

United Nations  
Committee on the Rights of the Child  
43<sup>rd</sup> Session

Speak, Participate and Decide  
The Child's Right to be Heard

Day of Discussion  
September 15, 2006



FIRST NATIONS  
CHILD & FAMILY  
CARING SOCIETY  
OF CANADA



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## **Declaration of Accountability on the Ethical Engagement of Young People and Adults in Canadian Organizations: A Model for Good Practice.**

### **Introduction**

Speak, Participate and Decide-The Child's Right to be Heard clearly indicates age does not define the potential of each person to make a contribution. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child increased the awareness of States and NGO's about the right of children to participate in decisions affecting them but unfortunately the lack of guidelines on how to involve children and youth has sometimes led to poor outcomes. *The Declaration of Accountability on the Ethical Engagement of Young People and Adults in Canadian Organizations*<sup>1</sup> aims to be a catalyst for growth in the field of child participation and youth engagement movements by establishing a model of good practice that will foster respectful and meaningful participation in schools, non profit organizations, institutions and communities. The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child articles 12-15 clearly state that children have an inalienable right to assert their voice and control over decisions and circumstances that affect their lives. In keeping with the goals of the Day of Discussion, we would encourage State parties to work with young people, young peoples' organizations and non profit organizations to develop similar guidelines to ensure that youth engagement respects the interdependent rights of children and optimizes their contribution. Furthermore, increasing the capacity of State parties, adherents, organizations, institutions and communities to monitor and evaluate their activities through the use of the guiding principles for youth engagement will assist in promoting good practice for child and youth participation throughout the world.

### **Background**

Children and youth have an integral role in the development of society as evidenced by the strength of youth engagement movements in Canada and abroad. Since the 1985 United Nations International Year of the Youth and the integration of child participation in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, great strides have been made by organizations, institutions, communities and governments to include children and young people in decision-making processes. However, the success of these efforts varies widely, and although there are positive examples of youth engagement in organizations, institutions, communities and governments, there have also been times when young people have not felt respected or included.

Despite significant advances in child and youth participation and engagement there continues to exist a subversive element that is frequently deleterious to the wellbeing of children and youth. This negative undertone of child and youth participation is evidenced in the willful or neglectful treatment of children and youth who often become trivialized, tokenized or, at worst, exploited by the very mechanisms designed to support their

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<sup>1</sup> Alderman, J., Balla, S., Blackstock, C., & Khanna, N. (2006). *Declaration of Accountability on the Ethical Engagement of Young People and Adults in Canadian Organizations*. Ottawa, ON: First Nations Child and family Caring Society of Canada. This document is available to download free of charge by visiting [www.fncaringsociety.com](http://www.fncaringsociety.com)

inclusion. Furthermore, the participation of children and youth within organizations, institutions, communities and countries varies widely depending on a country's norms and values. Moreover, the participation of children and young people varies widely around the world according to the will, level of investment and capacity of states and ancillary organizations. While the threat of violence in response to public participation is minimal in Canada, there are times when the physical and psychological exclusion of children and young people continues despite efforts to engage children and youth respectfully and meaningfully in research, organizations, governance, and volunteer activities.

As a response to this negative undertone to child and youth engagement, a working group of organizations, dedicated to pursuing an agenda that recognized not only the contributions of adults but respectfully, meaningfully and ethically engaged children and youth was organized. The working group explored issues of personal and professional relevance and examined with courage the challenges and successes experienced working with children, youth and adults.

### **Discussion**

There is a growing body of research and resources being prepared by Canadian organizations and institutions on the inclusion of children and young people in organizations, in conducting research (as researchers as well as subjects) and in their civic engagement in their communities. The following is only a brief list of the many organizations pioneering research in this field: *The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement, the McCreary Youth Foundation, the Laidlaw Foundation, and Save the Children Canada*. These organizations provide invaluable resources on engagement tools, strategies, benefits, challenges and successes of working in partnership with young people and adults. However, despite these documents outlining the process, the outcomes, the deliverable and the next steps, very little exists on the examining child participation through an ethical lens. The working group developed the Ethical Guidelines to begin a process of reflection on how organizations and institutions engage children and youth within their structures, the roles of adults and the role of supporting organizations, institutions, and communities.

### **Summary of the Guidelines**

#### ***Principle 1 Youth Engagement Is Not A Program***

Children and young people in Canada make significant contributions to society in the form of volunteer work, employment and by providing a unique perspective on society. Worldwide, children and youth have been the source of many of the most important social movements and thus it is critical for the wellbeing of us all that national organizations support, nurture and respectfully engage with children and young people. As the contributions of young people can enhance all levels of the organization's work, youth engagement should be viewed as a natural way of working in the organization versus as a special program.

#### ***Principle 2 Contributions Match the Organization***

Children and youth who are working with an organization should be recruited for their knowledge, skills, interests and commitment to the organizational mission - not on the

basis of age alone. Employees and volunteers are much less likely to feel tokenized if the organization's work lies within their personal knowledge and interest areas.

***Principle 3 One Person Cannot Represent the Many***

All members of an organization bring a particular identity and perspective, but people who come from unique cultural groups or life experiences should not be asked to speak on behalf of that group. For example, a young person should not be considered “the youth voice” at the table – everyone’s voices at the table should be acknowledged as bringing different perspectives to the issue. Diversity of voice is integral to the growth of inclusion and engagement within organizations.

***Principle 4 Debate as a learning tool***

Debate and critical analysis are key elements of a learning organization and personal growth. Debate and critical analysis of issues and organizational approaches, conducted in a safe and respectful way, challenges assumptions, builds on the experiences of experts and advocates and provides solutions to identified barriers to inclusion and engagement.

***Principle 5 Dignity and Safety***

Under no circumstance should children, youth or adults in the workplace feel that placing themselves in an emotionally, spiritually, physically or cognitively unsafe space is expected or required by the organization. This includes, but is not limited to, 1) sharing personal experiences; 2) unsafe working conditions; 3) expectations to take on more responsibility than the person is capable of managing; and 4) exposure to traumatic situations without adequate training or support. Although many organizations are very thoughtful when it comes to these matters there have, unfortunately, been times when well-meaning young people and adults have placed other children and young people in situations that have been unsafe often because the potential consequences have not been thoroughly examined.

***Principle 6 Avoiding False Expectations***

It is important to be honest about the changing role of children and youth within an organization, including recognizing that there are limitations that correspond to age, experience, education and training. For example, some opportunities may only be provided to youth and are not open in the same way to adults, or there may be different standards of qualifications for summer students acting in a particular role and full time staff. An open, honest and clear conversation with young people about these limitations is important.

***Principle 7 Balance and Accessibility***

As part of the development of the working relationship comes the understanding that most people require workplace accommodations to support them in making the optimal contribution to the organization – including children and youth. These accommodations for children and youth may mean flexible meeting times, transportation and support for children and youth before, during and after their time at the organization. Accommodations for young people should be viewed as comparable to those made for adults in an organization. A discussion about meeting the needs of the organization and

of the children and youth involves concrete and measurable goals that are positive and possible within the timeframe.

### **Conclusion**

Articles 12-15 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child articulates the conditions and the limitations surrounding the rights and responsibilities of individuals who wish to speak, participate and decide. What is not listed within these articles are the responsibilities of Governments, organizations, adults and individuals in supporting and advocating space for children and youth. Children and youth do not live in isolation from outside factors and influences largely imposed by those who are older or in positions with more authority. An honest review of the guidelines and their application within any system will engender a more comprehensive and holistic commitment to the right of children and youth to speak, participate and decide.

## **ANNEX 1: RECOMMENDATIONS**

**1. That the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child develop a General Comment on the Engagement of Children and Youth in consultation with children, young people and organizations working with children and young people.**

**2. States work with young people, young peoples' organizations and NGOs to develop national ethical guidelines for the engagement of children and young people with particular attention to the inclusion of marginalized children and youth (such as Indigenous children, persons with disabilities, refugee children). States and organizations then will have an accountability standard against which their progress on child participation can be measured when reporting on the participation of children and youth to domestic and international committees, panels, organizations or institutions.**

**3. The Ethical Guidelines are integral to an evaluation of child and youth participation and shall be used in an evaluation strategy that looks at how opportunities are provided to young people, what safeguards have been put into place and how State parties ensure that the rights of children and youth are respected, nurtured and protected.**

**4. There shall be open and honest conversations with children and young people on the benefits and consequences of participation. This conversation is unique to time and place, political, economic and social contexts but will nonetheless ensure the safe participation of children and youth.**

**5. Governments, institutions, organizations, communities and individuals must fundamentally chose to believe that the engagement of all this worlds young citizens is an inalienable right and the spirit, enthusiasm and innovation that children and youth bring are invaluable gifts to be protected, nurtured, shared and celebrated.**