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To Speak, Participate and Decide: The Child's Right to be Heard

The following article is an excerpt from a paper that the Canadian Child Care Federation (CCCCF) prepared on the occasion of the United Nations Day of General Discussion on "The Child's Right to be Heard," September 15, 2006.

In the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), children's participation rights are contained in the cluster of Articles 12 through 17, which refer to civic participation: right to have voices heard and considered (Article 12), right to freedom of expression (Article 13), right to beliefs (Article 14), right to association (Article 15), right to protection of privacy (Article 16), and the right to access appropriate information (Article 17). While the CRC identifies children's participation rights contained in Articles 12 through 17, the children's participation in this paper is especially focused on Article 12. In an attempt to demonstrate the linkages between Article 12 and other articles of the CRC, references to related articles have been noted in parentheses.

The right to be "heard": A fundamental concept in quality early learning and child care

Article 12 acknowledges that children have abilities to share insights about their lives, process information, develop opinions and make decisions. In order for children to develop these abili-

ties to their full potential they need access to developmentally appropriate opportunities to try, explore and learn actively. Quality early learning and child care encourages this active learning through play-based, child-directed programming (*Article 31*).

Beginning an early learning and child care program is often children's first experience socializing with peers and adults outside of their family unit. In ELCC environments, groups of children lay the groundwork for successful social interactions

throughout their lifetime.

The children share similar experiences, communicate and compromise with one another. They learn to express themselves in order to make their needs and wants known, and they learn to listen to others and to share (*Article 29*). If children's experiences in

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ELCC are positive they feel good about themselves and more confident to explore their environments and to interact with others in a positive way. It is through these experiences that they learn about themselves and the world.

In quality early learning and child care programs practitioners and parents are partners, sharing their observations of the child to gain a broader perspective of the child's thoughts, feelings, talents and areas where he might need extra support. With this information, parents and practitioners increase their understanding of how they can help the child to reach his potential.

To be "heard" refers to the child's right to speak, participate and decide. The child has the right to be "heard" during all types of activity. This means that adults are listening, observing and respecting the child's viewpoints when she is speaking, gesturing, playing, creating, and choosing.

"Speaking" and being heard

Quality early learning and child care programs are those in which practitioners strive to inspire children to realize their potential and recognize that in order to do this, children need

to feel “heard” (*Article 6*). “To be heard” implies that the child is not merely expressing himself, but that someone is listening to him, attempting to understand him and responding to what he is expressing.

Children need to be “heard” during all stages of development, *beginning in infancy*. Babies and toddlers do not use formal language, but attempt to express their needs by crying or through gestures and expressions. They feel heard when an attentive adult responds to their participation.

Young children depend on the adults around them to care for their needs. In order to develop a sense of security that these needs will be met, they need to feel that the adults understand them. When children feel heard they develop a stronger sense of self-esteem. They realize that others value what they have to say and thus feel accepted as individuals with their own feelings and thoughts. There are many ways that early learning and child care practitioners can help children to feel heard. During circle times children can be encouraged to share their personal stories, opinions and feelings. The child who is not comfortable speaking in front of the group may find channelling her voice vicariously through a puppet to be a more comfortable way to express herself. Practitioners can encourage children to speak by posing open-ended questions, which will give them the chance to speak and to elaborate.

If a child demonstrates interest in something, practitioners can follow up by offering more opportunities for him to try activities related to his interests and competencies. For example, during circle time a practitioner reads a book about a boy who lives on a farm. A child asks the practitioner why the chicken in the story is not flying. The practitioner explains to the group that chickens can only fly for short distances and thanks the child for asking the interesting question. The next day, the observant practitioner brings in information on flightless birds. By following up on the discussion initiated by the child’s question, it shows the child that the practitioner has heard and appreciated his expression of interest. When children’s questions are taken seriously they feel validated and comfortable to seek answers. Empowering children to seek answers engages them in the learning process.

Participating

It is the responsibility of early learning and child care practitioners to not just present children with facts, but to offer children opportunities to experiment, and to support them as they explore. In fact, the CRC specifically addresses direction and guidance for children in the exercising of their rights (*Article 5*).

When children are involved as participants, they are engaged and learn from the experiences. For example, when children participate by helping with cooking activities, they learn how ingredients are measured, the science of mixing substances to create a new substance, and how heating the mixture changes the substance. They also have an important opportunity to learn safety rules; for example, they learn that a hot oven can burn them and that they need to wear oven mitts when picking up a hot container.

When children participate in singing and dancing, they may learn new vocabulary from the song. They start to gain physical awareness through dancing; they learn that they can move in original and creative ways to the music and express themselves through dance. Even the youngest children can be encouraged to participate through creative art.

In quality ELCC settings, practitioners create environments that help children to participate and consider their views and input when deciding what opportunities to offer the children. They include a variety of activities and opportunities so that children can choose what to participate in, within their capacities to do so (*Article 3*). For example, by having several activity stations available, children can choose to participate in the dramatic arts area, the reading corner, the construction area etc. Quality early learning and child care environments are set up in a way that encourages participation among all children. Practitioners ensure that materials are accessible to everyone and consider how activities need to be adapted to encourage children with disabilities to participate.

Deciding

To “decide” does not mean that children will not have to follow rules and will make all decisions for themselves regardless of their welfare and the welfare of others. It means that they will be consulted and that their views will be considered. The CRC

includes the right of children to express views freely and to obtain sufficient information to make informed decisions, although it does not imply an obligation for children to express their views (*Article 13*).

In quality ELCC, to “decide” means providing children with choices and opportunities to make some decisions for themselves. For example, young children can be given the choice between a number of nutritional snacks and to serve themselves or to choose the book or activity for circle time. Such opportunities to choose are easy for the child care practitioner to implement, but can have profound effects on a child’s sense of empowerment and self-esteem. Practitioners consult with children by asking them to voice their feelings, ideas and opinions.

Both in the ELCC setting and in the home, being involved in the decision-making process gives children a sense of ownership of the outcome. For example, toddlers can have input into what clothes they wear, activities they participate in and if they want to play with others or participate in solitary play. Preschoolers can be encouraged to discuss ways to resolve conflicts, and suggest rules and changes to equipment or routines.

By being given opportunities to make decisions, children learn to discuss choices and consequences. Even if their proposed option is not the one selected, they will learn to express their opinion and recognize that others might have different views. The consultation process is fair if everyone has a chance to share their ideas and if the reasons for the final decision are explained well.

Children who are encouraged to communicate and share their needs, thoughts and feelings learn that they can influence their environment (*Article 13*). The sense of security fostered by healthy, reciprocal communication helps children to develop trust and feel safe to explore and learn about their world.

Nurturing children to become active, engaged citizens

Many First World democracies are currently struggling with low participation in elections and consultations at all political levels. Youth disengagement is an issue of great concern in Canada. In order to reverse these trends and nurture our children to become active, engaged citizens, we can help them learn to participate effectively during the early years. Children need to be empowered to develop leadership skills; to learn to negotiate, to per-

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suade and to influence right from the start — to foster citizenship skills (*Article 15*).

Every society hopes and expects that its children will grow up to be capable and responsible citizens who contribute to the well being of their communities. This development is not something that occurs overnight, when the child suddenly reaches the age of majority. As with other aspects of growth and development, it is a gradual process that must be nurtured (*UNICEF Canada, 2005, p.94*).

Supporting a child's right to be heard in the early years is integral to nurturing citizenship over the long term. Early learning and child care practitioners are uniquely positioned to take on this supportive role. They have the potential to be valuable contributors to the growth of healthy caring communities, sowing the seeds for more engaged populations in the future.

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Kim Wilson was a project coordinator who worked on contract for the Canadian Child Care Federation.

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