

November 16, 2009
Opinion Column Submission

Respecting the Rights of Children
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To mark the upcoming 20th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, my office held a province-wide child rights essay and picture contest. One of the winners from the almost 200 submissions was a drawing of two boys.

One boy, wearing a shirt with the words 'I'm cool' on the front, tells the other, "Change if you want to be my friend." The other boy replies "I don't want to change."

The right to be yourself – for this child, the most important of many rights.

For 11-year-old Malcolm, it is the right to good parenting care.

"There are so many kids in the world who do not have parents," he wrote. "I wish I could do something for them. I will adopt some kids when I (am) able to. A child should not think about him or herself as somebody's mistake for coming into this world."

The submissions are heartfelt, thoughtful and inspiring. Rights are held dear by our children, and their participation in our contest emphasizes the need for society to become more aware of the rights enshrined in the Convention.

The Convention, which turns 20 on November 20, contains general principles (non-discrimination, that best interests of children be a primary consideration, the right of the child to be heard), and addresses specific rights (protection from physical or mental harm, the highest attainable standard of health, education and play).

Canada is a signatory to the Convention but, to our national shame, we have not made significant progress in implementing it in our laws and policies. This must be done and this anniversary is a chance for Canada to show it truly values these rights.

Implementing children's rights is an investment with very real social and economic benefits to society. My office, in its advocacy work, sees these benefits daily when rights are translated in actions. When children are encouraged to speak out, to participate and have input into their own life plans, they gain the confidence that leads to social engagement and future participation in their own communities. They become more fully contributing members of society.

The Convention states that adults have a duty to ensure child rights are upheld. So how do we do this?

- We can – and must -- speak up for children. If we witness bullying, abuse or neglect, as adults we have a responsibility to take action.
- We should be child-centred in our decision making. Will our actions, decisions or policies benefit children?
- Children need to be involved in decisions that affect them. Encourage the meaningful participation of children in family and in community decision-making. Civic participation begins here.
- Be aware of Canada's commitment to the Convention and share information on the rights of children with the children and adults in your life.
- Speak out on behalf of children to elected officials if children's rights are being violated or not upheld. Advocate for change.

We must educate children about their rights. Here in B.C., one school leads the country in that regard. Coquitlam's Cape Horn Elementary is Canada's first – and only – participant in an innovative UNICEF program called the Rights Respecting School, its curriculum entirely centred on child rights.

It is time for change and seeds are being sown – from schools like Cape Horn Elementary to the UN Convention, and through words of wisdom from our children...

"To be healthy is to be happy," writes 11-year-old Kathryn.

Hannah, in Grade 6, writes: "Having a voice as a child is one right that is overlooked by adults. It is universally accepted that children are the future, yet no one will take them seriously."

Truth rings in the voices of children. A better future depends on our ability to hear.

The UN Convention essays and drawings can be viewed on the Representative's website at: www.rcybc.ca