Recommendations for
Canada’s National Plan of Action for Children

Submitted to:
The Honourable Landon Pearson
Senate of Canada

Submitted by:
The National Children’s Alliance
A coalition of more than 50 national organizations
committed to improving the health and well-being of Canada’s children

June 27, 2003

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Canada was at the forefront of what has been described as a decade of great promises for children. Canada was a leader in the drafting of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and co-chaired the 1990 World Summit for Children. Domestically, federal, provincial and territorial governments set out a broad vision for children in the 1997 National Children’s Agenda. As the decade came to a close, however, concrete achievements to address these promises were modest.

Once again, this time at the United Nations General Assembly's Special Session on Children in May 2002, the Government of Canada committed to a time-bound set of goals and framework to "make the world fit for children". This is an ambitious undertaking with (among other things) promises to put children first, eradicate poverty, care for every child, and leave no child behind.

Canada is now developing its National Plan of Action to create a better world for children in the next decade. This Plan must be visionary and concrete. It should also be bold. There are challenges to attaining a world fit for children including jurisdictional barriers, provincial/territorial disparities, the devolution of federal responsibilities, societal barriers, and the disengagement of civil society.

**Children who face disability and disadvantage**

One of Canada’s greatest challenges in creating a world fit for children is to ensure that no child is left behind. Currently, the maximum survival and development of many children (UNCRC general principle) is not assured. Aboriginal children, immigrant children, children with a disability, children living in the care of the state, and children living in poverty have been disproportionately disadvantaged in Canada on a sustained basis.

We need to acknowledge existing inequalities and substantially increase efforts on all fronts. Children with disabilities, for example, have varying opportunities to live "full and decent" lives as the supports and services needed are often not forthcoming. Aboriginal children are still more likely to be born into poverty and to suffer health problems, maltreatment, and incarceration than other Canadian children. It is essential that we act decisively to eliminate existing inequalities by setting goals with targets so that the needs of children who face disability and disadvantage are met.

**Economic security**

In a world fit for children we will put children first and break the cycle of poverty within a single generation. Chronic poverty is considered the single biggest obstacle to meeting the needs and protecting and promoting the rights of children.

The Child Tax Benefit must continue to be increased and not be “clawed back” by provincial and territorial governments. A non-refundable tax credit for families with children should be reintroduced and coordinated with the National Child Benefit.
We must improve tax policies for families caring for children with a disability. We need to make changes in parental leave, in particular the conditions of entitlement, benefit duration, replacement rate, and maximum insurable earning level. We must make better investments in social services and affordable housing.

There continues to be inequalities in funding levels between programs delivered on reserve by the federal government and those provided off reserve through provincial and territorial governments, resulting in service inequities for on reserve children and families.

Canada is an aging society and investments in our children are increasingly important. In a world fit for children we will build a foundation for sustainability by investing in generations to come.

**A Federal Minister for Children and Youth**

To achieve the necessary goals to make a world fit for children, the Prime Minister should appoint a Minister for Children and Youth to ensure that children’s health and well-being is “top-of-mind” at the Cabinet table.¹ This Minister would be responsible for Canada’s implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the National Plan of Action as well as domestic agreements such as the National Children’s Agenda. The Minister would:

- Work to integrate the goals of the National Plan of Action into government policies across all federal government departments and federal/provincial/territorial agreements and working groups
- Demonstrate Canada’s commitment to children and families in government decision- making structures
- Analyse the development of legislation, policies, budgets, and programs through a “children’s lens”
- Coordinate relevant grants and contributions
- Develop indicators of child well-being and national monitoring and evaluation systems to assess the impact of action taken; integrate government reports
- Build linkages and partnerships with voluntary/nongovernmental sectors to accomplish shared goals
- Promote widespread awareness and understanding of the rights and well-being of children.

**Federal/provincial/territorial partnerships**

In a world fit for children, federal, provincial and territorial governments will put children first by adopting the necessary legislation, raising public awareness, appropriating financial resources, and monitoring their effective utilization. While the

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¹ Since the Secretary of State for Children does not sit at the Cabinet table, she does not exercise sufficient power and authority and cannot adequately influence policy and budget. Splitting the responsibility for the health and well-being of children between two ministries does not provide the holistic approach that is needed.
Social Union Framework Agreement ensures access to essential social programs and services of reasonable comparable quality, the National Children's Alliance is increasingly concerned about the variability in the mix and quality of social services across jurisdictions. The "menu" approach to the Early Childhood Development agreement has meant that child care services have not been enhanced in some provinces, as was intended. The Multilateral Framework Agreement for Early Childhood Learning and Child Care, with its more explicit focus on child care, begins to address the child care “crisis” in Canada, but a much greater investment is needed to ensure that children “benefit” from child care as required under the UN CRC.

It is important that federal, provincial and territorial governments commit to reviewing the impact of funding mechanisms on the delivery of social programs in the context of their commitment to comparable social services. The federal government should use its spending power to work with provincial/territorial governments to replace the menu approach to ECD investment.

Federal/provincial/territorial and Aboriginal governments should consider striking a First Ministers' Council on Children and Youth to clearly demonstrate their commitment to the health and well-being of children.

**Partnerships with communities**

In a world fit for children, services and programs for children and families would be jointly funded by federal and provincial governments, delivered locally through municipalities and band councils according to community needs and priorities, and supported by sufficient resources and mechanisms to promote the sharing of effective best practices and encourage innovation where needed. This approach would be inclusive in nature and embrace accessibility, portability, congruency, and respect for diversity; it would be administered in the community and be evidence-based. The model would provide timely access, promote collaboration, strengthen and support community capacity, and provide the supports necessary to make learning and care inclusive, flexible and responsive.

Today, with block funding under the Canada Health and Social Transfer, provinces and territories have a great deal of discretion in deciding how federal transfers are spent which has led to significant variations in programs and services for children and families. Within provinces and territories, silos exist in funding allocations for education, health, social services, justice, and the environment with each group working separately, competing for funding and often vying with each other for similar, complementary initiatives. These government sectors must begin to work more cooperatively to effectively plan strategies and set priorities. This family-centered delivery model would reach out to children and families where they live, learn and play. Childcare and school settings, for example, are excellent places where holistic health promotion and primary care services can be delivered. This holistic, community approach to family services has been demonstrated over the years by family resource and other locally-delivered programs. The family-friendly delivery system would be culturally rooted, collaborative,
integrated, innovative, accountable and holistic.

Federal leadership is essential in promoting this model by forming direct partnerships with local communities and encouraging provincial, territorial and Aboriginal governments through the proposed First Ministers' Council on Children and Youth. The federal government should also expand the Health Reform Fund so that community based services, such as home care, meets the needs of children and families.

**Monitoring and Evaluation**

The Government of Canada is committed to implementing effective mechanisms for monitoring the progress of the National Plan of Action and to subsequently address obstacles and accelerate actions as required. There is also a recognized need to build community capacity for monitoring, assessment and planning. Domestically, under the Social Union Framework Agreement, governments have committed to monitor and measure outcomes of its social programs and report regularly to its constituents on the performance of these programs; and to use third parties, as appropriate, to assist in assessing progress on social priorities. Federal/provincial/territorial governments have agreed to work together on the monitoring of the ECD agreement and developing a joint framework for reporting on expenditures and services.

The federal government has not established a permanent mechanism to monitor Canada's implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and federal/provincial/territorial commitments to monitoring domestic agreements are not yet realized. Mechanisms for third party monitoring are not in place and the federal government has not built community capacity for monitoring through a nation-wide public education campaign about children's rights. There has also been limited progress in working with Aboriginal governments and organizations to ensure that these rights are realized within a culturally based context.

The federal government should coordinate its monitoring commitments of the following agreements: The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, The National Plan of Action, the National Children's Agenda, the Social Union Framework Agreement, and the Early Childhood Development Agreement. The federal government should work with the provinces and territories through the proposed First Ministers' Council on Children and Youth to develop consensus on monitoring processes, targets and action. The model should be transparent and encourage Canadians to participate in setting priorities and reviewing outcomes. Governments should promote widespread awareness and understanding of the rights of the child and regularly report on progress towards goals.

The federal government should fund third party monitoring of these agreements to promote more inclusive and responsive programs and services, more fully engaged governments and citizens, and healthier outcomes for children and their families.
Research

In order to effectively monitor the National Plan of Action, Canada is obligated to strengthen its national statistical capacity to collect, analyse, and disaggregate data and support a wide range of child-focused research. Critical conversations are needed around research that should involve the voluntary/NGO community. Key indicators of child well-being need to be developed and a wide range of child-focused research needs to be conducted. This research should be grounded through the involvement of the voluntary/NGO sector and its impact evaluated, building on success. Publicly funded research needs to be readily and reasonably accessible.

Conclusion

Over the years the National Children’s Alliance has recommended specific strategies to improve the lives of children such as raising the National Child Benefit to a maximum of $4,200 per child and making it available to all low, modest and middle-income families. The Children’s Alliance is prepared to work with the federal government in setting goals, targets and timelines for the National Plan of Action, and in monitoring progress.

The Prime Minister says that Canada is the best country in the world in which to live. For a country such as Canada, the goals identified in "A World Fit for Children" are attainable, as are those in the international and domestic agreements cited above. We just need the will. More than 12 years have passed since the ratifying of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The time has come for governments to work with the voluntary/NGO community so that the rights of Canada’s children are fully realized.

(June 27, 2003)