pays attention to children’s rights. We have a lot to say about how to support our peers, families, and communities, and we want to be engaged.

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