

What Children and Youth Need
Celebrating The Anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the
Child
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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child lays a solid foundation upon which we are to shape the lives and futures of our children. Some might say the Convention is purely rhetoric and something too grand to hope for. I see the Convention as full of promise. The Convention demonstrates clearly, as does each and every commitment, that is articulated in it, what is possible. It is simple really. We as a country must choose to have the will to live up to the promise of the Convention.

I believe the Convention articulates the outcomes we all want for our children; a life free of discrimination; a province where the best interests of our children is a primary consideration; a province where children can live in the full light of their potential; a province where the views of children can be expressed freely in all matters affecting them. I believe we can agree on this despite our often polarized views. Children have an ability to get us to do that.

If we can agree on these outcomes we desire for our children, the opportunity before us is crystal clear; build the structures upon the foundations we have laid to ensure we move towards achieving these outcomes. This is not easy work, not easy work at all, particularly in tough economic times. Yet it is in these times when we must hold our children just a little closer. It is in these times when we must move beyond the language that tough economic times brings. It is today when we must invest in our children.

Article 6 of the CRC states that countries should “recognize that every child has the inherent right to life, development and survival”. I think about whether in Canada this article is real for the children and youth I serve. I must say from their mouths to your ears the answer is “no it is not”.

I have the honor of writing as the Ontario Provincial Advocate For Children And Youth. The job of the Advocate's Office is to serve children and youth who, in one way or another have a level or degree of invisibility that comes from social exclusion.

These are children and youth who are in state care or on the margins of state care. They are children and youth connected to the child welfare system, the youth justice system, mental health systems, First Nations communities and children and youth with special needs

The Office of the Provincial Advocate was created by legislation, as an independent “Officer”. I report to the Legislature of Ontario. The legislation mandates my office to provide individual advocacy to youth seeking or receiving service under the Child and Family Service Agency *CFSA*. At present the individual advocacy service is provided primarily through the use of a 1 – 800 number. Children or youth can phone our line and request to speak with an Advocate. Posters indicating the 1 – 800 numbers must be posted in all residences and places of custody in the Province. Youth by legislation must be given privacy and access to a phone with which to call an Advocate a call is made. We listen. Advocates make an advocacy plan with the youth. We act. In our legislation we are mandated to act only with the consent of the youth or the child. This poses interesting challenges for us but that is for another article.

In addition to the individual advocacy my office is able to undertake systemic advocacy, my staff of child and youth advocates review residences where they have heard many concerns. They may undertake a report on a particular topic. For instance in the past several months they have worked on issues relating to the deaths of children connected to the child welfare system, kinship care, secure isolation in custody settings.

The work undertaken by my office is approached from a rights based perspective. My Office is one of a limited number of Advocacy offices in the country to have the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* cited as a guide in our legislation

The legislation asks us to be an exemplar in the participation of youth at all levels of service. It defines advocacy as a partnership between young people and the office. I think of it as if we were instructed to walk side by side with the children and youth we serve. We elevate the voices of children and youth in our mandate. We do not operate from a best interest perspective. We amplify the voice of children and youth. We take sides. We stand with the children and youth we serve.

As Ontario's Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth I have the privilege of listening to children and youth more often than most. I can tell you the important, fundamental things I have learned have not come from a book or some lecture by a professor but through dialogue with children and youth as I listen to the wisdom of their lived experiences.

I have come to the conclusion that young people in our systems, like any other young person or person for that matter, need three things to “develop”. What develop means is another important topic for another day. I know young people have a great deal to say about this as well.

What young people need, in fact what we all need, can be summed up in three simple words; Resource, Connection, Voice.

The first is the most obvious. Young people need access to Resources. This in fact can be about survival. They need shelter and food. Educational support. Money for school. Mental health services perhaps. Access to employment opportunities, etc.

Children and young people in our systems face barriers to the practical resources that they need. Often institutions and systems respond to children and youth by increasing access to practical resources. This is a valuable undertaking ,yet still children and youth often do not find the resources they need.

I remember one young person in care telling me he felt like an “*UFO*”. “We are sometimes glimpsed but not really there”. I remember someone else saying that the young people in our systems were “lost in plain sight”. They enter a system at some point in the child welfare or youth justice or mental health system and we as a society expect the system to meet all their needs. I continue to hear from young people that it feels like the public, sometimes the government, washes their hands of them.

I remember a group of young people in care reflecting upon a story creating headlines in a Toronto newspaper. A baby was found abandoned in a car park. The press named her “Baby M”, Child welfare became involved. The public was in an uproar. A major bank created a special fund for the baby and a way for the public to donate funds for the child. The young people thought, “yes now that she is a cute little baby she will get all the attention. But what will happen to her when she is 12 or 18 years. There will be no trust fund then. Teens are not so cute. She will be brought to the front door and placed in the attic and forgotten about by the public”.

A few months ago, I was told about a death of child from a “remote” community who was attending school in Thunder Bay. He was found in a river in the city dead. He was the fifth First Nations youth who had died in a similar manner from the same school. Did we hear about him or his peers here in the Southern part of Ontario? Have we heard about the conditions our First nations children live in?

Are the young people like the boy in Thunder Bay invisible? Are young people in our systems invisible?

At the same time youth have said to me “support us and watch what we can do”. They have expressed an incredible will to improve their lives. Consistently, almost to a person, they have expressed a desire to make a difference for those coming up through the systems after them. They often have framed this desire as “giving back”, a remarkable turn of a of a phrase

considering that the systems have often, from their point of view at least, been unable to serve them well.

It is important to hear the request for support and understand it as a request for confidence in our children and young people. The provision of resources is in fact a statement; a message of sorts. It tells children and young people that they are worth the investment, that we believe they can achieve, that they are valued. Any child or young person deserves access to resources regardless of where they live, what racial background they come from, regardless of gender, regardless of any challenge they face.

Young people have said to me in a variety of ways “Practical resources are important, even vital, but they are not enough”. Ask a youth who has come through life in a system relatively intact, “What made the difference?”. they speak of the importance of Connection.

Study after study about things like “resilience” or “independence” of young people in our systems relate that young people speak about the importance of a person who made difference in their lives. I think it is a common truth for most of us. Think about whom in your life there was. A parent, a brother, a sister, a teacher, a coach, a pastor, an elder....

One youth called it the “One Person Principle” and when they did I remembered my Grade 7 teacher. Many of us have known individuals who have directly influenced positive choices we've made in our lives. We can name these people. Of these people we often say:

“They had such a big impact on my life, my choices”. Young people have told me many times about the “one person” who made the difference for them.

We know for ourselves that this kind of personal connection helped us in our lives. It helped ensure the inherent right to our life as a child. We should challenge ourselves to be that “one person” when we interact with young people. By treating children with respect, and providing them with empathy, good advice and assistance, you will be strengthening that child’s inherent right to life, investing and supporting their development.

And you never know. For those reading this who are in the “helping profession” I bet that you have had the experience of someone coming back to you years after you have met them. They said something like “remember when you told me I was a good writer well now I am a journalist” and you barely remember who they are let alone the fleeting moment when you made the comment to them. We all have this influence on the children we serve and we never know when even a seemingly unimportant act or a comment will have an impact. This is true whether you are working in a professional capacity with children and youth or whether you are an employer, a friend, a neighbour.

Our systems that serve our children, that we ask to parent our children, often work against this type of connection. This is not to say that the people working in the systems are unfeeling. To the contrary for most the building of “reciprocal relationships” with those they serve is why they went to school in the first place.

In child welfare in Ontario youth are required to leave their foster homes by the age of 18 years. They live on their own by the age of 18 years ready or not with limited support from the system until the age of 21 years and then that is it.

Despite the system's best efforts children and youth continue to move from worker to worker. They move from placement to placement. With each move, or as one youth put it "migration". They may change schools, groups of friends, certainly, families. Hardly a system designed to encourage the establishment of long term permanent connections.

Outside child welfare in the realm of children's mental health for instance, fragmentation of service and time limited services created by funding requirements can mean relationships are extremely difficult to forge and to maintain.

When it comes to the concept of Connection youth have said two other things to me that have stuck. They have said, "You can choose your friends and you can choose your family". The concept of "family" includes for many of them friends, social workers, foster parents, teachers, employers, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, etc.. In some ways they have understood "family" to be a socially constructed concept which allowed them to create and choose their own. With this understanding, supporting the act of creation of family becomes crucial to the services we offer children and youth.

Young people have also said to me "To be on your own is not to be alone".

All of us who consider ourselves successful as adults have a point of connection. A family we were born into, although sometimes not, a club, a workplace, an association, a church community, friends....We are not alone. We are rooted. We belong. These connections help us with our identity. We must build these connections into the service we provide to children and youth.

Youth living in child welfare care have told me the same story in one form or another. They talk about telling one of their friends or acquaintances about being in care. They remember being asked "What did you do to come into care?" They remember thinking that they did nothing wrong to come into care but something happened to them outside of their control. They never told anyone outside of the system again.

We know this is also true for young people in youth justice systems and for young people with mental health issues. We know the racism that confronts many including our First Nations children.

It is important to create spaces where young people can feel less alone and understood.

This is all really important and simple but also really difficult to fund and organize.

Even so connection on it's own is not good enough and with access to resources still it may not be not sufficient.

The children and youth I am mandated to serve talk about a loss of sense of control over their lives. You can imagine what it must be like for a child abused at home. The child who comes into contact with the child welfare system through a surprise visit at school or a knock on the door. Meeting a worker they never met before who asks them questions. A child is taken away from the home rather than the perpetrator of the abuse they have suffered. A child may have to go to court even just Family Court to become a ward of the crown at the discretion of a judge. Then living in a system that has rules and regulations outside seemingly anyone's control let alone the young person. Moving from home to home, worker to worker. You can imagine that even when the system works well a child will begin to feel a loss of agency and control.

Paolo Freire¹ in his seminal work “The Pedagogy of the Oppressed” and many others after him, talk about the need to be a subject in the world rather than an object in order to be fully human. I remember a youth saying that “systems at best can acknowledge a child but what systems and institutions have such great difficulty doing is affirming a child. It is affirmation that makes us human.”

How service is offered can work to give control back to youth at every stage possible. It can help them become an actor in the world. It can support the third element — Voice.

Sometimes we think that children have a hard time speaking for themselves. More often than not, it's not children who have a hard time speaking but adults who have a hard time listening. To listen, to really listen, is to accept that we have something to learn. Do you

¹ Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Corporation, 1985.

remember having that conversation where your friend or spouse claimed you weren't listening and you spoke back word for word their last sentence as proof you were. That is not the listening I am talking about. The listening I am talking about comes from being truly engaged, open to learning, a dialogue.

Children have opinions and they must have the opportunity to express their views about policies and institutions that affect them. This needs to become a practice in all our institutions. Not just for a particular privileged group of young people but all children. This will take work. Government can encourage it, government can model it, governments can fund organizations that operate and demonstrate a best practice approach that includes this kind of participation.

Voice is manifested in service delivery. It is not just about creating advisory committees and youth engagement projects. In working with children and young people in our systems it is about walking alongside the children and young people we serve. As a youth told me "sometimes pushing from behind, sometimes being pushed, sometimes leading and sometimes being led and sometimes just walking along but it is about being on the journey together."

With voice young people can find the internal resources to choose to use the connection and resources they have. Without voice, - connection and resources remain untapped.

I have spent so much time with young people who as children have struggled through often horrendous difficulty and circumstance and then who have lived a life being parented by one system or another. With them I have found a truth. I have witnessed many of these young

people summon the courage and find the strength to set a positive course for themselves in the face of tremendous doubt and discouragement. I have witnessed them work to overcome the barriers that their life histories have presented them with. I have witnessed them succeed when most around them spoke or thought that their hopes and dreams for themselves were simply too much to ask for. I have learned from young people that what some say is impossible to achieve is in fact possible.

I know that the Convention is not impossible to achieve. It is not empty rhetoric unless we make it so. The young people I have just spoken about should not be the fortunate ones who overcome through pure courage and good luck to find the resources, connection and voice that they need.

We as a country as a province still have much to do. Too many children fight so hard for rights that come so easily for others.

Bibliography

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Corporation, 1985.