

# A National Child and Youth Strategy

**UNICEF Canada Submission: Bill S-282**

**August 2024**

# Canada's Children and Youth Need a National Strategy

Children make up a large part of Canada's population but are often overlooked in government decision-making: they cannot vote and generally have limited influence on decisions affecting them without 'corrective', child-sensitive governance measures such as children's strategies, child rights impact assessments and independent advocacy offices.

Recognizing the importance of government-wide strategies in prioritizing children on the policy agenda and upholding their rights, the Government of Canada developed a *National Children's Strategy* in 2000 and published *A Canada Fit for Children* in 2004. However, since then, a range of children's outcomes as measured in UNICEF Report Cards have stagnated or declined, even as Canada's national wealth has grown.<sup>1</sup> While these 'first generation' children's strategies articulated and led to significant policy and program advances for children, they have long expired, and a generation has grown up without a clear government agenda as well as steady and ambitious policy progress to advance their rights and well-being.

As a result, children's best interests are not always the priority they must be in budget allocation and on the public policy agenda. The impacts of inadequate child policies and programs are evident in the status of child health, development, protection and overall well-being of children. In Canada, many fundamental child outcomes lag behind those achieved in other high-income countries and are more inequitable.<sup>2</sup> Notably, many of these countries have placed a higher priority on inclusive and adequate social protection and care policies for children and have embedded child-sensitive governance mechanisms to help ensure children are visible, heard and a high priority for governments. Many have children's strategies that provide ambition and direction for policy advancement and policy coherence across government. These strategies serve as a foundation for allocating annual budgets for children and advancing policies and legislation to better serve children's needs.

It is time for a more ambitious approach in Canada.

The national strategy for children and youth proposed in Bill S-282 (*An act respecting a national strategy for children and youth in Canada*) can bring children into sharper focus on the federal agenda and help ensure that their interests and voices are central to our shared future. It can help Canada achieve outcomes for children comparable to those in other high-income countries, addressing the mounting evidence that early public investments during childhood lead to better outcomes for children and society and higher economic returns. Bill S-282 is shaped by diverse views and experiences, including those of children and adolescents. UNICEF Canada provides detailed considerations in this brief to establish a framework for a children's strategy, ensuring that Canada's next children's strategy is fit for purpose.

## What Should a Strategy Include?

In 2022, more than thirty years after Canada acceded to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that Canada develop a national

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<sup>1</sup> Evidenced in UNICEF's Report Cards <https://www.unicef.ca/en/publications-and-research>

<sup>2</sup> Evidenced in UNICEF's Report Cards <https://www.unicef.ca/en/publications-and-research>

children’s strategy which should include not only a list of priorities, as in Canada’s first-generation strategies, but also specific targets, a budget and accountability mechanisms.<sup>3</sup>

**8. The Committee recalls its previous concluding observations and recommends that the State party adopt a national strategy that provides a comprehensive implementation framework for the federal, provincial and territorial levels of government spelling out as is appropriate the priorities, targets and respective responsibilities for the overall realization of the Convention and that will enable the provinces and territories to adopt accordingly their own specific plans and strategies. The Committee further recommends that the State party allocate adequate human, technical and financial resources for the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of this comprehensive strategy and related provincial and territorial plans.**

Canada can learn from the experiences of other countries in creating and implementing children’s strategies. According to the OECD, 23 of 32 member countries have established children’s strategies, plans or frameworks in recent years.<sup>4</sup> Examples include Ireland’s *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* framework, New Zealand’s *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy* and Finland’s *National Child Strategy*.

## EXAMPLES OF CHILDREN’S STRATEGIES

### ***Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (Ireland)***

*Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* is the first national children’s policy framework in Ireland with a whole-of-government approach. It identifies six action areas that have the potential to improve five national outcomes for children, with indicators to benchmark progress. It also establishes cross-government structures, including the Children and Young People’s Policy Consortium, to support implementation and monitoring and to provide a forum for stakeholder engagement that includes children.

### ***Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (New Zealand)***

The *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy* directs government effort to reduce child poverty and improve child well-being in New Zealand. The strategy aims to make New Zealand “the best place in the world for children and young people”. It sets out six interconnected well-being outcomes that were considered important by children and young people. Specific actions are identified for each of these outcomes with corresponding indicators to monitor implementation effectiveness.

### ***The National Child Strategy (Finland)***

The *National Child Strategy* is based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and aims “to create a genuinely child-and family-friendly Finland” by respecting children; taking due account of their role in society; and supporting their well-being.

<sup>3</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth reports of Canada (June 2022), CRC/C/CAN/CO/5-6

<sup>4</sup> OECD (2023). Mobilizing evidence to enhance the effectiveness of child well-being policies. [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/mobilising-evidence-to-enhance-the-effectiveness-of-child-well-being-policies\\_faeb9a0d-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/mobilising-evidence-to-enhance-the-effectiveness-of-child-well-being-policies_faeb9a0d-en)

A children's strategy for Canada should include the following three elements:

### **(1) A compelling vision and specific actions linked to priority child outcomes**

Children's strategies typically articulate governmental and societal intentions – including children's own priorities – to achieve their rights and enhance their well-being. Signatories to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child should have government-wide children's strategies aimed at achieving the Convention, as described in the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 5.<sup>5</sup>

A children's strategy should present an aspirational vision or goal for children and adolescents that can unite decision-makers and stakeholders toward its achievement. Examples of goals from the children's strategies of other countries include “realizing children's rights”; “achieving a high level of happiness and life satisfaction”; “creating equitable environments of opportunity and inclusion”; “ensuring the best start in life”; and “elevating children's voices and best interests”. Ireland and New Zealand have articulated ambitious goals to be “one of the best places in the world” for children.

A children's strategy should translate its vision into coherent, high-level priorities that ‘fit together’ conceptually to achieve the vision. A child rights approach is common to almost all children's strategies in high-income countries, focussing on priority actions that will help achieve children's rights and yield specific child outcomes such as lower rates of childhood poverty. For instance, children's strategies in Ireland, Northern Ireland and Chile specifically identify how intended child outcome indicators are linked to realizing certain children's rights. Finland's strategy connects each substantive action it aims to implement with the achievement of relevant children's rights.

A focus on children's rights can be complemented with a broader ‘child well-being’ approach to outcomes that align with societal well-being initiatives such as Canada's Quality of Life Framework. Although children's ‘rights’ and ‘well-being’ approaches differ conceptually, methodologically and politically, they are complementary. Children's rights are entitlements requiring progressive implementation and accountability whereas child well-being encompasses additional needs, such as the quality of children's relationships.

Strategic priorities should focus on a limited number of intended outcomes and related action areas that are neither ‘too big and broad’ nor ‘too easy’. Overly broad agendas can create ambiguity about what governments need to address first and most urgently and can dilute effort and investment. According to the OECD, countries should use children's strategies to generate traction on a small number of critical issues. Most children's strategies set out a handful of priorities, such as tackling material deprivation and increasing children's mental health. For instance, Northern Ireland's strategy identifies eight child outcomes. The OECD further recommends an integrated approach across government, focussing on cross-cutting issues for which coordinated action is most needed.

Strategic priorities should be framed as measurable goals and targets with corresponding policy and program actions to be implemented within a specific timeframe. A Theory of Change can help

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<sup>5</sup>General Comment No. 5 (2003), General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (arts. 4, 42 and 44, para. 6)

logically link the actions (e.g., policies, programs and child-sensitive governance measures) to the intended child outcomes.

While Canada has not produced a cross-cutting children’s strategy at the federal level over the past twenty years, it has advanced issue-specific strategies on distinct aspects of children’s well-being such as autism and fetal alcohol syndrome. A broader, integrated strategy should start with consideration of the comprehensive situation of children in Canada including well-being deficits, rights violations and inequities. This assessment forms the basis to develop strategic goals, focused objectives and actions for policy and program priorities to advance better and more equitable child outcomes. For instance, the strategy can focus on the conditions that put children’s well-being at greatest risk and create the widest inequalities. Future iterations of the strategy, at regular intervals, can progressively address additional priorities. Some of this situation analysis and priority-setting has been done by others: there are already clear priorities to advance children’s rights and well-being identified in UNICEF Report Cards; the agenda for children developed by the Inspiring Health Futures initiative; the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society Spirit Bear Plan; the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action; and the Concluding Observations to Canada of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

***"Children and youths' opinions will always be changing. The government can consider reviewing strategy and update it accordingly to ever-changing political climate."***

U-Report Canada Poll on a National Child and Youth Strategy<sup>6</sup>

Well-designed strategies also identify who holds responsibilities; formalize coordination mechanisms; specify budget allocation; and include a plan for monitoring and evaluation.

## **(2) Child-sensitive governance measures**

To achieve ambitious goals for children, it is necessary not only to identify what policy and program actions a government will take and what outcomes they expect to achieve, but also how policy-making processes and structures will be child-sensitive and accountable. Many countries have implemented innovative governance tools to ensure better alignment between their agenda for children and the decision-making “machinery” of government.

The General Measures of Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child articulate the ‘governance architecture’ for children that States should implement to make children visible and heard and to prioritize their interests among others competing for public resources. However, a 2023 OECD study found that these child-specific tools for informing policy and budgetary decisions are not being sufficiently employed by OECD governments.<sup>7</sup> Compared to other high-income countries, governments in Canada, have a dearth of such governance measures. A children’s strategy should require the following measures:

*Child Rights Impact Assessment:* Austria, Finland, Iceland, Korea, Wales, Sweden and New Zealand have children’s strategies that incorporate a requirement to undertake systematic use of child rights

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<sup>6</sup> <https://canada-en.ureport.in/opinion/6072/>

<sup>7</sup> OECD (2023). Mobilizing evidence to enhance the effectiveness of child well-being policies. [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/mobilising-evidence-to-enhance-the-effectiveness-of-child-well-being-policies\\_faeb9a0d-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/mobilising-evidence-to-enhance-the-effectiveness-of-child-well-being-policies_faeb9a0d-en)

impact assessments. In Canada, the federal Department of Justice introduced a process of Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) in 2023. A child and youth strategy should mandate its use across the federal government, similar to Gender Based Assessment (GBA+). If children are to be a priority, they deserve a specific policy and budget lens.

*A Coordinating Unit for children:* There is no child-neutral policy or decision. Virtually every government sector or department has direct or indirect impacts on children, by intention or by omission. Effective child policy-making relies on considering the interdependencies of children’s rights and coordinating actions across different policy areas or sectors of government. According to the OECD, “good policy making for child well-being calls for government ministries, agencies and other service providers to better collaborate and to focus efforts on a small number of key child well-being issues”.<sup>8</sup>

Children’s strategies are a tool to help coordinate the child policy agenda across different government ministries and bodies, particularly if they are supported by a ‘coordinating unit’ with participation from across departments. For instance, in New Zealand, each priority area of the children’s strategy has a Lead Chief Executive who acts as a system convenor to support implementation within a coordinating unit for the strategy. Finland’s strategy sets out a governance architecture for coordinated decision-making and implementation.

A ‘children in all policies’ cross-departmental and cross-jurisdictional approach to developing policies and programs facilitated by a coordinating unit would help ensure that children are given due consideration across government; identify shared priorities; clarify responsibilities; increase policy coherence; optimize policy impacts and avoid unintended or inequitable impacts. This approach is also conducive to connecting child policy to the broader work of government and aligning with international commitments.

*Child Budget Statements:* Vienna (Austria), Wallonia (Belgium), Helsinki (Finland), Iceland and Scotland (UK) have children’s strategies that specifically and transparently identify related expenditures for children. This is a basis for ascertaining whether children have a ‘fair share’ of the budget and if the investments are adequate, equitable and effective. According to the OECD, aligning budget allocation processes with children’s policies and targets is critical so that child well-being can be considered alongside other government priorities at budget time.<sup>9</sup>

Federal budgets in Canada do not clearly identify spending on children as recommended by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.<sup>10</sup> A children’s strategy should require child public expenditure tracking, and budget impact statements should clearly identify child-focused expenditures.

## ***Child Budgeting in Finland***

<sup>8</sup> OECD (2023). Integrated policymaking for child well-being. OECD Papers on Well-being and Inequalities. See <https://www.oecd.org/social/integrated-policy-making-for-child-well-being-1a5202af-en.htm>

<sup>9</sup> OECD (2023). Integrated policymaking for child well-being. OECD Papers on Well-being and Inequalities. See <https://www.oecd.org/social/integrated-policy-making-for-child-well-being-1a5202af-en.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth reports of Canada (June 2022), CRC/C/CAN/CO/5-6



The Finnish Government has implemented child budgeting to systematically clarify and assess the impact of budgetary decisions on children. The 2022 budget included a pilot child budget documenting expenditure focused directly on children ages 0-17, as well as expenditure that clearly targets families with children under the age of 18. For certain services, the share of children in the total group directly benefitting from the service was included.

*Independent advocacy.* Every jurisdiction in Canada should have an independent children’s rights institution to monitor and advocate for their rights.<sup>11</sup> There has been considerable research and stakeholder consultation as well as Private Members’ and Senate public bills outlining how the federal government can introduce a federal accountability mechanism for and with children, with distinctions for Indigenous children. This could play an important role to help develop and monitor a child and youth strategy.

*Data and indicators:* Data about the state of children is essential for measuring the aims and impacts of a children’s strategy. A strategy should begin with a comprehensive view of the state or situation of children based on outcome indicators and the equity gaps revealed by available indicators and data. The indicators of greatest concern should be identified and their current state benchmarked as the baseline for action. The selection of indicators should take into account national and international targets for which Canada is accountable such as rates of immunization and breastfeeding and the Sustainable Development Goal targets for children. Action plans should be identified that would improve children’s outcomes in these aspects of life. The strategy should have a monitoring framework to measure action plan outputs and changes in child outcomes (including these indicators) for different groups of children.

Around half of OECD countries have a curated, public child well-being ‘indicator set’ they monitor, but fewer link it to their children’s strategies. Australia, Helsinki (Finland), Ireland, New Zealand, Valencia (Spain) and Scotland (UK) are examples of jurisdictions that have indicator sets of priority child outcomes. Slovenia has a Child Well-being Index. Scotland’s *Children, Young People and Families Outcomes Framework* is used to monitor whether actions across government are achieving better outcomes for children.

### (3) Guiding principles

Guiding principles should be articulated to address *how* the government must work to deliver the children’s strategy. The guiding principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child will help to avoid the tendency to regard children as passive recipients of government action, or as having value only as future citizens and earners. They provide a ‘north star’ for decision-making (best interests principle); remind governments to listen to and engage children; call for a level of inclusion and adequacy in government actions so that the children’s strategy is not considered achieved until it is equitably achieved, for every child.

*Child participation:* A children’s strategy should articulate a principle that children and youth have opportunities to express their views on matters affecting them and that these views will be considered

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<sup>11</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth reports of Canada (June 2022), CRC/C/CAN/CO/5-6

by decision-makers. Children and youth should participate in deciding their strategy, including identifying action priorities and targets, and in monitoring and assessing progress. This not only gives effect to their rights to participate in decisions affecting them; it helps ensure the inclusivity and relevance of the strategy and contributes to transparency and accountability. New Zealand uses its children's strategy as a tool to consider potential initiatives and actions from a child and youth perspective.

*The best interests of children:* Children have the right to have their best interests considered as the priority for government decisions, including in the allocation of resources (pursuant to articles 3 and 4 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child). Mechanisms to help ensure this principle guides all government actions include child budget reporting and Child Rights Impact Assessment. As discussed, these should be requisite government measures identified in a child and youth strategy.

*Equity:* Eliminating wide inequalities in children's access to and benefits from policies and programs should be an outcome of a children's strategy. Children's right to non-discrimination and equitable treatment must guide action plans and a data strategy to benchmark and monitor action plan outputs and child outcomes. A children's strategy should include specific measures for substantive equity in its action plans; disaggregated data to monitor their equitable advancement; and distinct approaches for particular groups of children including Indigenous and racialized children and those with disabilities. UNICEF research and data demonstrate that achieving better overall child outcomes is not possible without closing equity gaps. Notably, Australia developed a children's strategy specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, youth and families.

*Inclusion and adequacy:* In addition to children's rights-based principles, policy and program principles of inclusion and adequacy are highly relevant to a children's strategy. Some of Canada's child-focused policies, programs and budgets have been inadequately funded to be sufficient and inclusive and to achieve optimal outcomes. Childcare, income benefits, parental leave and school meals are examples of high-impact programs that remain exclusive and inadequate. The policies and programs identified in a children's strategy should be focused priorities that are adequate and inclusive.

***"Listen to the voices of youth from different places and different backgrounds. Youth should be treated with as much respect as anyone else."***

U-Report Canada Poll on a National Child and Youth Strategy<sup>12</sup>

## Clause-by-Clause Considerations

The following amendments are suggested for Bill S-282:

### Title

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<sup>12</sup> <https://canada-en.ureport.in/opinion/6072/>



Consider reframing the title and subsequent references as a 'National Child and Youth Strategy' so that there is less emphasis on a strategy 'for' children, when the strategy should be 'with' as well as 'for' children – co-developed with their full participation.

Consider the following changes indicated in brackets:

## Preamble

["Whereas children and youth are affected by virtually every government policy decision, the best interests of the child as defined by the Convention on the Rights of the Child shall be a priority consideration for all departments of government and relevant public authorities";]

"Whereas children and youth are especially vulnerable to ... [or any other status of the child and/or their parent(s)] and this negatively impacts their [health, development, protection, cultural], social and economic outcomes;"

"Whereas children and youth can benefit from [cross-departmental and] cross-jurisdictional collaboration to ensure their [well-being];"

## Definitions

[A "Child" is a person from birth to 18 years, consistent with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and in consideration of the distinct developmental stage and legal status of this age group. Certain strategic plans may include older young people such as youth in or exiting care.]

## Content

**Part (2): (a) (iii)** [(E) any future children's rights instruments adopted by the Government of Canada; and recommendations from United Nations human rights bodies including Treaty Bodies and specialized instruments.]

The child and youth strategy should specifically include the following elements, following a comprehensive situation analysis of the state of children and youth:

- Child rights-based principles
- A vision for growing up in Canada
- Action plans linked to a focused set of priority outcomes
- Child-sensitive governance mechanisms that will be implemented
- Budget allocations
- Baseline and target indicators and data
- Accountability measures

## Consultations

**Part (3) (b)** ...[Minister of Families, Children and Social Development and Minister of Gender and Inequality and Youth]

Most countries with children’s strategies centre responsibility in a particular government department: most often a social policy or health department. It is important that any mandated department have leverage and capacity to deliver on an integrated children’s strategy. To complement this focal point in government, a coordinating unit in the centre of government can help promote collaboration and coordination across government. For instance, Finland established a Child Strategy Group in the Prime Minister’s Office, then moved it to a relevant department which is also responsible to advance CRIA and child budgeting. An inter-ministerial committee involving civil society plays a role in many countries including Iceland, Italy, New Zealand and Portugal.

## Considerations

**Part (5) (a)** Canada’s human rights obligations [and the General Comments and Concluding Observations to Canada of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.]

## Review and Report

**Part (7) (1)** While the strategy’s framework could extend to five or more years, a mandatory review period of at least every three years instead of five years is strongly recommended to keep it relevant and responsive. A shorter review cycle would better account for the rapid emergence of crises affecting children (such as pandemics and financial shocks); children’s perception of time; and the urgency of addressing challenges during the most rapid and sensitive period of human development. The strategy should also be updated within one year of receiving Concluding Observations (“recommendations”) from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. Many countries require reporting to parliament on their strategies on an annual basis. Finland’s reports require clear descriptions of policy progress against objectives and outcome measures. New Zealand’s legislation requires the government to report annually on progress in achieving strategic outcomes and to review and update their strategy every three years.

## About UNICEF Canada

UNICEF stands for every child, everywhere. UNICEF is the world’s farthest-reaching humanitarian organization for children. Across 190 countries and territories, and in the world’s toughest places, we work day in and day out to defend children’s human rights and a fair chance to fulfil their potential, guided by the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. UNICEF Canada was founded in 1955 to fundraise for UNICEF’s highest priorities and to secure the human rights of children in Canada. As part of the UN family, our ability to work neutrally with to work neutrally with governments, civil society, the private sector and young people generates results on a scale that is unparalleled. Our mission has always been for children as the highest priority – regardless of race, religion or politics – and has always relied on voluntary contributions.

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