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CANADA

**VOTE for  
every child.**



**2021**

**POLICY BOOK**

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MAKE PARLIAMENT  
ACCOUNTABLE TO  
CHILDREN AND YOUTH

**#VoteForEveryChild** is an election advocacy campaign by UNICEF Canada. The purpose is to highlight the issues at stake for children when Canadians go to the polls and help voters let the candidates and political parties know that their vote will be a **#VoteForEveryChild**.

The next federal election will focus on who will best lead Canada beyond the pandemic and into recovery. With COVID-19 significantly impacting the lives of children and families in Canada and around the world, Canada must build back better by ensuring that children and youth are at the heart of the recovery.

COVID-19 is a child rights crisis. The pandemic has uncovered and exacerbated existing inequalities faced by children and youth around the world. As Canada's leading child-focused organization, operating across 190 countries globally and with over 285,000 supporters across the country, we are alarmed at the state of child rights today. The past year has seen an increase in children who have been left hungry, isolated, abused and anxious. Hundreds of millions of children have missed out on quality education. Access to protection services and health services has been severely impacted. Progress has gone backward across virtually every key measure of childhood. The signs that children will bear the scars of the pandemic for years to come are unmistakable, and the cost of inaction is high.

With inequalities deepening and children's futures at risk, this moment calls for nothing less than a dedicated focus by the next Government of Canada to re-imagine a better world as we move past the current pandemic. We need bold Canadian leadership to champion the rights of the most vulnerable children to be healthy, educated, protected and empowered. Canada must act to ensure that no child left is behind.

## A child-and youth-centred approach that leaves no one behind

In Canada, children have made tremendous sacrifices to keep the vulnerable in our communities safe from COVID-19. School closures, the loss of recreational opportunities, family separation or confinement, disrupted routines and experiences, and loss of family income have affected the physical and mental health of children and youth. Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic unleashed a world of crisis that has worsened global inequalities in child rights and eroded hard-won progress on child survival, access to education, health, nutrition and protection, and reducing discrimination. It has both revealed and exacerbated these overlapping crises, compounding the impacts of increasing humanitarian emergencies, protracted conflicts and the climate crisis.

How will we protect families at risk from a projected increase in child poverty? What is the plan for the millions of children and parents reporting new or worsening mental health? How can we give children everywhere the best possible start to life? Most importantly, how will Canada's recovery include those who have historically been denied their right to a childhood, including Indigenous and racialized children, children and youth with disabilities, and those facing discrimination based on their gender, sexual orientation, or religion? The extent to which their childhoods will rebound or erode depends on what Canada does next.

The children and youth of today are already becoming the leaders of tomorrow. With the proper support, children and youth can ensure an inclusive, just Canada where no one is left behind. The right action now will ensure that our momentum and development gains impacting children are not lost or set back and will ensure that we are on track to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

# POLICY PROPOSALS

## AT A GLANCE

### 01.

#### PROTECT EVERY CHILD'S RIGHT TO A CHILDHOOD

- End discrimination in services provided to Indigenous children
- Increase the ambition of Canada's feminist international assistance
- End child poverty
- Support an Integrated Agenda for Children through COVID-19 recovery

### 02.

#### GIVE CHILDREN THE BEST POSSIBLE START IN LIFE

- Guarantee accessible, high-quality early learning and child care for all
- Expand and improve Canada's parental leave system

### 03.

#### ENSURE CHILDREN AND YOUTH ARE HEALTHY, SAFE AND IN SCHOOL

- Protect nutrition, immunization and education services for women and children in emergencies
- Invest in child and youth mental health
- Develop a National School Food Program
- Launch a national Strategy on Ending Violence Against Children

### 04.

#### MAKE PARLIAMENT ACCOUNTABLE TO CHILDREN AND YOUTH

- Establish a Commissioner for Children and Youth
- Lower the voting age to 16 in federal elections
- Appoint a Special Envoy for Children in Crisis
- Create a Global Children and Youth Advisory Council
- Monitor Public Finance for Children

## 01. | **Protect every child's right to a childhood**

**We call on Canada's political parties to commit to ending discrimination in services provided to Indigenous children by implementing the Spirit Bear Plan, the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.**

All children have the right to a childhood, and Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that all children have the right to be free from discrimination, including on the basis of race. Unfortunately, Canada has failed to live up to this basic principle when it comes to First Nations, Métis and Inuit children. In 2021, a commitment from all political parties to end ongoing discrimination and address historical wrongs is an absolute necessity.

We call on all parties to work with Indigenous nations and communities to address the many recommendations left unanswered and commitments left unfinished by previous governments. This includes the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society's Spirit Bear Plan to provide equitable services and end ongoing discrimination, the Calls to Action of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and more.

**We call on Canada's political parties to commit to increasing the ambition of Canada's feminist international assistance to include other forms of discrimination including gender transformative, anti-racism elements that recognize the colonial roots of inequalities.**

Canadian aid directly contributes to fulfilling children's rights to survival, education, nutrition, protection from violence, and freedom from discrimination.

However, children facing different forms of discrimination – based on their gender, race, religion, or disability – are still being left behind. The rights of the most marginalized children have been devastated by COVID-19, and require sustained and increased investment to stop the setback and get back on track to ensuring every child's right to a childhood.

To build back stronger, healthier, safer and more inclusive societies, we call on all political parties to commit to a roadmap for adequately-funded international assistance with an increased focus on addressing different forms of discrimination including gender transformative and anti-racism elements that recognize the colonial roots of inequalities. Expanding the ambition of Canada's feminist international assistance by building on the foundation of tackling gender inequality to address other forms of discrimination, and investing in this ambition, will allow Canada's response to COVID-19, the global climate emergency and growing humanitarian crises to target those most at risk of being left behind.

**We call on Canada's political parties to commit to ending child poverty.**

Both globally and here in Canada, poverty remains the greatest threat to the right to a childhood. COVID-19 has already left a lasting impact, disrupting 25 years of global progress on development goals, including poverty, in 25 weeks. It is hard to be a kid when your family is struggling to access housing or put food on the table. We call on all political parties to include concrete commitments towards the goal of eradicating child poverty in Canada and around the world.



Despite Parliament's 1989 commitment to end child poverty in Canada by 2000, child poverty has decreased just 3.4 percentage points since then, from 22% in 1989 to 18.6% in 2018. At a minimum, Canada's political parties should commit to meeting the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target of cutting child poverty rates by half by the year 2030, achieving what some rich countries have already done.

Through the Canada Child Benefit (CCB) and similar income supports, and through a Feminist International Assistance Policy that includes cash transfers and other social protection mechanisms, Canada could help end child poverty.

**We call on Canada's political parties to commit to an Integrated Agenda for Children through COVID-19 response and recovery to realize the rights of the most marginalized children globally to be educated, protected, healthy, empowered and free from discrimination.**

Recognizing that children do not live siloed lives, Canada must champion an Integrated Agenda for Children through COVID-19 response and recovery. Canada must take urgent action to prevent, mitigate and respond to the pandemic's worst effects, while reimagining a more just, inclusive world for children. To respond to this challenge, Canada must develop and fund integrated health, nutrition, education, and child protection initiatives to realize the rights of the most marginalized children, with an expanded focus on early childhood (ages 0-8), when these needs are critical to survival, learning and future earnings potential. In addition, recognizing that social norms related to gender, race, ethnicity, religion and disability are often formed in children's early years, the Integrated Agenda for Children must have a deliberate anti-racist, feminist, human rights-based approach.

To fulfill our SDG pledge to leave no one behind, Canada's foreign policy and international assistance must prioritize the needs of the most marginalized children – including girls, racialized children,

children with disabilities, and children affected or displaced by conflict – and those facing other forms of discrimination that together cause multiple, intersecting barriers to rights fulfillment.

In order to be effective and address the most urgent needs, this commitment should bolster efforts to protect the rights of children in conflict and crisis, who are at increased risk of malnutrition, preventable disease, disrupted education, violence, and discrimination.



## 02. Give children the best possible start in life

**We call on Canada's political parties to commit to ensuring accessible, high-quality early learning and child care is available to all families in Canada.**

For too many families in Canada, quality child care remains unaffordable or unavailable. In some parts of the country, three years of daycare costs more than four years of post-secondary tuition. Too many parents are forced to choose between quality and convenience. Already under stress before the pandemic due to chronic labour shortages and rising operational costs, thousands of daycare operators across the country are facing a severe crisis. Significant investment is needed immediately to stabilize, expand and improve early learning opportunities across the country.

Early learning and child care is one of the best investments governments can make in a child's future. Participation in organized learning before elementary school is one of the most important indicators for future educational, economic, social, and health outcomes.

The time has come to act to ensure that high-quality early learning is available to all families in Canada.

**We call on Canada's political parties to propose ideas to expand and improve Canada's parental leave system.**

In the 2019 federal election, every political party proposed changes to Canada's system of parental leave. It is not often that there is such consensus that a system needs to change. While greater flexibility in duration, and particularly dedicated second-parent leave for parents and access to leave for adoptive parents, have been welcome changes, Canada continues to rank 28th out of 41 wealthy nations in parental leave policies.

In Canada, parental leave paid 52% of the average wage in 2018, making it unaffordable for some who qualify to take longer leave time and reducing family income in the critical early years of a child's life. Comparatively, across other wealthy countries, the average woman is paid two-thirds of average earnings, and 14 countries fully pay the average earnings. Better pay, elimination of all barriers to qualifying, and more flexibility in the timing and duration of leave are three key ways parental leave could work better for parents and children.



## 03. | **Ensure children and youth are healthy, safe and in school**

**We call on Canada’s political parties to commit to protecting nutrition, immunization and education for women and children in emergencies, ensuring non-discrimination in access to quality services.**

COVID-19 unleashed a learning crisis, with school closures disrupting 91% of students worldwide. Learning is even more difficult for children displaced or affected by humanitarian crises. The pandemic has also led to growing economic instability and decreased livelihoods, forcing families into harmful coping mechanisms that expose girls to sexual abuse, child marriage and pregnancy, increasing protection and health risks, and decreasing their chances at education. Risks are particularly high in conflict contexts, where attacks on children are increasing at an alarming rate – with perpetrators rarely held to account.

Lockdown measures severely disrupted services, rolling back decades of progress in the fight against malnutrition and preventable childhood disease. In Yemen, there has been a near-10% increase in cases of acute malnutrition. Globally, millions of the world’s most vulnerable children are at risk of missing out on life-saving vaccines that protect them from preventable death, including DTP, measles, polio and tetanus. Many of these children live in countries affected by conflict, displacement, disaster and other humanitarian crises. UNICEF analysis of countries that have experienced disease epidemics, conflict, political or economic shocks, even for a short period, shows that many could not return to pre-shock immunization coverage levels, and some continue to slip further.

Canada’s humanitarian action must uphold child rights and prioritize children’s survival, protection and education.

This means ending attacks on children, including civilian infrastructure critical for their survival, and holding perpetrators of these attacks to account. It also means investing in child survival and education and combating gender-based violence.

**We call on Canada’s political parties to invest in child and youth mental health in Canada and abroad.**

COVID-19 has put an entire generation’s mental health and well-being at risk, with the potential for serious long-term consequences. Over the past 18 months, school closures and physical distancing measures have reduced children and young people’s regular coping mechanisms, contributing to increased isolation and mental health risks. In Canada, two-thirds of parents polled reported that their child’s mental health had worsened during the pandemic. 48% reported their child was experiencing new mental health challenges since the onset of COVID-19. Call volumes to children and youth support services saw record highs. With services already stretched thin, young people need a dedicated and funded response from all levels of government.

Internationally, children exposed to conflict, natural disasters and other humanitarian crises were often already suffering severe psychological and social consequences, with children experiencing discrimination facing additional mental health challenges. COVID-19 has further disrupted access to mental health services. School closures, increased domestic violence, and isolation from peers have directly impacted children’s social and emotional well-being.

To protect a generation of Canadian and global children and youth, we are calling on all political parties to invest in child and youth mental health, focusing on children in crisis.



**We call on Canada's next government to convene other levels of government and work together to develop a National School Food Program.**

All children should have access to healthy food at school. Canada remains one of the few industrialized countries without a national school food program. The current patchwork of school food programming reaches only a small percentage of the country's over 5 million students.

We call on Canada's political parties to commit to investing in a cost-shared Universal Healthy School Food Program that will enable all students in Canada to have access to healthy meals at school every day. This program should build on the success of existing programs, include food education, and serve culturally-appropriate, local, sustainable food to the fullest extent possible.

**We call on Canada's political parties to commit to a National Strategy on Ending Violence Against Children.**

The Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children identified Canada as a pathfinder country. This is a tremendous opportunity for Canada to show leadership in addressing the levels of violence experienced by children in this country, which remain far too high. Whether it is through bullying, homicide, or self-harm, children in Canada are subjected to some of the highest rates of violence against children among all wealthy countries. This violence is not experienced equally: it disproportionately affects Indigenous, Black and other racialized children, as well as children living in households experiencing poverty. Additionally, gender-based violence remains too prevalent in Canada, and gender non-conforming children and youth continue to be at risk.

All political parties must commit to a national dialogue on ending violence against children in all its forms, culminating in a new National Strategy on Ending Violence Against Children.

The strategy should focus on the violence experienced by children in Canada and address the historical legacy of colonial state violence against Indigenous children directly. Canada should complement this commitment by helping close the gap in funding for child protection systems and programs to end gender-based violence in other countries. These systems remain critically underinvested, creating further barriers to rights fulfillment in other areas such as education and access to healthcare.



## 04. **Make Parliament accountable to children and youth**

Children and youth under 18 do not currently have the right to vote in Canada's federal elections. While members of Parliament commit to representing all of their constituents, including those too young to vote, there is no one in Parliament responsible for ensuring the rights and well-being of children are properly considered. Similarly, Parliament lacks effective oversight to ensure that Canada meets its obligations to children internationally. It is time for that to change.

**We call on Canada's political parties to commit to establishing an independent Commissioner for Children and Youth to advocate for and advance policy in the interests of children and youth.**

Despite the right to vote based on citizenship being enshrined in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, over 8 million Canadian citizens under 18 do not have the chance to vote. Therefore, Parliament should ensure children's interests are represented by placing special consideration on issues affecting them. Establishing an independent Office of Parliament known as the Commissioner for Children and Youth will help achieve this goal.

More than 60 countries have established a Children's Commissioner or Ombudsperson. International evidence demonstrates that an independent, non-partisan, collaborative approach advances all children and youth's health and well-being outcomes.

**We call on Canada's political parties to commit to lowering the voting age to 16 in the next federal election.**

The most effective way to make Parliament accountable to young people is to allow them to vote.

Unfortunately, despite all Canadians having the right to vote protected by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the right for young people under 18 is currently curtailed by the Elections Canada Act.

The current voting age is arbitrary, and the restriction it places on young people's rights is unreasonable. Many young people are informed about the issues and concerned about COVID-19, climate change, inequality, and the other challenges that affect their lives. These decisions will forever shape this generation and they will live with the impacts the longest. They should have the opportunity to contribute to the national conversation about what leadership is required to meet Canada's greatest challenges.

**We call on Canada's political parties to commit to appointing a Special Envoy for Children in Crisis.**

Canada has shown long-standing global leadership in advancing the rights of children and youth to be healthy, educated, and protected. To accelerate progress in these areas and to ensure the most marginalized children are not left behind, we ask that all parties commit to appointing a Special Envoy for Children in Crisis.

The Special Envoy would act as a focal point within the government to ensure Canada uses its positive diplomatic relationships to the fullest extent possible to advance a rights agenda for children in humanitarian crises. They would also help solidify political will around the world and pool global financial resources.



**We call on Canada’s political parties to commit to consulting children and youth in Canada and partner countries on Canada’s international assistance priorities through the creation of a Global Children and Youth Advisory Council, with a focus on diaspora voices.**

Following the feminist principle of “nothing about us without us,” the Global Children and Youth Advisory Council should work in partnership with the Special Envoy to ensure young people, especially girls, racialized children and youth, and those with disabilities, help create the solutions to the world’s biggest crises. From COVID-19 to the climate emergency and beyond, the Government of Canada should support them with the knowledge, skills and platforms to be active leaders and decision-makers in their communities.

Supporting today’s children and youth by investing in growing their leadership potential supports youth-led and feminist movement building, furthers good governance, and contributes to an inclusive, just recovery. This need is recognized in the Generation Equality Forums and six Action Coalitions but remains severely underfunded. Hearing the diverse voices of children and youth means creating democratic and respectful spaces that include girls, children with disabilities, and LGBTQ2S and BIPOC children, who are disproportionately denied opportunities to speak.

**We call on Canada’s political parties to adopt a series of budget reforms under the umbrella of Public Finance for Children.**

Public Finance for Children is a global UNICEF initiative to ensure that governments sufficiently fund services for children, that those funds reach the children and services that need it the most, and that all government funding for children is budgeted and spent transparently.

Political parties in Canada can support these principles by committing to:

- Publish key metrics of spending on children and families as a section or appendix to all future federal budgets, such that spending is comparable across time and jurisdictions;
- Include a specific subsection detailing spending on federal services to children on reserve, to ensure the government eliminates all disparities with off-reserve services;
- Include a specific subsection detailing spending on Official Development Assistance (ODA) and the amount and percentages directed to supporting children; and
- Conduct regular audits through the Parliamentary Budget Officer and/or the Office of the Commissioner for Children and Youth as called for by UNICEF Canada, to ensure government spending is reaching the children who need it most;
- Regularly consult with children and youth as part of the annual budget process and publish spending metrics in a language and format that is easy for them to understand.





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