How can family support practitioners help parents raise healthy children by respecting their rights? How can practitioners help children learn and exercise their rights? And what resources can family resources centres keep on hand to help practitioners achieve both of these goals? These are some of the questions that prompted FRP Canada to partner with the Landon Pearson Resource Centre for the Study of Childhood and Child Rights at Carleton University to produce a children’s rights newsletter just for family support practitioners.

In this issue, practitioners can find information on: connecting families to child vaccine information, a recent shift in childhood studies, children’s books and play. These topics, when viewed through a children’s rights lens offer meaningful opportunities to affect practitioners’ everyday work. Practitioners will also benefits from an insightful youth submission piece, titled “I Will Dance,” by Emilly Renaud.

The contents of this newsletter is based on interdisciplinary articles in the Canadian Journal of Children’s Rights. For research citations, readers are encouraged to consult the original journal articles. References are available at the back of this newsletter.

For readers who are new to children’s rights, these rights exist to ensure children’s healthy development. In Canada, as in most counties, they apply to anyone under the age of 18. A comprehensive list of children’s rights are recognized in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).
I Will Dance
By Emilly Renaud

I dance to express not to impress.
And even when my feet feel as heavy as lead,
I will dance, I will dance,
Through hope and through dread.
I dance to share and I really don't care
if my body doesn't quite meet the criteria.
Because I dance to inspire
and light souls with my fire
And dance doesn't need to require
years of ballet experience.
Because I'll never stop this rhythm until I die,
I will dance this earth and I will dance the sky.
I will dance through war and peace
I will dance through hunger and through feast.
through loss and gain
through sunshine and rain.
Through freedom and slavery
Through fright and bravery.
If music be the fuel of this passionate motion
then let it never stop like the waves of the ocean.
I will dance everything I needed
I will dance the tears my heart bled.
I will dance the wrinkles that smiles tattooed on my cheeks
And I will dance the words I was too scared to speak.
I will dance the cries of the voiceless
I will dance the stories of the choice-less
I will dance for the children and I will dance for the adults
I will dance for the rights and for all the faults
I will dance for the mothers and for all of the daughters
I will dance through all hell and all of its waters.
I will dance through ecstasy and I will dance through pain.
I will dance through pride and dance through shame.
I will dance through numbness until I begin to feel.
Because I don't dance to pretend, I dance to be real.

About this Poem
Consistent with the principles of inclusive collaboration and youth participation, every volume of the Canadian Journal of Children’s Rights includes submissions from young people. Originally featured in Volume 2 of the journal, Emilly Renaud’s poem and the creative pieces submitted by her peers capture the possibilities and challenges of participation and the importance of not only hearing, but listening to and understanding, young people’s views and perspectives on issues important to them as they navigate their own social lives.
Children’s Books for a Better Future

In need of a quality new books for your lending library? Interested in books that encourage even the youngest of readers to know and exercise their rights and to display good civic behaviour? You may find recipients of the Horace Mann Upstanders Children’s Book Award to be exactly what you’re looking for.

Good civic behaviour, such as standing up for the rights of others, can be hard to teach. But as J. Cynthia McDermott explains in her article, “The Creation of a Book Award to Encourage Child Activism,” children’s encounters with literature can encourage them to adopt good civic behaviour. Researchers have found that literature is an important socializing agent because it can teach children values, appropriate and acceptable behaviour and what it means to be a good person. It has also been proven that literature can have a small to moderate effect on how young people behave.

When children are told that good civic behaviour is important without being provided with relatable role models who stand up for the rights of others, they don’t see themselves as activists. Some children’s books do try to inspire children to engage in activism by narrating the journeys of real-life role models such as Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr., or Hellen Keller. Unfortunately, it is often difficult for children to see themselves as present and future rights activists when the only role models they have lived and died years ago; for young children, these individuals might as well be from ancient history. The capacity of most non-fiction children’s literature to inspire children to know and exercise their rights is therefore limited.

Fiction, on the other hand, has much more potential for encouraging children to recognize injustice and take appropriate action. Recipients of the Horace Mann Upstanders Award feature fictional characters that model the kinds of questioning and decision-making skills that children need in order to identify and address injustice. These books, written for children ages 3 to 12, encourage child activism by demonstrating to young readers that standing up against unfair behaviour is worthwhile. Teachers have reported that after sharing the award winning books with their classes, their students choose to speak out and to take action in small but important ways.

Parents and family support practitioners can provide young people with activist characters who may help children choose that role for themselves. Prompts such as “Who does [activist character] remind you of,” “Why do you think [activist character] decided to act like that?” or “Have you ever felt like [activist character]?” may help children understand forms of oppression in a meaningful way and identify responsive behaviours that can create positive change. It is important to allow children the opportunity to develop their own evaluation of cultural practices and allow them to feel freedom to explore human interactions while trusting them to make sensible and humane judgements.

Past recipients of the Horace Mann Upstanders award, as summarized by J. Cynthia McDermott, are:

Horace Mann Upstanders Award Recipients

“The Smallest Girl in the Smallest Grade” by Justin Roberts is the perfect book about standing against bullying. The main character watches carefully all of the nasty and mean things that happen every day in her school. Finally tired of the behaviors, she stands up and challenges everyone to stop. Ages 3-5

“Unspoken” by Henry Cole is a beautiful wordless picture book that takes place during the Civil War. The young protagonist puts aside her fear of the unknown by helping a runaway slave. Ages 4-8

“Violet the Pilot” by Steve Breen recounts the tale of Violet, a different kind of a kid who likes to invent things, particularly things that fly. After building a plane so she can enter a flying race, she stops along the way to rescue the very boys who consistently bully her, preventing her from making the race. In the end, the community recognizes her upstanding behavior. Ages 4-8

“Mrs. Marlowe’s Mice” by Frank Asch tells the tale of a cat dominant society where mice are hated. Mrs. Marlowe, however, protects a large mouse community and is almost caught thanks to a mouse-hating neighbour. Her bravery and cunning outsmart the Cat Police. Ages 5-9

“Almost Zero” by Nikki Grimes is a story about a young girl who demands a new pair of shoes from her mother only to be taught a lesson about greed. Only when she chooses to help a classmate whose home has burned does she understand what it means to stand up for others. Ages 7-9

“The Dunderheads” by Paul Fleischman describes a group of schoolmates who are constantly insulted by their teacher.
After she takes a toy cat from one of them, they come together to plot how to get it back and taking lots of risks and, by working together, they outsmart the teacher and win the day. Ages 7+

“The Real Boy” by Anne Ursu introduces us to a strange and silent boy who works for a magician. As the world around him starts to fall apart he is forced to make some choices. In the end he chooses exactly what is right and risks his life to fix what is wrong. Ages 8-12

“Ghetto Cowboy” by Greg Neri is a complex story. The main character is a pre-teen boy who is taken by his mother to live with his father who he does not know. The father and his friends rescue horses and use them to help teens connect to something important and leave gang life. In the end, all of the characters have to make hard decisions about standing up for what is right and taking on the challenges of the city. Ages 10+

More book suggestions can be found in J. Cynthia McDermott’s original article.

The Right to Play

Did you know that the right to play is one of the most neglected of all children’s rights? In their article “Moving Children’s Participation Forward Through Article 31 – the Right To Play” Emma Colucci and Laura Wright explain the importance of the right to play, describe sociological factors that have prevented it from being addressed, and define what organizations such as Right To Play have done to address this gap. Many family support practitioners may be aware how important play is to a child’s wellness and healthy development. Examining play from a child rights-based approach can help practitioners communicate the necessity of playtime to others and provide opportunities to support children’s right to play at the community level.

What it is?

The right to play is guaranteed in Article 31 of the CRC. Every country in the world, except for the USA, has signed and ratified the CRC. Although the CRC only binds countries that have signed and ratified the convention, all members of society—not just the government—have a role in championing children’s right to play. Given family support practitioners’ meaningful proximity to children, there are many opportunities to support the right to play at the community level.

Why is it important?

As demonstrated by Colucci and Wright, research in the last ten to fifteen years has increasingly highlighted the importance of play in the healthy cognitive, social, emotional and physical development of children. Play helps build physical literacy and social skills, increases children’s ability to regulate their emotions and behaviour as well as enhances their self-efficacy, self-esteem, confidence and well-being. It can also help children cope with distress and can foster hope, optimism, and social cohesion. On a cognitive level, play helps boost neurological growth, assists in the development of cognitively flexible brains and aids the development of concepts and ideas. Through play, children can build their executive functioning and critical thinking skills and can generate

**CRC, Article 31**

“States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.”
ideas of their own while exercising their imaginations.

**Why has it been overlooked?**

In countries around the world, local and national levels of government have rarely prioritized children’s right to play. Article 31 has even been referred to as “the forgotten article of the UN Convention.”

One of the reasons the right to play has been overlooked is due to a lack of a clear definition of what play actually is. There are many types of play—structured and unstructured, physical and less active, social and individual to name a few—but all types of play can act as a bridging language that can cut across sociocultural barriers.

Play has also been overlooked because how play can contribute to children’s growth, development and well-being is not well understood or appreciated by most adults. The physical and social benefits of play are most widely recognized. Less recognized are play’s cognitive benefits and its vital role in enhancing the learning process. This is due to the fact that play is often, and erroneously, seen in contrast to productive work. This view implies that play is not necessary and therefore not important. However, multiple studies, as outlined in Colucci and Wright’s full article, have proven play to be a productive and necessary time of learning.

**What can be done?**

Well-designed programs that use play as a tool for learning can create safe environments where lessons can be learned from low-consequence mistakes. For children’s programs in family resource centres, a well-designed program can optimize play’s cognitive benefits and its role in children’s learning processes. And perhaps most importantly, play can help create an engaging educational environment where children can develop a love of learning.

A well-designed play program can even encourage children to critically assess what they are learning by tapping into play’s interactive qualities to create a participatory learning environment. In this type of learning environment, children are actively involved in the learning process which can help them develop a sense of personal agency. Developing this sense of personal agency supports children as they become active agents of positive change in their lives, their communities and their world. Given that many schools still practice top-down and rote learning environments where children’s participation in their own education is relatively minimal, the need for learning environments that facilitate participatory learning is paramount.

Family resource centres that are looking to enhance their play programs or start a new one may find it helpful to consider how the international organization Right To Play has approached its work. Right To Play operates in eighteen countries around the world to strengthen positive child and youth development, quality education, health and to build peaceful communities. They employ a child rights-based approach in their programs and at an organizational level. By working in partnership with children, parents/caregivers, communities, civil society organizations, international institutions and governments they work to ensure that play-based approaches to development are woven into the fabric of countries’ national systems and structures.

In particular, Canadian family resource centres that service Aboriginal families and want to enhance their play programs may find it useful to examine Right To Play’s Promoting Life-Skills in Aboriginal Youth (PLAY) program which works in partnership with 90 communities across Canada. In this program, Community Mentors (local Youth Workers) design programs in partnership with their communities and lead the PLAY program with support from Right To Play. The PLAY program has reported substantial success in areas of youth health, education, employability and healthy relationships. Family resource centres may consider modeling some of their own activities on the PLAY program’s regular weekly sport and play based activities (after school and youth leadership programs), intergenerational events, sport clinics and youth-led initiatives.
**Childhood Studies, Re-envisioned**

What assumptions about childhood affect how people think about children in your community? Sam Frankel, Sally McNamee and Alan Pomfret’s article traces the recent shift away from restrictive notions of childhood and defines the new paradigm of childhood studies that several Canadian universities have embraced. They also describe how the new paradigm can drastically change how children actively participate in society. Family support practitioners can situate their own understanding of childhood on the spectrum between the old and new paradigms and consider how elements of the new paradigm could affect their daily work.

**The Old Paradigm**

- Childhood is an age-bound developmental process
- In childhood, children learn societal norms and roles to prepare for adulthood
- Children can participate in civic society when an adult deems they are mature enough
- Adults’ primary responsibilities are providing for and protecting children

**The New Paradigm**

- What ‘childhood’ means has been defined by different societies throughout history
- Children do not passively absorb societal norms
- Children are competent and have agency; they are meaning makers in their everyday life
- All children are capable of participating in civic society
- Providing for and protecting children is important as a theme, but effective protection and provision can only happen when children participate meaningfully in all aspects of matters that concern them

**Implications of the New Paradigm**

- Practitioners working with children should explore the wishes and feelings of the child and share these wishes with appropriate bodies (families, schools etc.), as necessary
- Children’s inability to participate in civic society has been due to a lack of opportunity, not competence
- It is easy to assume adults are making decisions in the best interest of children. However, this may not be the case if decisions are based on cultural assumptions about childhood rather than talking to children and hearing their responses. It is only by engaging with children that we can overcome adult assumptions and allow children to have a hand in determining what is best for them
- Child participation is the only foundation on which effective protection and provision can be achieved

**Food for Thought**

- What assumptions about children and/or childhood do you hold? These assumptions can include notions about age, gender and capacities
- What methods can you use to engage children in conversations about what they need to feel safe and provided for?

“Children’s inability to participate in civic society has been due to a lack of opportunity, not competence.”
**Children’s Rights and Vaccines**

Consent for childhood vaccines is at times a sensitive topic between many parents and health care providers. Regardless of personal stances on the issue, adopting a child rights-based approach when connecting families to community medical services can help families make informed immunization decisions and respect their children’s personhood. A recent study by Rita Nathawad, David Wood and Jeffrey Goldhagen examined Human Papillomavirus (HPV) immunization rates in young people worldwide and recommended adopting a child rights-based approach to increase vaccine education and delivery. While the study focused on HPV—the most common viral infection of the reproductive tract and a well-established cause of several cancers—many of their observations can help Canadian family support practitioners connect families to appropriate vaccine information that can affect children’s long-term health.

As outlined in the study, six child rights principles provide important context to the application of a rights-based approach to youth access to vaccines and vaccine information: best interests, responsibility, evolving capacities, parental responsibility, parental capacity and indivisibility. These principles can help guide exchanges with children and parents as they consider vaccination.

The ‘best interests’ principle means that in all actions concerning children, the primary consideration should be the best interests of the child. Reaffirming a shared commitment to a child’s wellbeing can help family support practitioners share up-to-date and accurate child health information with parents, even when personal beliefs conflict.

As rights bearers, youth are responsible for exercising their health rights in a manner that is consistent with their developmental capacity. Youth can and should access information related to vaccine risks and benefits. The onus to provide this information is on the government, but family resource centres can assist with this task by adding vaccine information for varying developmental capacities to their bank of family support material.

It is also important to recognize children’s evolving capacities to independently exercise their health rights. When linking parents and youth to vaccine information, the information must be provided in a language and format that will ensure child comprehension. Family resource centers may wish to seek out informational pamphlets or posters designed to communicate developmentally appropriate information specifically to children. These materials should be accurate, free from coercive advertising tactics, transparent with regards to profit-driven pharmaceutical marketing, understandable as well as culturally and linguistically sensitive. Government-funded health centres and public schools may be able to provide practitioners with, or direct them to, appropriate sources of print and online vaccine information to share with youth.

It will come as no surprise to family support practitioners that the UNCRC recognizes and places great emphasis on the critical role parents and families play in optimizing the health and well-being of their children. By embracing a rights-based approach to discussing vaccines with their children, parents can increase communication and discussion related to health needs and—in the case of the HPV vaccine—sexual activity and privacy.

> “Reaffirming a shared commitment to a child’s wellbeing can help family support practitioners share up-to-date and accurate child health information with parents, even when personal beliefs conflict.”

However, the ‘parental responsibility’ principle often relies on the principle of ‘parental capacity.’ If parents don’t have access to the information and resources required to educate and support the decision-making capabilities of their children, then children are not able to fully enact their health rights. This is where family resources centre have an opportunity to positively influence children’s long-term health and wellbeing. Family support practitioners can provide parents with the information and resources required for them to educate and support the decision-making capabilities of their children.

All rights in the UNCRC are ‘indivisible’; they have equal status. One right should not take priority over another as denial of one will directly affect the enjoyment of another. As the study suggests, implementing Article 12 (the right to participation) by allowing youth to independently consent to vaccinations without adequately considering Article 17 (the right to developmentally appropriate information) would risk groups of youth making uninformed vaccine decisions. Family resource programs and practitioners have an important role to play in ensuring that families can access up-to-date child vaccine information that can positively impact children’s health for years to come.
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The *Canadian Journal of Children’s Rights* is an academic, peer-reviewed journal which aims to encourage a deeper understanding of the rights of children. You can access the journal at: http://journals.carleton.ca/cjcr/index.php/cjcr.

The Landon Pearson Resource Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children’s Rights facilitates opportunities for youth to increase their civic and political participation by giving them the tools to be advocates for social change and by disseminating knowledge to educators, decision-makers, advocates and youth. Find out more about their activities at http://www.carleton.ca/landonpearson.

A collection of 60 watercolour images, such as the images used in this newsletter, is available for non-commercial use for community-based organizations and practitioners who support families with young children. These images can be downloaded for free at www.frp.ca.

References


