



Landon Pearson Resource Centre
for the Study of Childhood
and Children's Rights

A Canada Fit for Children 2015: Identity, Rights and Belonging

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Preface

A Canada Fit for Children 2015 is my third and final attempt to draft an action plan for Canada's children. The first two were official. This one is not; rather, it is a testament for and a tribute to all the young people to whom I have been listening for so many years and a show of confidence in their capacity to make a difference for themselves and for the rest of us.

For Canada's Children: A National Agenda for Action was the first attempt with which I was involved. It was the official report of the Canadian Commission for the International Year of the Child.¹ My role was to guide the Commission's considerations, encourage and organize consultations with children and edit the ensuing report. Many of the Commission's resolutions eventually found their way into public policy, with one notable exception. Although, since 1979, children's advocates have been established in virtually every province and territory there is still no children's commissioner at the federal level of government to focus attention on our youngest citizens.

For Canada's Children was framed by the United Nations 1959 Declaration on the Rights of the Child.² My second attempt, *A Canada Fit for Children 2004*, was Canada's response to the report of the 2002 UN Special Session on Children entitled *A World Fit for Children*.³ This final proposal, *A Canada Fit for Children 2015*, blends the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)⁴ with the voices of children and youth into a renewed call for action.

The concept of children as persons with rights was introduced into the official international discourse on human rights by Eglantyne Jebb⁵ who founded Save the Children as a result of the suffering of children that she had witnessed during and after the First World War. In 1924 she persuaded the League of Nations to adopt the first Declaration on the Rights of the Child.⁶ Out of the ashes of the Second World War arose a new league of nations now known as the United Nations committed to preventing a third world war through the promotion of the human rights of all members of the human family, including children.⁷ In 1948 the UN issued the Universal Declaration of Human Rights following which a whole slew of international covenants and treaties with respect to human rights were negotiated and agreed to under the sponsorship of the UN, including the CRC in 1989.

Since then and in association with the processes established by the UN to hold countries responsible for implementing the treaties they have ratified a substantial body of jurisprudence and commentary about children's rights has evolved and the discourse about children's rights has expanded. Millions of children have benefited from this new approach. However, what countries say they will do and what they actually do are not always the same. Those of us who have worked with the CRC over many years can no longer think of children any other way than as persons with articulated rights. But this is clearly not the case for everyone. The purpose of the following document is to look at the situation of children and youth in Canada through the lens that they, themselves, have crafted for us, the lens of identity, rights and belonging, and to spur everyone who can make a positive difference into action.

Hon. Landon Pearson O.C.

Introduction

2002

1. In May 2002 the United Nations General Assembly held a Special Session on Children to review progress on the goals set at the 1990 World Summit for Children, where an unprecedented number of heads of state and government had discussed the state of the world's children in the wake of the adoption of the CRC and committed their countries to action. The Special Session was convened to assess what had been achieved since the World Summit, to identify new and emerging challenges regarding children's rights around the world and to renew the commitment of the international community to further progress. Official delegations included not only national leaders and senior officials but also children and youth who were given many opportunities to speak. This was a major advance over the World Summit where the presence of children was tokenistic at best. Moreover, the Special Session attracted hundreds of non-governmental organizations whose delegation also featured young people and the United Nations buildings were filled with the sound of their voices. On the final day of the week-long session, two young girls mounted the podium of the General Assembly to announce "A world fit for children is a world fit for everyone" and urged us to remember that all of us, young and not so young, would be responsible for building it.
2. The Special Session continued until late that night when the representatives of the nations of the world adopted a Declaration and a Plan of Action entitled *A World Fit for Children*. Issuing from three years of intense negotiations that had continued throughout the Special Session itself right up until its final moments, this document represented a remarkable world-wide consensus on strategies to adopt and actions to take to improve the situation of all children everywhere. *A World Fit for Children* identified four priority areas for action: promoting healthy lives; providing quality education; protecting children against abuse, exploitation and violence; and combating HIV/AIDS. It contained a global plan of action that described what the nations of the world should do for and with children. All governments present at the Special Session committed to moving forward and each one agreed to prepare a national action plan based on its own national circumstances.

2004

3. Canada lived up to its commitment and in April 2004 delivered *A Canada Fit for Children*⁸ to the United Nations. This action plan was developed under the direction of Senator Landon Pearson who had been appointed by Prime Minister Jean Chrétien as his personal representative to the processes related to the Special Session. Senator Pearson initiated a broad national consultation with the support of the Ministers of Health and Human Resources to explore what Canadians, including a substantial number of young people, saw as the most important issues to be addressed in order to protect, promote and fulfill the rights of children. Individuals and groups were asked to propose strategies and actions that both governments and civil society could take that would improve their prospects and well-being. A draft document was prepared identifying four priority themes adapted from *A World Fit for Children*: supporting families and strengthening communities; promoting healthy lives; protecting from harm; and promoting education and learning. This was then sent back to those who had participated for comment before being finalised and taken to the federal Cabinet for official approval. In May 2004, *A Canada Fit for Children: Canada's Follow-up to the United Nations General Assembly Special Session* was launched officially in the foyer of the Senate of Canada with the support of several of the youth who had helped to create it.

2015

4. It has been more than ten years since *A Canada Fit for Children* was adopted by the Government of Canada as a framework for action. Although the document included benchmarks against which progress could be assessed it appears, in retrospect, to have been more of an aspirational effort than an effective one. Nevertheless, it is likely that a broad spectrum of Canadians concerned about children would still support the three conditions *A Canada Fit for Children* set out as necessary (if not sufficient) for healthy child development: adequate income for families with children; effective parenting within strong and cohesive families; supportive and inclusive communities. They would also continue to support most of the strategies and actions laid out for achieving this vision renewing, as they have many times since 2004, the call for all Canadians to work together for and with children. Regrettably, however, many of the issues such as unacceptably

high poverty rates for families with children as addressed in the action plan remain unresolved. The depth if not the breadth of poverty in which many children live has deepened, families continue to break down as well as to break up; some communities have become highly problematic for the children and youth living in them and Aboriginal children continue to be greatly disadvantaged.

5. It would appear that the progress to which we committed ourselves as a nation in 2004 has stalled. According to a 2013 report from UNICEF, Canada is “stuck in the middle”^{*} of a list of other developed countries.⁹ It is not that children in Canada are significantly worse off than children in those other countries; the 2004 version of *A Canada Fit for Children* noted that the majority of Canada’s children were doing well and this continues to be the case. From a child rights perspective, however, a “majority” is not good enough because every child, no matter how small, has rights and deserves national attention. Being “stuck in the middle” should be taken as a challenge for all Canadians so now it is time to take a fresh look at how current circumstances warrant a different approach for those who look after, work with and generally care about children. To do this we need a new lens, a lens that reflects the perspective of the children and youth for whom the original *Canada Fit for Children* was designed. The major issues that the young people with whom we have been talking in recent years almost all point to concerns about identity, rights and belonging. So this is the lens we will use.
6. The Introduction to *A Canada Fit for Children* 2004 described the overall Canadian context in which children were growing up at the time. This context is worth revisiting to see what has changed and what has not since then. The physical landscape is much the same except at Canada’s northern edge where the ice is melting. So is the constitutional landscape; Canada continues to be a federation comprised of ten provinces and three northern territories[†] with a constitution that provides unique roles and responsibilities for

^{*} In 2013, Canada ranked in the middle position for the overall wellbeing of our children among rich countries across the world (17th out of 29 countries). However, when Canadian children decide for themselves whether they are satisfied with their lives, Canada drops seven places to 24th position. This makes Canadian children among the least happy in the developed world. See UNICEF Canada. (2013). Stuck in the middle - Child Well-being in Rich Countries: A comparative overview, Canadian Companion. *Innocenti Report Card 11*. Toronto: UNICEF Canada; UNICEF. (2013). Well-being in Rich Countries: A comparative overview. *Innocenti Report Card 11*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research

[†] In 2006 Prime Minister Harper declared the Québécois a nation within a united Canada, but not an independent Nation. See Prime Minister Stephen Harper. (2006). *PM Declares That The Québécois Form A Nation Within A*

federal, provincial and territorial jurisdictions. Most issues related to children and families fall within provincial jurisdiction except for youth justice, and, for historical reasons, divorce. And even then, though they are governed by federal legislation, the administration of both the Youth Criminal Justice Act and the Divorce Act remain the responsibility of the provinces and the territories. The Indian Act outlines the federal government's responsibility for First Nations children living on reserve and there are many other federal acts that impact children one way or another. Cooperative federalism with respect to overlapping responsibilities regarding children is the ideal, but particularly with respect to Aboriginal children, it remains problematic.

7. The demographic landscape, however, has changed considerably over the last decade. The population of Canada, now estimated to be just over 35,700,000¹⁰ has not only grown but it is more and more diverse. According to the 2011 census¹¹, over 20 per cent of us were born elsewhere with the main sources of immigration shifting to Asia and the Middle East¹². Furthermore increasing numbers of people are self-identifying as Aboriginal - over 1.4 million¹³. Family structures are changing as well, with more complex households including a greater number of same-sex marriages and partnerships¹⁴. The landscape of childhood has also shifted dramatically since 2004. While both the original and this new version of *A Canada Fit for Children* adopt the CRC definition that the child is “every human being under the age of 18” (Article 1) it is important to keep in mind that childhood and adolescence are particularly dynamic periods in any human lifetime and that issues concerning children will always require different responses depending on age, gender and the social and cultural contexts in which children are growing up.
8. The last ten years have introduced some powerful new forces into the lives of children and youth, notably through the social media and other forms of electronic communication. At the same time the voices of young people have become stronger. They have spoken in a variety of venues since 2004 about many issues including how they understand their rights and how lack of respect for what they have to say and do has created barriers to their sense of who they are and where they belong. Considerable

United Canada. Retrieved from: <http://www.pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2006/11/22/pm-declares-quebecois-form-nation-within-united-canada>

knowledge regarding child development has recently become available from a number of disciplines in the social, biological and cognitive sciences demonstrating how genetic and cultural factors interact to influence how a child shapes his or her identity. Most babies come into the world full of energy and promise but it is how the world responds to them during infancy, childhood and adolescence, and how they, in turn, react according to temperament and other personal factors, that will determine which of the genes they are born with will be expressed or repressed and how their evolving neural pathways will be pruned and strengthened.¹⁵ Each one of us is unique and will have a unique life story, but all of us will wonder at one time or another “Who am I?” “Where do I belong?” and “What are my rights as a person?” It is these questions that children are increasingly asking today. A Canada fit for children in 2015 must be one that enables its youngest citizens to find their answers in a healthy and constructive manner.

9. Canada’s children, like children everywhere, have much to offer us both now and in the future. The best way to ensure that our country is one that is worthy them and their potential is to provide them with the best environment in which to explore all possibilities, to gain a lifelong sense of purpose and hope, and - most important of all - to become confident in who they are, where they belong and what they stand for. The document that follows is a result of efforts over the last decade to understand what children and youth have said would constitute a Canada fit for them and their ideas about what should be done and who should do it. Many of these ideas have been collected over the last eight years from the workshops that the Landon Pearson Resource Centre has sponsored with young people entitled *Shaking the Movers*,¹⁶ workshops that have been designed to encourage children and youth to explore a broad spectrum of issues that affect them from a rights perspective within a safe and respectful environment, assured that their opinions will be carried forward to those who will listen and respond.¹⁷ Identity and belonging have emerged from all of these workshops as major preoccupations for children and, especially, for adolescents, preoccupations that cut across every aspect of their daily lives, their lives within their families and schools, among their peers, on the streets, in the shopping malls, at work (if they have any) and on the Internet. The hundreds of *Shaking the Movers* participants are not, of course, representative of all children and youth in Canada, nor are they the only source for the ideas expressed in this

document. Nonetheless, they are articulate representatives of their generation and their voices deserve to be heard.

Children in Canada: A Shared Responsibility

10. *A Canada Fit for Children 2004* opened with the following Declaration: “A country that believes in the future values its children. Canada is a forward-looking nation with a strong sense of responsibility. We believe that children should have the opportunity to be fully prepared to live a responsible life in a free society, in a spirit of understanding, peace, dignity, tolerance, equality and solidarity.”¹⁸ There is every indication that ten years later this Declaration is still valid with its implication that every child in Canada merits attention from all members of society and that his or her well-being continues to be considered by most Canadians as a shared responsibility. We still want to help children to be healthy, safe and secure, successful learners, and socially engaged and responsible.¹⁹ What is different is the way the children and youth for whom the original agenda was designed understand the nature of the barriers that prevent them from achieving these goals.
11. *A Canada Fit for Children 2015* attempts to respect this new way of seeing the situation while retaining, for the sake of comparison, the 2004 consensus on key priorities within the four central themes of supporting families and strengthening communities; promoting healthy lives; protecting from harm; and promoting education and learning. While these categories do not encompass every possible issue to which we should be paying attention to make Canada better for children and youth today, they can help us see where there has been progress and where there are new possibilities, particularly when viewed using the lens of identity and belonging within the framework of the CRC. In this document, the issues facing children and adolescents today are described and considerations for the future within each category follow. Without an understanding of the issues at hand coupled with an approach stemming from a child rights perspective, as seen through the lens that young people across the country have led us to use, we cannot be sure that the actions taken now and in the future truly align with what children want and need for a Canada fit for them.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child

12. The CRC, the most comprehensive and universally ratified human rights treaty in history, is the starting point for any discussion regarding the status of children as persons with inalienable rights like everyone else. It addresses children's rights in every domain, including their social, economic, cultural, civil and political rights. It is a rich and comprehensive document and all of us, including children and youth, should know it better so that we understand what to do to engender a culture of respect for children and their rights. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, whose task it is to examine every state party to the CRC, all 195 of them,²⁰ on a regular basis for its progress in implementing the CRC, has come up with four guiding principles that apply not only to states but also to our individual and collective actions with respect to children. Based on CRC Articles 2, 3, 6 and 12 these can be summarized as non-discrimination; adherence to the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival and development; and the right to participate. Any and all measures taken to fulfil children's rights should be oriented by these principles, which is why we reference them throughout this document. Seeing the issues confronting children and adolescents in Canada today through the triple lens of identity, rights and belonging will, we hope, inspire everyone to make changes to the way we interact with them, whether in our own lives or in our official capacities as educators, caregivers, health professionals, public service members or politicians.

Issues Facing Canada's Children and Adolescents

I. Supporting and Strengthening Families

13. Everyone can agree that families are where it all begins. But families do not exist in isolation. *A Canada Fit for Children 2004* recognized that "families operate within the context of communities, workplaces and public institutions. The role of governments is to ensure that each of these settings function, individually and together, in ways that support families with children and children within families".²¹ Family units are the primary social unit of any country, and Canada is no exception. A child's family, even more than his or her affiliation with a religious, racial or ethnic group, is at the root of his or her identity and this is where the first attachments that are foundational to a sense of belonging are (or

are not) formed. To begin with is the family into which he or she is born. For almost all children, this family of origin will continue to matter even if the child grows up in a different family situation. In 2011, 1.2 million Canadian parents were no longer in a spousal or common-law relationship with their child's mother or father and 5 million Canadians had separated or divorced over the 20 years prior.²² Separation and divorce are not the only reasons why children may no longer be growing up with both biological parents. A parent may die, children may be removed from their families into child welfare because of abuse or neglect, they may have a parent or parents deployed overseas as military personnel, a parent may be in prison, a child may be given up for adoption or adopted from abroad into a new family having lost his or her own through war or natural disaster. A number of children over the past ten years have been conceived through the use of new reproductive technologies using sperm or egg donations or surrogate mothers further complicating issues of identity.

14. Whatever their current family circumstances, however, children will continue to seek answers to the questions: Who am I? Where do I belong? And what are my rights? And they will continue to ask them until they are more or less satisfied. According to the CRC, the child has a right to have these questions answered to the fullest degree possible²³ and families have a responsibility to support them in their search. However, families under stress often find it difficult to even think about this. Their daily lives are too complicated and for many families there simply isn't enough money or time or support from the surrounding community to enable them to be the strong and cohesive families within which children feel comfortable and thrive. This is one of the main reasons that it is so important that all of us in Canada, including every level of government, do everything possible to support and strengthen the families in which our country's children are growing up.

Ensuring Financial Security for Low-Income Families

15. The place to start is making sure there is enough money for adequate and satisfactory living, and not having enough of it is a huge stressor for families. In 2012, over 1.3 million children or 19 per cent lived in poverty. In the Aboriginal population, 40 per cent of children live in poverty.²⁴ Despite Canada's relative economic stability in recent years, across the spectrum "children continue to be at greater risk of poverty...than the broader

population”²⁵ and many families in Canada are not faring well²⁶ even though they are usually the first place youth will go for help when they are struggling. Although the unemployment rate stands at 6.6 per cent with many jobs being added last year,²⁷ Canada has experienced an overall increase of workers with part-time and temporary, and often precarious, employment.²⁸ Income inequality in the country is increasing.²⁹ Minimum wages across the country are inadequate, job benefits are declining and social assistance provisions are shrinking. As a result, parents’ incomes are not keeping up with the cost of living,³⁰ and even when some families see their situation improve this does not include the most vulnerable. As a more recent report has stated, Aboriginal families with children, immigrant families with children, families with more than two children are still “more likely to be poor”.³¹ Overall, perceptions of stress presumed to be related to work situations among Canadians increased 11 per cent between 2007 and 2013³² and poor families, worried about the number and quality of children’s opportunities to thrive, have difficulty accessing food security, adequate housing and quality child care. And the stress poverty imposes on their family lives is not the only factor that challenges a child’s sense of his or her identity. Being poor is compounded by being seen as “poor” by their school-mates, many of whom have the latest in gadgets and clothes and look down on those who don’t. Further, many youth who are of employment age are having trouble finding opportunities to earn money for their own purposes or to supplement the family income.³³ Given the precariousness of the contexts in which so many children live it is no surprise that, increasingly, children are wondering about where they really belong, what they are supposed to do with their lives, and how they can get a start towards their futures.

Food Security

16. Food security, defined as a lack of “access to nutritious foods in sufficient quantities to maintain good health”,³⁴ is often thought to be a problem only in developing country contexts but it is also an issue for many families in Canada. The “extent and impact of household food insecurity” is not well recognized or understood publicly³⁵ but from rights-based perspective food insecurity in an affluent country like Canada, and indeed in any country, is unacceptable. Yet there are millions of Canadians who experience it at some level. It is important to realize that children in the Arctic and in other remote areas are not the only ones who do not have enough nutritious food to eat: in 2008 the Public

Health Agency of Canada discovered that 25 per cent of the children they surveyed in grade six reported that sometimes they went to bed hungry because there was not enough food in the house.³⁶ Since 2005 food insecurity has persevered or grown in every province and territory³⁷ and in 2012 almost 13 per cent of households in Canada including over one million children experienced “some level of food insecurity”.³⁸ Food bank use in 2014 was 25 per cent higher than it was the year the global recession started in 2008, with 37 per cent of users being under the age of 18.³⁹ So, this is not a small problem and the effects on child and adolescent health can be substantial.

17. It is not only a basic level of health that is compromised when food insecurity is a persistent reality. Food security is not only about having access to adequate quantities of nutritious food but also about being able to consume it in a socially acceptable way.⁴⁰ When children at lunch time in a school cafeteria do not have enough to eat, or are sourcing their meals in a way they are uncomfortable with, this can affect their sense of security about being accepted members of the school community. Two additional factors to consider are the busy caretakers who give children primarily packaged food and the media advertising that targets young people and encourages them to seek out foods with high salt and sugar content even when other food is available. Clearly location, poverty and bad habits imposed by various forces are at play here and a Canada fit for children would be one in which none of these situations penalizes the health of growing children.

Youth Homelessness and Housing

18. Accessibility, affordability, adequacy and safety should characterize any living space where children and youth reside. Having a regular place to live is crucial to giving children a sense of place, a feeling of being grounded and the ability to feel confident that they belong somewhere. For a child’s sense of self being rooted in a fixed physical space and having the certainty of a home containing a measure of comfort, however limited, is extremely important. Unfortunately, homelessness affects 35,000 Canadians on any given night and over 235,000 Canadians per year, 20 per cent of whom are youth aged 16 to 24.⁴¹ Most of these youth have fled or been kicked out of traumatic environments in which they relied on adult caregivers,⁴² meaning that both their sense of place and of self has already been drastically diminished. They are “searching for belonging and

acceptance”.⁴³ Even those who have left home for other reasons are still struggling to find spaces with affordable rent let alone gain home ownership.⁴⁴

19. Housing, along with nutrition and clothing, are material provisions that governments should assist parents and guardians of children to obtain, so that the right of every child according to CRC Article 27 to “a standard of living adequate for [their] physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development” can be fulfilled.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, for many young people out on their own, parents and guardians are not present to mediate such assistance even though they are often the only ones in a position to do so. Social housing projects need to directly engage young people as much as they do adults. Yet, despite “modern mass homelessness” and a population growth of 30 per cent in the past quarter century, federal housing investments have dropped over 46 per cent since 1989, along with housing programs.⁴⁶ And, of course, it is not only the homeless or those at risk of homelessness who are affected by the lack of affordable housing in Canada. But when the most vulnerable cannot access housing – in 2006 all levels of government funded only 4,393 social housing units annually⁴⁷ – it is clear that many individuals and families who need a safe place to call home will be struggling to find one for some time to come.

Affordable and High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care

20. Another significant stress factor for families is the lack of affordable child care. Article 18 of the CRC calls on states to “render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services in the care of children”. Even when one parent is able to stay at home, their children could benefit from some access to early childhood care and education. All the research on early childhood supports the enrichment of children’s lives through various opportunities outside the home.⁴⁸ Still, venturing outside the family can put a child’s sense of belonging and identity at risk if he or she finds himself or herself in a setting of questionable quality. Youth, looking back, have stated that “when you are young, having people love you is very important,”⁴⁹ and “childhood is a big step in a person’s life and if they don’t feel important, that’s what they will carry with them for the rest of their life.”⁵⁰ Parents who cannot be with their children for most of the day certainly do not intend to send a message of neglect when

their only choice is to place their child in an inadequate setting; nevertheless, their children may feel that they are not worthy of attention and care.

21. While there are effective models of child care all over the world,⁵¹ families in Canada still struggle to find and pay for quality child care. Only 22 per cent of children under the age of five are in licensed daycare, and even if there were more spaces available, affordable child care is out of the question in most of Canada.⁵² Without a national child care policy, costs for child care range widely, quality and availability are not ensured, and mothers and fathers are left to try and provide the best possible environment for their children while juggling work and home.⁵³ The absence of full supports in early childhood has immediate ramifications for the strength of a child's identity building blocks.⁵⁴ Quality early childhood education also has an important role to play in children's lives in order for a seamless later transition into formal education. In Canada too many children are still arriving at school not yet ready to learn, even though most children have accepted the idea that education is important and that they belong in school. If we understand that 27 per cent of children across Canada are already struggling or vulnerable in one or more areas of "physical, social, emotional or cognitive" development by the time they start kindergarten⁵⁵, it is clear that more must be invested in those early years before formal schooling begins.

Youth Employment

22. More must also be invested in the transition from school to work and to civic engagement. Youth in Canada are experiencing a precarious and shifting socio-economic environment⁵⁶ at the same time as they are attempting to participate as full-fledged members of society. This is not as easy as it should be because too little attention has been paid recently to these issues from a policy perspective. Some of the young people who attended *Shaking the Movers* workshops stated that generally in Canada, "we need systems that are more youth friendly",⁵⁷ that they find it difficult to be engaged when they are excluded,⁵⁸ that they lack information they need to "go out and make a change"⁵⁹ as independent human beings. They are still making enormous efforts to find a place in society where they can demonstrate that they, too, are important and contributing members. These efforts are reflected, for instance, in enrolment statistics for post-secondary education, apprenticeship programs and pre-job training,⁶⁰ as well as other

opportunities such as unpaid internships (which in and of themselves can be problematic).⁶¹ Despite these efforts, the reality is that the overall youth unemployment rate in Canada rose by two per cent from 2008 to 2014⁶² at a rate of 12.8 per cent among 15 to 24 year-olds.⁶³ Significantly, this rate is twice the national average.⁶⁴ Additionally, for the high percentage of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET),⁶⁵ the consequences may be long-term unemployment, dependence on welfare, crime, drug abuse and mental health problems.⁶⁶ Although provincial and federal governments fund skills training programs – which are sorely needed for the unemployed and entrants to the labour market, like youth – access to these programs is difficult and sometimes even restricted by other policies related to labour and employment in Canada.⁶⁷

Separation and Divorce

23. It would be impossible to write about the importance of the family for a child's sense of identity and belonging without a reference to the issues raised by the separation and divorce of his or her parents. Sometimes stresses related to financial difficulties or to the lack of social supports become too much for a marriage to survive and the parents break up. There are many other reasons for parental separation as well, of course, but no matter the precipitating cause or how well parents handle the situation children are bound, initially at least, to feel unsettled, unsure of who they are and where they belong. This is a time when a child rights-based perspective can be particularly helpful. All four of the guiding principles should come into play, especially "best interests" (CRC Article 3) and "the right to be heard" (CRC Article 12) when decisions are being taken as to where and with whom they are going to live. Children have the right to maintain relations with both parents (CRC Article 9) when they are living apart and by extension other family members who can be so important for a child's sense of continuity. And it should be without question that children have the right to be consulted about their living arrangements and other aspects of their lives that are going to change dramatically. In recent years some progress has been made to reduce the number and nature of adversarial divorces and to provide better preparation to parents with respect to the parenting responsibilities they will continue to share. In general, the number of divorces steadily decreased from 2006 to 2011. However, the majority (65 per cent) of the divorce cases

that take more than a year to finalize involve issues of child support, access or custody,⁶⁸ meaning that ever more respect needs to be paid by all concerned to the rights of the children involved.

Foster Families and Adoption

24. Being placed in a foster or adopting family also raises significant issues related to belonging and identity. From a rights perspective, CRC Article 20 states that in alternative care “due regard shall be paid to the desirability of continuity in a child’s upbringing and to the child’s ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background” and Article 21 states that in adoption “the best interests of the child shall be the primary consideration.” In practice, however, this is not often achieved because there are not even enough homes for all the children who need them in the first place, nor are there enough resources for foster and adoptive parents that address how to meet the particular needs of children in care.⁶⁹ At the same time, there are many remarkable foster parents just as there are devoted and caring adoptive parents who understand very well the challenges represented by bringing up a child who has been separated for whatever reason from his or her family of origin. The foster family may simply be responding to an emergency situation and opening their home until a more permanent solution can be found, but parents who adopt will need to be especially nurturing, knowledgeable about how to parent a child who may have attachment issues and deeply committed to the long haul. International adoptions may present even more difficulties with their attendant risks of racism and deculturation.⁷⁰ Canada has long been a State Party to the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption⁷¹ and it is important that all international adoptions comply with it. Canada is also a signatory to the Hague Convention on International Child Abduction.⁷² Parental abduction is an issue that plays out nationally as well as internationally⁷³ the impact on the identity and the sense of belonging of the child or children involved is huge.

Out-of-Home Care

25. Children and youth removed from their families into care are often forgotten. They are hidden in many ways, and infrequently addressed in policy. Nevertheless, some have spoken up to say that they are “vulnerable”, “isolated”, “left out of our lives”, that “no

one is there for us”, “care is unpredictable”, “we keep losing who we are” and “care ends and we struggle”.⁷⁴ Youth in care are very much alone even though the phrase “in care” implies that they should not be. Some of the significant problems youth in care experience are unsafe living places, excessive disciplinary measures for minor infractions, not having meaningful guidance and mentorship, no voice in making decisions about their lives and where they might end up, being criminalized, and being thrown into independent life without preparation or help when they reach the age of adulthood.⁷⁵ Aboriginal children are over-represented in the child welfare system; in 2011, 48 per cent of children in care under the age of 14 across Canada identified as Aboriginal.⁷⁶ There are more Aboriginal children in care today than “at any point during the residential school period”, and “the number one reason” is neglect, related to “poverty, poor housing conditions and high incidences of substance abuse” within families.⁷⁷ The sheer number of Aboriginal children, not to mention the total number of children, in the child welfare system, warrants more constructive action than is being taken at the present time.

Considerations for the Future

26. Adequately supporting and strengthening families in Canada today so that their children know who they are and feel safe and secure depends on recognizing three things. First of all, the uncertainty and precariousness of employment prospects today coupled with rising costs of living means that not all parents or guardians are able to earn enough income to fulfill their children’s right to a standard of living that meets all their needs – physical, mental and emotional. Second, families with children are making a major contribution to the rest of society, and are contending with expenses and challenges that those without children do not have. Third, it is in the public interest for any shortfalls experienced by parents in providing and accessing goods and services needed for positive parenting to be given public assistance. The Prime Minister has expressed acceptance of these realities stating recently that “Canada’s moms and dads deserve all the help that we can give them”.⁷⁸ According to Article 18 of the CRC, the government has the responsibility to “provide support services to parents, especially if both parents work outside the home”. Further, even if both parents do not work governments must provide assistance, especially for food, clothing and housing (Article 27). The question for the

future is how to ensure that Canada gives all moms and dads and other caregivers what they deserve and what they truly need to ensure that all children are growing up happily and in good health.

27. There are several programs currently providing child and family benefits, including the Child Care Expense Deduction, the Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB) and the Family Tax Cut. Whether existing programs provide what the poorest families need, however, is questionable. Recently, the government announced several initiatives aimed at helping families care for children: increasing the child care expense deduction limits, expanding the UCCB to replace the Child Tax Credit, and introducing the Family Tax Cut. The main questions to be asked when these policies should be: do these policies target and assist those who need them most? How, and for how long? Do these changes help families who have already been disadvantaged by the elimination of the National Early Learning and Child Care Program, for example? Experts⁷⁹ have noted that the Family Tax Cut would only benefit a small portion of Canadian families, 13 per cent,⁸⁰ and not the families that need strong family policy reform the most. The UCCB also has its shortcomings, one of which is that it has more benefits for couples with one income earner than for single parents or couples both of whom are income earners.⁸¹ The enhanced Child Care Expense Deduction is seen to be regressive in that it benefits the well-off more than the poor.⁸² In contrast, policies that would benefit the families who need it most, such as the Canada Child Tax Benefit, are being given less support.
28. The most glaring oversight in the Canadian child benefit system is that families do not receive the full amounts associated with each entitlement after taxes and adjustments. For example, couples are taxed on their UCCB so they do not actually receive the full amount every year.⁸³ Every child should receive benefits and every parent should receive compensation for raising children regardless of their income. However, the more vulnerable – the children living in poverty, without warm clothing and nutritious food every day – should be given increased consideration and care. From a rights based perspective there are also problems with the income-splitting for tax purposes initiative which is more beneficial to upper-income families and couples with one earner than to others. A child benefits system that does not discriminate would not favour some families over others, especially when those families are better off in the first place. Any federally

or provincially sanctioned program targeting children should be conducted and periodically reviewed with a view toward ensuring that CRC principles are incorporated and properly implemented.

29. For the sake of children three additional areas would require expanded national (that is both federal and provincial-territorial) programming in place: child care, food security and affordable housing. The importance of appropriate care and guidance in obtaining basic functional skills for entering formal education in a child's earliest years has been proven beyond doubt.⁸⁴ In such a critical time in a child's life, certain standards must be applied to ensure that the environments in which children spend the most time (as it stands now, most children in daycare are in informal, unlicensed and non-standardized operations) are conducive to their optimal development. One young person who attended the *Shaking the Movers* workshop in 2007 noted, "the way children are treated by society is an indication of what that society is all about".⁸⁵ It is also an indication of how that society envisions its future. Without a nationalized child care program with standards that are regularly monitored and enforced (for example, effective early childhood care and education standards would require 50 per cent of staff to have relevant post-secondary training and qualifications)⁸⁶ we will continue to have high rates of children entering kindergarten unprepared to learn. The capabilities that even the most disadvantaged of children are encouraged to develop in high quality early-learning centres will impact the rest of their lives. If we do not give children the best possible start in life by failing to provide what they need, not only are we contravening the CRC but we are also short-changing ourselves. We recognize that children should not be seen merely as investments, but we know that every dollar that is invested in programs and services for children under six and their families yields a return of \$7.⁸⁷ Alleviating the national work-family conflict by creating a national, high quality accessible child care program would inject \$4 billion into the economy each year.⁸⁸ If children and taking care of children are public goods, then child care is a public service, one that should be fully funded and regulated by the State.
30. The arguments for a national housing policy are not much different. A child's right to life and development (CRC Article 6) can only be guaranteed if he or she is not only sheltered from the elements but has a place called home to go back to at the end of the

day. The absence of decent housing has ramifications for the entire household with implications with respect to education, health, and food security. There is an urgent need for the federal and provincial governments to raise their investments or reinvest into affordable and social housing and to give developers reasons to increase the number of affordable rental units across the country, or to change the way that housing can be obtained altogether.⁸⁹ Food insecurity also imposes far-reaching hardships on the emotional and physical well being of children. Ensuring all children enrolled in primary school have access to a publicly funded food program for breakfast and lunch⁹⁰ as exists in many other developed countries would go a long way to provide for the nearly 75,000 children⁹¹ who experience moderate to severe food insecurity across the country today.

II. Improving the Well-being of Aboriginal Children and their Families

31. A particular group of families in Canada merit special attention in *A Canada Fit for Children 2015*, the families of Aboriginal peoples; First Nations, Inuit and Métis. This is because Canadian governments have historically torn these families apart and continue to undermine them through legislation, policies and regulations at federal, provincial and territorial levels. Children and youth, who often see things more clearly than adults do, recognized this at a 2007 *Shaking the Movers* workshop, responding to a question about their understanding of rights by emphasizing the principle of non-discrimination in the application of rights to all people in Canada, including the Aboriginal population. They stated that particular attention should be paid to the “rights of Aboriginal peoples and their traditional practices that no other people possess”.⁹² They went on to discuss the realities of the situation facing many Aboriginal communities in Canada, how those realities differ from those in the rest of the country and emphasized the need for “people [to] advocate in support of Aboriginal youth, not on their behalf, because this takes away power”.⁹³
32. These statements from STM young people reveal the extent to which they recognize that Aboriginal youth have unique and legitimate needs that must be addressed if they are to have the same opportunities as all other children in Canada.⁹⁴ According to CRC Article 30, “due regard must be paid to not denying their right, in community with other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion and to use their own language.” For Aboriginal children, failing to give due

credence to Aboriginal identities as created and experienced by Aboriginal peoples is failing to give due respect to “their constitutional, treaty, and internationally-recognized rights”.⁹⁵

33. There has been some progress in relations between Canada and Aboriginal peoples since the first edition of *A Canada Fit for Children* in 2004. In 2008 Prime Minister Harper apologized on behalf of the people of Canada for the harms inflicted by the residential school system, leading to the creation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.⁹⁶ News coverage of the Commission’s hearings along with movements led by Aboriginal peoples, such as young Shannen’s Dream[‡] for “safe and comfy” schools and “Idle No More”,⁹⁷ have raised consciousness in the Canadian public with respect to the challenges created by government rules and policies for Aboriginal peoples throughout the country. Jordan’s Principle,[§] declaring that the needs of a sick First Nations child should take precedence over jurisdictional disputes about funding, was unanimously adopted in Parliament in 2007. This was another positive step. But principles are one thing and implementation is another: in 2015 the Auditor General found, at least in Manitoba and Ontario, that “committees to resolve interjurisdictional challenges have generally not been effective”.⁹⁸ The fact that the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Human Rights Commission has had to bring the Government of Canada in front of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal for race-based discrimination against First Nations children in child welfare⁹⁹ is a sad testament to the fact that progress has been far too slow.

[‡] “Shannen Koostachin, youth education advocate from the Attawapiskat First Nation in Ontario, had a dream: safe and comfy schools and culturally based education for First Nations children and youth... Shannen worked tirelessly to try to convince the Federal government to give First Nations children a proper education before tragically passing away at the age of 15 years old in 2010. Named in her memory, the campaign engages Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples to better understand the education inequities and to take action to ensure all First Nations children and young people attend good schools and receive a proper education that prepares them to achieve their dreams and be proud of their distinct cultures and languages.” See First Nations Child and Family Caring Society. (2015). *Shannen’s Dream*, <http://www.fncairingsociety.com/shannens-dream>

[§] “Jordan’s Principle: Where a jurisdictional dispute arises between two government parties (provincial/territorial or federal) or between two departments or ministries of the same government, regarding payment for services for a Status Indian child which are otherwise available to other Canadian children, the government of ministry/department of first contact must pay for the services without delay or disruption. The paying government party can then refer the matter to jurisdictional dispute mechanisms. In this way, the needs of the child get met first while still allowing for the jurisdictional dispute to be resolved.” See First Nations Child and Family Caring Society. (2014). *Jordan’s Principle: Fact Sheet*. <http://www.fnfcwc.ca/advocacy-activities/jordans-principle/>

Aboriginal Identities in Canada

34. Nevertheless, Aboriginal identity is increasingly being reported to census takers and not only because the Aboriginal population of Canada is growing.¹⁰⁰ Many people reported Aboriginal identity in 2011 who had not done so in 2006, leading some to believe that there is a growing “sense of pride, especially among youth, in the heritage of Canada’s original peoples...[and] a growing realization on the part of Aboriginals that the rights bestowed upon other Canadians also apply to them”.¹⁰¹ Today, First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities are regaining a sense of pride, and languages and traditions are increasingly being passed on to their youth¹⁰² who comprise 48 per cent of the 1.4 million self-identified Aboriginal population.¹⁰³ We know Aboriginal youth have welcomed this, because they have stated that their cultures are intricately tied with who they are and who they will become. They have said that “the loss of traditional language...is detrimental to how young people view themselves...trapped between...Canadian and traditional cultures”,¹⁰⁴ that “having their language and culture [is] a form of resiliency”,¹⁰⁵ and that “it is very painful to lose [one’s] culture.”¹⁰⁶
35. However, Aboriginal youth have also expressed that the way they see themselves is greatly affected by others’ perceptions of who they are. They have said that “Aboriginal youth are seen as troublemakers” or “criminals” and that “people see drugs and crime as part of the culture”.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, the majority of Aboriginals, at least in urban settings, believe that non-Aboriginals perceive them in a “negative light” and hold an array of stereotypes about them “most commonly relating to addiction problems”, such as with drugs and alcohol, and less commonly relating to laziness, lack of intelligence and education, unemployment, and reliance on social assistance and welfare.¹⁰⁸ The majority of urban Aboriginals in Canada can recount experiences of being discriminated against as a result of how they are perceived.¹⁰⁹ The admission in 2014 by the RCMP that police recorded 1,017 murdered and 164 missing Aboriginal women between 1980 and 2012, and that Aboriginal women are at higher risk of being victims of violence than non-Aboriginal women¹¹⁰ is one of the direst indications of the continued vulnerability of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. The trauma of this experience is deep, extending to young people as well: 88 per cent of missing or murdered Aboriginal women in Canada left behind children or grandchildren.¹¹¹

36. Perceptions of stereotyping, and what children themselves have labeled “open discrimination against Aboriginal peoples,”¹¹² distort the way identity and belonging are construed for Aboriginal children: “if everyone keeps thinking of someone negatively, they start to believe the same thing about themselves”.¹¹³ In this way, the fundamental self-worth of so many children is tainted when the very thing that defines them is being held up as inferior. Perhaps this systemic alienation is what contributes to Aboriginal children feeling “trapped”, and that “there is a glass wall”¹¹⁴ between Canadian and Aboriginal cultures. Many Aboriginal children find it difficult to discover and build a sense of identity when they do not feel a concrete sense of belonging on either side of that glass wall. As one person put it, “most of our young people don’t know who they are. All they know is that they are Aboriginal...but they don’t know what that means”.¹¹⁵

Separation of Aboriginal Children from their Families

37. Feelings of alienation and isolation are imprinted on the hearts and minds of many Aboriginal children even before they are able to articulate them. One way this happens is a result of what has been called the “evacuation policy”, in place since between 1892 (informally)¹¹⁶ and the late 1960s¹¹⁷ to early 1970s (formally)¹¹⁸. Under this policy, countless numbers of pregnant Aboriginal girls and women living in remote communities have been, and still are, taken away from their homes and families and flown alone to hospitals about four weeks before they are due to give birth.¹¹⁹ While this may be necessary in high-risk pregnancies, the majority of pregnant women are still subject to evacuation because maternity care is unavailable in or near their communities.¹²⁰ Childbirth for these women is “a stressful event that disrupts rather than strengthens families and communities”,¹²¹ with children being born into an environment in which the mother is often alone and afraid,¹²² unable to communicate due to language barriers, and unable to eat because of dietary differences. Although this policy has been crucial to saving lives in some cases, there is evidence that evacuation contributes to increased complications for mothers and newborns, as well as to post-partum depression.¹²³

38. Furthermore, the policy has broken down traditional birthing and maternal care practices and structures over the course of its existence,¹²⁴ depriving Aboriginal communities of the opportunities such practices offer to welcome the child into their home and give them an immediate sense of their place in the world. Before the evacuation policy, Aboriginal

women gave birth surrounded and assisted by family and community members¹²⁵, who instantly instilled strong cultural roots in the children, helping them “develop a clear sense of identity...[and] become resilient and responsible members of their community”.¹²⁶ Taking Aboriginal women away from their communities shortly prior to childbirth results not only in emotional turmoil for both mother and baby, but also in the separation of the child from a particular way of “relating to and understanding the world”¹²⁷ from the very beginning of his or her life.

39. Another way separation of Aboriginal children from their families has occurred and continues to occur is placement in the child welfare system, which has been growing exponentially since the late 1960s.¹²⁸ Aboriginal children have said of their experiences in the system that they are growing up “alone, isolated, feeling abandoned”, with increasing instability, without trust in anyone, without supportive relationships, and - at worst - contemplating suicide because they do not feel connected to the world around them.¹²⁹ Today, more Aboriginal children are in government care than during the “peak years of the residential schooling era”,¹³⁰ being removed from their families “at a rate eight times higher than non-indigenous Canadians”.¹³¹ This constitutes a denial of the reality that Aboriginal children, like all children, rely on and are entitled to relationships with their families and surroundings to form their own sense of personal identity.¹³² The disruption of Aboriginal children’s bonds with their communities, languages and cultures is particularly problematic, especially when they are placed into non-Aboriginal homes in alternative care,¹³³ which is the case for approximately 50 per cent of adopted Aboriginal children.¹³⁴ This puts incredible stress on the children, many of whom feel that they have no control or choice and end up expressing their anger in destructive ways, often leading to violence and incarceration.¹³⁵
40. Violence towards self and others, and heightened chances that they will break the law, can be seen as a direct consequence of the removal of Aboriginal children from their families,¹³⁶ whether in this generation or the ones prior.¹³⁷ This violence sometimes takes the form of membership in gangs and other illegal activity. Even for Aboriginal youth who have not been removed from their families, but are living in unsafe environments and conditions such as abject poverty - the situation facing 25 per cent of First Nations children¹³⁸ - engaging in these activities is a way to survive, cope and, perhaps

unsurprisingly, find belonging.¹³⁹ Despite the fact that the incarceration rate for all youth in Canada declined 31 per cent between 2003 and 2013¹⁴⁰, in 2014 almost 37 per cent of incarcerated offenders between 18 and 25 years of age were of Aboriginal descent.¹⁴¹ Aboriginal youth also suffer high rates of acute stress and depression,¹⁴² the latter of which “is the strongest correlate of suicidality”.¹⁴³ 38 per cent of all deaths among First Nations youth aged 10 to 19 in 2006 were attributed to suicide.¹⁴⁴ The contributing factors point to issues of identity and belonging, including “early childhood loss...and social isolation”, and for a great number of years, one of the recommendations made with a view to preventing these has consistently been “to ensure Aboriginal children retain strong ties to their culture”.¹⁴⁵ All of this aligns with what Aboriginal children have said about why their peers so often take their own lives: “Suicide stems from loss of identity, if you don’t know your language, [if] you don’t know your culture.”¹⁴⁶

Equal Rights to Health and Education

41. Canada has made some progress over the last decade in addressing disparities between the health status of Aboriginal and other children including lowering Aboriginal infant mortality rates.¹⁴⁷ However, child welfare services for First Nations children on reserves are still underfunded by 22 per cent as compared to provincial spending on Canadian children “on average”.¹⁴⁸ The Auditor General’s 2015 report on access to health services for remote First Nations communities found that “health Canada has not adequately managed its support of access to health care services for remote First Nations,” as evidenced by studies done in Ontario and Manitoba.¹⁴⁹ In general, the audit found that nurses and nursing stations are underequipped to serve remote First Nations communities, resulting in possible poorer health outcomes for people living there. Additionally, community health needs are not taken into consideration when national supports are being allocated to these areas, nor are rates and equality of access to health services measured in comparison to “provincial residents living in similar geographic locations”.¹⁵⁰ This means that there is no certainty that the actual health needs of communities are being met, or that First Nations who need clinical care have the same opportunities as non-First Nations residents in remote settings to receive that care. This uncertainty is reflected in the “commonplace” practice of removing children from their

communities to receive care for health problems when they would be better served close to home.¹⁵¹

42. There seems to have been equally little progress with respect to education. Aboriginal children receive between \$2000 and \$3000 less in funding per student than non-Aboriginal children¹⁵² and there is continued shortfall in funds dedicated to infrastructure and social and education programs,¹⁵³ especially on reserve where there is little money available for special education, libraries, computers, languages and extra-curricular activities. High school incompleteness rates for First Nations youth living on reserve have not changed since 2006¹⁵⁴ but progress on reforming education on reserves has stalled.¹⁵⁵ These are additional indications that discrimination against Aboriginal children in the provision of services continues, something that contravenes various articles of the CRC. Shannen Koostachin, a remarkable young Cree girl, came to Ottawa from Attawapiskat at the age of 13 to ask government for a “safe and comfy” school to learn in to be built in her community. She simply wanted a school free of the black mould, rats, and oil spill fumes that had closed the existing one, a school that would embody the cultural values of her community. There was an all-party resolution in Parliament to support her dream in 2012 and a new school has since been opened. But little other real action has followed to resolve the ongoing issues related to Aboriginal education in general. Shannen had to leave to her community to go to a secondary school in a distant town (a not uncommon experience for vulnerable youth from northern reserves who are forced away from their families for secondary education because of the lack of resources to continue their education at home). She was tragically killed in a car accident at the age of 15. Nevertheless her dream lives on and we must all honour it.

43. It is not that there are no government-supported programs for young Aboriginal children. The Federal Government funds Maternal Child Health, Prenatal Nutrition, Aboriginal Head Start, and Fetal Alcohol Disorder programs on reserves, all of which have been positively evaluated. The problem is that not all children are able to benefit. Further, while provinces have made commitments to help improve Aboriginal health care in general and maternal health in particular,¹⁵⁶ due to federal budget cuts many existing initiatives have been shut down. These programs were housed, for example, in the National Aboriginal Health Organization,¹⁵⁷ Health Canada’s Women’s Contribution

Program,¹⁵⁸ and the Native Women's Association of Canada, all of which have been cut.¹⁵⁹ Despite stating that it "supports the direct involvement of First Nations and Inuit communities in the design and control of their health programs",¹⁶⁰ the government seems to have diminished communities' capacities to do so, along with the abilities of organizations that for many years provided independent guidance and assistance to those communities. This is greatly detrimental not only to Aboriginal children today but their communities also, far into the future.

Considerations for the Future

44. For those born into Aboriginal heritage, the questions of identity begin with and extend far beyond the immediate family itself. For many, culture and language are as much constitutive of identity as other factors like ethnic origin, and, according to CRC Articles 20 and 30 all children have a right to them. Are Canada's policies towards Aboriginal children taking this into account? At the same time as many Aboriginal communities in Canada are becoming stronger and prouder, too many are unable to move forward in the ways they need and want, largely due to the complex relationships they have with the federal government entities constitutionally responsible for Aboriginal affairs and the provincial governments responsible for services.¹⁶¹ Many Aboriginal communities, like their children, are "trapped behind a glass wall",¹⁶² having been given neither the independence nor the authority required to improve conditions on their own and recreate self-sufficiency, nor the necessary resources to give their children the best possible chances at optimal development.
45. In First Nations traditions, the child has always been viewed "as a communal responsibility...cared for by extended family or members of their clan or kinship group".¹⁶³ When a child's own parents could not take care of them, instead of automatically severing the child-parent connection the community came together to provide the additional support required¹⁶⁴ for the child to grow up with a well-grounded sense of belonging shaped by their cultural identity as well as a strong personal identity, informed by their specific family background. The federal government has acknowledged Aboriginal peoples' beliefs that children's positive self-identity development and belonging can and should be fostered by allowing "Aboriginal communities [to] develop solutions that they know work best for their children".¹⁶⁵ This recognizes the crucial role

of cultural continuity, in the sense of Aboriginal communities having control over their own governance, land, education and cultural facilities, to the very survival of Aboriginal children.¹⁶⁶ Therefore, the government should also heed leaders' calls for the return of birthing to communities¹⁶⁷ and for Aboriginal children in need of care to be placed "in their extended families' own communities"¹⁶⁸ whenever possible, rather than be ferried into the child welfare system. Acting in the best interests of the child, and allowing the views of the child and the child's community to permeate decision-making about their present circumstances of care and their future means ceasing to take the child out of their community unless it is truly (not nominally) in their best interest. If the reality that Aboriginal children fall "well below the national averages for Canadian children" in "almost all health status indicators...and determinants of health and well-being"¹⁶⁹ is going to change, any policy created with the best interests of children in mind must make cultural continuity central to its approach.

46. CRC Articles 24 and 28, which state that *all* children have the right to the best health care possible and that *all* children have the right to a primary education, must be realized. This is such a basic provision that the federal government's ceaseless efforts to escape having to close the funding gaps for health and education are intolerable. Efforts to stall rather than encourage any remedies for this discriminatory status quo have resulted, for example, in the failure to implement Jordan's Principle in good faith and the feeble response to Shannen's Dream. A Canada fit for children is a Canada fit for every single child no matter who, no matter where. Closing the funding gaps for Aboriginal health and education, and reintroducing funding and support for the organizations and initiatives that have been shut down are essential to fulfilling the rights of Aboriginal children, ensuring their survival and supporting their full and optimal development.

III. Ensuring Healthy Lives

47. The World Health Organization defines health as follows: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity".¹⁷⁰ With certain notable exceptions most young children take their physical health for granted and, instead, focus their social experiences. Children's statements about what being healthy means to them echo this. They have said, "we are healthy when we are in happy relationships with our friends and family, we can participate in our

cultures, we can be with our friends and do the things we enjoy, [and] when we can help others”.¹⁷¹ They see physical activity not just as exercise, but also as socially driven recreation, games and play,¹⁷² to which all young people have a right under the CRC.¹⁷³ Young people also need and value supports to their emotional and mental competencies and struggles, sexual wellness and knowledge and inclusion of those with disabilities, among other concerns.

Physical Activity, Recreation and Play

48. The constant chatter on the Internet and in the media about what constitutes healthy weight has tended to take the spotlight away from how to nurture overall physical well-being. This is regrettable because all of a child’s physical attributes, not just their weight, contribute to their overall sense of self and wellness. This is especially true for elementary school aged children onward to adolescence for characteristics such as physical attractiveness, capabilities and possessions.¹⁷⁴ At a young age, children place high value on their own and their peers’ judgments about their physical appearance; this in turn affects their sense of self worth.¹⁷⁵ Children will often note peers’ opinions about their physical abilities, particularly their athletic abilities, and if they perceive negative judgments about their abilities they will internalize messages of doubt regarding their competencies and likely carry these messages into the future.¹⁷⁶ This is, of course, detrimental to development through to and beyond adolescence, as a sense of alienation or discomfort about the physical self leads to a lack of confidence and makes the process of becoming mature, when children are able to put less emphasis on the judgment and acceptance of others and more on growth according to their own values, difficult.¹⁷⁷ For these reasons, and not just the idea that they need to be active to control their weight, all children and young people need to feel as some do that being able to partake in activities that will increase their physical fitness “increases [their] personal standard of life and thus their quality of life”.¹⁷⁸
49. Unfortunately however, for a variety of reasons, many children in Canada are, indeed, overweight. Alongside Greece and the United States, Canada is one of only three countries in the developed world with childhood “obesity levels higher than 20 per cent - twice the rate of the top performing countries”.¹⁷⁹ One factor compounding this situation appears to be that too many children and youth in Canada are not taking advantage of

opportunities to be more physically active. Despite the presence of physical education programs in almost every school in the country, children aged 12 to 17 spend nine hours per day being sedentary, with the number of hours having grown with age.¹⁸⁰ Part of the reason for this could be that while the majority of children and youth have regular access to gymnasiums, playing fields and playground equipment,¹⁸¹ they only make use of their access during school hours. Additionally, 15 per cent of boys and 11 per cent of girls 18 years old and younger have never been able to access recreational activities, sports, or after-school programs.¹⁸² This is unfortunate as barriers to play and other forms of recreation, such as high costs, lack of funding, inaccessibility of community programs or infrastructure, absence of transportation, or family bias against recreational activities,¹⁸³ are also barriers to physical, mental and social well-being.

50. Being sedentary from a young age can become entrenched in a child's routine and is an unhealthy behaviour, leading to unhealthy weight, that can become part of a cycle of being unwell, losing confidence, deepening frustration and losing motivation to change.¹⁸⁴ In contrast, having and taking up ample opportunities to play and engage in recreation in a way that enhances physical activity not only has positive outcomes for health indicators like weight, but overall mental and social well-being through "building upon protective factors, assets, and resiliencies by fostering increased interactions with caring adults and friends, increased exposure to positive social values, reinforcement of positive norms of behaviour within peer groups, and opportunities to engage in constructive and creative activities within safe settings".¹⁸⁵ Children have noted this too, by stating that play "is important to improve your health, develop life skills, and help foster peace for children and communities as well as, most importantly, expressing yourself towards others".¹⁸⁶ Participation in "meaningful leisure activity" is a critical source of positive self-image and self esteem.¹⁸⁷ With this in mind, an important way in which excessive sedentary behaviour can be combated is to provide children a "mix of opportunities" to be active throughout each day.¹⁸⁸

51. Leisure, recreation and play, whether structured or unstructured, are not only important to keep children physically active, however. Play of any type is critical to the overall development and well-being of children and youth. They recognize this at a young age, saying that play entails "freedom to imagine", "expressing yourself", "[exercising] the

right to be yourself”, “form[ing] who you are” and “overcoming barriers”.¹⁸⁹ Play, especially at the beginning of a child’s life, allows him or her to build a sense of self, form relationships and perform and experiment with social roles. This sense of self and awareness of one’s environment, natural, social and otherwise, is crucial to strong identity development. Play allows children to gain autonomy and feel a sense of control over who they are by facilitating self-motivated and voluntary exercising of different skills and abilities.¹⁹⁰ For these reasons, opportunities for physical activity as well as play in general should be equally accessible for all, as stipulated under Article 31 of the CRC.

52. The government of Canada states that children aged five to 11 should be engaged in at least one hour of “moderate to vigorous-intensity physical activity” each day.¹⁹¹ Do its major fitness-related policies facilitate all children’s adherence to these guidelines? Unfortunately, one of the primary supports provided by the federal government to ensure that such opportunities exist, besides the Canadian Sports Policy, does not conform to the principle of equal access mandated by the CRC. The Children’s Fitness Tax Credit has been boosted so as to double the amount families can claim in 2015.¹⁹² However, the policy affects families in different income brackets in different ways. While families with low income should be benefiting most from programs related to fitness and physical well-being, the Fitness Tax Credit actually requires that families pay for programs and for the children to be enrolled for at least eight weeks straight in order to be eligible. Moreover, after having spent that money on fitness programs, low- and modest-income families, the ones that have actually heard of the Credit, “are highly unlikely to receive it”.¹⁹³ Those families that do benefit from the Credit do so at unequal rates. A study by a group at York University revealed that high-income households, those earning above \$200,000 per year, claimed \$250 more in “physical activity expenses” than low-income households, those earning less than \$40,000 annually.¹⁹⁴ With low-income families already representing the smallest proportion of Canadian children involved in sports activities¹⁹⁵, a credit that benefits them less than richer families cannot be considered respectful of CRC Article 31, which calls for equal access to play and recreation for all.

Nutrition and Eating Disorders

53. Nutrition is not only a concern for those who suffer from food insecurity, but it is also a concern for those who have access to healthful foods and can exercise power in deciding

what to consume. The last decade has seen an increase in the study of what and how people eat, coupled with growing awareness and discussion about which foods are considered healthy and which are not. Images of food are everywhere and people are both more deliberate about what they eat and why, and more concerned about the aesthetic of food than ten years ago. Both undernourishment and over-eating are well-recognized as problems for the overall health and well-being of children. So are eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia and their relationship to body image and identity. What is less well-studied is another form of compulsion when it comes to diet. Obsession over a particular food or food group and its consumption, “clean eating”, measuring portions, documenting daily consumption and compulsive exercise are trends that need to be better understood. Youth must be taught to question food fads or trends and even scientific studies, especially when they recommend harsh restrictions of a food or food compound. The adage “you are what you eat” is present on the mind of many young people who care about their body image. Eating habits that do more harm than good to the mind and body can in part be seen as reflections of a strong impulse to control what others see on the outside by controlling what goes inside, and media plays an immeasurable part in encouraging this impulse. It is important that youth are taught to scrutinize the barrage of constant messaging around food that influences how they think about food and what food, in turn, makes them think about themselves.

Immunization

54. The topic of immunization has also been increasingly subject to media, social media and popular culture influences, especially in the last few years. Many news stories have come out recently documenting concerns about immunization, the most notorious of which linked vaccination with autism and has not only been thoroughly debunked but voluntarily retracted.¹⁹⁶ Other concerns have been cleared up. The phenomenon of opposition to vaccinating children based on misinformation has likely influenced Canada’s rate of immunization against measles, polio and DPT3 which has dropped below 90 per cent, resulting in Canada ranking of 28 out of 29 industrialized countries for vaccination rates.¹⁹⁷ Immunization is a now re-emerging concern that must be addressed by campaigns to inform the public about why it is not only important but essential, and clarify what the risks really are.

Emotional and Mental Well-being

55. The young people's definition of health cited above¹⁹⁸ revolves around what enables them to feel satisfied with their lives. Life satisfaction, being a "single-item indicator of emotional well-being", is described, in part, by a youth who stated that being satisfied, being emotionally healthy overall, means feeling "good inside, positive".¹⁹⁹ Unfortunately, self-reported life satisfaction drops dramatically with the onset of adolescence. In the sixth grade, the majority (60 per cent and above) of boys and girls rank their life satisfaction at 8 out of 10. This number drops for both groups as they get older. By grade ten, only 55 per cent of boys and 44 per cent of girls give the same ranking. "Mental health suffers as adolescents move through the grades, especially for girls".²⁰⁰
56. Mental health is clearly of great concern to many young people, and yet children and adolescents have stated that "mental illness [is] not something that many people talk about or [have] knowledge of" and that "we only notice [mental illness] once it gets bad, and this is a problem because we need to be noticing it from the beginning to be able to help people".²⁰¹ While not all incidences of being emotionally or mentally upset are equivalent to being "ill", there needs to be more dialogue about the fact that one in five boys and one in three girls "feel depressed or low on a weekly basis or more often".²⁰² Even if there is no generalized name or label for non-clinical fluctuations in mood (hereafter simply termed "mental health issues"), young people have stressed that they "don't feel like there is enough support for young people [with mental health issues] today" and "accommodations for mental health are not visible".²⁰³
57. Having these supports and accommodations is important for youth because "mental health is derived from our perspective of ourselves and others".²⁰⁴ How children and adolescents perceive themselves as they experience the roller coaster of emotions associated with growing up plays a major role in identity development, affecting how they relate to others and adjust to their surroundings. In other words, mental and emotional well-being is highly relational, and many environments like the home and peer group shape and impact the feelings and emotions of children and youth.²⁰⁵ Environments that are supportive, with "good communication with adults and peers", are strongly associated with positive mental health outcomes.²⁰⁶ However, youth feel as if there is a

continuing stigma associated with mental health issues²⁰⁷, and this is problematic because it means many still find it difficult to speak up if they are struggling. With almost seven million children and adults in Canada dealing with a mental health issue at any one time,²⁰⁸ it seems that more youth-to-youth and youth-to-adult conversations should be happening. When youth feel they cannot speak up about these issues, they remain unexplored, misunderstood and stigmatized.

58. Silence about suffering often results in lack of treatment, and mental health issues that are untreated in childhood will inevitably lead to more life challenges, such as violence, family difficulties, low academic performance, increased risk for physical illness and shortened life expectancy.²⁰⁹ The fact is, of the more than one million Canadian children and youth affected by a mental health issue in any one year, less than 20 percent will receive appropriate treatment.²¹⁰ The natural resilience of children is likely to decrease²¹¹ and their self-esteem to decline over the course of their lives if they are left without the supports they require to continue establishing a sense of certainty that they are loved and cared about. It is a sad fact that close to 800 youth die by suicide in Canada every year.²¹² And yet we know that many mental illnesses can be prevented or moderated with early intervention. The fact that close to 70 per cent of adults suffering from mental health issues say that their symptoms began to appear during childhood²¹³ (most mental health problems can be observed before a person reaches 24 years of age),²¹⁴ makes childhood and adolescence especially important times to feel as supported, loved and cared for as possible.

59. Two of the main concerns for children with regard to supports, aside from the family and peer environments, are the availability and affordability of professional or semi-professional help for any type of mental health issue. According to some youth, it can take from weeks up to a year to be able to talk to someone like a therapist, counsellor or psychologist,²¹⁵ even though the Canadian Psychological Association recommends a cap on waiting times of four weeks for care involving “stable symptoms”.²¹⁶ Some youth have to stop receiving treatment because of the expense.²¹⁷ Although there are supports available for some children in schools, in communities, online and through charitable organizations, there is still much work to be done. Youth confirm education as one of the starting points. “In order to break down these barriers for seeking support”, they say, “we

need to provide education on mental health, where to access supports/resources and make it clear that mental health affects everyone...education is most important in changing perceptions regarding mental health!”²¹⁸ Schools are, then, a logical place in which to begin or expand support for children’s mental health. Yet, in a 2013 survey of 177 school districts across the country, 80 per cent of respondents stated that there are considerable needs that are yet to be met with respect to student mental health in their school or school board.²¹⁹

Drug Use, Substance Abuse and Addictions

60. Drug use by young people seems to have become more accepted as a norm of young adult life over the past decade. However, this does not curb the harmfulness of such activities, especially when illicit substances are involved. Drug use is not limited to the use of illegal drugs such as cocaine, ecstasy and hallucinogens, but also includes the abuse of pharmaceuticals such as pain relievers, stimulants and sedatives to get high.²²⁰ 15 to 24 year olds were the largest group of illegal drug users (60 per cent) out of the general population in 2012,²²¹ which is concerning because those years are exactly the time when youth are most susceptible to negative impacts on health, scholastic achievement and social relationships resulting from risky behaviours. For example, 15 to 24 years olds are “approximately five times more likely than adults aged 25 years and older to report harm because of drug use”.²²² Substance abuse disorders are a result of many factors, including but not limited to genetics and neurobiology; mental and emotional issues; a propensity to impulsivity; the internalization of negative feelings such as anxiety and depression; and the influences of peers and families.²²³ The thread that runs through all these factors, though, is that young people often must navigate them alone, or under negative influence from others. Drug use and abuse is almost always a response or coping mechanism for feelings of isolation and helplessness.
61. People suffering from addictions are no different. “One doesn’t have to be a victim of anything...to become an addict”,²²⁴ or, in fact, to begin abusing substances at all. What matters is that they are having trouble coping. It is important to remember that neither addicts nor their children, if they have any, are tainted, as they are often seen to be, even though they are “enraged and devastated”.²²⁵ Children affected by substance abuse and addiction need to be treated with an understanding that they are growing up in a different

way than other children. They are often abused, stigmatized and alone as a result of addictions. While there are services to help those affected, “health and human services programs” lack “age-appropriate services for young people and their families”. More importantly, youth are treated away from their families and communities even when they are not under threat from them.²²⁶ Treatments for substance abuse and addictions should be part of a holistic health approach and not fragmented like they are today.

Sexual Well-being

62. Sexuality, sexual identity and diversity and sexual health are uncomfortable topics for youth and mainstream society to discuss. Yet, conversations about these issues are happening between and among youth all the time, so there should be a greater focus on the kind and quality of information that they are receiving and using. While sexual health education is concerned with problems such as the “unacceptably high” prevalence of STIs among youth in Canada,²²⁷ and the physiology of reproduction, it is also supposed to address “the development of a positive self-image and the integration of sexuality into rewarding and equitable interpersonal relationships”.²²⁸ However, 45 per cent of students surveyed in Ontario in 2011 stated that the sexual health education they received inadequately covered “topics of a sexual nature they had or expected to encounter”.²²⁹ For example, many non-heterosexual youth do not receive relevant sexual health education.²³⁰ We must acknowledge that sexuality is a large part of identity, but it is often ignored because it is difficult to address. Sexual identity is strongly tied with other aspects of identity, such as gender, which can and should also be discussed. Open-minded and non-judgmental guidance and information to “prevent negative sexual health outcomes”, to which Canadians of all ages actually have a right,²³¹ are important not only for health outcomes but also for positive identity development.

Inclusion and Support for Children with Disabilities

63. Children hold different opinions about having disabilities, especially when it comes to how disability affects a child’s view of himself or herself. The fact of having a disability plays both major and minor roles in the self-concepts of children and adults alike,²³² but all children with disabilities, according to CRC Article 23, “should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the

child's active participation in the community".²³³ Disability thus needs to be a major consideration when discussing children within the framework of identity, rights and belonging, because many of the difficulties that children with disabilities face have to do "not [with] the disability itself but rather a combination of social, cultural, attitudinal and physical obstacles... which children with disabilities encounter in their daily lives" and that, in turn, affect quality of life.²³⁴ As with all people, the experiences of children with disabilities are informed by their relationships with others and the environments around them. Structured interviews with Canadian adolescents with various physical disabilities reveal that low expectations for what they can achieve present them with a particularly difficult challenge²³⁵ by placing the social burdens of disability on the persons with a disability rather than distributing them in a way that promotes their dignity, self-reliance and participation. Furthermore, because children with disabilities are more likely to be subjected to adult and medical interventions than other children, they are more vulnerable to abuse and other situations of maltreatment or neglect.²³⁶

64. If children with disabilities are segregated and marginalized from their peers as they often are, whether in speech or in action, they are deprived of having the same level of rights and obligations as everyone else within a group or in society, often leading to feelings that they do not belong, do not have the same worth as others and cannot relate with others.²³⁷ These children may be deprived of equal opportunities for expression, the right to which is guaranteed in the CRC,²³⁸ in spite of the fact that they want to participate in such activities with other children and youth. For the 202,350 children under the age of 15 in Canada with a disability,²³⁹ participation in a variety of activities is vital to their development and to their overall life satisfaction.
65. In 2006, the latest year for which this data could be found, 31 per cent of children with disabilities surveyed had difficulty accessing special education services. 43 per cent said their disability delayed the achievement of their educational goals (i.e. reaching their present grade).²⁴⁰ This is part of a broader problem of social exclusion, not only from policy considerations but from community life in general. Most children with disabilities in Canada are apparently not being included in peer groups and do not have opportunities to participate. A 2012 study showed that 53 per cent of children with disabilities among 166 families surveyed in Fredericton, Regina and Toronto did not have social contacts

they could call close friends and those who do have friends spend very little time interacting with them. In the same survey, 53 per cent of the children also rated the level of support they receive from their neighbourhood communities as “very low”, and 52 per cent rated the level of support received from their cultural group community as also very low.²⁴¹

66. As they face adulthood, children with disabilities should not be twice as likely as other Canadians to live in poverty, nor experience rates of violence that stand among the highest for any group in our society.²⁴² Despite the Disability Tax Credit and Supplement, Child Care Expense Deduction for children with disabilities, Canada Study Grants for Students with Disabilities, and Child Disability Benefit for low and modest income families, youth with disabilities will still grow up to have a difficult time having the same opportunities as others and being fully integrated as called for in CRC Article 23. For example, only 49 per cent of adults with disabilities had jobs in 2011.²⁴³ We have an urgent responsibility to help build inclusive environments for children with disabilities, within a society free of barriers to the participation of all children so that all the components of their identities can develop and thrive.

Considerations for the Future

67. There is such plentiful information available about what it needed to ensure that children are healthy that it is increasingly surprising that Canadian children are not as healthy as they could be. When part of a child’s health is compromised, they are unable to fully exercise their right to participate. And when a child is not fully supported in pursuing full health on terms that they can both assent and consent to, they are even more vulnerable because not only their well-being but also their rights are undermined. Good health and well-being do not automatically result from respecting the rights of the child, but are only enabled and made fully possible when approached from the standpoint of rights. A rights-based approach assumes that children have a say in all matters concerning their health and that they are capable of understanding what certain decisions (for example, regarding treatment) mean when fully explained in age-appropriate terms. This means that all health professionals, parents, guardians, caregivers and even the media have responsibilities to remember the autonomy and agency of each and every child especially when it comes issues of health. At the very least, adherence to Article 12 of the CRC

should be guaranteed: “when adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account”.²⁴⁴ This is very relevant to sexual health education, for example, where even when children express a desire and need to learn about topics that are not covered in the curriculum, they are ignored. The knowledge that young people need is going to change depending on the shifts they experience in growing up: for example, puberty is now beginning earlier in the lives of both girls and boys.²⁴⁵ What they say they need to know to navigate the murky waters of adolescent turbulence should be respected and educators should have the resources they need to provide this information.

68. In addition to the considerations offered above, another challenge for ensuring healthy lives in all areas is building or changing the infrastructure that exists in our schools, community centres and cities in ways that encourage physical activity and activities that improve mental health. Parks, after school program equipment, green spaces, bike lanes and many more physical assets are lacking in our cities and, especially, rural and remote areas. Too many structures in our communities fail to accommodate people with disabilities, and do not incorporate features for safe usage by children. Safety concerns that hinder opportunities for children to play outside and commute on their own to and from home should be addressed in ways that do not restrict their freedoms. Finally, all structures and programs should be made accessible and affordable for all in and out of school. Funding should be made available to all children to have access to mental health and addictions advice and help in schools, and for children with disabilities to acquire the supports they need for everyday living and learning.
69. With regard to sexual and reproductive knowledge, nutrition and immunization, relevant, truthful and evidence-based information is critical to addressing the issues at hand. The government is especially well-poised under Article 17 of the CRC to disseminate information about children’s health and well-being to the widest possible audience by encouraging mass media to talk about community health (for example immunization is about herd immunity from which everyone benefits) in ways that children can understand. All people have a responsibility to discuss these issues too.

IV. Promoting Safer and Supportive Communities

70. Strengthening communities in order to protect and support children in all areas of life begins with recognizing the changes that have taken place over the last decade. There is no doubt that long-recognized forms of violence against children, such as physical, sexual and emotional child abuse and neglect, still exist.²⁴⁶ There were 88,000 reported instances of domestic violence in 2013,²⁴⁷ in 2010, the latest year for which this data is available, 49,500 children were victims of family violence.²⁴⁸ Children who witness family violence even if they are not experiencing it directly can suffer long-term development, behavioural and emotional problems far into adulthood.²⁴⁹ There is also the issue of corporal punishment, which is still allowed by Canada's Criminal Code "if the force does not exceed what is reasonable under the circumstances".²⁵⁰ But what is "reasonable" and "unreasonable" is not defined.²⁵¹ Moreover, when is it ever reasonable to hit a human being? "No violence against children is justifiable, and all violence against children is preventable".²⁵² This is the point of CRC Article 19 which condemns all forms of violence against children and requires States Parties to take "all appropriate legislative" and other means to protect children. While we must pay attention to the continued abuse and exploitation of too many children in this country it is imperative that we also acknowledge the new concerns that have come up over the last decade. In speaking about these issues it is important to remember that children and adolescents have stated that, despite both the continuities and changes they experience, they hold certain values in common with others of their generation such as inclusivity, participation, access to information, and unconditional support for themselves and for others.²⁵³ While helping children and youth navigate the rocky landscape of childhood and adolescence it is a comfort that these values appear to be firmly embedded.

Violence, Bullying and Other Forms of Intimidation: Emerging Harmful Trends

71. One of the reasons children have said they require the unconditional support of at least one person in their lives²⁵⁴ is that there are forms of violence that have emerged over the last ten years that did not exist before. While the homicide rate in Canada sits at its lowest in 48 years,²⁵⁵ and the youth crime rate has decreased over the last decade,²⁵⁶ the rate of bullying has remained consistent over the past decade, with 35 per cent of children reporting experiences of bullying in schools in 2013.²⁵⁷ In addition, youth have raised

concerns about new outlets for violent behaviour such as the Internet and its capacity to enable cyberbullying. Sexually exploitative images of children have widely proliferated over the last decade, with an estimated five million images available online in 2009,²⁵⁸ mostly of girls.²⁵⁹ And even as real life instances of physical violence in children's lives seem to be less publicly discussed, more subtle types have been observed by young people, such as in "music, TV shows, movies, the news [and] video games, particularly war games".²⁶⁰ Other less or non-violent but also worrying activities include the media portrayal of sexuality; sexting, which few youth (eight per cent) initiate but which 32 per cent of boys and 17 per cent of girls have received; and pornography found on the web, which 40 per cent of boys and seven per cent of girls in grades seven to 11 surveyed in Ontario have accessed.²⁶¹

72. Violence experienced by youth today is frequently gendered. For example, girls between 15 and 24 years of age are most likely to experience sexual assault, rape, domestic assault and criminal harassment (including stalking). At the same time, sexual violence is one of the least reported offenses due to several deterrents, including "inherent biases" under the justice system.²⁶² Girls also made up the majority, 80 per cent in fact, of hospitalizations for self-harm from 2013-2014.²⁶³ Gendered violence does not only refer to girls and women, however. Boys are most susceptible to general intentional assault, having made up 66 per cent of hospitalizations for intentional assault injuries and 83 per cent of "all bodily force assault cases" in 2013 to 2014. At the same time, fewer boys are being treated after being attacked now than five years ago.²⁶⁴ Thus it seems that much of the time neither girls nor boys feel that they can pursue official pathways to seek recourse for the acts of violence of which they are the victims. As a result, we must strive to provide in our communities adequate supports for all children, responding to them appropriately in accordance with their age and gender.
73. The reasons for self or peer-on-peer harm cannot be pinpointed, but the rise of social media, particularly as it facilitates ubiquitous but often hidden acts of cyberbullying, is one suspect.²⁶⁵ Indeed, the Internet in general, accessible to virtually all children and youth in Canada, contains all sorts of opportunities for cyberbullying, and not just because of social media. 99 per cent of students in Canada have access to the Internet,, compared to 79 per cent a little more than ten years ago.²⁶⁶ The Internet allows youth to

become “anonymous and invisible”, something that 59 per cent of children surveyed across Canada in 2005 reported they took advantage of.²⁶⁷ While some youth state that “social media allows you to be who you want to be instead of who you are”, others state that one reason why the Internet makes it easy, almost compelling, to engage in behaviour they might not engage in otherwise is because they can “hide behind a screen...it’s kind of like a shield”.²⁶⁸ In this way, the Internet is a place where youth both find a sense of comfort with their identities and, perhaps paradoxically, isolate themselves or take on identities that are not true to who they are or who they want to become. The anonymity and cloaks of invisibility the Internet bestows are perhaps two reasons that cyberbullying, the rate of which “has [in Canada] been persistently high relative to other industrialized countries for the past decade”,²⁶⁹ is such a widespread phenomenon. They are also the reasons that cyberbullying flies under most parents’ radars,²⁷⁰ happens at any time, and often increases “the trauma felt by victims”. The latter is true for two reasons: the first being that online bullying can leave a more permanent record for a wider audience than “traditional” bullying, and the second that those who are at risk of being bullied in general are also at higher risk of being cyberbullied.²⁷¹

74. This is particularly worrying in the case of LGBTQIA* youth (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual and other sexual, gender and expression minorities),²⁷² one of the groups “at greater risk of being bullied than other children”.²⁷³ For all the talk in the last decade about creating safer spaces for youth who identify as LGBTQIA*, the hallways of schools, change rooms and washrooms across Canada remain very unsafe. 68 per cent of Trans students, 55 per cent of female sexual minority students and 42 per cent of male sexual minority students reported “being verbally harassed about their perceived gender or sexual orientation” in 2009. More than 21 per cent of LGBTQIA* students surveyed in that year stated they been “physically harassed or assaulted due to their sexual orientation” and 30 per cent said the same things happened to them due to their gender expression.²⁷⁴ In turn, identifying as LGBTQIA* increases these students’ chances of being targeted via cyberbullying as well.²⁷⁵

Youth and the Justice System

75. In their search for belonging and identity many if not most adolescents in Canada occasionally cross the line between what is legal and what is not. While their actions are

often quite serious according to the laws on the books it is only the ones who get caught more than once who enter the youth justice system. These youth, mostly boys, tend to be overwhelmingly from vulnerable populations: they are Aboriginal or from visible minorities living in struggling communities.²⁷⁶ Some are what is known as “cross-over kids” who are moved from the child welfare system into the youth justice system for the kinds of infractions that middle-class families would probably manage on their own. Many are suffering from mental health issues, including FASD,²⁷⁷ which render them exceptionally vulnerable to severe treatment.²⁷⁸ All of them encounter negative stereotyping in the media leading to punitive public opinion calling for harsher sentences. As a result these youth, who are not yet adult, are in particular need of having their rights protected. Articles 37 and 40 of the CRC set very clear parameters for youth justice systems in any country that has ratified the Convention and, to a great extent, our Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA) of 2003. The problem lies both in the implementation of the CRC within the YCJA and in the regressive modifications that were made to it under Bill C-10, bringing it farther from compliance with the CRC.²⁷⁹

76. At *Shaking the Movers V* in 2011 the young participants, some of whom had had their own direct experience of youth custody, were very disturbed by the treatment of certain youth in the correctional services, notably Ashley Smith, who in 2007 committed suicide in full view of staff after years of inappropriate measures.²⁸⁰ “No one listened to Ashley’s voice,” one of them said, going on to add that “the responsibility falls upon the adults to be the liaison between young people and their rights and this is the problem”. The youth argued for guidance, saying that young people in conflict with the law should be given the chance to learn from their mistakes because they are still learning and developing. The justice system should aim to turn young offenders into students instead of criminalizing them. “Being in the system”, said another, “changes people...it has made me who I am today. I inherited the jail mentality. That is why I always get into fights...not because I want to but because I have that mentality.” In spite of the severity of some of the crimes that a relatively small and decreasing number²⁸¹ of young people in Canada have committed, no one really wants the identity with which a youth offender emerges from the youth justice system to be that of a hardened criminal. None of us would be any safer.

Immigrant, Refugee, Asylum-Seeking and Stateless/Undocumented Children

77. Two views emerge on the issue of inclusivity from children who have been consulted: that of all children being included in conversations about matters that concern them and that of all people being included and having a sense of belonging in society. Inclusivity is about, among other things, “recognizing that each individual is a person, no less, no more than anyone else”.²⁸² In talking about inclusion in this way, children have reconciled the divide that is sometimes placed between recognizing and honouring diversity on the one hand, and including everyone on the other. According to them it is simply about treating all people as persons in their own right, as humans with rights that are inalienable and equivalent to all others, although many of them recognize that this is hardly “simple” because of power differentials, for one thing. Youth have referred to discrimination and “negative images of certain people (like Muslims) and regions (like Africa) which perpetuate racism and stereotypes”²⁸³ to illustrate that this type of treatment is not the reality today. They have addressed the notion that some people, such as newcomers to the country, have many “added challenges like language, growing up in a different culture”,²⁸⁴ and should be given support to be included. This kind of support is very important for immigrants, refugees, asylum-seeking and undocumented people alike.
78. However, today, it is increasingly difficult to have a dialogue about the circumstances of people of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds without a certain sense of wariness about what certain ethnic or cultural differences might mean. For the federal government, for example, these differences in many ways justify treating newcomers as exceptions to the universal application of rights to all people regardless of “race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status”.²⁸⁵ A glaring example of this is a recent declaration by the Minister of the Citizenship and Immigration that “citizenship is not a right”.²⁸⁶ The status of being a citizen, which confers the right to have rights, illustrates a government’s commitment to treating someone as a human being but it is not, as it is in the eyes of the Minister, negotiable. This negotiability not only applies to newcomers, non-residents, non-citizens, and their children, but people who were born and raised in Canada as well.²⁸⁷ From the estimated 80,000 to 500,000 undocumented people²⁸⁸ living in Canada for whom there are no “dedicated legal procedures”,²⁸⁹ to the alarming Protecting Canada’s Immigration

System Act (which among various concerns allows the detention of asylum-seeking children)²⁹⁰ and the cuts to health care for refugees,²⁹¹ to the latest report about Canadians' "conflicted" views towards immigrants²⁹² and the new express entry points system²⁹³ that will favour economic immigrants over those in other categories, events of the past several years have shown us that not all people of all backgrounds are readily accepted as persons with equal rights in this country.

79. This is increasingly becoming a struggle for young people. Recent immigrants to Canada have been "relatively young" with 34 per cent in 2011 being under the age of 24.²⁹⁴ Among children born in Canada to "relatively recent immigrants" who are racial minorities, 63 per cent are under the age of 16 years.²⁹⁵ This means many children witness or are peripherally subject to the acts of discrimination that one in five landed immigrants over the age of 15 has reported experiencing in Canada over the last five years alone.²⁹⁶ Many more children see discriminatory behaviour that may not be targeted at them or their families: 56 per cent of students across the country "see racist or sexist content [online] at least once a day or once per week" by the time they reach grade 11.²⁹⁷ Possibilities of discrimination and negative stereotyping are increasingly directed at and concentrated on youth today with, for example, the media's focus on radicalization, a "broad message" of which is seen to be "spreading via the Internet and finding fertile minds that process and nurture the message[s]".²⁹⁸ Indeed, one recent headline simply states that "youth are vulnerable to violent extremism".²⁹⁹

Considerations for the Future

80. In the face of all this, the wisdom of the young people quoted in this document stands out when thinking about how to begin tackling these enormous problems. They have said that "there are many ways to participate and there is a need to ensure that all voices are being heard. This should include groups who have a hard time being heard, such as Aboriginal children and youth, new Canadians and young people with language barriers, and children with disabilities."³⁰⁰ The principle of inclusion is crucial to building safe, protective and supportive communities. Youth who are indeed thinking about joining or do join extremist groups, for example, are in large part youth who feel excluded. They support extremist ideologies as a part of their identity development, which has been informed by their feelings of isolation.³⁰¹ The communities surrounding these youth are

more likely to be successful with measures to stop them if they feel “included and valued”, if there is intercultural dialogue.³⁰²

81. For all children who experience some form of violence or bullying in their lives, approaching others for help is often very challenging. This is not only true for victims of domestic violence but also for those who are bullied or harassed in or outside of school. Young people who are cyberbullied already exhibit high rates of clinical depression,³⁰³ anxiety, substance abuse, suicidal thoughts and self harm.³⁰⁴ Many believe that they may be threatened further, and thus face greater distress, if they ask for help. Some youth do not think their parents will understand, since the Internet seems an almost entirely different world from the one with which their parents are familiar. Finally, some youth fear that their access to technologies such as their computers or cell phones will be restricted if they admit that they have partaken in or been the victims of harmful or violent behaviours online.³⁰⁵ Young people have said that they know they are responsible for protecting themselves online, but they also need guidance as to how to stay safe and how to scrutinize the countless pieces of information that are constantly communicated to them via the web. They acknowledge that the Internet can be a problematic place but they value many of the relationships they have gained from online engagement. For these children solutions do not involve measures of control or censorship, but dialogue and education instead.

82. It is up to us to ensure that children know they are not alone when they are bullied whether online or elsewhere, that they will not be judged for being taken advantage of, that it is not their fault when they are victimized. This applies similarly to all children who feel discriminated against due to their ethnicity, nationality, culture, sexuality, religious affiliations and so forth. Helping all youth feel safe enough to approach members of their communities about harmful and violent content in the media and behaviours around them is the first step to protecting and supporting them. Strategies to keep youth safe everyday must be devised with the youth as active partners sharing their knowledge and experiences. Indeed, research shows that the best approach supporters of children can take in protecting them from harm and strengthening ties with them is to be open and engaged, to share experiences, and to invite honest discussion about any of the issues they are facing no matter how difficult to navigate.³⁰⁶ This approach also parallels

the values children hold of being included and being able to participate freely in discussions surrounding all matters that affect them. In all communities, there is a constant need to build cohesion, or at least connection, whether it is through discussion, collective action or other means. It is really our responsibility to build up a society where it is untenable for the State to withhold the rights of some people simply because they are not “from here”.

83. Finally, with respect to youth justice, the international standards on youth custody supplied by the UN,³⁰⁷ many of which are already in place in Canada, are the best response to the issues young people have raised, particularly the statements that custody must always be a measure of last resort, that youth must always be maintained separately from adults and that even in custody they are entitled to all their rights with particular attention paid to their security and health, their education and maintaining their ties to friends and relatives. A focus on rehabilitation is essential as young offenders are also our fellow citizens and sooner or later will come back to live among us.

V. Enhancing Education and Learning

Quality Literacy Instruction

84. The meaning of literacy has expanded over the years to include not just a minimum level of reading ability but also to recognize the need of young people to acquire critical competencies in many other areas of daily living. The first two forms of evolving literacy needs that immediately come to mind are digital and consumer literacy. Digital literacy is about navigating the constantly growing and more complicated world wide web in a way that balances the freedom the Internet brings with concerns over accessibility, privacy and safety. Seen from the perspective of identity, rights and belonging, this translates into balancing opportunities to mould others’ perceptions of one’s personal identity – and perhaps to create a new persona, to join on-line communities or to express oneself creatively – with the responsibility to protect oneself and fellow net users from bullying, exploitation and the theft or loss of real-life identity and dignity. Being digitally literate means understanding certain realities about the digital age: to what extent certain digitally-driven behaviours are healthy and normative, who uses electronic devices and social media and to what ends, how to deal with negative experiences and problems arising from engaging in a wired world and who to go to when something is not

understood. Without this knowledge, young people are deprived of agency and power over the consequences of constant connectedness.

85. Consumer literacy broadens digital literacy to include being able to “read” other media directed toward young people such as movies, video games, magazines, newspapers and posters. It involves learning how to understand messages of advertising, how to separate out truth from half-truths and downright lies and being aware of the dangers of manipulation. This should also involve training in political literacy. Children and youth should not only know how governments work and how extensively they shape the environments in which they are growing up but also have opportunities at home and at school to practise the democracy all Canadians claim to believe in. In this as in other areas of literacy critical thinking is crucial.
86. There also appears to be inadequate training young people in what are known as “life skills”. This requires different kinds of literacy training; for example, financial literacy is a prerequisite for building skills in budgeting, spending wisely and living within one’s means. Before young people leave home or care it is imperative that they know how and where to find social and health services, buy food, prepare meals, find a job, rent and keep up a living space to live, pay bills, seek out avenues for education or occupational advancement, and much more. Different youth have varying degrees of need for training in any life skills area, but many are much more confused and uninformed than they should be. For adolescents leaving home or care, not having life skills can be especially challenging because they are trying to gain, assert or cope with forced independence while at the same time trying to find out who they are, much of the time without the physical, emotional, mental and instructional supports they should have. Emotional literacy³⁰⁸ should also be considered a life skill³⁰⁹ and has been increasingly promoted in recent years partly as a way to prevent bullying.³¹⁰
87. Finally, parental skills are a form of literacy that is too often forgotten. It is unclear whether parents and caregivers are any more informed about what healthy child development and appropriate child rearing techniques look like than in 2004 when *A Canada Fit for Children* committed to providing opportunities to develop confidence, skills and knowledge with regard to child rearing. Parents have little guidance before, during and after the birth of the child, and it is difficult for them to find it as it is not clear

how many of those not professionally trained in a discipline of child care or medical care are sure of what child-rearing and care entail. Parents are also not always warmly or officially welcomed in schools, places of work, and even some public places that should be accessible to everyone (for example, breastfeeding mothers face backlash over caring for their child in some public spaces). While we recognize that parents make an enormous contribution to the public good and that bringing up children is a difficult and challenging, though hopefully rewarding, task, we do not pay enough attention to the fact that many parents (as they have said themselves)³¹¹ do not receive guidance as to how to do it. Including a module on effective parenting within the new sexual education curriculum in Ontario might be a good place to start.

Arts Education and Artistic Expression

88. CRC Article 31 states that all children have the right to participate in and enjoy cultural, artistic and other recreational activities. In tandem with this, Article 29 states that one of the aims of education is the development of the child's talents as well as his or her mental and physical abilities to their fullest extent. This means that every child has the right to an education in the arts which can complement the right to artistic expression by opening up his or her imagination to what is possible and, indeed, to what is beautiful. However, many young people express concerns that pressures to succeed in non-arts subjects are trumping the in-school opportunities for self-knowledge and community-building that participation in the arts present.³¹² "Expressing yourself [through the arts] brings out the inner you," said one of the young participants at STM VII in 2013. "This is one way we can communicate when no one really listens to what we say," said another, adding "it is our way to connect". Young people have also conveyed their resentment at being judged on what they produced whether through painting, music or dance.
89. Dance, in particular, is appreciated because every body can move to music regardless of size, shape or physical limitation. Ontario has now made dance a compulsory component of the physical education curriculum and this is encouraging. However, according to some young people, it is not always taught by teachers who understand the potential of creative movement to connect the body and the spirit, and they turn it either into a rote exercise or sexualize it by expecting the younger girls to be "cute" and older ones to be "sexy".³¹³ "There is no right or wrong in art," STM VII participants have affirmed,

making it clear that they understand that exercising a right is not something to be evaluated according to someone else's standards. While there have been many excellent if uncoordinated initiatives in both programming and infrastructure in recent years there needs to be, for the sake of us all, a much greater and more considered investment in the arts for children across Canada than currently exists.

90. This is because Article 31 also means not only that all children should have the opportunity to partake in play and recreation, but also that all types of play and recreation in which children have an interest should be recognized. This is not the case, for example, with the existing Children's Arts Tax Credit, however well-intentioned. This credit, under which parents can claim up to \$500 per child for fees paid for involvement in an "artistic, cultural, recreational, or developmental activity... that develops creative skills or expertise" is eligible only if it is "intended to improve a child's dexterity or co-ordination, or helps in acquiring and applying knowledge through artistic or cultural activities such as literary arts, visual arts, performing arts, music, media, languages, customs, and heritage".³¹⁴ These limitations are detrimental because they assume that the arts are instrumental, not important in and of themselves: programs that just try to create space for leisure, play and self-expression are essential too. Beyond the Child Arts Credit, there seems to be few subsidies for children and youth to take part in other types of play, self-expression or identity development,, so those who cannot or do not want to access or participate in programs that only strive to develop skill or expertise are at a disadvantage.

Aims of Education

91. Since education in Canada is a provincial responsibility, implementing most of the technical obligations related to CRC Article 28 fall under provincial and territorial jurisdiction. However, since all provinces and territories signed the CRC before Canada ratified it in 1991, they should all try to respect the aims of education as specified in CRC Article 29. It is highly likely that every school board in the country will have incorporated CRC Article 29a ("The development of the child's his or her own cultural personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential") into their statements of goals. However, CRC Article 29b is somewhat more problematic. It reads "the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations." Young people consistently tell

us that although they are usually introduced to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms at some time during their school career, very few of them know anything about the CRC as required by CRC Article 42. On the other hand, they tell us that CRC Article 29c is reasonably well respected in rhetoric if not in practice. This article, which calls for “the development of respect for the child’s parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate and for civilizations different from his or her own” is key to strengthening a child’s sense of belonging and identity and should provide a real focus for school curricula and teaching. In a country where there are so many newcomers, knowledge of and respect for the country to which they have come is also key. This involves a deep exposure to Canadian history and a reminder that we are officially a bilingual and bicultural country whose two dominant cultures have followed somewhat different trajectories.

92. While the growing interest in the history of the Aboriginal peoples who first occupied the land that is Canada is very welcome, the appreciation of Quebec as a distinct society with a different language and culture seems to have weakened somewhat in the rest of Canada, raising new issues for belonging and identity. Education in Canada should be preparing all young people to be capable of treasuring every aspect of our diversity. This is what CRC Article 29d affirms when it states that one of the aims of education is “the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding , peace , tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin.” Finally, among the aims of education is “the development of respect for the natural environment.” This has probably become more urgent since 2004 and certainly since the CRC was adopted in 1989. The growing evidence of climate change is one of the factors in the wider world that is increasing the incidence of anxiety in this generation partly because many feel powerless to stop it. With knowledge children and youth can become empowered to know what they can and cannot do and this is essential because they are the ones who are going to have to manage it.

Global Citizenship

93. Fostering a sense of respect for the languages, cultures and traditions of all people and treating all people with dignity and fairness starts with communities. Children have acknowledged that communities are becoming more global in their makeup, but so are young people themselves. They have declared themselves to be global citizens; belonging “to the world and its global movements”, “in a world present with opportunities”.³¹⁵ They want to play a part in “promoting, implementing and maintaining the physical, mental and spiritual health of their unique community”³¹⁶ but also realize that they require more ethics education and opportunities to be better global citizens. For some, this kind of citizenship means that children should be given greater chances to learn to have “big ears for listening to others; big eyes to see what’s going on; big feet for stepping up to defend their rights; a strong backbone to stand up for what they believe in; a mouth that speaks out and also smiles; a big heart to care for others; an open mind; and good actions and good intentions”.³¹⁷
94. This means allowing children to express ideas and values important to them. This means taking their concerns, on topics ranging from violence to the health of the natural environment, seriously. Their relationships and interactions with other children all over the world, whether through face-to-face visiting or wearing a garment possibly made with child labour or using a gadget made by children exploited in a far away country, need to be held up as meaningful and worth exploring. Giving children and youth the time and space to be themselves, to think and speak up, will go a long way in addressing not only issues close to home, but the global issues – social, economic, environmental – that we all care about. Children also want to be involved politically but feel that they do not have voices in political processes and are often not part of major policy decisions that affect their lives.³¹⁸ Helping youth understand their rights and the guiding principles of the CRC — that interactions with children should be marked by non-discrimination, respect for their best interests, meaningful youth participation and attention to their optimal development³¹⁹ — is an important place to start giving youth the power they deserve to make determinations about their own lives according to who they are and what they are able to offer.

Considerations for the Future

95. One of the biggest concerns pertaining to the education of children in Canada is that most do not know or understand their rights. The aims of education, as described in Article 29 of the CRC, are broadly directed at developing children's personalities, talents and abilities. Education, however, has primarily been instead about preparing students to score highly on tests, to obtain grades that will allow them to attend university, and to pursue degrees that will lead to careers. Education needs now more than ever to broadly encompass the reality of the lives children lead and to teach students how to navigate that reality. This means curricula need to teach students how to respect not only themselves, their own and other's rights, but also the diversity of the cultural backgrounds of their companions; their own values, which education and critical thinking can help to clarify; the values of their parents and mentors; and, last but not least, the natural environment. Digital, consumer and life skills literacy are examples of where all of these can be conveyed to students. The Convention can and should be a key tool and framework for discussing these issues and their implications.

Final Observations

96. What this document has tried to do is give more weight and power to the voices of youth as they have been so generously shared with us. The issues they have flagged over the years as concerning to them have been described along with their desire to be included, to participate and to learn, to build strong identities, to belong and to have their rights understood and fulfilled. Twenty-five years after the adoption of the UNCRC, the changing landscape of childhood and the perspectives of all children must continue to guide our actions in order for the next 25 years to make a difference. Children's identities are both solid and fluid, in that some elements of identity are determined early on and stay the same throughout life and some are malleable and open to influences, both positive and negative. In order to support children and youth in developing identities with which they are at ease they must be treated respectfully and responded to in ways that recognize their core beings, and provide them with opportunities for positive learning and growth. To this end, we must continue to commit to both recognize and act on our responsibilities to all children, to support and strengthen all families, to promote healthy

lives, to build safe and supportive communities, and to encourage and enhance global citizenship education. This is best framed within an understanding of the CRC, which has undeniable implications for actions, actions we as Canadians have not yet taken on to the full extent possible.

97. A recent conference of young people who wanted to reaffirm their identities as Canadians and explore the meanings of citizenship for themselves, offered a renewed commitment to our country through a pledge. It goes as follows: “I pledge my head to clearer thinking, my heart to greater loyalty, my hands to larger service, and my health for better living, for my club, my community and my country”.³²⁰ The youth show with these words and through their actions as engaged citizens serving their neighbourhoods, schools, gathering spaces as well as online communities a strong understanding of the roles and responsibilities of being a young person in Canada today. Indeed, children and young people across Canada have told us that they wish to be seen as full participants in society from very early on, and to participate meaningfully in the decisions that affect their lives whenever possible. Participation, including the opportunity to be heard on matters directly affecting their lives, builds in children, as it does in adults, a sense of agency that informs their life goals and their decisions to contribute to society. In order for a Canada fit for children to exist, children and youth want to have a voice and a hand in envisioning and building it. If one looks one can already see the immense contribution that children and youth make to our societies every day. A great number of young people in Canada are hopeful. They are full of admiration, still, for the country that Canada is and can be. The characteristics the youth at the conference used to describe their homeland indicate appreciation and pride: they see beauty in the landscape and peacefulness in our social cohesion; people that are generally welcoming and trusting; neighbourhoods that mostly feel safe; and democratic values prevail against many challenges. And they want and will work to keep it that way.
98. As children and youth reaffirm their commitment to Canada every day, the rest of us must in turn renew our commitment to them. A good number of young people have the support and care they need to be strong contributors to society. Being able to take the above oath honestly is to have the resources, energy and time to be active members of communities. However, this is not the reality for all. At some point, or throughout their

entire lives, too many children are deprived of their basic needs and rights and this makes them more vulnerable and less able to give as much as they want. The field of possibilities should be level for all. The CRC is our pledge to this vision, our reference document for informing and driving our actions with regard to all young people across Canada no matter their status or background. When Canada ratified the CRC in 1991 we collectively recognized that every child holds the same inherent rights as any other person, and that no child should be left behind. We also recognized that every child is entitled to special provisions that take into account their vulnerability and the requirements and challenges of their personal development. It is time to revisit this binding promise and make sincere efforts to implement it.

99. *A Canada Fit For Children 2004* ended with a call to action. “Supporting families and strengthening communities, promoting healthy lives, protecting from harm and promoting education and learning are all attainable goals in Canada as long as we can rally the will and the resources.” But it is clear that our efforts overall have stalled³²¹³²² and that new challenges to the rights and well-being of children have arisen. So *A Canada Fit For Children 2015* will conclude with a call for reflection as well as for action. The issues of identity, rights and belonging that preoccupy our children and youth need to be understood as issues for us all. In Aboriginal traditions the child is often depicted as a teacher for the community. Adults are expected to learn from the children among them. This is a noble tradition and should be respected. So what can we learn from the situation of children and youth in Canada today as described by them and documented in this report?

100. First of all it is clear that the issues of identity and belonging are all about relationships and that relationships are all about us and our children. After all, we are the ones who, by the choices we have made and the actions we have taken (or failed to take), have created or enabled the conditions that put too many of our children at risk. In consequence we are the ones who, in relationships of trust with them, should make every effort to improve them. When we find a child or young person’s behaviour objectionable or distasteful what does that say about us? Why do we react the way we do? Are we more interested in power and control than children’s rights? As we reflect on our own identity and our sense (or lack of it) of belonging to the “human family” where should this lead

us? Learning the language of human rights and especially of children's rights is a good start. There is now a rich and wide-ranging body of literature on the subject to peruse. The Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva, which is mandated to review the compliance of States Parties to the CRC, regularly issues General Comments on various aspects of children's rights and these are well worth studying.³²³ The next one will be devoted specifically to the rights of adolescents. Adolescents now comprise the largest generation the world has ever known, larger even than the cohort of their younger brothers and sisters. Who they are and where they seek to belong is already having an enormous impact on the peace and security of the entire planet. Canada has long promoted both the language of children's rights and the practice of child protection internationally. We should match this with our actions at home. Then a Canada fit for children in a world fit for children may one day lead to a world fit for us all.

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