

November 20th is



Guest Post: Christine Slavik and Monique Goerzen, Child, Youth and Family Studies, UFV National Child Day

November 20th is National Child Day when Canadians celebrate children. This date has been recognized in Canada since 1993 and commemorates the adoption of two documents on children's rights: the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child (November 20, 1959), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (November 20, 1989). The UN Convention holds the belief that well-being comes through respectful relationships. Canada recognizes the government's role in protecting children and both its actions and inactions have an impact on children. It was in 1991, Canada made a pledge to confirm that all children are treated with dignity and respect. In acknowledging a commitment to the rights of children, Canada joins nations around the world in promoting the opportunity for children to have a voice, to be protected from harm, and to ensure their basic needs and opportunity to reach their full potential are assured.

Monique...

We are living in extraordinary times. It is during these times that I revisit my core beliefs about the image of the child. In the face of the current pandemic, the images that I see of children are that of courage, confidence, and competence. In a newsletter entitled 'Rechild,' Malaguzzi (2001), expresses it well in a metaphor where "beyond the wall there is always a beyond" (p.6). COVID is a journey into an unknown path and a time to look beyond the customs of habit and what was once 'normal', to find new possibilities and gifts.

As I drive by the parks, playgrounds, forests and lakes, I see families spending time together, I hear the laughter of children, and I observe the wonder and curiosity of those seeking solace in nature. In this time of heightened anxiety, it becomes apparent that it is not just people that we have deep relationships with. We hold an emotional connection to nature and the quality of that relationship impacts well-being. Natural settings have become an oasis of stillness and wonder, a time to experience joy and freedom despite ever-increasing restrictions. Nature has

the capacity to decrease the stress hormone cortisol, reduce depression and anxiety, and provides healing to our nervous systems.

Covid-19 has elevated the use of our parks and green spaces, reflecting on nature's capacity to develop resilience, competency, and well-being. Nature needs to be viewed as a central right to the health, safety, and well-being of our children. Perhaps advocacy for green spaces and access to parks and natural spaces will be an unexpected gift of Covid-19 in restoring the health of our children and youth and their right to play.

Christine...

I agree whole-heartedly with my colleague that advocacy is needed to ensure children have the opportunity to access and utilize natural spaces to exercise their right to play. There are other areas of needs and rights that can be explored further. The theme of National Child Day 2020 is #SeenAndHeard, which challenges the Victorian phrase that children should be seen and not heard. The purpose of National Child Day is to promote awareness about the convention to Canadians, to support Canadian children's rights by voicing concerns about rights violations, and to educate our children about their rights and responsibilities. This year, children and youth from across the country will discuss what it means to be seen and heard. This is a plea to listen to children, and to better understand the circumstances our children and youth face in Canada today.

Children First Canada, a national non-profit organization comprised of an alliance of Canada's leading children's charities and hospitals, research institutes and corporations that invest in children and youth, released their Raising Canada 2020 report, that found that many of the top threats to childhood, including mental illness, food insecurity, child abuse, physical inactivity and poverty may be increasing – or are in danger of increasing – because of the COVID-19 pandemic. We are still learning what the overall impact on child health and well-being will be as the pandemic continues to evolve. Excerpts from the Raising Canada 2020 report include:

“There are indications that children's mental health may be worsening during COVID-19. There has been a significant increase in calls to Kids Help Phone since the pandemic began, which could be an indicator that children are struggling with their mental health.” (p. 18).

“One in four kids (26%) says friendships have been negatively affected by stay-at-home orders.” (p.18)

“The closure of playgrounds during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic likely had a negative impact on younger children in particular. Playgrounds are noted as important community infrastructure that help children stay active.” (p.27)

“Research done by ParticipACTION during COV-19 restrictions found that 62% of children and teens were less physically active outdoors, and 79% were spending more leisure time on screens.” (p.27)

We need to listen to these voices and take action to ensure that rights related to the overall health and well-being of children and youth are upheld. One of the key principles of a rights framework is that children and youth are not passive, rather they have ideas, opinions and the right to participate in decisions that affect them. Every child has rights. Here are a few that relate to the need for children and youth to be able to access and utilize nature for healthy development.

Article 27

1. States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.

Article 29

1. States Parties agree that education of the child shall be directed to...
(e) The development of respect for the natural environment.

Article 31

1. 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.
2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

So perhaps this November 20th take some time to learn about the rights of children and youth. Plan to find a way to listen and involve children and youth in decisions that affect them. Children are human beings, not human becomings! Their perspective is valid and significant, and we have a duty to ensure their rights are upheld and they reach their full potential.

And when a child in your life asks if you will play outside or go to the park, consider the immense value in saying yes.

Here are some ways to find out more:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/childhood-adolescence/national-child-day.html>

<https://childrenfirstcanada.org/raising-canada>

<https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention#Learn>

<https://www.outsideplay.ca/>