

# The Child Friendly Cities Movement

## – its implications for schools and education

Robert Yates

The 2002 United Nations Special Session on Children marked another important step in establishing an environment where children's rights are a priority. Its Outcome Document, *A World Fit for Children*, notes:

*The experience of the past decade has confirmed that the needs and rights of children must be a priority. There are many key lessons: change is possible – and children's rights are an effective rallying point.<sup>1</sup>*

Part of its text also notes that:

*By building on ongoing initiatives, such as Child Friendly Cities and Cities Without Slums, mayors and local leaders can significantly improve the lives of children.<sup>2</sup>*

Over the last 20 years, the UN has started to focus us, once again, on the importance of children. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (the Convention) was developed during the 1980s and is now ratified by 192 countries, including Canada. In the last ten years the Convention has gradually begun to embed itself into our legal and policy frameworks.<sup>3</sup> For many institutions, it has meant a new way of doing business.

But it has been very much a 'top down' approach. The pace of change in national and provincial laws may have been fast for lawyers, but has been maddeningly slow for child advocates. More recently, the Convention's impact has been augmented by a 'bottom up' approach: child friendly cities.

Internationally, the child friendly cities movement grew out of the 1996 United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II). Efforts to include the particular needs of children in the pre-conference materials bore fruit in the declaration of the Conference and a parallel one from the Mayors of the World. They pronounced that:

*"The well-being of children is the ultimate indicator of a healthy society and good governance".<sup>4</sup>*

Since then, the movement has grown around the world, and in 2001, UNICEF formally added a Child Friendly Cities Secretariat

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Roberts Creek Community School Child Friendly Communities Workshop, 2001.

to its organization. The link to the Convention is made very clear in its literature: a Child Friendly City is a city committed to the fullest implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>5</sup>

By 1996, various initiatives were underway in Canada that focused on child friendly cities. In 1994, the Society for Children and Youth of BC published two booklets on Child Friendly Housing and has continued to develop the concept of Child and Youth Friendly Communities.<sup>6</sup> The first National Conference on Child and Youth Friendly Communities was held in Vancouver in May 2002. Several cities also have child friendly initiatives: Child Friendly Calgary and Child and Youth Friendly Ottawa are examples.

What are the implications of the child friendly cities movement for schools and education? We will touch on a few here:



VOICI CE QUE LES  
PARTICIPANTS  
ONT DIT SUR  
LE SOMMET EN  
AVRIL DERNIER:

« *Remarquable !  
Qualité des invités  
excellente, équilibre  
des intérêts selon  
la province des  
participants* »

Micheline Larivière,  
Chef Imputabilité  
Conseil de district  
catholique du  
Centre-Est, Ontario

« *Intérêt général  
maintenu par  
la qualité des  
conférenciers  
et présentations* »

Denis Roy,  
Directeur général  
ADIGECS, Québec

HERE'S WHAT  
DELEGATES SAID  
ABOUT LAST  
YEAR'S EVENT:

“*Remarkable! High  
quality speakers  
and well-balanced  
interests based  
upon the origin  
of participants.*”

Micheline Larivière,  
Accountability Manager  
Conseil de district  
catholique du  
Centre-Est, Ontario

“*General interest  
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## EN BREF

Au plan international, le mouvement des Villes amies des enfants découle de la Conférence de 1996 des Nations Unies pour les établissements humains (Habitat II). Depuis, le mouvement n'a cessé de grandir partout dans le monde, et en 2001, l'UNICEF a officiellement créé un secrétariat des Villes amies des enfants. Une ville amie des enfants est une cité qui s'est engagée à mettre en vigueur, autant qu'elle le peut, la Convention relative aux droits de l'enfant. Le premier congrès des Villes amies des enfants s'est tenu à Vancouver, en mai 2002. Signalons que des initiatives amies des enfants ont été lancées dans plusieurs villes canadiennes. Le mouvement des Villes amies des enfants est susceptible d'avoir des retombées positives en éducation, notamment au plan du leadership, de l'environnement scolaire, de l'habilitation des enfants et des jeunes, du style d'enseignement et de la participation communautaire.

**At the heart is the question 'how does your local community allow you to exercise your rights?' There are endless topics for learning as we challenge students in all grades to think about what makes a community child and youth friendly.**

### It's about School Board leadership:

While the Convention places the onus for implementation on 'states parties', which is the federal government, all levels of government share responsibility for the implementation of the Convention . . . and that includes school boards. One way that a board can start working on children's rights awareness is by looking at making its schools and their communities child and youth friendly. This means empowering schools and giving them the appropriate resources. The materials produced by Society for Children and Youth of BC will give School Boards a good idea of how to start this process.

### It's about environments, but in the broadest sense:

Child friendly schools have child friendly physical environments.<sup>7</sup> The fields, the playgrounds, the corridors, the buildings...with careful thought all can be made more child and youth friendly. But it is also about policy environments and treating children and youth with respect and dignity, and creating a school system that embodies these values.

### It's Child and Youth Empowering:

The Convention (Article 12) talks about a child's right to be heard. This, of course, includes being heard at school in a positive way, both individually and as a student body. Meaningful participation in school governance goes well

beyond a student council. Using the materials from Society for Children and Youth of BC on Child and Youth Friendly Communities with the student body will help them to ask the key questions in a non-threatening way. They will be happy to tell their school administrators about the strengths and weaknesses of the school, and the relevance of education to their lives.

### It's Inclusive

The Guiding Principles of the SCY's Child and Youth Friendly Communities materials ask the question: Do we recognize the diversity of children and youth and address their unique needs in terms of age, ability, cultural background, economic status, gender, sexual orientation, and interests? We have made excellent progress in opening up education to all children. The Convention makes it mandatory that we continue this progress.

### It's about new styles of learning and teaching

Learning about the Convention is not an issue just for Law 12 classes. It represents a new way of thinking and should be central to everything that children learn at school. In addition to existing curriculum materials on the Convention, the Child and Youth Friendly Communities materials allow teachers to make 'the community' their laboratory.<sup>8</sup>

Does this fit in with where curriculum and instructional strategies are going? Yes! In the last five years for instance, the BC Social Studies Curriculum has been rewritten. The new curriculum requires students to identify issues, conduct research, prepare and present a report on their findings.



Roberts Creek Community School Child Friendly Communities Workshop, 2001.

Within this framework it is possible to focus on the issues that matter to students in their communities. At the heart is the question 'how does your local community allow you to exercise your rights?' There are endless topics for learning as we challenge students in all grades to think about what makes a community child and youth friendly.

### It involves the whole community

The Child and Youth Friendly Communities initiative involves all the community in learning and building. Linking to parents and Parent Advisory Committees will involve the whole school community in looking at the streets and parks in the catchment area. This can be achieved by working with the local recreation department to identify what child friendly recreation would mean: after-school programming, linking to pre-school recreation, much more.

The Society for Children and Youth of BC has developed a comprehensive toolkit to assist community groups, such as schools, that wish to make themselves more child and youth friendly. They also distribute materials from the Rights Awareness Project to increase understanding of the Convention. All these materials can be obtained from SCY's Vancouver office by calling 604-433-4180, email [scyofbc@portal.ca](mailto:scyofbc@portal.ca), or through [www.scyofbc.bc.ca](http://www.scyofbc.bc.ca).

- 1 *A World Fit for Children*, Outcome document of the United Nations Special Session on Children, para. 13. The full text and related information can be found at <http://www.unicef.org/specialsession/>.
- 2 *Ibid.*, para. 32(3).
- 3 Not by itself of course, but thanks to the hundreds of dedicated children's advocates. For reference materials, contact the Society for Children and Youth of BC, and the Canadian Coalition on the Rights of the Child.
- 4 *Children's Rights and Habitat*, UNICEF, App. 2
- 5 Peter Newell, *Building Child-Friendly Cities* (UNICEF: 2002).
- 6 *Child Friendly Housing: A Guide for Housing Professionals; and A Smart User's Guide to Child Friendly Housing*.
- 7 For reference materials on child friendly school grounds, see materials from the School Grounds Coalition (through Society for Children and Youth of BC)
- 8 Can be found on the Canadian Coalition on the Rights of the Child website at [www.XX](http://www.XX)

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