

UNICEF Canada Policybook: Vote for Every Child

2025 Canada Federal Election

Children's Futures are on the Ballot

A country's success depends on the well-being of its youngest citizens. Children and their families in Canada and globally face an increasingly complex web of challenges including economic volatility, poor mental and physical health, shrinking child populations, technological disruptions, societal and environmental change. Robust public policies and investments are needed to protect them from the impacts. Investing in children is an investment in Canada's future.

In Canada, overall progress for children has been falling or stalling in recent years, with few areas of life that are measurably improving, even as national wealth continues to rise. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Canada ranked 30th of 38 wealthy nations in child and youth well-being according to UNICEF Report Card 16. Since then, children's mental and physical health, development, safety and overall happiness have shown limited signs of improvement. In recent years poverty and hunger have risen. Despite Canada's wealth, we have failed to guarantee the basic rights of every child including nutritious food, a decent place to live and a healthy environment. To create a country of equitable opportunity and a future of prosperity, Canada needs public policies that prioritize children and their families, helping them thrive in a rapidly changing world. To foster the safety and security of all, investments in children through global programs is critical. Thriving children and families mean strong communities, a strong economy, and a strong Canada.

Proven Solutions for Children Exist

History has shown that with determination and collaboration, Canada can achieve the seemingly impossible. Over the past two decades, remarkable milestones for children have been reached when governments and civil society work together with resolve:

In Canada:

- A decline in adolescent suicide rates from about 10 deaths per 100,000 adolescents in 2018 to about 8.4 deaths per 100,000 adolescents in 2022.
- A drop in families reporting difficulties affording childcare from 48.3% to 41.2% between 2019 and 2023.
- A fall in child poverty rates from 21% to 18% between 2017 and 2021, per the LIM-60 measure. Canada's official rate saw a decrease from 11.7% to 7.4% in the same period.

Globally:

- A near-eradication of polio, with 99.9% of cases eliminated.
- Safe drinking water provided to over 2 billion people.
- A one-third reduction in stunting among children under 5.
- The global under-5 mortality rate reached its lowest level ever recorded in 2023.

The work to protect childhoods in Canada and everywhere is far from complete. In Canada, child poverty and food insecurity are rising, and children’s mental well-being is free-falling. Canada’s next government can step up and help ensure that every child is healthy, developing, protected and ready for the future. When children thrive, families and communities grow stronger, countries prosper, and a future of opportunity becomes possible.

Creating Fairness for Every Child

Because early moments matter most.

Ensure that every newborn and adopted child is entitled to adequately paid caregiving time with a parent or primary caregiver.

The early moments of life have lifelong effects. The first days and years of a child’s life are the most critical for their physical, cognitive, emotional and social development. Responsive care from a parent or primary caregiver during this period sets the foundation for a child’s future success, as it helps ensure they are well-nourished, access health care, and have ample bonding and learning opportunities. When a child succeeds, the whole country benefits.

The ability of parents to take time off to care for their children is an affordability issue. Currently, while Canada offers some paid parental leave from employment for caregiving, it is falling short. The length and level of compensation are insufficient for many families, especially those who face economic hardship. Restricted eligibility criteria exclude many new parents from qualifying for this support altogether. As a result, approximately one-third of infants are deprived of protected and paid time with a parent or primary caregiver. Without adequate support, many families face a difficult choice between ensuring their child’s well-being and seeking or returning to work due to financial pressures. This fosters stress and poor mental health among all family members.

According to UNICEF Canada’s 2024 Public Opinion Poll, parents say they need more support to care for their infants the way they wish to. Of 2,025 Canadians (500 of these being parents of children under age 5) less than half of respondents (42 per cent) believe Canada’s current parental leave policies reflect the actual needs of families, highlighting a major disconnect between policy and the realities parents face. Almost every survey respondent believes paid parental leave should extend to every newborn – a rare, universal consensus for the direction of public policy.

Internationally, Canada’s parental leave system is below standard. While average public expenditure for parental leave is \$16,600 USD per child amongst OECD countries, Canada invested less than \$13,000 USD in 2019. Canada’s parental leave is more exclusive and pays less than parental leave in most other high-income countries.

It does not have to be this way. The next government can respond with a child-centred parental leave system that gives families choice in caring for their children. Parenting leave should offer well-paid, protected time to care for every child, from birth or adoption, regardless of a caregivers' employment status or the nature of their parental role - whether biological, adoptive, kin or customary.

Income enhancement could be provided universally through a tax-free income benefit that is universally available and adequate to protect children from deprivation. Employment insurance may be the optimal anchor for employed parents, but eligibility should be expanded and pay made more adequate. New parents should be entitled to full employment income (with a ceiling) for at least the first six months of parental leave, with remaining pay at or above two-thirds of their salary. Canada has what it takes to build a best-in-class parental leave system, one that helps families afford to make the choices that work best for them.

Increase income benefits to eradicate child poverty.

After years of progress, child poverty rates in Canada are on the rise. For many years, child and family income benefits in Canada have been lifting children out of poverty, but this progress is regressing. The rate of child poverty has increased for the past two years of available data, and recent reports by UNICEF and Campaign 2000 revealed that close to 1.4 million children live in poverty. Many parents worry about affording the essentials they need to give their children the best start in life.

The Canada Child Benefit is no longer sufficient to lift families out of poverty, and many of the most vulnerable children are excluded from income support altogether. For instance, around 10 per cent of eligible households do not claim their entitlements, which hinge on filing income tax returns. Compared to other high-income countries, Canada's investment in child-focused income benefits is just average.

A stronger and more resilient Canada begins with ensuring that all children can grow up healthy, educated and free from poverty. International evidence demonstrates the power of a proven solution to free children from the corrosive, lifelong effects of poverty: universal child-focused income benefits. To that end, a low-income supplement to the federal child income benefit should lift all families with young children in Canada above the poverty line, "bending the curve" of benefit payments across the income gradient while maintaining the universal and progressive nature of the current policy.

A 2020 report by UNICEF and the Overseas Development Institute found that universal child benefits are the norm in high-income countries and are the most effective public policy to reduce child poverty. Income benefits improve children's overall well-being, health, education and future productivity. Children who grow up with this support are better equipped to contribute to their communities and economies as adults, and their societies save the high remedial costs of poor physical and mental health, education and justice.

Ensure that every child has access to healthy and nutritious food every school day.

More than 1 in 4 children in Canada faces food insecurity, placing Canada among the lowest performers for childhood nutrition among high-income countries. Food insecurity is exacerbated by rising poverty and affordability challenges, making it increasingly difficult for families to access nutritious food.

This demands action from all levels of government. The National School Food Program and recent provincial and territorial investments are a positive step forward to ensure that no child must go hungry through a school day. But at current levels of investment, fewer than half of children will enjoy the many positive impacts of these programs and too few families have this relief for their stretched time and budgets.

Well-nourished children are better equipped to learn, grow and contribute to society. Research shows that investing in childhood nutrition serves Canada's society-wide goals by supporting children's learning and development, reducing long-term physical and mental healthcare costs and boosting their economic outcomes and future workforce productivity.

The next government should pledge that every schoolchild will have access to at least one healthy, nutritious meal per day by contributing to sustained progress toward universal, accessible school food programs from coast to coast to coast.

Because children are entitled to governments that place their best interests first.

Establish an independent Commission for Children, Youth and Families; transparent budgeting; and a child policy lens to ensure robust public policies for children and families and to monitor progress.

Governments have the responsibility to deliver effective family and child-focused policies. There are close to eight million children and youth in Canada, but as non-voting citizens their interests are easily overlooked on the public agenda.

As UNICEF Canada's Report Cards have revealed, Canada's wealth has been rising for decades, but the well-being of children has not kept pace. A new equation is needed. UNICEF's upcoming Report Card 19 provides a current baseline of the state of children and youth in Canada – and a ready agenda for change in the next federal parliament.

An independent Commission for Children, Youth and Families would help the federal government ensure that child and family interests are consistently prioritized across the many federal departments that affect them; encourage interdepartmental coordination; and foster stronger laws, policies and services that are responsive to children and families.

Transparent budgeting that explicitly tracks public spending benefiting families and children would further enable the federal government to assure them a “first call” on limited public resources. Finally, a child policy lens applied to new bills and policy proposals would help ensure that government decisions optimize positive impacts on children and families and avoid unintended harms.

Because Canadian leadership means global leadership, for every child.

Commit to ensuring that the specific needs and vulnerabilities of children in crisis are addressed through a robust humanitarian response.

Protecting children in conflict is critical to saving the lives and dignity of every child while fostering peace, stability, and development. Canadian leadership means a commitment to protecting children in conflict through a robust response to meet the critical needs of children affected by humanitarian crises.

When crises occur, be they natural disasters or conflict, children are among the most vulnerable and most affected. Canada’s commitment to put a child-centred response at the heart of our country’s leadership in humanitarian response must be prioritized.

Canada’s leadership in standing up for human rights is critical as children’s lives, rights and well-being are increasingly under threat in conflict. Over 473 million children – more than one in six globally – lived in areas affected by conflict in 2023, further increasing in 2024. 2025 can be the year we commit to reversing this trend.

Canada at a Crossroads

Canada stands at a crossroads. The decisions made today will shape the well-being of children and families, and the prosperity of the entire country, now and into the future. Canada has the resources, knowledge and capacity to be a leader in child well-being, but this will only be achieved if the next government prioritizes children’s rights and best interests as a non-negotiable foundation of public policy. With proven solutions to do so, the next government can reverse troubling trends, bridge the gap between policy and living realities and ensure that every child has the conditions to thrive. This requires bold leadership, meaningful investments and a commitment to putting children at the centre of the national agenda by:

- Ensuring that every newborn and adopted child and their parent or primary caregiver is entitled to adequately paid parenting leave;
- Increasing income benefits to eradicate child poverty;
- Ensuring that every child has access to healthy and nutritious food every school day;

- Establishing an independent Commission for Children, Youth and Families; transparent budgeting; and a child policy lens to ensure robust public policies;
- Ensuring that Canadian humanitarian responses prioritize the specific needs and vulnerabilities of children.