

Children's Rights: Frequently Asked Questions

Who is the resource for?

This resource is for anyone who cares for young people including youth, families, community members and professionals. It provides information on children's rights and explores why these rights deserve special consideration.

What are children's rights and what is the UNCRC?

Children's rights are important freedoms and equal opportunities for all human beings under the age of 18. They are outlined in a separate rights document called the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)*. The *UNCRC* has 54 articles that set out the rights of all children and how adults and government should work together to uphold these rights.¹ The *UNCRC* provides a solid road map of what we need to raise healthy and happy children and youth. Supporting the *UNCRC* involves treating all young people fairly and with respect; providing what they need to live, survive, and develop; considering their best interests; and respecting their views when decisions affect them.²

Why are children's rights important?

When we meet children's rights, they experience safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and develop the strength necessary to cope with significant stressors or challenges. When children experience harm, like abuse or neglect, this can create toxic stress which can impact their brain development and their long-term mental and physical health.³ When we do not uphold their rights, and young people do not have enough support, they may be marginalized, exploited, or suffer serious injury.⁴

Children are special: The *UNCRC* recognizes children as rights holders and outlines rights specific to their developing needs. The *UNCRC* includes rights particularly relevant to children that may not be specifically covered by other rights documents such as the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the *United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the *United Nation Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)*, or the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)*. The *UNCRC* can be used alongside these other rights documents to protect the rights of children in Canada.

Decisions affect them disproportionately: Supporting children's rights is a key factor in improving their quality of life. Government policy and decisions may affect children more intensely than other groups, but since children generally cannot vote, their views are not often considered in the political process.⁵ Failing to consider the rights of children, and support their healthy development, can have a negative impact on the future of all Canadians. Without special attention to their opinions and specific needs, many important issues go unaddressed. Including child rights impact assessments (CRIAs) in decision-making processes can help. By looking specifically at how decisions may affect children and their rights, CRIAs can improve public policy and make children's well-being a priority.⁶

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Poverty and inequities: Research shows the level of investment in children's early years impacts their contribution to society over the course of their lives.⁷ Many young people in Alberta face poverty, discrimination, poor mental health, bullying, and abuse. The COVID pandemic has further added to these challenges.⁸ Young people are more vulnerable to these inequities which deter them from participating in society and moving toward self-sufficiency. A community that promotes children's rights, and addresses these adversities, raises citizens who are healthier and more engaged.⁹

What is the UNDRIP?

The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)* is a rights document that recognizes Indigenous peoples' basic human rights as well as other inherent or pre-existing rights, including the right to self-determination, language, equality, and land. *UNDRIP* affects the collective health and well-being of Indigenous children. It can be used with the *UNCRC* to ensure that the rights of Indigenous young people are being upheld and they are receiving what they need to grow up into healthy adults. When *UNDRIP* was adopted by the United Nations in 2007, Canada voted against it (one of only four countries to do so).¹⁰ It was nearly a decade later, in 2016, when Canada reversed its decision and endorsed *UNDRIP*.¹¹ When a country endorses a declaration, it is agreeing to act in a particular manner. Implementing *UNDRIP* will help build a better nation for Indigenous peoples and all who live in Canada.¹² For more information on what Canada is doing visit <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/declaration/index.html>

Why do Indigenous rights need special recognition?

UNDRIP did not create new rights for Indigenous peoples, it elaborates on existing human rights standards and fundamental freedoms. Indigenous rights are inherent – they have existed since before the arrival of settlers.¹³ They include rights to land, subsistence activities and resources, self-determination, self-government, culture, customs, and language.¹⁴ While Indigenous rights are meant to be guaranteed within Treaties, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the *Canadian Constitution*,^{15,16} and *UNDRIP*, Indigenous Peoples in Canada have experienced, and continue to experience, violations of their basic human rights¹⁷ through systemic inequities, discrimination, and racism created by colonialism.¹⁸ Upholding the rights of Indigenous Peoples is essential to realizing both the Calls to Actions from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission¹⁹ and the Calls to Justice from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.²⁰

What is the UNCRPD?

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)* is another rights document that can be used with the *UNCRC* to ensure young people are receiving what they need to live full and healthy lives. This document aims to ensure that people with disabilities have access to all human rights and fundamental freedoms.²¹ Rather than viewing people with disabilities as 'objects' of charity, the *UNCRPD* approaches persons with disabilities as 'subjects' with rights who are capable of making their own life decisions and actively participating in society.²²

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How can we respect children's rights?

- Teach children about their rights – there are lots of excellent resources to help you do this (see below for a list).
- Ask young people for their input! Give them opportunities to participate and practice their problem-solving skills.
- Listen to them and be approachable. At the core of respecting a child's rights is their voice being heard, believed, and valued in their community.
- Advocate for safe spaces for them to learn, grow, play and to create positive relationships with caring peers and adults.

Why is it important to teach children their rights?

Teaching children about their rights can help them to:²³

- Develop good citizenship values and participate in decision-making
- Have a better understanding of both rights and responsibilities
- Respect the rights of others and reduce bullying
- Be more inclusive and accepting of diversity
- Develop more compassion and stand up for others
- Have better relationships with the peers and adults in their lives
- Be more self-confident and experience greater well-being

When can you start teaching kids about their rights?

It's good to start building knowledge about rights at an early age. Even very young children can articulate what they want and how they feel.

What are some resources to help teach kids about their rights?

- *Office of the Child and Youth Advocate: Resources Page* - ocya.alberta.ca/resources
- *National Child Day Alberta* - nationalchildday.ca
- *Explaining Human Rights to Kids on International Human Rights Day* - kidskonnnect.com/articles/human-rights-for-kids
- *Early Childhood Education, Child Rights, and You: A Resource for Aboriginal ECE Practitioners* - scyofbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/1160-SCY-ECE-booklet-WEB-4.pdf?opt=HKSUFT
- *Resources from the Society for Children and Youth BC* - scyofbc.org/resources
- *National Child's Day Children's Rights Activity Guide* - canada.ca/en/public-health/services/national-child-day/children-s-rights-activity-guide.html
- *Teaching for Children's Rights: Rights, Wants and Needs Card and Activity Set* - unicef.ca/sites/default/files/legacy/imce_uploads/rights_wants_and_needs.pdf
- *Know Your Rights Guide: United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples for Indigenous Adolescents* - un-declaration.narf.org/wp-content/uploads/un-adolescents-guide2013.pdf

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