

CHILDREN'S STATEMENT

During the North American Regional Consultation for the
United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence Against Children

June 3, 2005

Good afternoon Honourable Senator Landon Pearson, Youth Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen. In our ever-changing world today we are faced with many obstacles and challenges. A prominent issue is violence against children and youth.

From Saskatchewan to Nova Scotia, New York to Mississippi, we gather from across North America to discuss **our** views, the youth perspective on violence against children. Through the North American Regional Consultation for the UN Secretary-General's Study on Violence Against Children, we discussed several areas of violence against children, and here are our resolutions:

Operating in a Federal System

Our theme was operating in a federal system, a conflict of jurisdictions. Seeing as though this is a broad topic, we went with questions instead of key messages. We learned about the current system in Canada and the United States and relationships between provincial/state governments and federal policy making.

The key messages that came out of our discussion are:

- To engage youth in policy making
- Working with cooperation and coordination between jurisdictions
- How to take knowledge and implement it in a productive way

During our discussion Senator Pearson said, "no talking about us, without us!" We think that this is especially important when it comes to making decisions that affect today's youth.

Models for Offices of the Children's Advocate, Children's Commissioner or Children's Ombudsperson.

In order for the mental, moral, emotional, spiritual and physical rights of children to be respected and upheld, there must be a permanent system to ensure children's protection. Within this system, children's opinions and feelings must always be considered just as important as those of adults. The top priority of this system must be for the best interest of the child.

Violence in the Home

We, the youth, agree that violence in the home is a growing problem. In our group, we talked about violence in homes and the most common reasons for violence. We think that a major cause of family and home violence is lack of trust and communications by adults and children. Our recommendation is: To provide programs for families to build relationships based on trust and communication.

Peer Aggression (Bullying)

Bullying is a relationship problem. We need to teach children how to relate to other people – this begins at home. Parents need to be good role models to ensure their child can develop positive relationships rather than some sort of power relationship.

A lot of bullying is school based but we tend to overlook other areas where this may occur, such as in families or neighbourhoods.

We need to educate children to embrace other cultures, styles, and interests – to not feel intimidated or to pick these individuals to be victims.

Youth engagement and interventions are key because children can relate to other youth. Other youth give them a sense of normality and acceptance, making it easier to help the child. In the school system, the bully is usually overlooked. We need to pay attention to these kids. We need to provide the resources to help them. A lot of research needs to be done especially when it comes to bystanders. Bystanders need to believe in themselves and need to believe that they can help, and that bullying is wrong.

Epidemiology and Surveillance of Violence Against Children

So, putting this into youth friendly terms, it means getting information. How we get information and what we do with the information were key points throughout the discussion. Many studies have been conducted on violence against children and the best way to get this information is always a hot topic.

Some of the key points and recommendations that emerged were:

- Closing the gap between research and recommendations
- Effectiveness of current dissemination and making it youth-friendly
- Youth engagement in the research process

Child Welfare Legislation, Policy and Practice

We, the youth of today, feel that child welfare legislation, policies and practice are not accessible and hidden within cities. Children should have the right to voice their opinion on how they feel the services should be run, considering the services are supposed to be for the children.

We believe that if there were more awareness and funding, the services in place would be put to better use and would help prevent violence against children.

Violence Against Children in Juvenile Justice Settings

When taking a closer look at children in juvenile justice settings, the resounding question “what happens to youth once they are in custody?” becomes a very prominent issue. A general observation made by youth at this meeting is that more and more youth in juvenile justice settings are being abused by authorities as well as experiencing peer-on-peer violence. In order to combat this physical, sexual, mental and emotional abuse, we propose:

- Providing daily counselling sessions for youth in custody
- Upgrading rehabilitation programs to improve the quality of life for convicted youth
- Immediate response to a complaint made by youth – possible transfer or training staff how to deal with the youth appropriately
- An alternative to jail time (community service, outreach projects, restorative justice)
- Eliminating life without parole for youth

We feel our juvenile justice systems have the responsibility to rehabilitate youth and integrate them back into society rather than subject them to more violence.

Violence Against Children with Disabilities

There are thousands of people with disabilities in North America. Many of these people are youth. They need special attention, and the last thing they need is to be hurt physically and emotionally.

We need to create more buildings for them. By doing this we will encourage them to explore places they could not access before. This is where we would need the cost of electric wheelchairs to be lower as well as the price of medicines. On top of that it would also be nice to have more disabled-friendly vehicles.

Violence Against Aboriginal and Native American Children

Aboriginal children and Native American children are a disenfranchised group in society. They are not treated or seen in the same respect as anyone else. They are carted around from one reserve to the other, governments neglect their situations and they were assimilated. There are problems with substance abuse, which cause parents, relatives and friends to physically, mentally and emotionally abuse the children.

There are many solutions that the youth have come up with; there should be counselling for substance abuse, also the governments should give more funds to education on reserves and provide basic human needs, such as housing and education.

Violence Against Children in the Media

Violence in the media is an urgent social health issue. This subject requires a lot of research, youth on youth engagement, media awareness education at an early age and media awareness education for parents.

Video games, movies, music videos, music, magazines and cyber bullying are all becoming more violent due to the demand of society in North America. Children have become desensitized. They are unable to differentiate between what is fantasy and what is reality. Parents sometimes don't realize how much they can do to stop negative media influence on their child's mind. A lot of parents don't know how to, therefore parents need to be educated on what programs are available to block certain sites, they need to know how to use the Internet, they need to be involved. Parents need to influence their children positively before television or games can teach it to them.

Violence Against Children in Sport

We believe that violence within sport is becoming a very common issue that is not always recognized. A key problem is that the coaches feel that they have power over the children and may abuse this power in the form of physical, emotional or even sexual abuse.

Often violence in certain sports, such as hockey, is glorified and seen as "no big deal".

We think that a solution and preventative measure would be to increase supervision among youth teams, to ensure that players are safe and not being taken advantage of. Also, rules and regulations for coaches must be increased and enforced by authorities, rather than just by schools. Finally, children should be encouraged by everyone involved to play fairly rather than roughly.

The Role of Primary Prevention

The majority of anti-violence funding in both Canada and the U.S. goes towards dealing with the effects and repercussions of violence, rather than preventing violence in the first place.

We believe, if children are taught when they are young about the reality of violence and the alternatives, then much of the violence caused by youth could be prevented. We feel that primary prevention begins in the home – with proper communication between parents and children - and with proper implementation on a personal, direct and engaging level in schools. With proper education and preparation, children will be less likely to react violently to situations as they grow.

Violence Against Ethno-cultural Minorities, Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Children

Plato once said, “Let us suppose the world to be the very image of that whole of which all other animals both individually and in their tribes are portions.”

Given that scenario, we in North America should reach a caring hand to cries of help from children around the world. There should be more government funding to provide for the basic necessities and ensure living standards are met for refugees. We need to ensure that these children are not being abused by people in power by putting stricter rules in place about their treatment and handling.

There are uncountable numbers of children suffering trauma and violence everyday – in their homes, schools and families.

Someone once said, “A child can ask questions that a wise man cannot answer.” Indeed, children and youth are the curious wonderers of today and the voices of tomorrow - no, of today!

We hope that through this meeting we provided the UN and all participants with constructive ideas and suggestions to diminish violence against children in North America. Perhaps it is very soon that children everywhere will live in a more compassionate, peaceful and harmonious world.

Thank you.