

The Rights of Children with Disabilities in Canada: Call to Action

What is the state of affairs in Canada?

- Canada has ratified two United Nations treaties with specific provisions for children with disabilities: the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). However, implementation and monitoring of both are limited¹.
- There is a lack of data about children with disabilities and their families. The last national dataset about children with disabilities in Canada was in 2006 (10.9% of young Canadians under 15 years old identified as having a disability).²
- We know little about children with disabilities in distinct circumstances such as: living in rural areas, in foster care, with low socioeconomic status, of Indigenous origin, immigrants and refugees, and others who face more systemic marginalization because of their circumstances or identities.¹
- Children with disabilities face significant challenges in access to health, social, and educational services.^{3,4} They also participate less in civic life, including play, a crucial part of life for all children.⁵

These are some recommendations to Canada from the UN CRPD Committee in its Concluding Observations on Canadian Children with Disabilities:

1. Develop a data collection strategy on children with disabilities, disaggregated by type of disability and across national and provincial services to identify needs and to inform equitable policies and opportunities at all levels of government.¹
2. Promote inclusive education in all provinces and territories.¹
3. Remove financial constraints and access to services for children and their families across the entire child life span. Particular attention must be given to services for indigenous children with disabilities.¹
4. Protect children with disabilities from violence.¹
5. Create more opportunities for civic and community participation, considering the needs of children with disabilities in their communities.¹

“I am frustrated when I can’t go in places where I want to go with my wheelchair”

-Youth, 16 years old.



Figure 1 Youth in wheelchair behind two youth on bicycles

“My research focuses on the lived experiences of People with Disabilities. [...] My boys have shown the world how beautiful disability is and that living differently is okay. Our experience of disability is filled with stigma, discrimination, and ableism.”

-Parent, researcher, advocate: Samadhi Mora Severino

Priorities for ACTION!

1. Statistics & Data Collection

- Coordinated national, provincial/territorial approach to collect longitudinal, disaggregated data (by disability type, including children below 15) since this data is lacking.¹
- More information on education, income, living/housing conditions, medical procedures, healthcare expenditures, participation in the community by children with disabilities and their families.¹

2. National Implementation & Monitoring

- Co-ordinated approach for implementing and monitoring the CRC and the CRPD.¹
- Involve key stakeholders: children and youth with disabilities, Canadian Human Rights Commission, disability advocacy groups, families, caregiver groups, Indigenous disability organizations.¹

3. Health & Rehabilitation Services

- Funding, services, and supports, including access to necessary assistive devices, should be equitable for children and their families across provinces/territories.^{1, 6, 7}



Figure 2 Child in walker holds another child's hand



Figure 3 Youth in wheelchair passing basketball

4. Participation in the Community, Play, & Rest

- Policies to support inclusive play spaces and participation for children with disabilities.¹
- Consideration of and inclusion of children with disabilities in national health promotion campaigns.¹
- Use of Universal Accessibility parameters for all play spaces and programs including built environment, training of staff, and funding support to include children with disabilities in structured and free play opportunities like other children.^{1, 8-11}

5. Childhood Disability in National Policy

- The New Accessible Canada Act: consider what needs of children should be included in the national disability policy currently being implemented.^{1, 12}
- National Autism and Disability Strategy: Information gathering, sharing, and developing best practices across provinces/territories about outcomes for various services for children with autism and other childhood disability groups.¹
- Consultations with children with all types of disabilities, including those with communication limitations, deaf, autistic, and intellectual disabilities, and their caregivers.^{1, 13}

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Children with Disabilities & COVID-19

The following is a summary of rights-based considerations for the COVID-19 response to children with disabilities, based on the UNICEF and OHCHR reports noted in the box at the bottom of this page.

United Nations Treaties

The CRPD and CRC state that in situations of high risk, such as the current pandemic, countries should do all they can to protect people with disabilities.^{14, 15} Children with disabilities have the right to appropriate healthcare, education, and opportunities for play and active participation in life.^{14, 15}

Risks for Children with Disabilities

- Health conditions that make them more susceptible to severe COVID-19 symptoms.^{17, 18}
- More likely to face inequities like poverty, increasing COVID-19 risk.¹⁷
- Limited resources in places with high COVID-19 incidence, and increased risk of discrimination.¹⁸ Their rights must be respected.^{17, 18}

Rights-based COVID-19 Public Policy Responses

- **Education**
 - Children with disabilities have the right to continued learning during the shift to virtual teaching, including special education.^{17, 18}
 - Teachers should be trained to support students through remote methods.^{17, 18}
 - Additional and tailored support needed for caregivers.^{17, 18}
- **Healthcare**
 - New directives within healthcare settings and long-term care homes must be accessible.^{17, 18}
 - While caregivers may have restricted access to health facilities, special measures are needed to ensure necessary support is provided, since caregivers provide essential services.¹⁷
- **Health communication**
 - Ensure that children with disabilities (e.g. those with intellectual, hearing, or visual impairments) receive accessible COVID-19 prevention messaging.^{17, 18}
- **Public health surveillance**
 - Monitoring and surveillance is required to collect disaggregated data on the impacts of COVID-19 and public health responses for children with various disabilities.^{16, 17, 18} Without this data, we cannot develop effective, targeted public health responses to ensure that Canada is meeting the rights of children with disabilities.
- **Participation/play**
 - Children with disabilities also face more barriers to participation and play.^{1, 18}
 - Emergency public health decision-making processes need to be inclusive of people with disabilities and their caregivers.^{17, 18}



For the full UNICEF report, consult:
<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/covid-19-response-considerations-children-and-adults-disabilities-enuk>



For the full OHCHR report, consult:
https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Disability/COVID-19_and_The_Rights_of_Persons_with_Disabilities.pdf



CHILD-BRIGHT
Network

For up-to-date resources, consult:
<https://www.child-bright.ca/covid-19-resources>

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