

Connections Vol 3.2

Learning and Teaching about Children's Rights

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On November 20, 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was unanimously adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, and with it, the global community took a significant step forward in the way it values and respects children and their rights. The Convention acknowledges the universal rights of all children. In recognition of the tenth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Canadians will be celebrating National Child Day on November 20, 1999. Together children and youth along with their caregivers, early childhood practitioners, teachers, child and youth care workers and families, can create and take part in child-centered activities which honour and respect children and youth while educating them about human rights.

Early Childhood Care Programs

To celebrate National Child Day, early childhood practitioners can reflect upon children's rights and examine how those rights are incorporated into their early childhood care programs.

What rights do young children (infants, toddlers and preschoolers) have under the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child?

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, young children have the same rights as any other person under the age of 18 in Canada.

Summarized, they are:

- rights of provision such as adequate food, shelter, clean water, health care, and formal primary education;
- rights of protection from abuse, neglect, and exploitation; and
- rights of participation such as children taking part in decision making about matters which directly affect them.

What do you do as an early childhood practitioner to ensure that children's rights are upheld?

Some things to think about and discuss:

- ...how do you speak out for children and families;
- ...how do you follow your early childhood practitioner's code of ethics and deal with ethical dilemmas individually and as a team; and
- ...how do you deal with infringements on children's rights?

What do you do as an early childhood practitioner to ensure that children know, practice and respect the rights of others and themselves?

Some things to think about and discuss:

- ...how do the curriculum materials you have incorporated into your program address children's rights;
- ...how do your routines, schedules, materials, discipline measures and activities demonstrate, teach and practice respect for the rights of the children; and
- ...how do your interactions with children and adults demonstrate honour, respect and modesty?

By examining how one's early childhood programs demonstrate a respect for the rights of children and teach children about their rights and responsibilities, early childhood practitioners honour and respect children and their rights.

School Programs

A recommendation of the 1994 report on the progress of implementing the Convention was that education programs on the Convention be further developed and implemented in Canada for persons of all ages. In light of that recommendation, and in response to ongoing interests voiced by teachers, students and families, several education programs have been implemented in Victoria, British Columbia. These programs offer insight to early childhood practitioners working with school aged children.

The World Around Us (Murray, 1995);

This curriculum has been successfully implemented within select public schools in Victoria, since April 1996 and recently into the eight Collaborative Learning Communities within the Calgary Board of Education in Alberta. The key purpose of this curriculum is to advance education for responsible citizenship by offering students opportunities to explore issues surrounding the human rights of children and their responsibilities. This comprehensive curriculum resource includes literature-based activities, with learning and teaching strategies that support children's conceptual development in addition to their literacy, social, and participatory skills. Classroom-based research on the impact of this curriculum indicates that Primary-level students can begin understanding and respecting their own and other's rights.

Both teachers and parents value how the curriculum enhances the children's social skills, such as respecting oneself and others as well as taking responsible actions. For example, in one Primary classroom where the curriculum was used, the students with their teacher examined an incident that happened the previous afternoon on the school bus. Jake had demanded that Mary give up the coveted window seat at the front of the bus just behind the bus driver. With the teacher's guidance, the children discussed the idea that even though Jake might want Mary's place on the bus, his freedom of choice was restricted in practice. Using a model for decision making included in this curriculum, the students and their teacher identified the problem, and considered options. The children eventually decided that the seat should be available to all interested students. As the discussion continued, the teacher asked the students if the seat should be given to students with special needs, such as someone who walks on crutches. The children agreed that a person with special needs should get the seat; as eight-year-old Jake concluded: "Some people really need the front seat because it's too hard to get to the back of the bus, and not just because they want to look out the window." Perhaps when children can begin to reason the relationships amongst needs, rights, and responsible actions, then their awareness of rights and sense of respect and responsibility to oneself, others and the world may best be realized.

Family Education Program on the Convention on the Rights of the Child:

Developed in response to parent's interest, this program is meant to increase public awareness of CRC, and to strengthen ties between the school and the community by offering family-oriented education workshops. It includes

a comprehensive Workshop Facilitator's Guide that assists in planning and presenting workshops that best meet the needs and interests of the target audiences. Its use as a model for community-based education about the CRC and children's rights, as well as child and youth advocacy and self-advocacy, is encouraged beyond Victoria.

Giving Voice: Children's Rights Come Alive

This third-year university course, developed by affiliates of the School of Child and Youth Care in partnership with the United Nations Children's Fund-Canada and the Canadian Coalition on the Rights of the Child, is offered through distance education by the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria. A key purpose of this post-secondary course is to breathe life into the Convention by translating its principles into front-line child and youth care practice within various family, community, and cultural contexts.

In the spirit of the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education, (1995-2004) the worth of education programs may be judged by the extent to which they afford citizens opportunities to learn about the Convention, and offer children and youth opportunities to understand and experience their rights and responsibilities. A legacy of learning and teaching about children's rights through such education programs may be that participants are moved to protect the rights of others by advocating for the inclusion, respect, responsibility, and safety of all persons at school, and within their communities.

Authors:

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Resources, Connections Library:

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