

November 21, 2005

Canadian Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat
222 Queen St., 10th Floor
P.O. Box 488, Postal Station A,
Ottawa, Ontario
K1N 8V5

Dear First Ministers and National Aboriginal Leaders:

The National Children's Alliance is pleased that the focus of your meetings this week will be on Aboriginal issues. The 67 national member organizations have made Aboriginal children and youth, living on and off reserve, a priority for our work over the past two years. As the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has repeatedly noted, the majority of Aboriginal children and youth in Canada are not enjoying the benefits of living in one of the richest countries in the world. In "A Canada Fit for Children", Canada's action plan, issues affecting Aboriginal children are highlighted.

It is clear that Canadians are unwilling to tolerate the unacceptable levels of poverty facing Aboriginal children. Basic needs must be met, both on and off reserve. Adequate income support, clean water, safe and healthy housing are some of the basic needs that have not been met in too many Aboriginal communities. Research has demonstrated that a critical determinant for improving socio-economic outcomes for families includes access to a range of services delivered with community based decision making. We urge you to set aside the 'jurisdictional wrangling' that has stalled substantive progress and work collaboratively to make immediate and substantive investments in basic needs

for families to ensure that Aboriginal children and youth secure the opportunity to maximize their full potential.

Longitudinal studies show that success in school is determined both inside and outside the education system. For Canada's Aboriginal children and youth this means governments need to take responsibility to adequately fund programs to ensure access to responsive and integrated services, both on and off reserve. In particular, there is a huge gap in programs for Aboriginal children between 6 and 12, the foundation years for educational attainment. We know what works. School success is enhanced by community services that build upon language and culture with recreational components.

There are more Aboriginal children in the child welfare system than were ever in residential schools at their height at a time when Aboriginal child welfare agencies are inequitably underfunded. Jurisdictional disputes routinely leave children and their families without any services. All governments can make a difference for Aboriginal children by implementing a policy that the provincial/territorial or federal government of first contact pays for services without delay and settle jurisdictional disputes later, known as Jordan's Principle. Jordon was a young First Nations child with complex medical needs who was kept in hospital for more than two years after he was ready to go home while government departments argued over who would pay for needed home care supports. And Jordon never did make it home. He died in his fourth year having never left the hospital. Today you have the opportunity to adopt "Jordan's Principle" to ensure that no First Nations child falls through the cracks.

The Prime Minister, speaking with Peter Mansbridge on February 4, 2004, declared that his mandate would be a failure in the absence of a clear path that addresses Aboriginal conditions that are best described as a national disgrace.

We are concerned that there is not yet a clear path to address the needs of the 52% of Aboriginal peoples living in urban centres. There is no clear path for the more than 300,000 Aboriginal children that will be born over the course of the next decade. There is no clear path for our Inuit children and youth living in the north in dire circumstances.

In considering your important agenda to improve poverty levels, housing and education it is imperative to keep children and youth at the forefront. Aboriginal children and youth, on and off reserve, can wait no longer. Attached is the National Children's Alliance policy statement on Aboriginal children and youth as well as the Joint Declaration on Jordan's Principles. The National Children's Alliance urges you to set jurisdictional issues aside so that significant progress can be made.

As Canadians, with our rich and diverse heritage, we cannot afford failure.

Sincerely,

David Young
Executive Director
FRP Canada
On behalf of:
The National Children's Alliance