

**Oct 25, 2009**  
**UNITED NATIONS SUNDAY: THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN: HOW ARE WE DOING?**

**Part 1 by Pat Dickinson**

As I indicated at the beginning of today's service we believe there is a good fit between the Week of the Child and United Nations Sunday. One of the goals of the Ontario Week of the Child, to educate and enlist the help of the community in fulfilling our responsibilities to children also fits well with our own principles, particularly those related to the inherent worth and dignity of every person and justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

You hear a great deal about what UNICEF is doing for the world's children in honouring the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. But how are we doing in our own backyard with our children in Canada? That is our focus today.

I recently heard someone ask how we can afford current proposals on behalf of young children in Canada during such difficult financial times as though it were a luxury; eg...the proposal for the early years in Ontario and a similar proposal in British Columbia, and closer to home, the proposal for a full time Children's Religious Exploration professional.

My immediate response is how can we afford not to provide basic rights to our children and families? What does it say about how we value children if we say we can't afford to provide them with quality care and learning in their earliest years?

According to the latest UNICEF Report Card, a majority of the rising generation in the 25 richest countries is now spending a significant part of childhood in out-of-home childcare: almost 80 per cent of the three-to-six year-olds and 25-50% for the under threes. In Canada, 60 % of mothers with children under three are working outside of the home.

In part, these changes reflect new opportunities for women's employment outside the home. But they also reflect new necessities. And the poorer the family, the greater the pressure to return to work as soon as possible after a birth - often to unskilled, low-paid jobs. These are the realities of the working poor.

At the same time, progress in the scientific understanding of early brain development is confirming that the quality of care and interaction in the earliest months and years of a child's life are critical for almost all aspects of a child's development. Taken together, these two developments mean that the transition to out of home child care has the potential both for great benefit and great harm.

The positive or negative effect of quality impacts all children, the rich and middle class, as well as those living in poverty. Poor quality child care may result in weak foundations for future learning, psychological and emotional development. Investments in high quality early childhood education and care can boost educational achievement, limit disadvantage, promote inclusion and good citizenship, and advance progress for women.

There is good news! Some countries are pursuing policies designed to realize the potential benefits. Close to home the French Catholic Boards of Education in Ontario and the entire province of Quebec have provided seamless day, family friendly services for 4 and 5 year olds for more than 10 years. But in other parts of Ontario, in other Canadian provinces and other countries, out-of-home child care is proceeding in an ad hoc way with less assurance of quality.

UNICEF proposed ten benchmarks by which progress could be monitored and compared across the 25 richest countries.

**The benchmarks include:**

**Appropriate parental leave policies**

**A national plan with priority for disadvantaged children**

**Subsidized and regulated child care services to meet the needs**

**Adequate staff education and staff to child ratios**

**% of GDP spent on early childhood services**

**Child poverty rate at less than 10%**

**Near universal outreach of essential child health services.**

Although these are pretty obvious services, only Sweden meets all 10 of the suggested benchmarks. Canada? Of the richest 25 countries in the world, Canada and Ireland come dead last in meeting the benchmarks, just after Australia and the United States. This is what I call the Anglo-Saxon/Victorian viewpoint of young children (and women)...to be seen but not heard, necessary but unimportant. Canada and Ireland meet 1 of the 10 benchmarks, Australia, 2, the US, Switzerland, Spain and Mexico, 3, Germany, Italy, Japan, Portugal, Korea, 4, UK, Netherlands, Austria, 5, Slovenia, NZ, Hungary, Belgium 6, Norway, France, Finland, Denmark, 8, Iceland 9 and Sweden, 10.

Which one do we meet? **50% of those working in child care are educated beyond high school with a relevant accredited qualification**

And how do we reward these individuals, mostly women, who have spent 1-4 years gaining specialized education in ECE? In Ontario, the average yearly salary for an early childhood educator is \$27,000. What does that say about how we value children and their caregivers in this country?

But surely we meet the goal of having less than 10% of children living in poverty. The latest results for Hamilton? 26.4% of children under 6 in are living in poverty.

The 25 richest countries spend on average, .7 % of the GDP on early childhood services. This ranges from 2% in Scandinavian countries and Iceland to less than .2 % in Canada, the lowest of the 25 richest countries.

So what's gone wrong in Canada? We were moving forward a few years ago under the federal Liberal government with a Unilateral Child Development initiative of 2.2 B. dollars. However, the rescinding of this unilateral agreement which had been signed by all of the premiers was one of the first actions taken by the current Conservative government in Ottawa.

The irony in all of this is that doing a better job for the birth-6 population is not only ethical, but also economically sound. A leading Canadian economist recently stated that the one single initiative that had the most potential to stimulate and provide a more stable economy is the provision of family friendly and accessible child care and learning experiences.....dramatically greater than investing in some of the more currently popular stimulus and infrastructure initiatives, eg., manufacturing, recreation facilities, and roads

So what is holding us back...is it our belief system that children should be at home with their mothers, or fathers (even if they aren't there)?

OR is it perhaps our limited view of children's capabilities. I am going to ask Karyn to speak now to this possibility.