

Introduction

This paper has been prepared by the Canadian Child Care Federation (CCCCF) in preparation for the September 17, 2004 Day of Discussion on implementing child rights in early childhood. CCCCf is submitting this paper to add to the discussions on starting sound practices early and promoting the young child as a right-holder. In order to illuminate some of the challenges and opportunities inherent in promoting young children’s rights in Canada, the paper will look at four particular scenarios, and provide recommendations for future action based on our analysis of these case studies.

The Canadian Child Care Federation is a non-profit, charitable organization founded in 1987, a federation of 19 provincial/territorial affiliate organizations representing over 10,000 individual members. CCCCf is committed to “excellence in early learning and child care”.

Case Study #1

Working with government to put in place a policy framework that (1) makes discussion of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and A World Fit for Children (WFFC) relevant; and (2) encourages actions to promote their implementation.

The Context

Canada has unique strengths and challenges inherent in federal and provincial/territorial negotiations related to revenue sharing, decision-making power and regional autonomy.

The Challenge

Due to the division of powers in Canada, policies on such issues as child care and child welfare are primarily the mandate of the provincial and territorial governments – not the federal government. There is no national structure to:

- ensure federal and regional government adherence to the *CRC* and *WFFC*; or
- develop a national infrastructure for early learning and child care

The Opportunity

In the past five years, Canada has forged a way for federal and regional governments to work together on domestic issues. Through multifaceted deliberations among the federal, provincial/territorial governments and civil society, a number of inter-related policy frameworks have been developed:

- Social Union Framework Agreement 1999 (SUFA)
- National Children’s Agenda 1997 (NCA)
- First Ministers Early Childhood Development Agreement 2000 (ECDA)
- Multilateral Framework Agreement on Early Learning and Care 2003 (MFA)

In spite of ongoing tensions related to federal and provincial/territorial government power-sharing, these policy frameworks have enabled new investments in early learning and child care, embedded in the key principles of respecting rights and valuing equality, fairness and respect. These frameworks give child rights supporters a “hook” to which they can attach the language and recommendations of the *CRC* and *WFFC*.

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The Process

The main purpose of the Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA) is to improve the network of social policies and programs developed by various levels of government in Canada. Under SUFA, the federal, provincial and territorial governments commit themselves to:

- A framework for adjusting and modernizing social programs; and
- Ways of working more closely together to develop social programs.

Through SUFA, the provincial and territorial governments retain much of the decision-making power over how funds transferred from the federal government are spent and how social programs are delivered in their jurisdictions. SUFA’s principles reflect the fundamental values of equality, fairness, respect, and individual and collective responsibility – a constructive backdrop for discussions and coordinated action related to the *CRC* and *WFFC*.

With SUFA in place, the federal and provincial/territorial governments began work on the National Children’s Agenda (NCA) developed in consultation with CCCF and other civil society organizations. NCA sets out a shared vision for children in Canada. Its language is very similar to the *CRC* and *WFFC*: “...wanting our children to be loved, to thrive; and be valued; to develop their unique physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and creative capacities; to be protected and, in turn, to respect and protect the rights of others; and to belong and contribute to communities that appreciate diversity, support different abilities and share their resources.”

As a result of NCA’s designation of early childhood development as one of four key areas for action, the federal and provincial/territorial governments reached a historic agreement to improve and expand the services and programs they provide for children under the age of six and their families. The Early Childhood Development Agreement (ECDA) marks the first time that governments committed to report to the public on a set of jointly agreed upon indicators of child well-being.

However, under the ECDA, the transfer of resources from the federal government is in the form of block funding and there’s no requirement for the provinces or territories to put any of the funding into child care. As a result, only a very small fraction of this investment has been spent on early learning and care.

Building on the ECDA commitment to improve and expand early childhood development programs and services, the federal/provincial/territorial Multilateral Framework Agreement (MFA) was developed to improve access to affordable, quality, and provincially and territorially regulated early learning and child care programs and services. On the heels of this commitment, follows a newly announced government priority to invest in child care as clearly indicated in Prime Minister Paul Martin’s response to the Speech from the Throne (February 3, 2004).

Concluding Observations

With these policy and governance frameworks in place, it has become easier to promote children’s rights. The frameworks have given civil society a way to pursue the recommendations of the *CRC* and *WFFC*.

The challenge is to build on this momentum. The work has just begun. The children’s rights strategy requires a long-term agenda requiring further work over a period of many years.

Case Study #2

Developing ways to communicate a rights-based approach to early childhood educators, policy makers and the public.

The Context

As an organization, we believe that the foundation for early learning and child care is a “rights-respecting” approach. In this regard, the *CRC* and *WFFC* provide a way to integrate the core areas of our work (promoting best and promising practices, capacity building, and networking, collaboration and partnership).

The Challenge

We want to see a rights-based approach included in the day-to-day work of early learning and child care practitioners, in the realities of family and community life, and in policy making. However this requires an effective way to communicate the rights-based approach and make it accessible to diverse groups.

The Process

Applying the Lens of Children’s Rights to the Early Learning and Child Care Setting

Over the years, CCCF has developed a number of resources to help familiarize practitioners with the *CRC* and *WFFC*. We began by developing two resource sheets for child care practitioners and parents entitled:

- *Respecting Children’s Rights in Practice*
- *Respecting Children’s Rights at Home*

As child care practitioners became more familiar with the *CRC*, CCCF put together a *Special Collection on Children’s Rights*. This collection contains primary sources (e.g. *Child Care and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*), other relevant publications, booklets, and articles (e.g. *Research Connections Canada Vol. 7*, focusing on the research on children’s rights); and popularization materials (e.g. a poster on the *CRC* in child-friendly language that was distributed broadly to early childhood education programs, CCCF members, partnering organizations and the general public).

But a challenge still remains: How can CCCF make children’s rights real and accessible to local early learning and care practitioners? How do we explain it so they see their role as pivotal in creating a rights-respecting environment?

To help meet this challenge, CCCF is currently developing a learning kit entitled *Children’s Rights in Practice*. Designed for practitioners, this kit will include a facilitator’s guide (designed to help organize and lead workshops for colleagues and parents), a research paper that outlines the history and other details of the *CRC*, and other resources that can be used in everyday practice. Building on our other relevant resources mentioned above, the goal of this learning kit is to take the learning process one step further – by demonstrating how fostering an environment that protects, respects and promotes children’s rights can be practically implemented as part of best and promising practices in early learning and child care.

Early learning and child care practitioners’ knowledge of child development makes them well suited to listen to children’s thoughts and opinions help them give voice to their views, and build relationships of trust. Hearing and connecting to a child’s message respects the *CRC*. And similarly, practitioners’ behaviour with one another sets the standard of best and promising practice that sustains a rights-based environment.

CCCF has used this paradigm in its curriculum guide entitled *Learning Through Play: A Child-centred, Play-based Learning Curriculum*. This guide was generatively designed with community partners in Argentina and funding support from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Participants in the training module responded

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positively to the use of the children’s rights lens in the implementation of the new curriculum. Understanding children’s rights in terms of their own role in shaping the early learning and care environment was a new concept for them and supported best practice.

Applying the lens of children’s rights to our awareness-building work with policy and decision-makers

CCCF has played a key role in government deliberations, civil society discussions and public education strategies on children’s rights in Canada. For example:

- CCCF participated in consultations to provide input on the development of Canada’s National Plan of Action for *A World Fit for Children*. Together with the Canadian Health Network, the CCCF designed and led a formal consultation process on early childhood development. With an explicit focus on health and social policies and practices related to the early years, the goal of this consultation was to inform discussions related to the National Plan of Action on:
 - existing gaps in early childhood health and social policies, services and monitoring systems;
 - achieving equitable outcomes among young children in Canada; and
 - ensuring access and equitable participation of Aboriginal children and children with disabilities in early childhood programs and services

CCCF’s executive directors have consistently taken a leadership role in the Canadian Coalition on the Rights of Children (CCRC) since its creation in 1988. Currently CCCF executive director Sandra Griffin serves as chair of the CCRC. This leadership role in children’s rights did not happen by accident; it was shaped by a formalized commitment and the involvement of CCCF’s board of directors and by the dedication of the organization’s successive executive directors.

Concluding Observations

It is important to emphasize the critical role of effective communication of child rights in building public recognition and support for the *CRC* and *WFFC*. We have learned that it takes deliberate and creative efforts to move beyond speaking with and among ourselves to connecting with those unfamiliar, fearful or skeptical of a child rights-based approach. Therefore, our organization looks for all opportunities to highlight the *CRC* and *WFFC* in an effort to make them real and relevant to Canadians. For example, our executive director incorporates children’s rights into her formal speeches and presentations, and all the staff reference the *CRC* and *WFFC* in discussions with civil society colleagues and CCCF members. In 2000, CCCF facilitated a leadership institute *Keeping the Promises* which focused on the national and international agreements and covenants that support the health and well-being of children. Recently, Canada’s Prime Minister began using the sound-bite “Keeping Our Promises.” The CCCFs current key message links the government’s political agenda with children’s rights: “It’s now time to keep our promises to children, while raising our expectations on fulfilling all of their rights.”

Case Study #3

Applying the lens of children’s rights to Aboriginal issues

The Context

In Canada, Aboriginal children face substantial challenges to achieving health and well-being. Challenges such as childhood poverty and injury pose serious risks for healthy child development. A 2003 report card on poverty in Canada (Campaign 2000) reported that 41% of Aboriginal children in off-reserve communities are living in poverty. In a document released by the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada (Blackstock et. al., 2004), First Nations children die from injuries at disproportionate rates. The mortality rate from injury for First Nations infants is four times higher than non-Aboriginal infants and five times higher for First Nations preschoolers.

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The Challenge

It is important that society be respectful and inclusive of all Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. The diversity of languages alone (53 spoken First Nations languages) can be a challenge when developing culturally-appropriate, rights-based services. Additionally, the number of Aboriginal children living in urban environments is on the rise – a reality which presents other challenges such as poverty and the growing dependence on non-Aboriginal-focused services. An example of this would be the growing number of Aboriginal children being removed from their home and being placed with non-Aboriginal families (*National Children’s Alliance Policy Paper on Aboriginal Children*, 2003).

The Process

At the core of Canada’s strategy, the federal government is responsible for the 32% of young Aboriginal children who live on-reserve (*The Well-Being of Canada’s Young Children: Government of Canada Report*, 2002). In an effort to uphold and respect the rights of young Aboriginal children, the federal government has been working in partnership with Aboriginal peoples to develop a comprehensive system of services and supports for young children and their families living on reserve.

According to a 2001 census by Statistics Canada, the number of urban Aboriginal children under the age of 14 was documented at 227,000. To address the growing population of urban Aboriginal children, the federal government launched Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC) in 1995. In 1998, the program was expanded to serve young children living on reserve – Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve (AHSOR).

The Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) programs are a culturally-based early learning and care strategy which is community controlled and delivered. These programs are designed to provide Aboriginal children ages 0 to 6 (with an emphasis on ages 3 to 5) with a positive sense of themselves, a desire for learning and opportunities to develop fully and successfully as young people. Also designed to support parents, each AHS program reflects the uniqueness of the community, respecting its language, culture and traditions. In addition, because the program is locally controlled and emphasizes parental involvement, AHS is designed to empower Aboriginal communities.

At the core of this strategy is the belief that Aboriginal children and families have the right to expect the best possible outcomes from available resources, and that they are in the best position to describe what these outcomes should be and how resources should be deployed to attain them.

As a civil society partner with the federal government on improving the health and well-being of Aboriginal children living both on- and off-reserve, CCCF is involved in efforts to start sound practices early and cultivate discussions on children’s rights with Aboriginal peoples.

Ensuring sound practices early

CCCF in partnership with the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada has recently launched a project to develop an Aboriginal Early Childhood Development (ECD) Network and Clearinghouse. With the goal of supporting Aboriginal ECD providers in their important work with children and families, this project will result in a comprehensive web resource on Aboriginal ECD and the development of a sustainable network of Aboriginal ECD providers.

Young children as full actors in their own development

CCCF has had the opportunity to work with Aboriginal representatives and groups in forums related to the *CRC* and *WFFC*. These discussions have revealed some cultural differences in recognizing rights. For example, within Aboriginal cultures, there is an emphasis on the communal rights and responsibilities for children and all community members. Additionally, the notion of “child” is not a recognized concept. For many Aboriginal cultures, as identified by Cook (2002:82) in *Research Connections Canada Vol.7*, there can be a rite of passage for Aboriginal children which may only happen after the age of 14. This activity is not prescribed by chronological age but by life

experience. Therefore, a child-rights approach within an Aboriginal context necessitates that early childhood development strategies:

- be developed with the voices, expertise and Indigenous knowledge inclusive of all Aboriginal Peoples in Canada;
- seek to build the capacity of communities to support their children; and
- be developed in the context of the principles of ownership, control, access and participation.

Concluding Observations

CCCF believes that there is much to be gained from conducting dialogues with Aboriginal groups on young children’s needs and participatory rights. This mutually instructive dialogue helps combine insights relating to protection of children’s rights with insights related to community responsibility for the well-being of children.

Case Study #4

Educating the young child as a right-holder

The Context and Challenge

Given that most Early Childhood Education (ECE) and kindergarten programs in Canada do not include a specific focus on children’s participatory rights, how can we infuse existing curriculum and child care programming with easy-to-use activities that teach children about the concept of participatory rights and their responsibilities as right-holders to exercise them?

The Process

One such developmentally appropriate and methodically tested program has been developed in Canada by Ellen Murray, currently with the Department of Child and Youth Studies at Mount Royal College in Calgary, Alberta. Murray’s *The World Around Us* was designed to:

- Support the development of children to their fullest potential;
- Promote responsible citizenship through children’s rights education; and
- Be easily adaptable for use with children of various ages.

Her qualitative research used an exploratory case study design with 30 grade 3 students participating in *The World Around Us*. Listening to children’s voices during their participation was fundamental to gaining insights into what strategies were especially effective in helping children understand and exercise their participation rights and responsibilities. The analysis and interpretation of the research findings yielded a number of insights related to children’s rights education.

For example, a set of four participatory strategies appeared to help the children both understand and exercise their participation rights and responsibilities. These effective participatory strategies were concept mapping, decision-making, role playing and responsive writing. These four participatory strategies – together – provide “appropriate participatory strategies” (Article 5).

Murray is currently developing a facilitator’s guide for the CCCF’s learning kit *Children’s Rights in Practice*.

Concluding Observations

A key learning from promoting and using *The World Around Us* is that administrators and teachers appreciated that the curriculum was:

- designed to serve as a stand-alone curriculum or as thematic materials to be integrated into existing subjects such subjects as language arts or social studies;

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- developed to be used as a set of learning activities that can be used in an early learning and child care setting; and
- promoted as a voluntary, as opposed to a mandatory, curriculum.

Recommendations

1. Commission a project on children’s participatory rights which would:
 - design a research protocol to pilot test and evaluate learning activities that help young children understand and put into practice their participatory rights;
 - develop a template set of learning activities for use with young children, based on the findings of the research; and
 - market the template resource, which can be tailored to specific cultures and traditions.
2. Develop an international web-based clearinghouse that includes or advertises the availability of:
 - tested training materials for early childhood educators on children’s rights and the creation of rights-respecting environments and their application within an early learning and child care environment;
 - tested curricula and proven learning activities designed to help young children understand and put into practice their participatory rights;
and
 - other relevant resources that help promote child rights in early childhood.
3. Commission a project, similar to the model suggested in #2, on training resources for early learning and child care practitioners which would assist with the creation of a rights-respecting environment within their early learning and child care settings.
4. Facilitate one or more forums (or use existing channels) to attract a new set of participants and constituencies to the discussion on child rights in early childhood. Based on this initiative, develop a set of concise resource sheets on children’s rights that are tailored to specific groups/constituencies, drawing on their unique perspective and incentives, and that includes quotes of support by international/national leaders in their particular field.
5. Facilitate the exchange of expertise on children’s rights and early childhood among both developed and developing countries. (CCCF’s international experience with the CIDA-funded project in Argentina has reaped mutual benefits and insights).