

The State of Childhood in Canada in the Digital Age

Online harms become the number one threat facing children in Canada

TOP 10 Threats to Childhood in Canada

For the first time since Raising Canada began tracking the Top 10 threats to childhood in 2018, online harms have risen to become the number one threat. Raising Canada has documented the growing impact of online harms for several years. What is different in 2026 is the scale, speed, and reach of digital harms, and the extent to which they now permeate every stage of childhood and accelerate many of the other Top 10 threats.

From AI-enabled toys, connected devices, and algorithm-driven content in the early years, to social media, gaming, messaging platforms, and AI in adolescence, **there is now no stage of childhood untouched by the digital world.** Every child in Canada is growing up in an environment shaped by technology, with profound implications for their health, development, relationships, learning, and safety.

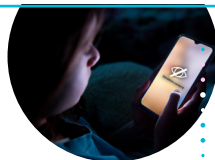
The impacts extend far beyond the screen. Online harms are contributing to worsening mental health, declining physical activity and play, bullying, evolving forms of violence and abuse, racism and discrimination fuelled by online hate, and the spread of vaccine misinformation. Even climate change is connected, as the rapid expansion of AI and digital infrastructure places growing demands on energy and water resources. **Online harms have reached a tipping point: they are not only a serious concern in their own right, but an increasingly powerful force shaping the broader state of childhood in Canada.** Addressing them must therefore be

central to protecting children's fundamental rights to health, safety, survival, development, participation, and play.

The urgency for action is reinforced by Canada's continued decline on international measures of children's rights and wellbeing. **In 2026, Canada ranks 72nd on the global KidsRights Index, falling from 67th in 2025 and 66th in 2024.** This troubling trajectory should serve as a wake-up call: a country as prosperous as Canada can and must do better for its children.

There is no greater nation-building project than raising a generation of children who are safe, healthy, and able to thrive. Raising Canada's children should be a shared national responsibility. Children First Canada calls on elected representatives, educators, parents, communities, businesses, and all Canadians to embrace their role in building a country where children's fundamental rights are protected, barriers to their wellbeing are removed, and every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

THREAT 1 Online Harms



Digital dangers now reach into every corner of childhood, creating threats kids and parents are not equipped to face alone. The Canadian Centre for Child Protection processes more than 100,000 reports of online child sexual abuse every month (Public Safety Canada). Police-reported online child sexual exploitation incidents rose 347% over the past decade (Statistics Canada, 2026). The Tumbler Ridge tragedy in February 2026, which resulted in the death of six children, two adults, and the perpetrator, became a defining moment in Canada's online safety debate and intensified calls for platform accountability and mandatory reporting (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2026). The emergence of violent online networks such as 764, which have been linked to the exploitation and death of children, has resulted in law enforcement agencies warning that these networks are actively targeting Canadian children (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2026).

THREAT 2 Unintentional and Preventable Injuries



Unintentional and preventable injuries are the leading cause of death among children and youth, claiming 2,068 lives between 2020 and 2024 among those aged 0 to 19 (Statistics Canada, 2026). Falls were the leading cause of injury-related hospitalizations and emergency department visits among Canadian children aged 0 to 9 between 2010 and 2023, accounting for an average of 4,590 hospitalizations and 187,709 ED visits per year. Falls from windows and balconies were most likely to result in hospitalization, and nearly three-quarters of falls among infants under one year, from baby carriers, grocery carts, change tables, and baby seats, resulted in traumatic brain injury (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2025). E-scooters and e-bikes resulted in 57 cases of severe injury or death among children under 18 across Canada (CPSP, 2025).

THREAT

3

Violence against Children/Child Abuse

Violence and abuse remain a serious threat; nearly 6 in 10 Canadians (59.7%) have experienced at least one form of maltreatment before their 15th birthday (Statistics Canada, 2023). Nearly half of Canadian youth (44.9%) ages 15 to 17 report experiencing emotional abuse during childhood, 22.3% report physical abuse, 5.3% report sexual abuse, and almost four in ten (39.4%) have been exposed to emotional intimate partner violence between caregivers (Health Canada, 2026). Indigenous children represent less than 8% of Canada's child population, yet more than half of children in foster care (Hahmann et al., 2024; McGonegal et al., 2025). Black children are investigated by child welfare authorities at more than double the rate of white children in matched cases (Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2025).



THREAT

4

Poverty and Food Insecurity

Canadian children and their families face a deepening poverty crisis. Nearly 1.4 million children, or 18.3% of the child population, now live below the poverty line (Campaign 2000, 2025; PROOF, 2026).

Children in lone-parent families face by far the highest risk: 45.2% live in poverty, compared to 10.1% of children in couple families (Campaign 2000, 2026). Poverty is also sharply unequal along racial and geographic lines: 52.4% of children living on reserve were in poverty in 2023, rising to 58.1% in Manitoba, and racialized children face a poverty rate of 14.8% compared to 10.4% for non-racialized children, with Arab children experiencing the highest rate among racialized groups at 25.4% (Campaign 2000, 2026).



THREAT

5

Poor Mental Health

Mental health disorders account for 45% of all disease burden for Canadian children and youth aged 10 to 24 (Tian et al., 2025; Rubin-Kahana, 2025). By age 25, approximately one in five Canadians will have been diagnosed with a mental illness, with 70% of mental health problems beginning during childhood or adolescence (CIHI, 2025). Recent Canadian reporting points to a rise in self-harm-related injuries among youth; this reflects the severity of distress and growing strain on healthcare systems (Saunders et al., 2020).



THREAT

6

Vaccine-preventable Illnesses

Vaccine-preventable illnesses are a significant public health concern for Canadian children. Canada is experiencing its largest measles outbreak in decades, with over 1,000 cases reported by June 2026 (Health Infobase Canada, 2026). In November 2025, Canada lost its measles elimination status for the first time since achieving it in 1998, following more than a year of sustained transmission (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2026). National childhood vaccination coverage remains well below the 95% threshold needed for herd immunity, with only about 83% of children fully vaccinated by age seven, and vaccine hesitancy reported by up to 48% of parents of children aged 0 to 4 (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2024).



THREAT

7

Bullying

The majority of Canadian youth aged 12 to 17, or 71%, reported experiencing at least one form of bullying in the past 12 months, according to the Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth (Statistics Canada, 2023). This remains the most recent published national measurement: Statistics Canada re-fielded this survey in 2023 to 2024, but has not yet published updated bullying-specific findings.



THREAT

8

Systemic Racism and Discrimination

Racism and discrimination continue to impede children's safety, sense of belonging, mental health, and opportunities to thrive. Anti-Muslim hate crimes increased 173% between 2020 and 2024 (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2026). Antisemitic incidents have increased by 145% since 2022, with 6,800 cases in 2025 (B'nai Brith, 2025). In Manitoba, 91% of the 8,919 children in care in 2024 were Indigenous (Government of Manitoba, 2024). A study of 1,472 Black Canadian youth found that over 40% reported racial discrimination in educational settings, with significant associations with anxiety, depression, stress, and PTSD (Cénat et al., 2025). These barriers extend well beyond child welfare, mental health and social isolation, compounding into unequal health outcomes, educational exclusion, and economic insecurity that shape quality of life (Alumona et al., 2025).



THREAT

9

Limited Physical Activity and Play

37% of children and youth accumulate an average of at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA) per day (Statistics Canada, 2025), and only 31% of children and youth meet the recommended recreational screen time limit of averaging no more than 2 hours per day (ParticipACTION, 2026). Increasingly sedentary lifestyles and excessive screen use are contributing to poorer physical and mental health, including higher rates of obesity, anxiety, depression, sleep disruption, and reduced overall well-being. They are also displacing opportunities for active play, exploration, social connection, and time in nature, undermining children's fundamental right to play.



THREAT

10

Climate Change

Canada is warming at roughly twice the global average rate. 2024 was tied as the warmest year on record, and federal projections indicate 2026 to 2030 will likely be the hottest five-year period ever recorded (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2025; 2026). Children are increasingly experiencing the impacts firsthand as wildfires, floods, extreme heat, and other climate-related disasters disrupt homes, schools, and communities. Among Canadian youth aged 16 to 24 accessing integrated youth mental health services in British Columbia, 40.9% reported being very or extremely worried about climate change, and 28.0% said those feelings were negatively affecting their daily lives (Klassen et al., 2025). These impacts are felt disproportionately by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children, whose communities are often on the front lines of climate change.



The School Crisis:

School Absenteeism, School Violence, and Classroom Complexity



For the first time since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Raising Canada 2026 also identifies the growing crisis in Canadian schools as an emerging threat. Chronic absenteeism, escalating violence, increasing classroom complexity, and growing mental health needs are placing unprecedented pressure on students, educators, and school communities, with significant implications for children's learning, safety, and well-being. In many cases, these challenges are being intensified by children's digital experiences both inside and outside the classroom, particularly with the rapid rollout of artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies. Educators are also raising concerns about increasing cognitive offloading—the reliance on technology to perform tasks that were once essential to learning—as well as declining attention spans, reduced critical thinking, and the growing difficulty many students experience sustaining focus, problem-solving, and independent learning.

- Chronic absenteeism has become a defining feature of the post-pandemic classroom. A population-level Canadian study of more than 513,000 kindergarten children found that chronic absenteeism increased from 18% before the pandemic to 41% afterward, with post-pandemic kindergarten children three times more likely to be chronically absent than their pre-pandemic peers (Reid-Westoby et al., 2026).
- Classroom complexity is placing growing pressure on educators and students, as schools work to support increasingly diverse academic, behavioural, mental health, and disability-related needs. Concerns have been raised about inadequate supports for students with disabilities, including experiences of exclusion, seclusion, and restraint (Community Living Ontario, 2025).
- School violence is also rising. In Ontario, violent incident reports increased by 114% between the 2017–18 and 2022–23 school years (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2024). Nationally, a survey of more than 4,700 educators found that 41% disagreed that they work in a safe environment (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2026).

Infant Mortality

For the first time, infant mortality has moved from the Top 10 threats to the *Raising Canada* Watchlist, reflecting modest improvements in infant health outcomes while recognizing the need for continued vigilance. The national infant mortality rate declined from 4.7 to 4.5 deaths per 1,000 live births between 2023 and 2024, representing encouraging progress (Statistics Canada, 2026, [Table 13-10-0712-01 Infant deaths and mortality rates, by sex](#)). However, infant mortality remains a persistent concern, particularly for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children, families living in poverty, and those in Northern and remote communities, where longstanding inequities in access to healthcare and the social determinants of health continue to contribute to poorer outcomes.



This shift also reflects the emergence and rapid escalation of other challenges, particularly online harms, that are increasingly affecting children and youth across Canada. It should not be interpreted as diminishing the importance of infant mortality. Rather, it underscores the growing number of complex and interconnected issues affecting children's health, safety, and wellbeing, especially among the country's most vulnerable children. The Raising Canada Watchlist serves as a call to governments, healthcare systems, researchers, and community organizations to sustain progress, address persistent inequities, and ensure that every child has the opportunity to survive and thrive from the very beginning of life.

Calls to Action

The following Calls to Action, endorsed by Children First Canada's Youth Advisory Council, Young Canadians' Parliament, and Council of Champions, chart a path forward to confront the escalating and interconnected challenges facing children in Canada:

1 Strengthen and Pass Bill C-34 to Enact the Safe Social Media

Act: Parliament should strengthen and pass Bill C-34, the Safe Social Media Act, without delay and fully resource the new Digital Safety Commission of Canada (Government of Canada, 2026). The legislation should extend beyond traditional social media platforms and AI chatbots to protect children across gaming platforms, messaging services, livestreaming platforms, and emerging digital technologies. It should also include mandatory transparency and safety reporting requirements for AI systems and digital platforms. Legislation alone will not solve the problem. Governments should also invest in a comprehensive national digital literacy strategy. This should provide free, evidence-based resources for children, youth, parents, caregivers, educators, and healthcare professionals.

2 Pass Bill S-212 and Develop a National Strategy for Children and Youth:

Canada needs a coordinated vision for children. The federal government should pass Bill S-212, An Act respecting a National Strategy for Children and Youth in Canada, and work with provinces, territories, Indigenous governments, municipalities, children, youth, families, and community organizations to develop and implement a comprehensive strategy that advances children's rights and well-being throughout childhood and adolescence (Government of Canada, 2026). The strategy should adopt a lifespan approach that recognizes children's needs evolve from

infancy through young adulthood (Ettinger, Risser, Rahman, et al., 2022; Lou, Anthony, Stone, et al., 2008) and align with Canada's Quality of Life Framework (Statistics Canada, 2026), the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the OECD Child Well-being Dashboard (2025).

3 Invest in Children Through a Coordinated, Whole-of-Government Response:

Children experience these challenges together, and governments must respond the same way. The evidence presented in this report demonstrates that online harms, poor mental health, poverty, food insecurity, violence, declining physical activity, racism, vaccine-preventable illnesses, climate change, and the growing pressures facing schools are deeply interconnected. Canada needs a coordinated, whole-of-government approach that aligns investments across health, education, justice, child welfare, housing, Indigenous services, digital policy, and social development while partnering with community organizations, researchers, businesses, and families.

- 4 Join the Movement to Put Children First:** Protecting childhood is a shared responsibility. Governments have a responsibility to enact laws that protect children. Technology companies must design safer products and be held accountable when they fail to do so. Parents, educators, healthcare professionals, community organizations, businesses, researchers, philanthropists, and Indigenous leaders all have an important role to play. Children and young people themselves have the right to be heard and to help shape the decisions that affect their lives.

Scan the QR code to view references



The findings of *Raising Canada 2026* are a wake-up call, but they are also an invitation to listen more carefully to children, create healthier homes, schools, and communities, and build a digital world that puts children's rights, safety, and wellbeing first.

The future of Canada starts with our children. Let's put them first and build a country where every child is safe, healthy, heard, and empowered to thrive.

Go to www.childrenfirstcanada.org to sign the Raising Canada pledge and take action today.

