

# From Vision to Reality:

On A National Strategy for Children and Youth in Canada



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CANADA



# **From Vision to Reality: A National Strategy for Children and Youth in Canada**

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# INTRODUCTION

***Canada's children deserve every opportunity to grow and flourish. They make up a significant portion of our population, yet despite Canada's human rights obligations they remain underserved by current government policies. Canada's children and youth are the future of the country and will be tomorrow's innovators, leaders, creators, healers, and builders.***

Yet, as it stands, Canada does not have a vision to ensure their health and well-being, or to ensure respect for their rights.

Our children are supported by a patchwork of programs, supports, and benefits, resulting in poor outcomes. These programs and benefits, although well-intentioned, fail to consider the full range of children's experiences and fail to include all children. They perpetuate a system where children's voices and issues fall by the wayside. Ultimately, as things stand, children will continue to struggle to reach their full potential without a central strategic vision to ensure their wellbeing and the respect of their rights.

A National Strategy grounded in collaboration, with the voices of children, youth, and their advocates front and centre, is needed to depart from the status quo and give our children the best chance possible at success and well-being.

# HOW WE GOT HERE

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The process for this report began with initial engagement and consultations with stakeholders to confirm their interest in the idea of a National Strategy and their willingness to participate in roundtable discussions. Based on these opening discussions, Senator Moodie developed a plan to convene a set of roundtables, the first of which was held in Ottawa on October 21-22, 2022, and included advocacy groups, parliamentarians, and other stakeholders.

The second roundtable was held virtually on January 26-27, 2023, focusing on the inclusion of a wider range of voices than the format of the first allowed, especially for the inclusion of the voices of children and youth. Notably, this office was intentional in including a wide range of views and experiences.

These roundtable discussions with interested parties, stakeholders, and children and youth served to confirm the need for a National Strategy and, importantly, to shape what that strategy might look like. Stakeholders were asked to prepare a short presentation, followed by robust Q&A discussion sessions. They were given background and key questions to assist them in their presentation.

# WHAT WE HEARD

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Questions were offered to participants to stimulate discussion and the summaries that follow bring together what we heard from participants on these areas of inquiry.

All individual ideas were included, therefore inclusion in this report should not be interpreted as it receiving consensus support.



# DOES CANADA NEED A CHILDREN'S STRATEGY? IF SO, WHY?

*Among roundtable participants, there was broad consensus that Canada's youth and children need a National Strategy, with the federal government's last attempt at a cohesive plan for children and youth, A Canada Fit for Children, being nearly 20 years old.*

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We heard that Canada's current government infrastructure for children and youth is failing young Canadians, with a third of Canadian children living without a safe and healthy childhood. One participant noted that "in the year 2000, when child poverty was supposed to have been eradicated, it was actually peaking, with almost a quarter of our children living in low-income families." Even now, income inequality continues to widen, with the gap between the incomes of rich and poor families with children continuing to increase.

We heard that federal budgets fail to provide an adequate focus on children and youth and do not provide transparency on what spending actually goes toward young Canadians. This is especially so as spending is rarely distinctly earmarked for children, instead it is often buried within programs geared at serving the public in general, and its impact on children is often an afterthought.



"Our council has seen too many examples of governments failing to honour promises to prioritize children and youth."

**CCCYA**

# DOES CANADA NEED A CHILDREN'S STRATEGY? IF SO, WHY?

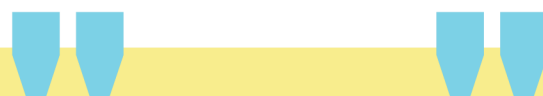
In particular, the lack of a comprehensive strategy creates the situation in which disjointed provincial policies develop to fill the gaps. This fragmented approach leaves cracks in the system through which our most vulnerable youth often slip. Specifically, the lack of coherence in child policies limits the accessibility of core programs such as parental leave and childcare.

The current patchwork is especially failing BIPOC youth; we heard from one participant that the current approach is creating complex barriers for Black youth. Black youth are often improperly put in lower-level classes in school, experience racism throughout their childhoods, feel unsupported by educators, and struggle to meet their basic needs.

We heard that a National Strategy would provide provinces and territories with a comprehensive framework for the implementation

of their own policies that align across levels of government. Canada is behind the curve on policy for children's well-being, as "many countries across the Global North have had a national strategy for children and youth for many years now."

A National Strategy for Children and Youth in Canada would help policymakers put children's health, well-being, and education at the forefront of consideration for policy issues and help ensure that a wider variety of children's cases are dealt with properly by government institutions; an outcome that would serve to bring Canada in line with its international commitments.



"We find that many countries across the Global North have had a national strategy for children and youth for many years now."

**CARE Jeunesse**

# DOES CANADA NEED A CHILDREN'S STRATEGY? IF SO, WHY?



## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

While being at the forefront of the ratification of the UNCRC, Canada has failed to live up to its representation and it has not kept children and their interests at the centre of decision-making in all matters that affect them.

**CCCYA**

Action plans, child agendas, strategies have been invested in and then just disregarded or forgotten, either due to a change in government, political will, or simply drift.

**CCCYA**

In the year 2000, when child poverty was supposed to have been eradicated, it was actually peaking, with almost a quarter of our children living in low-income families.

**Campaign 2000**

The problem [is that] Canada is failing young people. There are young people in Canada who are forced into pipelines to homelessness, poverty, human trafficking, criminalization, hospitalization, and even death. There are no equitable standards and no strategy for children and young people in Canada.

**OCAC**

Income inequality is continuing to widen. The gap between rich and poor is continuing to widen among families with children.

**Campaign 2000**

Canada was once ranked 10th among OECD countries for children's well-being, but sadly we have now fallen to 30th place.

**Children First Canada**

# WHAT SHOULD THE NATIONAL STRATEGY INCLUDE?

*A strategy would be a broad and comprehensive roadmap toward the respect of children's rights and the implementation of policies that ensure their health and well-being. Stakeholders spoke about what the foundational notions guiding the strategy should be and what the strategy should include.*

A major theme we heard was the need for a rights-based approach, namely one based on the guiding principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ("UNCRC"), so that - as one participant put it - "all children and youth in Canada have appropriate living conditions, access to good education, and access to services to assist with any family or developmental challenges they might be experiencing." This should also include enabling legislation for the UNCRC.

Framing the services delivered under the Strategy as "rights" is an important component of ensuring equitable access for all and avoiding an uneven distribution of those services, which in turn risks leaving out children and youth from already disadvantaged demographics.

Likewise, we heard that the Strategy should adopt the principle that no child be left behind and should focus on advancing substantive equality.

"International human rights standards are essential to protect the safety and security of children, which is why these rights are protected under international human rights conventions to which Canada is a party."

**OCAC**



# WHAT SHOULD THE NATIONAL STRATEGY INCLUDE?

In particular, we heard that the Strategy should focus on guaranteeing the right to security and survival, the right to education, the right to public health and mental health services, the right to be protected from illicit drugs, the rights of children with disabilities, and the right to an adequate standard of living. However, it should not be confined within the existing framework of the UNCRC but should endeavour to fill in the gaps as well.

We also heard that the Strategy should also focus on raising awareness among children and youth of their rights and developing their confidence as future Canadian leaders. The focus on rights is central, as those rights being recognized in law could be used to compel future governments to respect them. This should be an intentional and explicit part of the strategy.



"The strategy has to come with an investment in actually changing children's lives for the better."

**Children First Canada**

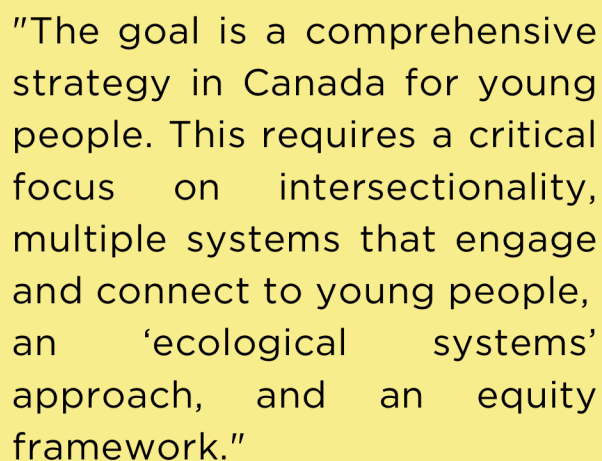
In addition to a strong focus on rights, the Strategy ought to seek to remedy the most pressing threats to childhood within Canada by, according to one participant, "reducing unintentional and preventable injuries, improving child and youth mental health, eliminating systemic racism and discrimination, ending child abuse—including prohibiting all forms of violence against children, addressing vaccine-preventable illnesses, ending child poverty and improving food and nutritional security, reducing infant mortality, ending bullying, improving physical activity and play, and reducing the impact of climate change."

# WHAT SHOULD THE NATIONAL STRATEGY INCLUDE?

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Specifically, we heard that ambitious goals on child poverty should be set from the beginning, with a focus on ending disparities in the delivery of children's services across Canada. By taking more direct responsibility for each and every child in Canada, policymakers can make a huge difference in the lives of children and youth. It is important to note that any strategy which seriously hopes to take aim at these issues must include adequate funding from all levels of government.

Beyond rights and threats to childhood, the Strategy should seek to actively empower youth in five key areas identified by young people themselves: education, health, employment, climate action, and youth in care. A major focus of this area must be services tailored to ensuring a seamless transition from youth to adulthood, in areas including employment and access to services. Another key aspect is to ensure that youth do not age out of the programs before they are ready to move on.



"The goal is a comprehensive strategy in Canada for young people. This requires a critical focus on intersectionality, multiple systems that engage and connect to young people, an 'ecological systems' approach, and an equity framework."

**OCAC**

We heard that intersectionality must constitute another core principle of the National Strategy to level the playing field for all of Canada's children and youth.

In general, there needs to be better anti-racism training for frontline workers and educators to help address systemic racism and discrimination. This anti-racism training should constitute a universal requirement for public-serving officials.



# WHAT SHOULD THE NATIONAL STRATEGY INCLUDE?

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Regarding Indigenous children and youth, we heard that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action must take centre stage. In particular, Call to Action 66—establishing multi-year funding for community-based organizations to deliver programs on reconciliation and establishing a national network to share information and best practices—would be a core principle in implementing the Strategy.

Likewise, funding must be distributed equitably and must include smaller, on-the-ground Indigenous organizations to ensure quality delivery of services. Jordan's Principle and the Inuit Child First Initiative should inform the Strategy as it pertains to Indigenous peoples, and the Strategy should seek to go beyond Western frameworks of social determinants, and consider the social impacts of colonialism on Indigenous children.

Additionally, the strategy must make a concerted effort to include BIPOC children and youth, with a deliberate focus on providing dedicated funding for specific marginalized groups, recognizing the specific and diverse needs and challenges faced by different communities.

As an example, we heard that the funding mechanism within the Strategy should contain a dedicated fund to build capacity for Black-youth-focused services to address service gaps, as they face unique challenges not adequately addressed by generalized programs.

Similarly, the funding mechanism ought to include specific funding systems which recognize the nuances of Black, Indigenous and other youth-led and youth-serving organizations.

# WHAT SHOULD THE NATIONAL STRATEGY INCLUDE?



## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

We feel that any decision makers need to take a more active role as corporate parents, adopting the principle, “What if this was my child?”

**C.A.R.E. Jeunesse**

Listening to children and youth and prioritizing their best interests, addressing the top 10 threats to childhood in Canada, and looking at how we can monitor what matters most in the lives of children and youth.

**Children First Canada**

Government transfers have a real role to play in raising people’s incomes and reducing child poverty.

**Campaign 2000**

The Canada we want increases access to clean water, affordable and clean energy, and provides a more sustainable environment for future generations.

**Students’  
Commission of Canada**

The development and implementation of the Canadian Children and Youth Strategy must intentionally include the nuanced disadvantages facing Black children and youth; while systemically dismantling systemic anti-Black racism across academic, employment, healthcare, and all other contributing socio-economic, political, and environmental systems.

**DYLOTT**

# SHOULD TARGETS, GOALS AND OUTCOMES BE INCLUDED?

*The consensus from stakeholders was that Canada's National Strategy must include the collection and analysis of data to ensure accountability and follow-through by the government.*

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We heard that this data strategy should include specific measurable outcomes for children and youth, such as the participation of youth in the workforce, the mental well-being of children and youth, and the proper functioning of children's healthcare services.

Outcomes should be specific, ambitious, and developed from the beginning. In particular, one participant expressed a desire for ambitious targets on the reduction of child poverty to be renewed annually.

To ensure the Strategy is equitably serving all of Canada's children and youth, we heard that it is important to ensure the collection of disaggregated data, especially

on the subjects of health and well-being.



Disaggregated data should be collected in collaboration with children- and youth-serving organizations, national Indigenous organizations, as well as children and youth themselves; and should include quantitative and qualitative sources.

# SHOULD TARGETS, GOALS AND OUTCOMES BE INCLUDED?

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We heard that the collection of disaggregated data should inform the creation of specific goals and targets, differentiated based on what the data indicates for different communities, with a particular focus on equity-deserving children and youth.

A centrally important point on the subject of monitoring progress was the need for open communication of targets, goals, and outcome measurement.

Canada's National Strategy should include a comprehensive plan for the sharing of data, outcomes, and the overall progress of the strategy across urban and rural communities across Canada.



"We have to develop a comprehensive data strategy that would encompass the collection of disaggregated data. We need to break it apart and see what's happening in different parts of our country on the health and well-being of children, supported by real analysis, research, and insights."

**Children First Canada**

# WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN CREATING THE STRATEGY?

*The process for the creation of the National Strategy should be collaborative, with a particular focus on including the voices of young Canadians of all backgrounds, by making the development accessible to children, and by ensuring children feel a sense of ownership over it. Children and youth should also play a central role in the dissemination of the completed strategy.*

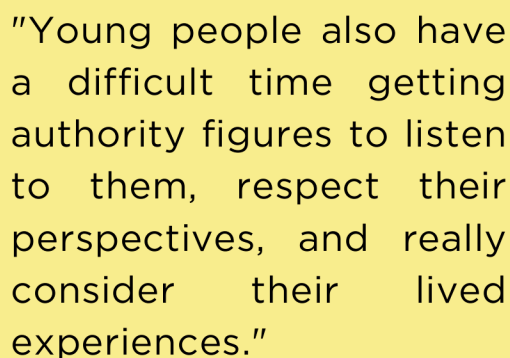
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We heard that the task force charged with creating the strategy should include representation from all provinces and territories, municipal governments, academic institutions, and from civil society—including NGOs.

It is important for policymakers to keep an open mind when consulting with children. Should Canada introduce a federal accountability officer for children, they could take the leadership role in the creation of the strategy.

As mentioned, it will be important to include diverse voices in the creation of the strategy, especially those of BIPOC children, youth, and organizations.

This will require recognition of the specific challenges in receiving input from those communities and deliberately seeking out their perspectives through the use of necessary accommodations.



"Young people also have a difficult time getting authority figures to listen to them, respect their perspectives, and really consider their lived experiences."

**CCR-YN**

# WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN CREATING THE STRATEGY?



## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Consultation should include a wide variety of voices from every demographic, including age, wealth, health, language, location, jobs, and heritage. It's important to hear from those who are experiencing the highest levels of poverty, but it's also important to hear those who are not.

**ACYF**

Programs and plans need to be based on broad engagement. Broad engagement is messy. It's not easy. We hear things that don't necessarily align with what we think is the right way to go, but that is how we get to intersectionality.

**Campaign 2000**

Strategy development should include consultation with children and young people themselves, as well as those who live and work with them, in particular to bring in the expertise of organizations and individuals who work with children to make sure that the consultations include child-sensitive materials and processes that make the consultation and the resulting strategy accessible to children and provides them with some degree of ownership over it.

**UNICEF Canada**

Children are not allowed to vote on these issues that will affect their present and future, and they are often not consulted or engaged on issues that are related to them, such as health.

**YCRH**

There should be financial and other support for educational opportunities to participate in the creation of the strategy. Finances should not be a barrier for genuine engagement.

**YCRH**



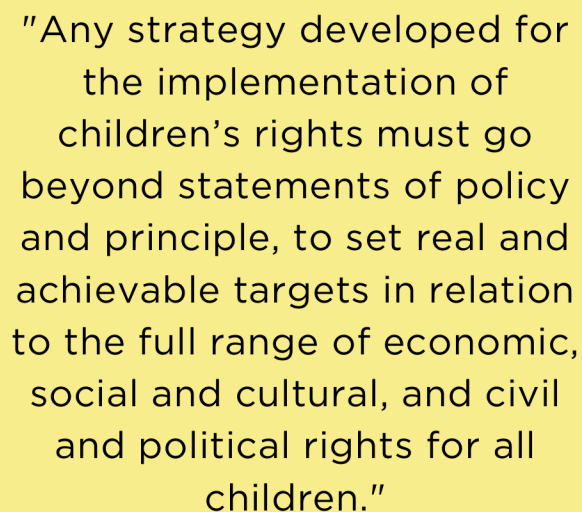
# SHOULD THERE BE ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES? WHAT SHOULD THEY LOOK LIKE?

*Once the National Strategy is in effect, there should be several accountability mechanisms to ensure the policy is being effectively carried out.*

A common thread we heard from stakeholders was the need for regular review periods, although there was some disagreement on the frequency of reviews. The recommendations included every 2-3 years, every 3-5 years, and every 10 years.

This reporting should be made available to the public to ensure their involvement in accountability.

In addition to proactive reviews, we heard that the Strategy should include an effective complaints resolution process for Canadian children and youth, so that young Canadians may personally hold the government to account when policies created under the Strategy fail them. One participant noted that “the Strategy and reporting can be disseminated to all levels but particularly the public, because ... the public tool is really handy to keep things accountable ... and have better outcomes for government not to be able to let it drift or slide into oblivion.”



“Any strategy developed for the implementation of children’s rights must go beyond statements of policy and principle, to set real and achievable targets in relation to the full range of economic, social and cultural, and civil and political rights for all children.”

**UNICEF Canada**

# SHOULD THERE BE ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES? WHAT SHOULD THEY LOOK LIKE?

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We heard that human rights and intersectionality must underpin the National Strategy's entire accountability framework, with broad engagement throughout. This includes, but is not limited to, a GBA+ analysis with identifiable targets and timelines.

In line with Canada's international commitments, one participant raised that an additional focus should be placed on Black children and youth, in light of the United Nations' Decade for People of African Descent, which was recognized by Canada in 2019. In this regard, reports should include disaggregated data on social determinants of health for Black children and youth, and the Strategy's targets should incorporate and ensure the achievement of the UNDPAD's themes.





# SHOULD THE FRAMEWORK BE NATIONAL OR SIMPLY FEDERAL?

*The consensus from the roundtable is that unilateral action by the federal government would be insufficient; buy-in and participation by the provinces and territories is important in the creation and operation of a National Strategy.*

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A truly national strategy should include a coordinating mechanism between levels of government, for example, an interdepartmental working group on children's rights could be established, charged with and capable of acting on recommendations heard, with an open structure consisting of more than just public servants.

We heard that “a national versus federal strategy would align with the CRC’s concluding observation that a national strategy enables provinces and territories to adopt accordingly their own specific plans and strategies. A framework-style bill could outline parameters and structural components embedded in all the FPT strategies to ensure effectiveness and accountability.”

The federal government should take a leadership role, both in terms of standardization and funding.

We also heard that the Strategy should include federal guidelines for related services, which should be supported by financial incentives, such as conditional funding. That said, it is important that funding be adequate to facilitate the provision of services.

# SHOULD THE FRAMEWORK BE NATIONAL OR SIMPLY FEDERAL?

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A second major advantage of a national—rather than merely federal—is the facilitation of greater communication between levels of government and with children and youth themselves.

Likewise, greater cohesion between federal and provincial/territorial governments would clarify for children and youth the process of participation in policy.

We heard from stakeholders that children and youth, especially those in remote communities, are often unsure of which level of government is responsible for a given policy issue.

A cohesive, intergovernmental policy task force would provide a central mechanism for feedback, concerns, and complaints to be heard directly from children and youth.



# WHICH MINISTER(S) SHOULD BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE STRATEGY?

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Some stakeholders expressed a preference for splitting responsibility for the Strategy between different existing portfolios, including those of:

- the **Minister of Families, Children, and Social Development**;
- the **Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Youth**;
- the **Minister of Canadian Heritage**;
- the **Minister of Justice**;
- the **Minister of Health**;
- and the **Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs**.



That said, other stakeholders expressed a preference for the creation of a new ministry for the strategy, with one suggesting a Minister for Youth, Infrastructure, and Innovation, whose mandate would include collaboration with provincial, territorial, and municipal ministers with the same portfolio.

# SHOULD THERE BE A PERMANENT ADVISORY BODY TO MONITOR THE STRATEGY?

*There was consensus among participants that the Strategy should have some advisory body charged with monitoring the Strategy and progress on government policies, though there was some disagreement on the shape this advisory body should take.*

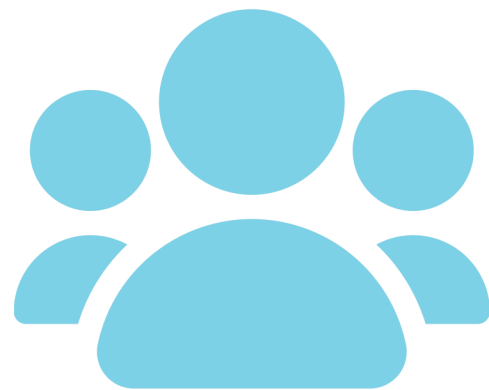
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Some participants expressed a preference for the creation of an office for a Commissioner on Children and Youth with corresponding provincial and territorial youth advocates.

This approach would serve as a streamlined focal point for children and could encourage meaningful and ongoing participation with young people on issues relevant to them.

This would be consistent with Article 12 of the UNCRC: the right for children to express their views.

That said, other participants expressed a preference for a council rather than a single individual per jurisdiction.



We heard that a council could be more effective at actively monitoring government efforts relating to children and youth and could provide independent reports to Parliament.

# SHOULD THERE BE A PERMANENT ADVISORY BODY TO MONITOR THE STRATEGY?

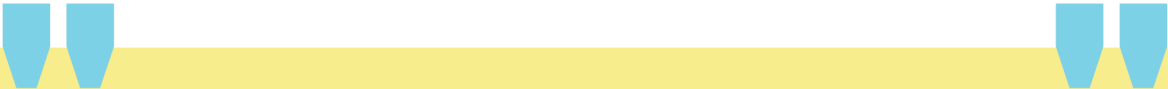
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Should an advisory council be pursued, we heard that it is important that the council include young people in some capacity, with members who are representative of the diversity of Canadian society.

We heard that it is also important that federal and provincial governments themselves be kept at arms' length from the council, such as by all-party parliamentary appointments in place of unilateral appointments by the sitting government.

Regardless of the form chosen, an advisory body will form an important component of the national strategy, playing a role in accountability and standardization.

As one participant put it,



"Although each province and territory will have their own right to decide how they implement the national strategy, there should be an advisory board or commissioner who oversees the provinces and brings it back to the national strategy to ensure accountability and reduce jurisdictional disputes."

**Arctic Children and Youth Foundation**

# ARE THERE ANY OUTSTANDING AND IMPORTANT QUESTIONS THAT SHOULD BE CONSIDERED?

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Participants gave additional recommendations that the Strategy should include policies expanding the ability of the charitable sector to move money to grassroots entities, that the government should remove the requirement that Indigenous entities engage with non-Indigenous entities—including the mandatory splitting of funding and that the Strategy’s core funding should be distributed with a priority given to organizations with no history of government funding to assist the delivery of community services.



Finally, we clearly heard that one very important element of the National Strategy has to be to ensure its focus on children and young children.

A central element of this has to be to make sure explanatory and educational materials on the Strategy are distributed to children of all ages and are age-appropriate for their intended audiences.

# CONCLUSION

The message we received was clear: If you don't know where you're going, you'll never get there.

Canada lacks a comprehensive strategy to ensure every child in Canada grows up safe, happy and healthy. This leaves every level of government, communities and civil society scrambling to fill in the gaps.

There is clear consensus among stakeholders, advocates and young people consulted that a National Strategy for Children and Youth in Canada is needed. This report proposes the broad contours of a strategy.

Participants were clear that the Strategy's guiding principle should be the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child, and that it should be developed with a child rights centered approach. The development and implementation of the Strategy should be accessible and intersectional, with a focus on the most vulnerable and marginalized youth and a differentiated approach based on a recognition that children and youth are not a monolith. The Strategy should set ambitious goals—led by strong disaggregated data—with clear targets and outcomes.

# CONCLUSION

The National Strategy for Children and Youth in Canada should be reviewed regularly, as the needs of young people change and shift over time. The Strategy should also be cohesive, making space for different levels of government, grassroots organizations, civil society and NGOs and children and youth themselves to work together for the good of children and youth in Canada. A successful Strategy will be open and transparent. A willingness to share data, strong accountability measures and a commitment to public education will help ensure the Strategy's success.

Young people must play a central role in the Strategy—both in its creation and during its implementation. Youth were clear that dedicated efforts to communicate the strategy to the public, especially young people, and to educate children and youth about their rights, will be key.

Done well, a National Strategy will help empower youth and let them take charge.

Children and youth know where we need to go - it is up to the rest of us to follow their lead.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This report would not have been possible without our roundtable participants and partners.

- The Arctic Children and Youth Foundation (ACYF)
- Assembly of 7 Generations
- Assembly of First Nations Youth Council
- C.A.R.E. Jeunesse
- Campaign 2000
- Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates (CCCYA)
- Canadian Coalition on the Rights of Children
- Canadian Council of Refugees Youth Network (CCR -YN)
- Children First Canada
- Children's Healthcare Canada
- Developing Young Leaders of Tomorrow Today (DYLOTT)
- Easter Seals Canada
- Être et Devenir
- Feathers of Hope
- National Association of Friendship Centres
- National Inuit Youth Council
- Ontario Children's Advancement Coalition (OCAC)
- Regional Multicultural Youth Council
- Students Commission of Canada
- Council for the Advancement of African Canadians in Alberta
- Tropicana Community Services
- UNICEF Canada
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- Alicja Krubnik
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