



## What is the Right to be Heard?

Children and young people are fully capable to form ideas and opinions about the world around them and express those to adults. Adults, in turn, are responsible to seek and seriously consider those ideas and opinions in accordance to a child's age and maturity when making decisions that affect children's lives. A child's right to be heard reminds adults that children's participation is a fundamental human right and is important for the realization of all other rights, for example, freedom of expression with capacity to demand rights to health, education, birth certificate, information, and protection from violence.

**Why is it important to listen to children?** Listening to children and supporting their participation is important to children's well-being. It can make services and organizations more efficient and effective. It will also have a positive impact on children's self-esteem, confidence and skills. Creating opportunities for children to participate can help them become active citizens and understand the relationship between them and the authorities that influence their lives.

**"Many youth don't know that they can participate, or that it's not just for the top students - the right to participate needs to be widely communicated."**

~ Shaking the Movers - Speaking through to power:  
Civil and political rights of children, 2007, 6

**"The right to speak is the right to be listened to: there is a gap in practice between speaking and being listened to"** ~ Young people at a conference in Canada

**What Do Children Require to Participate?** Children need to be given the necessary information so that they can express their views if they desire, and understand the consequences of those views and the decisions that will affect them — within a safe and comfortable environment. Adults can foster child participation by, for instance, facilitating non-verbal forms of communication including play, body language, facial expressions and drawings, through which very young children demonstrate understanding, choices and preferences. Children also need to be given a range of choices, which is a necessary component of active participation. When children are informed and able to express themselves, then a process of dialogue needs to be encouraged within families and in all institutions that affect children, which, in turn, increases children's responsibilities and opportunities to be an active, tolerant and democratic citizen.

### A Rights-Based Approach to Being Heard and Participating

In 2009, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child issued a General Comment on a child's right to express themselves and to be heard. This guidance was significant because it reminded the world that the right of to be heard and taken seriously constitutes one of the fundamental principles of the Convention, in addition to the principles of non-discrimination, the right to life and development, and the best interests of the child. As a principle, the right to participate should be respected in the ways that all other principles and rights are understood and fulfilled. A rights-based approach to being heard and participating includes:

- the child is informed about their right to express their views and understands the potential risks and impacts
- the context in which the child is expressing themselves is enabling and encouraging
- the child's views must be given due weight according to their evolving capacities
- the child is informed about the outcome of the process and explained how their views were considered-this gives the child the opportunity to insist, agree or make another proposal
- the child is able to access a complaint and remedy procedure in any situation when their right to be heard is disregarded or violated

## International and Canadian Dialogue

The General Comment states the difference between the individual child and children as a collective, which emphasizes the importance to listen to or seek the views of children speaking collectively, outlined in the country examples below. A collective may be represented through an organized group of families, communities, schools or child-serving civil society organizations.

### “Children in other countries know what their rights are...Most kids here don’t know about the Convention” ~ Shaking the Movers - Speaking truth to power: Civil and political rights of children, 2007, 11

A number of countries and regions have developed specialized government units that monitor and report on children’s issues, including children’s participation and complaints about violations. In the case when countries are not able to find a solution to violations of a child’s rights, the UN designed the Third Optional Protocol to the CRC which allows for children to complain about violations directly to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

**Country-specific examples:** The UK has a Children’s Commissioner who acts on behalf of children through various regional organizations and brings young people’s rights to the attention of Parliament, local government and others. Similarly in Canada, the *Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth Act*, creates a role for an individual to advocate for and represent children and youth to government and the broader public.

**Municipal and local examples:** Local youth-initiated councils, clubs and groups regularly form throughout the world to represent the voice of youth and children on local and regional issues. Many adults support these collectives as a way to strengthen youth capacities and find ways for their meaningful participation and expression. For example, the Regional Network of Adolescent Communicators was created as a regional community of networks to identify opportunities to showcase and exchange local experiences and learning know-how concerning adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean. Their common premise is the right for children and adolescents to participate as agents of change and to have their voices be heard.

**Groups of Countries:** The ‘Junior 8’ is a part of the G8 where young people come together to present their ideas to government representatives. The Junior 8 is also an opportunity for young people from across the world to come together, share their experiences and design collaborative solutions to global issues. Another example is the National Children and Youth Advisory Boards (NCYABs) in 13 West African countries which was organized to bring the ideas, perspectives and opinions of children and youth to civil society and governments on issues concerning violence against children.

**Global Movement:** Child-friendly cities is a global initiative where local governments are designing cities that are committed to fulfilling children’s rights. The Canadian cities of Edmonton and Vancouver have recently joined this movement by recognizing and acting on the rights of young people as contributing members of society who have a sense of ownership and a voice in their community. UNICEF, Save the Children, Plan and World Vision are other examples of child-serving civil society organizations throughout the world that routinely consult children as a collective in order to represent their voice to other groups in society, such as government and business.

**“I think that [children’s rights are] important, not only for the well-being of children, but hopefully, if children care about their rights, when they grow up, they will be more proactive about human rights of all sorts.” ~ 15-year old, Survey on Experience of Rights by Young People**

## A Right to be Heard for All Children

The right to participate and be heard is one of the pillars of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Ensuring the opportunity for children and youth to participate and to be heard must be taken into consideration in all decisions that are being made, whether it is within local, national and international discussions. Within these discussions, there is a role to be played by all individuals in a space that ensures the participation of young people. Adults must be able to create an environment that is encouraging and free from manipulation and pressure. In addition, adults must be reminded that young people are fully capable of expressing their opinions and making decisions; therefore the voice of young people must be respected and encouraged to listen to.

### More information:

Visit the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of the Child website where additional supporting documents can be found: <http://rightsofchildren.ca>

For the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.12 (2009), *The right of the children to be heard*, <http://www.crin.org/en/library/publications/crc-general-comments>

For the full UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:

<http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>



Canadian Coalition  
for the Rights of Children

Coalition canadienne  
pour les droits des enfants