



**CHILDREN
FIRST**
CANADA

**LES ENFANTS
D'ABORD**
CANADA

January 28, 2022

The Honourable Chrystia Freeland, P.C., M.P.
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

Dear Minister Freeland:

On behalf of [Children First Canada](#) (CFC), please find our Budget 2022 submission enclosed for your consideration.

CFC is a national charitable organization with a bold and ambitious vision that together we can make Canada the best place in the world for kids to grow up. We are harnessing the strength of many organizations and individuals to advocate for and with children and youth in Canada. We are committed to improving the health and well-being of young people across the country – the leaders of today and tomorrow.

Over the last two years, the federal government has supported this important work in many ways, including through investments in the [Young Canadians' Parliament](#), which teaches children their rights and supports their participation in decisions that affect their lives. We have been grateful for the Government of Canada's support.

We were pleased to see the federal government outline key priorities for children in the recently released mandate letters, including the goal of ensuring that the voices and needs of children are represented in the Government's agenda. We applaud these priorities and the federal leadership behind these important objectives.

A decade ago, Canada was ranked in 10th place amongst OECD countries for the wellbeing of children. Today, Canada ranks 30th, marking a sharp decline over the past decade. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in widespread violations of children's rights that require urgent attention and bold investments, and we look forward to working together with you to bring about measurable and lasting change in the lives of 8 million children.

The enclosed recommendations lay out a roadmap to help us achieve our shared vision of making Canada the best place to grow up, and have been endorsed by our [Council of Champions](#). We also support the recommendations being brought forward by the Young Canadians' Parliament, and by key strategic partners, including Children's Healthcare Canada and the Coalition for Healthy School Food.

We would be pleased to meet with you, your staff, or Finance Canada officials in the coming weeks. Thank you in advance for your consideration of this submission.

Sincerely,

Sara Austin

Founder and CEO, Children First Canada (CFC)

Cc: Ms. Janice Charette, Interim Clerk of the Privy Council; Mr. Michael Sabia, Deputy Minister, Finance Canada

Executive Summary: CFC Budget 2022 Submission

Children First Canada (CFC) provides the following recommendations for the Government of Canada's consideration:

- 1. Establish a **Federal Commissioner for Children and Youth** and develop a **National / Pan-Canadian Strategy for Children****
- 2. Launch a **Catalytic Investment Fund for Children** and publish a **Children's Budget****
- 3. Collect **disaggregated data** on the health and wellbeing of kids across Canada**

CFC believes that these recommendations will advance the following key government priorities impacting children:

- Ensuring that the voices and needs of children are represented in the Government's agenda and working to make Canada the best place to grow up.
- Ensuring that mental health supports are accessible to children and youth as they recover from the impact of the pandemic.
- Developing a National School Food Policy and working toward a national school nutritious meal program.

CFC stands ready to assist the Government of Canada pursue the creation of these initiatives, including working in partnership with children and youth, like-minded strategic partners and federal departments to achieve real and lasting change in the lives of 8 million kids in Canada.

Detailed Recommendations: CFC Budget 2022 Submission

1. Establish a **Federal Commissioner for Children and Youth** and develop a **National / Pan-Canadian Strategy for Children**

There are 8 million children in Canada and they all have something in common – their rights. By ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the Government of Canada has a duty to ensure children can reach their full potential.

A **Federal Commissioner for Children and Youth** is a non-partisan and evidenced-based approach to improve the wellbeing of children, including children's health and safety, and addressing specific issues such as child poverty and child abuse.

Children's commissioners have been established in more than 60 countries, including Sweden, the United Kingdom and New Zealand. It's a proven strategy to improve results for children. In the UK, the children's commissioners in Scotland, Wales and England helped improve their international rankings for child well-being by five points. That's measurable change for children.

During the pandemic, children's commissioners have played a critical role in addressing the impacts of lockdowns on children by ensuring that children's concerns are prioritized. In England, for instance, the commissioner applied a "children first" lens to the pandemic response by regularly issuing reports and policy briefs and coordinating federal and local stakeholders to mitigate the negative impacts on children. A broad array of issues has been addressed, including age-specific recommendations for infants, addressing the unique needs of highly vulnerable children, such as those experiencing abuse, children in custody, and homeless children. As someone who has heard directly from young people about their experiences, the commissioner has been a strong public advocate for children and youth.

In Canada during the pandemic, support for children has had a fragmented approach, as children fall under multiple ministerial portfolios and there is no single lead Minister with ultimate responsibility for their wellness. What is required is a comprehensive and concerted effort to address the impacts of the crisis on children, and a child-focused lens on the federal response to the pandemic, which has been absent.

Federal responsibility for children spans across government departments, including:

- Employment and Social Development Canada
- Women and Gender Equality Canada
- Canadian Heritage
- Indigenous Services Canada
- Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada
- Justice Canada
- Public Health Agency of Canada
- Public Safety Canada

This list is by no means exhaustive. As a result, big, bold comprehensive ideas for children are often difficult to gain traction on. A children's commissioner would coordinate efforts across departments in a new way and propel action to increase child well-being.

With a mandate to promote, investigate and advise on legislation and policies impacting children and youth – and defend the rights of children and youth across federal jurisdictions and ministries – a federal commissioner would have the authority and autonomy to influence significant and positive changes with respect to better outcomes for all young Canadians.

In establishing the federal Office of the Commissioner for Children and Youth, it is essential to work nation to nation, respecting and including the self-governance rights of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. The Assembly of Seven Generations and the First Nation Child and Family Caring Society of Canada spoke with Indigenous Youth about establishing the federal Commissioner for Children and Youth, the results of which have been captured in:

[Accountability in Our Lifetime: A Call to Honour the Rights of Indigenous Children and Youth](#).

In conjunction with establishing a Commissioner, CFC urges the government to develop a **National Strategy for Children and Youth**. National strategies or action plans for children, like Australia's National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy,¹ can help ensure that the voices and needs of children are represented in government agendas and work to markedly improve the overall wellbeing of children. Canada's last national strategy, *A Canada Fit for Children*, was issued in 2004 in response to the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children and is an important resource that should be considered.

Canada can measurably improve the lives of kids by creating and implementing a *National / Pan-Canadian Strategy for Children*. This strategy, developed with the provinces, should outline priorities, targets and timelines, with a clear delineation of the responsibilities of the various levels of government that are needed to make measurable progress for children in Canada.

Priority areas to consider have been identified in the latest [Raising Canada](#) report on the top 10 threats to childhood, and must be focused on helping children recover from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including:

1. Unintentional and preventable injuries
2. Poor mental health
3. Systemic racism and discrimination
4. Child abuse
5. Vaccine-preventable illnesses
6. Poverty
7. Food and nutritional insecurity
8. Infant mortality
9. Bullying
10. Limited Physical Activity and Play

Efforts to tackle the top 10 threats to childhood and put Canada back into the top 10 global rankings for children's wellbeing can be further catalysed by **establishing an investment fund of \$2 billion to be allocated over the next four years**, as outlined in the following recommendation.

¹ [National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy - National Mental Health Commission](#)



2. Launch a **Catalytic Investment Fund for Children** and publish a **Children's Budget** to provide strategic and ongoing investments and ensure transparency for all federal expenditures related to children.

The health and wellbeing of kids in Canada has sharply declined over the past decade, and the pandemic has threatened the survival and development of children.

In 2021, Children First Canada, children's hospitals and leading child health advocates jointly declared **#codePINK** – a term used for pediatric emergencies. Across Canada, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to devastating effects on the mental and physical health of kids and resulted in widespread learning loss. School closures, the lack of access to sports and recreational programs, and social isolation have taken a high toll on young people.

The urgency to invest in children and youth has never been greater.

CFC recommends that the Government of Canada establish a **Catalytic Investment Fund for Children of \$2 billion to be allocated over the next four years**. The aim of the fund is to catalyse efforts to tackle the immediate and urgent threats to children's wellbeing resulting from the pandemic and to drive systemic change.

The proposed Catalytic Investment Fund for Children will provide the resources required to take immediate action to address the crisis facing kids in our country and drive sustainable change for future generations, with the goal of making Canada the best place in the world for kids to grow up.

An investment of \$2 billion over four years is big and bold, and entirely warranted. While Canada's investment in social protection throughout the pandemic "has been more robust than many of its peers, spending slightly more than the average of 10 per cent of pre-pandemic GDP," according to UNICEF, "Less than 2 per cent was spent on responses directed to children."²

Child and youth mental health is one of the many areas requiring investments. In 2021, Children's Healthcare Canada and the Pediatric Chairs of Canada estimated that an investment of \$450 million dollars was required to address current gaps in services and infrastructure to support children's mental health.

The proposed Catalytic Fund should be made available to credible national and local child and youth serving organizations to implement proven and effective strategies to address the short-, medium- and long-term needs of children and drive meaningful change for children. Further, Canada must ensure that First Nations, Métis and Inuit children receive equitable funding and services.

The Catalytic Investment Fund for Children is inspired by several bold and ambitious efforts undertaken by the Government of Canada and its peers to advance the health and wellbeing of children, including:

- *New Zealand's Investing in Children Program: Transformational Change* initiative, which involved an ambitious and substantial reform to significantly extend the range of services provided to vulnerable children and young people and take a proactive and life outcomes-focused approach to meeting their needs. The program involved a cross-

² <https://www.unicef.ca/en/press-release/child-poverty-rise-above-pre-covid-levels-least-five-years-high-income-countries>

sector, social investment approach, and draws on the experience and expertise of professionals, communities, caregivers, young people and families.

- Ireland's Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures initiative, involving one of the largest and most ambitious areas of public sector reform with over 4,000 employees and a budget of over €570 million across existing agencies. The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People provided a seamless, whole-of-childhood approach to the development of policies and services to improve children and young people's outcomes.
- Canada's *Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (MNCH) Initiative*, which involved a 10-year commitment of \$6.5 billion aimed at improving the health of women and children in the world's most vulnerable regions.

It is important to note that each of these ambitious investments in children were made within the context of an economic downturn and budgetary constraints, and there was common recognition of the immense return on investment to be gained.

As a preliminary step, is advised that the proposed Catalytic Fund should consider adopting the following core principles and priorities:

- A child-centred approach to policy development and service delivery
- Hold the highest aspirations for children
- Big, bold investments in driving, short-, medium- and long-term change
- Strategic partnerships
- Evidence based and outcomes driven
- Demonstrable return on investment
- A commitment to upholding the rights of children

Children First Canada is currently undertaking a more in-depth analysis on the development of this Fund, and we would be pleased to provide this to Finance Canada and other departments upon completion.

In conjunction with the Catalytic Fund, we also recommend that the government publish a **Children's Budget** to ensure transparency and accountability for all federal expenditures for children. Children's budgets are a proven strategy that have been used in jurisdictions around the world to ensure that investments are made towards evidence-based programs that improve the lives of children and of future adults.

Existing policy tools such as the GBA+ framework can be leveraged for the Children's Budget, and build on the initial efforts used by the Department of Finance in Budget 2019 for the [Investing in Young Canadians' Budget](#) booklet.

To this end, such an approach could also capture major federal investments in children and youth, including the landmark childcare agreements signed by your government with provincial and territorial governments.

3. Collect disaggregated national data on the health and wellbeing of kids across Canada through the Canadian Health Survey of Children and Youth (CHSCY).

In 2021, Children First Canada's latest Raising Canada report revealed the shocking reality that one-third of kids in Canada do not enjoy a safe and healthy childhood, and that that COVID-19 pandemic has caused widespread violations of children's rights, particularly for the most vulnerable.

While the Raising Canada report highlights a substantial fraction of the enormous amount of evidence emerging in Canada related to children and youth, there is still a need to invest in research related to children's well-being and health. For example, Canada lacks national longitudinal studies (and related data) on children and youth that can provide a foundation on examining how Canadian child and youth mental health changes across time (including during the pandemic).

As such, continuing to invest in a comprehensive annual survey led by Statistics Canada, as a follow-up to the Canadian Health Survey of Children and Youth (CHSCY), represents an opportunity to obtain missing information about impacts of the pandemic on children's mental and physical health.

Additionally, there must be a national priority to collect and analyze race-based data related to children, especially using longitudinal methods. We were pleased by the Canadian Institute of Health Research's (CIHR's) announcement of a funding opportunity that aims to understand and mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children, youth and families in Canada. More opportunities to support scholars in undertaking child-centred research is necessary.

Therefore, CFC recommends that the Government of Canada establish a pan-Canadian and comprehensive data collection system for children, and analyze the data collected as a basis for consistently assessing progress.

Data should be disaggregated by age, sex, geographic location, ethnicity and socio-economic background. This will facilitate analysis on the situation of all children, particularly those who are most vulnerable, and strengthen the application of the GBA+ lens in relation to children.

The Case for Action: CFC Budget 2022 Submission

A decade ago, Canada was ranked in 10th place amongst OECD countries for the wellbeing of children. Today, Canada ranks 30th out of 38 nations for protecting the wellbeing of children, marking a sharp decline over the past decade.³

Key to Canada's previous success was dedicated federal leadership and the investment of financial resources. It has been more than a decade since Canada implemented a pan-Canadian plan of action or strategy to improve the lives of children.

The statistics are alarming:⁴

- One-third of children in Canada do not enjoy a safe and healthy childhood,
- One in three Canadians report experiencing abuse before the age of 15,
- One in five children live in poverty,
- Suicide is a leading cause of death for children aged 10 to 14 in Canada.

CFC's latest Raising Canada report provides a clear foundation for the federal government to appoint a Commissioner for Children and Youth, create and implement a National/Pan-Canadian Strategy for Children. Re-establishing a plan of action or strategy is an essential first step to improving the lives of children, which can be further accelerated by establishing a catalytic investment fund for children.

The pandemic has exacerbated and accelerated the crisis, and Children First Canada's [Raising Canada](#) reports have revealed that the top threats to children's mental and physical health are worsening or at risk of worsening.

All children and youth have been impacted, but some have been particularly hard hit, including First Nations, Metis and Inuit children, Black and other children of colour, children growing up in poverty, those with complex medical needs and disabilities, and children who experience abuse in their homes.

Children and their families are suffering from the impacts of the pandemic:⁵

- 61% of parents expect residual effects of the pandemic on their children's mental health, even after the pandemic is over, and 17% expect these impacts will be long term.
- Only a quarter of parents say they have received adequate support from all levels of government throughout the pandemic. The remaining 75% either say they have received some, but it hasn't been enough (42%), or they haven't received any support at all (33%).

Collecting disaggregated national data on the health and wellbeing of kids across Canada is an important step to ensuring that those who are most vulnerable receive the mental health supports they need.

³ [World's richest countries grappling with children's reading and math skills, mental well-being and obesity \(unicef.org\)](#)

⁴ Raising Canada 2021: [Raising Canada - Children First Canada](#)

⁵ Source: Inspiring Health Futures & Abacus Data, June 2021

CFC's extensive experience with comprehensive data collection and analysis through the Raising Canada reports can act as a roadmap for the federal government to establish an ongoing national data collection system to facilitate analysis on the mental health of children in Canada. This will both facilitate analysis and strengthen the application of the GBA+ lens in relation to children, while helping to ensure that proven and effective strategies are implemented to drive meaningful change for all children in Canada.