Youth Views About

01 Education

02 Youth Mental Health

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A UNICEF Canada Youth Advocacy Initiative

REIMAGINE PLAYBOOK

(A BETTER FUTURE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN CANADA)

2026

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UNICEF Canada extends our gratitude to the young people who contributed to writing this Playbook.

UNICEF Canada also thanks the copy-editor, Eileen Hoftyzer and production contributors who supported the clarity, consistency, and accessibility of this Playbook.

UNICEF Canada recognizes that our work takes place on Indigenous territories across Turtle Island and pledges to work in reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. UNICEF Canada's national office is situated on the ancestral, traditional territory of many nations including the Huron-Wendat, Petun, Seneca and, most recently, the Mississaugas of the New Credit. This territory is part of the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement for all people to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. This territory is also covered by the Upper Canada Treaties. It is home to diverse First Nations, Métis and Inuit Peoples today, and we are grateful to live and work on this territory.

Aussi disponible en français.

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ABOUT THIS PLAYBOOK

This Playbook represents the work of youth advocates who came together throughout 2026 to learn and share knowledge and skills about their human rights and how to advocate for them. These young people identified five interconnected issues that unite them in their passion for shaping a better country and a reimagined world: **Education, Youth Mental Health, Gender Equality, Children's Rights** and **Social Justice.**

Each group statement summarizes how young people are experiencing these issues in Canada and around the world. Each section includes recommendations from the youth for decision-makers, adult allies, and other young people on how we can support them in their advocacy. While these words are their own and may not represent positions of UNICEF Canada we are proud to provide this platform for the views of young people on the issues that matter to them. Please read and share them widely to amplify youth voices and experiences and help reimagine a better future for young people in Canada.

The Playbook was formally released on the week of November 20, 2026, in recognition of National Child Day and World Children's Day (November 20).

A digital version of this Playbook is available at www.unicef.ca/reimagineplaybook

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OUR VISION FOR LASTING CHANGE

We are the national cohort of the UNICEF Canada Youth Advocacy Program, a collective of young leaders, researchers and advocates representing diverse regions, lived experiences and systemic challenges. What unites us is an unwavering refusal to let others dictate our futures without our voices being heard. We carry the frontline realities of our communities and stand at the intersection of children's rights, education, gender equality, social justice and youth mental health. Our voices matter not because we are the leaders of tomorrow, but because we are experts in the failures of today.

Youth consultation is not a courtesy, and our well-being is not negotiable. Leaders must listen because policies made without us inherently fail us and defer crises to future generations. We are not here to offer feedback on work that is already done or to ask for symbolic representation. We are delivering evidence-based solutions, and we expect structural accountability. The time for leaders to quietly endorse youth perspectives without acting on them is over; the era of youth-led transformation is now.

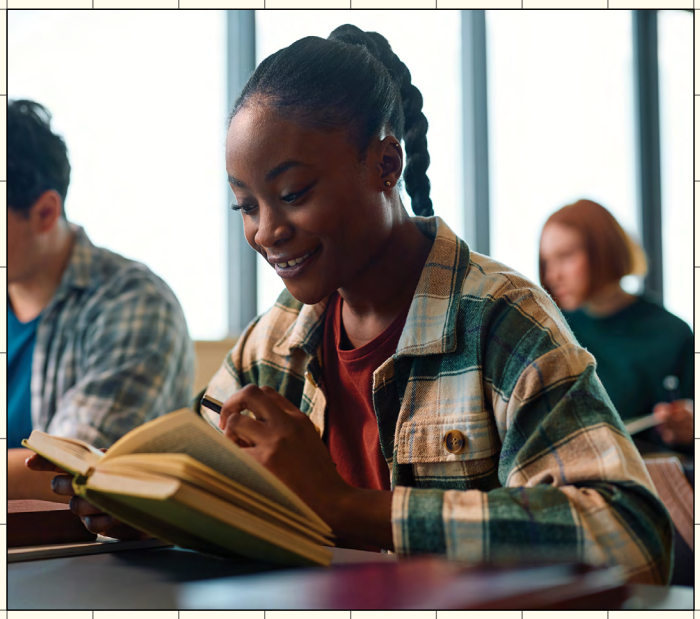
Turning this vision of meaningful youth consultation into lasting change begins with confronting the systemic injustices that continue to deny young people equal access to their rights. First Nations youth continue to face educational inequities through funding gaps, culturally unsafe schools, harsh disciplinary measures and Eurocentric curricula. These barriers exacerbate broader social inequality, as 44 per cent of First Nations people aged 15 and over do not hold any certificate, diploma or degree compared to 23 per cent of the Canadian population (Assembly of the First Nations, n.d.). We call on decision-makers to identify and eliminate educational inequities affecting First Nations youth by federally funding research to deconstruct systemic barriers in Indigenous Peoples' education.

Achieving educational justice also requires examining the emerging systems and technologies that increasingly shape how young people learn. As technology becomes increasingly embedded in children's learning environments, a growing priority has become ensuring that young people can engage with it safely, responsibly and in ways that support their development. Rapid adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) in Canadian education has outpaced policy, curriculum and training built to govern it. Left unaddressed, unregulated AI use threatens students' long-term cognitive abilities, critical thinking and fundamental skill development – the exact skills schools should foster. We call for restrictions on how AI tools are designed and applied in K–12 classrooms, including safeguarded scaffolding requirements on provided models, as well as teacher training and integrated student curricula on foundational AI literacy and responsible use.

Whether shaped by technology, curriculum or representation, education cannot fulfill its purpose unless every young person has an equitable opportunity to learn and participate. Gender equality is the groundwork for equitable social systems; nonetheless, 53 per cent of Gen Z women identify as feminists, compared with 32 per cent of Gen Z men, representing a 21-percentage point gap (Ipsos, 2025). Advancing gender equality is pivotal to societal progress and essential to safeguarding youth opportunities and education. Yet an opportunity is only as limitless as the environment that surrounds it; thus, we urge that decision-makers foster opportunities for youth representation within federal decision-making spaces to ensure perspective-led advocacy that authentically contributes to discussions of gender-based violence, reproductive health care and providing 2SLGBTQIA+-inclusive education.



A commitment to equality must extend to every young person, especially those whose rights and futures are threatened by conflict and displacement. Children's rights are non-negotiable, yet millions surviving war are abandoned when short-term emergency aid ends, even as war inflicts chronic, lifetime physical disabilities and leaves over 84 per cent of affected youth in deep psychological distress (Save the Children, 2022). Survival cannot remain the baseline of protection and Canadian decision-makers must do more than passive alignment. We demand a commitment to funding multi-year rehabilitation, accessible rebuilding, trauma-informed health care, and dignified data protections both internationally through Canadian foreign aid recovery frameworks and domestically through a comprehensive, long-term health and disability support package for refugee youth resettling in Canada.



Protecting children's rights means supporting not only their survival and recovery, but also the everyday conditions that shape their long-term health and well-being. Youth mental health is affected by more than access to mental health services. What young people eat and what they see about food, diets and body image can also affect their well-being. However, school food is often treated as a way to address hunger rather than as part of addressing students' mental health. We call on decision-makers to strengthen the National School Food Policy with a clear, measurable standard for nutrient-dense school food that recognizes nutrition's role in supporting youth mental health and provides age-appropriate education on nutrition and mental health, including how food, body image and social media can influence young people's eating behaviours and well-being.

We are asking Canada's leaders to turn this Playbook into meaningful, collaborative action. Real partnership means inviting youth directly into the rooms where decisions are made and co-creating policies rather than simply asking for our feedback after the work is done.

Leaders can show that our voices truly shape decisions by establishing transparent mechanisms and publicly showing how youth input directly influenced final legislation, budgets and programs. When decision-makers show us where our ideas live in the policy, they prove that we as young people are valued as experts in our own lives.

We leave decision-makers with a direct question: How will you ensure that the choices you make today honour our rights and build a future where every young person can thrive?

Sincerely,
UNICEF Canada 2026 Youth Advocacy Program Participants

SPOTLIGHT:

UNICEF CANADA'S ADVOCACY PRIORITIES

Young people identified and developed the issues and recommendations in this Playbook, drawing on their lived experiences, research and knowledge of their communities. Through the Youth Advocacy Program, UNICEF Canada provided a platform, guidance and support for youth advocates to shape and advance their own priorities. Their work connects closely to many of UNICEF Canada's advocacy priorities for children in Canada and globally.

UNICEF Canada's advocacy work helps situate these perspectives within a broader policy and rights-based framework, guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Grounded in this framework, UNICEF Canada works to ensure that every child can grow, learn, participate and thrive.

Key priorities include:

Child Protection & Social Protection	In Canada, UNICEF Canada calls for sustained and targeted investments in core social protection programs, including income benefits and supplements to reduce and ultimately eliminate child poverty. Globally, we advocate for the protection of children in armed conflict and support for children in humanitarian crises through timely, flexible and predictable funding.
Digital Safety & Online Harms	UNICEF Canada advocates for a digital safety framework that places children's rights at the centre of digital governance and platform design. Young people's calls for stronger digital literacy and AI education align closely with UNICEF Canada's advocacy efforts to ensure children and youth have the knowledge, skills and protections needed to thrive in an increasingly digital world.
Child Health & Nutrition	In this Playbook, youth mental health is closely linked to nutrition: Food insecurity, unhealthy food environments and unequal access to school food can affect stress, concentration, belonging and overall well-being. UNICEF Canada seeks to ensure healthy school food environments for children by advocating for sustained investments in the National School Food Program. Globally, we advocate for investments in child survival, encompassing immunization, polio eradication, nutrition, and maternal, newborn and child health.
Mental Health & Protection from Harm	Young people's perspectives highlight the need for accessible, equitable mental health supports alongside reliable access to nutritious food, as well as stronger protections from bullying, online harms and emerging digital risks. UNICEF Canada calls for increased earmarked investments in child and youth mental health supports through bilateral transfers and federally funded initiatives such as the Youth Mental Health Fund.
Climate Adaptation & Healthy Futures	UNICEF Canada advocates for the need to systemically embed Child Rights Impact Assessments, child sensitive targets, routine youth participation and child critical service adaptations into Canada's emergency response architecture. Globally, we advocate for Canada to ensure children's unique vulnerabilities are systematically integrated into climate finance, adaptation planning, mitigation efforts and broader climate policy decisions.

Child Rights, Participation & Systems Change	UNICEF Canada advocates for young people's right to meaningfully participate in decisions that affect their lives, grounded in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This means moving beyond simply listening to youth toward ensuring they are informed, supported and able to influence policies, programs and services, with governments and institutions creating meaningful and inclusive opportunities for participation.

Together, these connections position the Playbook as both a youth-led advocacy resource and a bridge to UNICEF Canada's broader policy priorities. The section that follows invites each group to consider how their topic is shaped by and impacts poverty, inequality, public systems and the rights set out in the UN CRC, and to reflect on how their recommendations can help move Canada closer to becoming a country where every child thrives.



SPOTLIGHT:

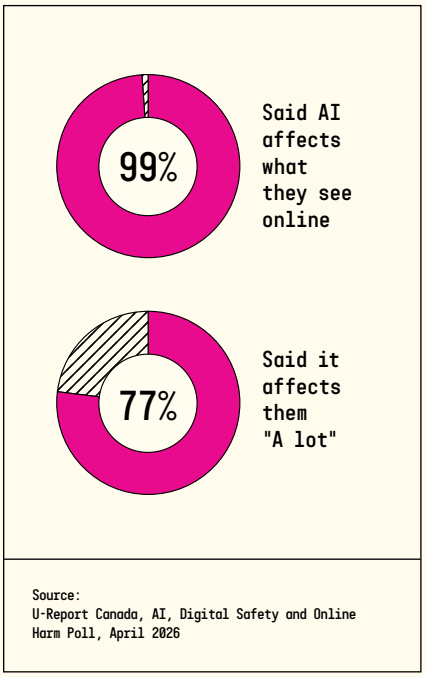
U-REPORT CANADA

U-Report is a digital polling platform developed by UNICEF for youth ages 13 to 24. It provides quick, real-time pulse checks of young people's views about issues they care about; to understand how different groups of youth are affected by decisions, policies, services and events; and to involve youth in decisions that affect them. There are more than 3,800 U-Reporters in Canada, and they reside in every province and territory.

U Report
by UNICEF

EDUCATION





Source:
U-Report Canada, AI, Digital Safety and Online Harm Poll, April 2026

The Current State of Education

We are in the midst of one of the most consequential technological shifts in human history. Generative artificial intelligence (AI) can imitate capabilities once inseparable from human learning and expertise, and students have adopted it faster than systems can regulate.

Three-quarters of Canadian students already report using AI for schoolwork, and over half of students believe their own critical thinking skills have deteriorated since they started using AI (KPMG, 2026). Left unaddressed, unregulated AI use can harm learning and threatens the long-term cognitive abilities and skills development that school exists to foster (Bastani et al., 2025; Kreijkes et al., 2026).

Canada's response with the AI for All strategy frames AI education largely around adoption and workforce-readiness (Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2026); it funds efforts to improve proficiency in responsible AI use but does not address AI's impacts on youth cognitive development. The strategy's K–12 teacher-training commitment provides training kits to 3,000 educators, and its delivery partner aims to reach up to 50,000 by 2031, but both fall short of the more than 400,000 educators nationally (Vang, 2026; Statistics Canada, 2025).

Most critically, the nation lacks a binding federal standard that governs how consumer-facing AI tools and large language models (LLMs) are designed and deployed, especially for young users. Bill C-34 proposes broad safety duties for chatbots, but leaves specific design requirements to future regulation and does not specifically target education (House of Commons Canada, 2026). Further action must be taken to address this pressing need in Canada, as child safety and development are largely left to the private frontier labs developing these models.

AI has immense potential to make education more accessible, personalized and innovative, but realizing this potential requires decisive and urgent federal action. As the technology advances, education and the young people at its centre must advance with it.

How Young People Are Experiencing Issues Surrounding Education

While AI makes assignments feel easier to complete, students are offloading the difficulty rather than improving their abilities. In one study of high school students, those using unrestricted AI did not perceive any loss to their learning, but they performed 17 per cent worse on an exam once the tool was taken away compared to peers who did not use AI (Bastani et al., 2025). In the long term, uncontrolled AI use can harm cognition and fundamental skill development (Kreijkes et al., 2026). It further masks skill deficits over time, as "productive struggle" is necessary for effective learning.

Nearly half of Canadian students say their first instinct is to use AI on an assignment rather than attempt a first draft unassisted, and 51 per cent reported that their critical thinking skills have deteriorated since they began using AI (KPMG, 2025; KPMG, 2026).

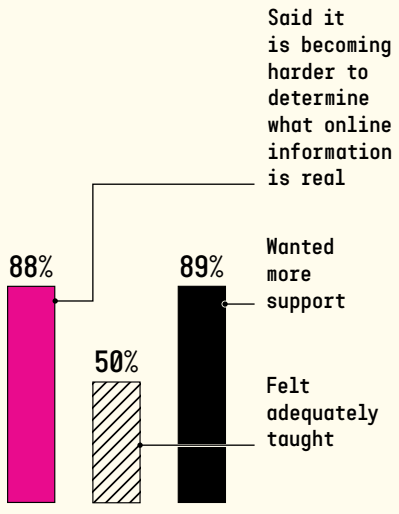
Young users are especially vulnerable; because they are still developing their self-regulation, critical thinking, and metacognition, they struggle to know what they don't know (Armitage and Gilbert, 2025). AI readily produces inaccurate or "hallucinated" information while presenting it confidently as a fact, making identifying errors harder for developing youth (Kidd and Birhane, 2023).

This impact on youth doesn't just resolve with time or increased adoption. Among university students, neither prior AI use nor years of schooling protected against lowered critical thinking; in fact, cognitive disengagement was the strongest among the most tech-confident students (Choudhuri et al., 2026).

Further, there's growing concern with how these tools are implemented in K–12: 63 per cent of Canadian teachers report having no training on instructing reasonable AI use to students, and only 34 per cent report a policy for staff AI use (MacPherson, 2026). We've seen this in action in our schooling: Teachers may use generative AI to create assignments and assist with marking, while students are encouraged to use AI to expedite their learning or complete assignments. This approach, without proper instruction, inadvertently creates reliance on AI to optimize short-term grade gains, while disincentivizing creative exploration and independence. These tools can certainly be used to improve learning accessibility and make material more engaging (such as individualizing a course's application to a student's interest through independent projects), but implementing this approach requires added guardrails.

Student AI use for learning also raises potential concern about better immediate performance for students with access to more expensive reasoning models, highlighting potential inequity issues (KPMG, 2026). Inequality can also be compounded by underlying systemic gaps, as only 62 per cent of rural Canadians reach the federal broadband standard (Canada School of Public Service, 2024). In addition, given that large language models (LLMs) draw on what is represented in their training dataset, they can further reinforce existing inequalities for underrepresented groups. For example, the models behind these tools perform poorly in Indigenous languages due to their training, and are often built in ways that may violate Indigenous data sovereignty principles (First Peoples' Cultural Council, 2026). For French-speaking students, Francophone institutions have raised concerns to the federal government about participating in designing and adopting the tools (ACUFC, 2026). While all students are affected by potential offloading of their learning, certain demographics face added equity issues.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization urged nations to develop human-centred policies for generative AI in education, emphasizing human agency, equity, teacher preparation and meaningful learning (Miao and Wayne, 2023). In line with Canada's recent AI strategy that calls for Canadians to be "informed participants in an AI-enabled society," now is the time to act (Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2026).



Source:
U-Report Canada, Digital Literacy and Navigating Information Online Poll, May 2026

Education Recommendations

Young People

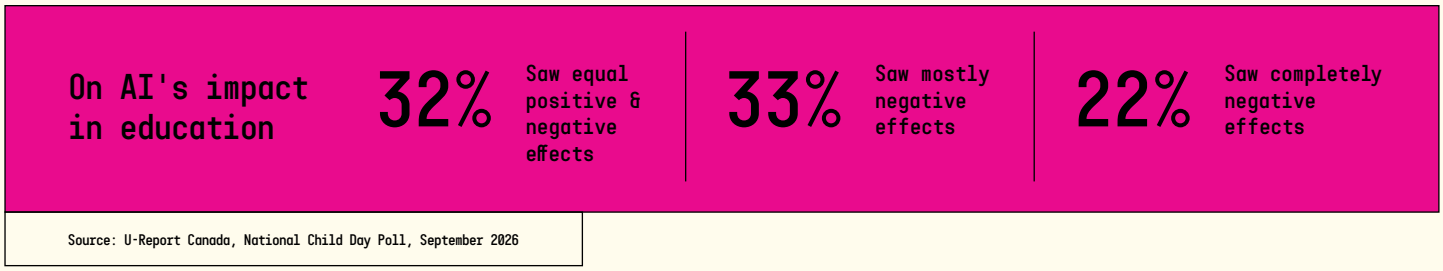
LLMs are incredibly powerful tools, but they should be used responsibly to heighten, rather than replace, creativity and critical thinking.

- **Learn how LLMs fundamentally work** to predict outputs based on training data, understanding why they're prone to bias, hallucinations, misinformation and plagiarism. This is vital to approach these tools critically.
- **Be skeptical.** Always assess model outputs for accuracy against primary sources, and actively look for potential inaccuracies or hallucinations. If you can't tell where to be critical of its outputs, it's likely a sign you need to better learn the subject and its foundations before using AI for that task.
- **Deliberately learn and create using little to no AI** to protect your original voice, critical thinking, and artistic and academic growth. Prioritize using LLMs to explore unfamiliar subjects to relate them to your interests, or for menial tasks like compiling spreadsheets and debugging software.
- **Coordinate with others to advocate** and reach out to your local leaders (Member of Parliament or Legislative Assembly, city council members, trusted adult allies, school admin) about concerns with AI in education.

Adult Allies

Whether they are advocates, teachers or parents, adult allies can provide guidance and shape change.

- **Lead by example.** Use AI responsibly, especially around children and young people. Demonstrating transparent, ethical habits helps inform how they should approach it.
- **Encourage children to read physical books, write by hand and complete tasks without AI.** Foundational literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills make it possible to use AI as a tool rather than a crutch. In learning spaces, create structured systems that encourage these skills naturally, such as daily reading times or group collaboration.
- **Connect youth with opportunities** (local councils, workshops, advocacy programs, etc.), help them bring projects to life and cheer them on as they get involved.
- **Set, communicate and enforce clear expectations for responsible AI use.** Create non-punitive conversations around generative AI to avoid vilifying the technology or the people using it. Honest conversations allow young people to admit how they actually use AI, which makes it possible to help them use it more responsibly.
- **Reach out to your local decision-makers and government leaders** about your or youths' concerns with AI in education



Source: U-Report Canada, National Child Day Poll, September 2026

Decision-Makers

Governments at various levels can shape AI policy in a sustainable, accountable way. The following recommendations generally build on commitments made in Canada's AI strategy, incorporating youth development.

- **Make safe-by-design AI tools, instead of general purpose models, the default** in K–12 educational settings. These tools must include built-in assistive guardrails that challenge students in their learning, rather than providing answers or summaries, which mitigates harms on cognition and engagement (Bastani et al., 2025).
- **Implement regulatory standards for youth safety** and development in consumer-facing AI, maintained by a committee that includes youth-development and learning experts. The aim is to develop an enforceable federal framework that can remain proactive and adaptable with advancements in the field.
- **Develop a risk-scoring system that assesses AI tools** on said standards, which can be paired with federal subsidies and penalties. This system would provide governments, school boards and parents with a critically needed quantifiable metric to compare AI tools and make decisions, while providing incentives for frontier labs to improve youth AI safety.
- **Adapt student curricula and teacher training** for a holistic understanding of AI literacy. This education should showcase specific examples of responsible and irresponsible use, risks to users and broader societal impacts, and encompass how the tools fundamentally work. Access to teacher training must also be accelerated.
- **Engage youth to advise on AI and digital safety issues** throughout the policy development process. Canada's strategy commits to giving Canadians a meaningful voice in shaping AI, and this should remain especially true for youth.

> "I AM FIRMLY AGAINST UNREGULATED AI [...] ALL AI SHOULD BE FACT CHECKED AND PROPERLY LABELED AS AI GENERATED MEDIA [...] AND THERE SHOULD BE LAWS/RULES/REGULATIONS TO ENFORCE THIS [...]"
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> U Report by UNICEF

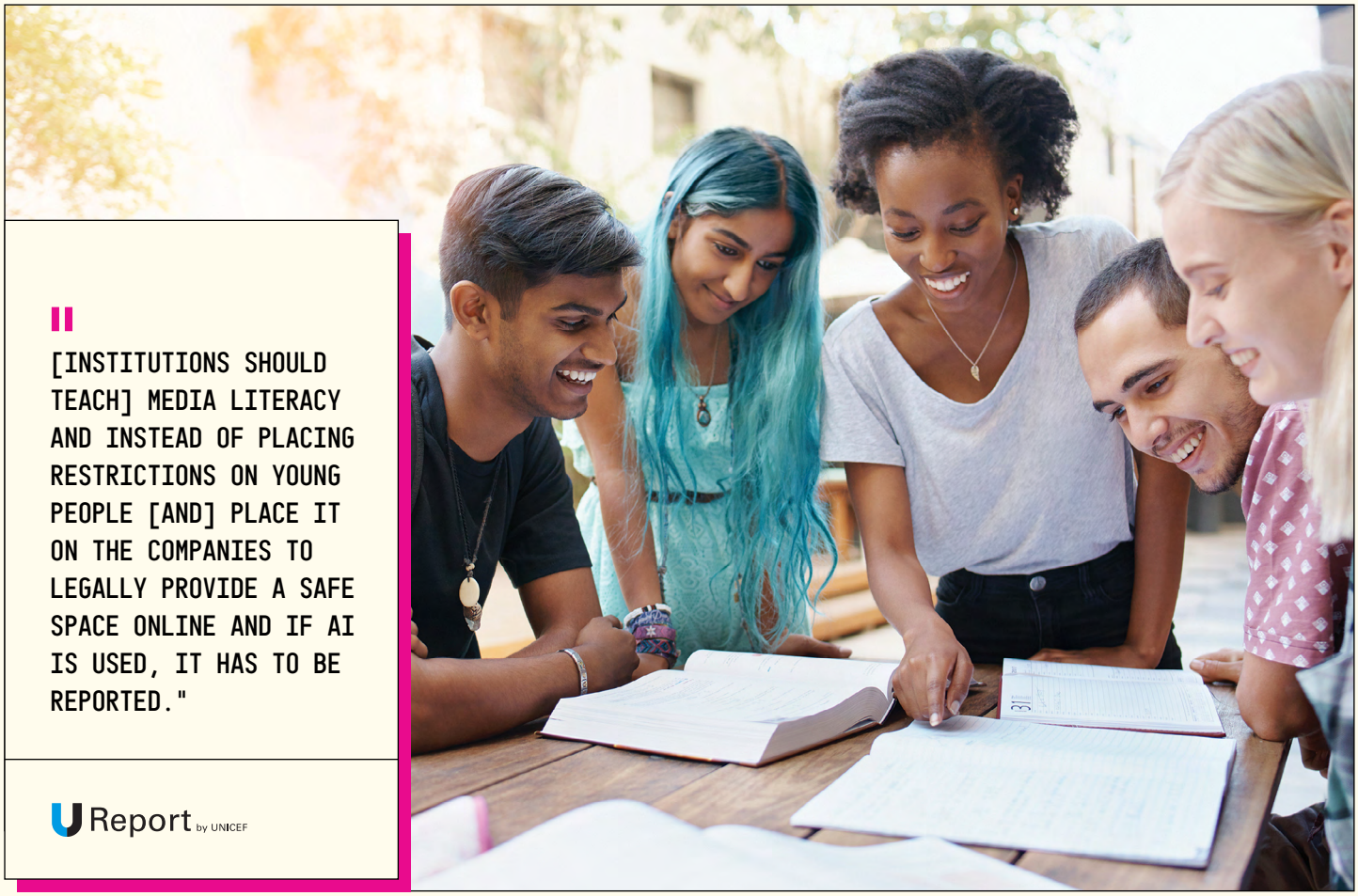


How does Education connect to the bigger systems that help young people thrive?

Education not only shapes individuals' lives, but influences nearly every facet of general prosperity, including upward mobility for escaping poverty, increased civic engagement and better health (UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, 2017; OECD, 2023; OECD, 2025).

We've already witnessed at least one rapid adoption of technology this generation: Social media reshaped how young people learn, communicate and see themselves, largely before schools or policy could adapt. Canada's ranking in the World Happiness Report fell from 6th in 2013 to 25th in 2026, a decline concentrated among people under 25 that coincides with increased social media use (Helliwell et al., 2026). Generative AI risks an even greater shift, but its future headlines depend on policies and decisions set in motion today.

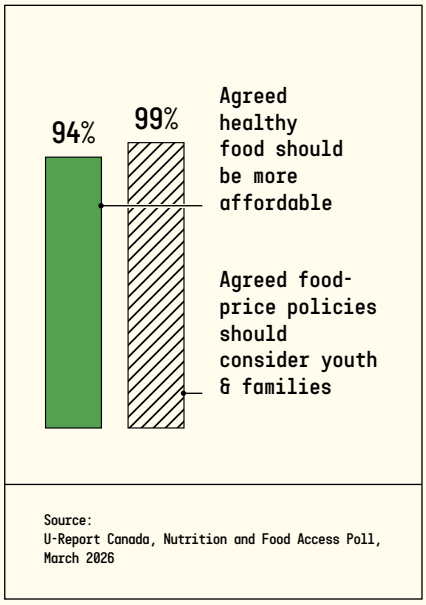
In the meantime, technology will continue to accelerate in ways we cannot predict. Society's ability to adapt depends on foundational skills learned in youth and developed traits like creativity, critical thinking and independence. Our ask is to ensure that these technologies are built and implemented in ways that strengthen education, without degrading the underlying abilities that make learning possible.



> "[INSTITUTIONS SHOULD TEACH] MEDIA LITERACY AND INSTEAD OF PLACING RESTRICTIONS ON YOUNG PEOPLE [AND] PLACE IT ON THE COMPANIES TO LEGALLY PROVIDE A SAFE SPACE ONLINE AND IF AI IS USED, IT HAS TO BE REPORTED."
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YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH





The Current State of Youth Mental Health

Every school day, students are expected to learn, focus, participate and manage the pressures of adolescence, but what they eat while doing so may affect more than their physical health. We are focused on setting a minimum measurable school food standard specifically for mental health, as a preventive mental health strategy rather than a nutrition issue alone.

Youth mental health is a growing concern in Canada and around the world. In Canada, the percentage of youth aged 16-21 who reported their mental health as “fair” or “poor” increased from 12 per cent in 2019 to 26 per cent in 2023 (Statistics Canada, 2024). Globally, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 1 in 7 young people aged 10–19 experiences a mental health condition (World Health Organization, 2025).

At the same time, research increasingly demonstrates a connection between diet and youth mental health. A systematic review of children and adolescents found unhealthy dietary patterns were associated with poorer mental health, including depressive and emotional symptoms (O’Neil et al., 2014). More recently, a 2026 study that combined 49 major research summaries with approximately 1.9 million participants across 48 countries found that healthier dietary patterns were associated with fewer depressive symptoms, while less healthy diets were associated with more depressive symptoms (Campisi et al., 2026).

Yet Canadian data show that eating habits can decline during adolescence. In 2022, reported breakfast consumption among students in Grades 9 and 10 was 12 percentage points lower than among students in Grades 6 to 8 (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2025).

Students spend a significant part of their day at school, and food provided at school has become part of their regular diet. Because the food students receive can contribute to their mental well-being, it should not be left to varying nutritional standards without a clear national requirement. But Canada’s current school food program doesn’t set a measurable school food standard. Our advocacy is for clear, measurable school food standards that recognize youth mental health as part of nutritional well-being, supported by federal funding, periodic audits, and accountability to ensure the standard is actually met across provinces and territories.

How Young People Are Experiencing Issues Surrounding Youth Mental Health

Youth mental health affects more than how a young person feels. Mental health challenges can affect how young people focus in school, manage stress, build relationships and participate in their everyday lives. Young people also experience these challenges alongside academic pressure, financial stress, food insecurity and social media. When these pressures overlap, it can become harder to maintain overall well-being.

Food and nutrition are one part of this issue that is often overlooked. Research has also identified a relationship between diet and mental health in children and adolescents (O'Neil et al., 2014). When young people do not have consistent access to nutritious food, their energy, concentration and ability to manage everyday demands can be affected. Worrying about where their next meal will come from can also create ongoing stress, while feeling unable to participate in meals or food-related activities with peers may contribute to isolation. Research involving 337,738 students aged 11–18 across 95 countries found that food insecurity was associated with poorer mental health, more missed school and other challenges affecting young people's daily lives. The study included students from six WHO regions, with the largest shares from the Americas (28.3 per cent), Western Pacific (23.7 per cent) and Eastern Mediterranean (19.6 per cent). These associations also differed by age and sex, showing that food insecurity does not affect all young people in the same way (Fram et al., 2022).

School is an important part of this issue because students spend a significant amount of their time there, and for some young people, food provided at school may be an important part of their regular diet. The quality, availability and affordability of food in school environments can, therefore, shape students' everyday experiences. A 2025 review of school feeding programs across 13 countries in multiple regions found that these programs were associated with healthier dietary intake, better social engagement and reductions in stigma. However, the review also highlighted that program design can affect young people's experiences differently (Tadesse et al., 2025).



This shows why access to school food alone is not enough to improve well-being; the quality and inclusiveness of that food environment also matter.

Young people are also constantly exposed to information about food, diets and body image, particularly through social media. Unrealistic body standards, diet trends and misinformation can contribute to negative body image and unhealthy attitudes toward food, adding another source of stress during an already significant period of physical, social and emotional change. Young people do not always have access to clear, reliable and age-appropriate information to help them navigate this content.

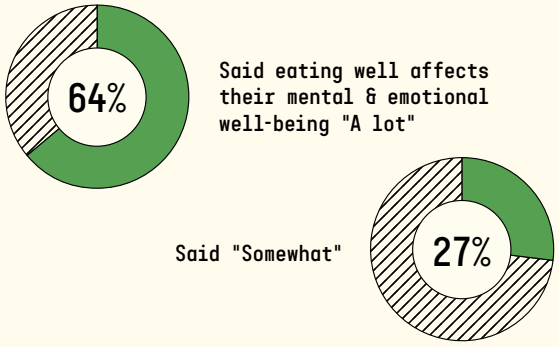
These challenges can be greater for young people experiencing poverty or food insecurity, as well as those living in rural, remote or Indigenous communities where food costs, availability, infrastructure and access to services can create additional barriers to accessing healthy nutritious food. Supporting youth mental health, therefore, means considering the environments where young people live, eat, learn and receive information. School food is one practical setting where Canada can help create more equitable conditions for young people's well-being.

Youth Mental Health Recommendations

Young People

Students notice how food affects their focus and mood long before anyone measures it. Young people don't need formal power to act on that; they only need somewhere to bring that information.

- **Record what your school serves for a week.** Include cafeteria meals, vending and snack programs, and note how much of it is nutrient-dense. Written proof shows whether students are actually being fed in a way that supports their mental health. Several students can work together to track the food offered and share their findings with school administrators or school board trustees. Documenting a pattern several people have noticed is harder to dismiss than one person's complaint.
- **Raise the issue of school food with your student council or write to your school board trustee.** Ask in writing which nutrition standard your school follows, and whether it accounts for students' mental health. Nutrition is rarely mentioned in school mental health programming, even though adolescent diet quality is associated with depressive and anxiety symptoms (Dabravolskaj et al., 2024).
- **Be careful what food information you take from social media.** Much of this content is created by people without formal health or nutrition expertise, and the eating patterns they promote can work against student mental health.



Source: U-Report Canada, National Child Day Poll, September 2026

Adult Allies

Teachers, parents and food service staff make the daily decisions that shape whether students are fed well enough to focus and cope. Adults in these roles are usually the first to see what is not working, and they are already in the position to ask for better options.

- **Ask administration which nutrition guideline your school follows.** Ask what nutrition standards are used to determine the food served in schools and whether these standards take into account the relationship between nutrition and mental health.
- **Include nutrition in the approaches your school already uses to talk about mental health.** Well-being assemblies, health classes and student support classes rarely mention food. Adults running those spaces can include it without scheduling anything new.
- **Learn what the evidence says about diet and youth mental health, then use it.** Most adults making food decisions in schools have never been shown that link. Those who plan menus or order supplies can choose options that support how students focus and cope, not only what is the cheapest or easiest to serve.

> "A BREAKFAST CLUB PROGRAM... WAS A GAMECHANGER FOR ME PERSONALLY. IT SHOULD BE AVAILABLE TO ALL SCHOOLS... ALL HEALTHIER AND ACCESSIBLE."
>
> U Report by UNICEF

Youth Mental Health Recommendations

Decision-Makers

Only federal, provincial and territorial governments can set a standard that applies to schools and attach funding to it. Canada's National School Food Policy is a big step forward, but it defines access rather than nutritional quality, and it sets no measurable requirement for food that supports mental health.

- **Create one clear, measurable National School Food Standard that specifically supports mental health.** The National School Food Policy and existing relevant guidelines should be reviewed against the evidence on diet and adolescent mental health, then amended or replaced accordingly. The standard should be set by health and nutrition professionals, account for cultural and religious food needs, and apply consistently across every province and territory.

- **Provide federal funding alongside periodic audits that confirm provinces meet the standard.** Audits should check whether schools are actually serving what the national standard requires, with results being public. When a province is funded and still does not meet the standard, continued funding should depend on closing that gap. This is what separates an accountability system from a promise, since funding currently flows without any check on whether the food students receive meets the standard.

- **Include light, age-appropriate education in funding agreements.** Schools should offer education on how diet and social media influence eating habits, body image and mental health, developed with mental health and eating disorder professionals.

- **Give rural, remote and Indigenous communities the funding and staff required to meet the same national standard.** These communities face higher food costs, have fewer staff, and already have the least access to mental health services. Without enough funding and staff, these communities may struggle to meet the national standard, putting students' access to nutritious school food at risk.



"[THERE SHOULD BE] MORE TRANSPARENCY ABOUT WHAT IS IN THE FOODS AS WELL AS SCIENCE BACKED LEARNING ON FOOD AND IT'S IMPORTANCE... AND... BETTER SUPPLIED NOURISHING FOOD."

U Report by UNICEF

How does Youth Mental Health connect to the bigger systems that help young people thrive?

Young people do not experience mental health, food, education and income inequality as individual or separate issues. At school, they often overlap. For example, while a student may have access to a meal, the meal may not automatically be adequately nutritious to support their health and well-being for the entire day. That makes school food part of the wider conditions that can support or strain youth mental health.

Income security affects families' ability to afford nutritious food, while health and nutrition connect to physical and mental well-being. School food can reduce pressure during the school day and support learning. Canada's National School Food Policy also connects school food with household food costs, health, education and sustainable food systems (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2024).

Safety matters, too. Students should be able to access food in a school environment that feels safe, inclusive and non-stigmatizing. Positive school environments and feelings of safety are associated with youth well-being (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2025).

Climate resilience is another aspect that must also be considered. Climate change can raise food prices and disrupt food systems, affecting access to nutritious food (Health Canada, 2024). Sustainable, resilient school food programs can help protect access as conditions change.

Canada's National School Food Policy recognizes that food can affect children's physical and mental well-being and says programs should align with Canada's Food Guide. It also identifies transparent monitoring and evaluation as core principles (Government of Canada, 2024). However, the policy still does not create a single measurable nutrition standard that every province and territory must meet. Current federal agreements track how many schools participate and how many meals are served, while "common quality and outcome measures" are still being developed for future agreements (Government of Canada, 2024–2027).

Canada's National School Food Program can be substantially strengthened by setting a consistent minimum standard, measuring whether schools meet it and publishing the results. Further directions may include providing additional funding to rural and/or Indigenous communities to meet that standard in ways that respect local food systems and culture.

Young people should play a role in defining these outcomes because they are the ones who deal with these programs nearly every day. Because they experience school food, education, health, safety and related supports in their daily lives, they can help identify what is not working, develop more relevant solutions and assess whether changes are improving their health and well-being.

65%

Identified cost as the leading barrier to healthy eating

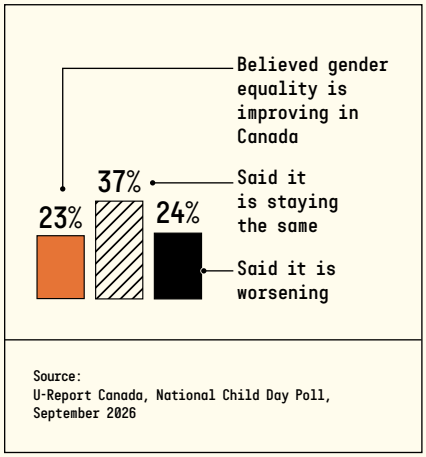
51%

Worried often or very often about not eating enough healthy food

Source:
U-Report Canada, Nutrition and Food Access Poll, March 2026

GENDER EQUALITY





The Current State of Gender Equality

Despite global commitments under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, closing the global gender gap is projected to require 171 years, with progress remaining notably sluggish (Carducci et al., 2022). With efforts from Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE) over 50 years, women have advanced in education and the workforce, supporting women in leadership, addressing gender-based violence and protecting 2SLGBTQIA+ rights. However, even with these continuous efforts, gender equality is far from achieved (Government of Canada, 2026). Women and gender-diverse people continue to face challenges including gender-based violence, unequal leadership representation and barriers to equitable opportunities (Howard, n.d.).

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Even in high-income nations such as Canada, which ranks 25th globally in the World Economic Reform (WEF) Global Gender Gap Report but recently fell six positions due to declining political empowerment and economic opportunity scores, gender equality is far from achieved (Wells et al.; Carducci et al., 2022). In Canada, approximately 70 per cent of women experience inequality in their lifetime, while broad societal progress has visibly stalled across structural domains (Meherali et al., 2021; Guppy and Luongo, 2015). These systemic disparities intersect profoundly with race, disability and sexual identity, leaving Indigenous women and racialized communities facing disproportionate disadvantages (Wells et al., 2023; Vanner and Almanssori, 2021).

For young people aged 15–24, who make up over 12 per cent of Canada's population, persistent gender disparities directly shape life trajectories during formative developmental transitions (Sani and Quaranta, 2017; Meherali et al., 2021; Kågesten et al., 2016). While federal policy tools like the Canadian Gender Budgeting Act and the Department of Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) exist, youth remain systematically excluded from leadership spaces where policies governing their health, safety and rights are decided (Wells et al., 2023; Vanner and Almanssori, 2021; Carducci et al., 2022). Meaningful youth representation is essential to reveal hidden barriers that older policymakers overlook, ensuring democratic accountability and responsive institutional reform (Vanner and Almanssori, 2021; Carducci et al., 2022).

How Young People Are Experiencing Issues Surrounding Gender Equality

Youth experience the brunt of gender inequality, resulting in a multitude of lived experiences where a lack of representation, education, and advocacy restricts opportunities and gender norms. This is especially true for members of marginalized communities, with factors such as disability, sexual orientation, race, Indigenous identity and geography contributing to diverse experiences of inequality.

Firstly, youth experience challenges surrounding the rise of gender-based violence. Between 2018 and 2020, intimate partner violence increased by 14 per cent, with women and girls accounting for approximately 78 per cent of those affected (Government of Canada, 2025). Gender-based violence can cause significant physical, mental, and social harm, including long-term health impacts such as minor to life-threatening physical traumas, chronic uterine tract infections (UTIs), and reproductive health issues.

Additionally, youth have begun to normalize the marginalization of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth and women through consuming “redpill media,” which can reinforce harmful gender norms, misogyny and discrimination against women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA+ youth. Such content can contribute to online environments that amplify discriminatory attitudes and behaviours, increasing the risk of cyberbullying and harassment and reducing safe spaces to express individuality. These experiences can undermine young people’s safety and well-being and their ability to express themselves freely and participate in digital spaces.

These challenges affect whether young people feel that their voices are heard and valued. Across Canada, 64 per cent of girls aged 14–17 share a common belief that their ideas are not taken seriously (Plan International, 2025). Oftentimes, the perpetual inheritance of restrictive gender stereotypes causes the intellect, decisions, or beliefs of young women, girls, and gender-diverse youth to be undermined, causing underrepresentation within advocacy, leadership positions, and decision-making spaces. This lack of representation can also affect young people’s confidence and willingness to speak up about issues that directly impact leadership opportunities and personal health and safety. Without young girls and gender-diverse youth in Canada represented in leadership, advocacy through educational programs and youth-engaged discussions, they may become less confident in their ability to contribute to meaningful social change. Ensuring that girls and gender-diverse young people have meaningful opportunities to participate in leadership, advocacy, education and youth-led dialogue is, therefore, critical to advancing gender equality.



How Young People Are Experiencing Issues Surrounding Gender Equality

Canada has committed to advancing SDG 5, which calls for ending discrimination, violence, child marriage, female genital mutilation and unequal decision-making power for women and girls (Filho et al., 2022; Dhar, 2018). But commitment is not the same as completion. Progress on SDG 5 remains slow globally, and Canada has also faced challenges in sustaining progress: Canada ranked 25th in the world on the Global Gender Gap Index and fell six places after weaker performance in political empowerment and economic participation (Carducci et al., 2022). In the labour market, Canada was also identified as one of the lowest-performing G20 countries in pace of progress toward the Brisbane target on reducing gender gaps in labour-force participation (Beletskaya and Zotova, 2020). Even within Canada's academic institutions, women remain outnumbered, outranked and outpaid in senior university leadership, showing that inequality persists in spaces that shape young people's futures (Carducci et al., 2022).

Globally, gender inequality continues to shape girls' lives through harmful practices, unequal education and lost opportunities. More than 230 million girls and women have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) worldwide (Tsegaw and Fentahun, 2026). Child marriage also remains widespread: One review found prevalence estimates ranging from 1.8 per cent to 90.85 per cent, and another analysis estimated that 650 million girls and women alive today were married before age 18 (Pourtaheri et al., 2023; Efevbera and Bhabha, 2020). In sub-Saharan Africa, pooled data across 12 countries found overall prevalence of 52.19 per cent for FGM and 57.96 per cent for girl-child marriage; Guinea had the highest reported country level of FGM, reaching 97.17 per cent, and Chad had the highest level of child marriage, at 78.06 per cent (Ahinkorah et al., 2022). The country-level variation in child marriage, early childbirth and school non-attendance shows how uneven but persistent these harms remain across regions.

These findings support a clear message: Gender inequality is a global issue with local consequences, and solving it requires both Canadian accountability and global action (Hailu and Beyene, 2025; Odera and Mulusa, 2019).

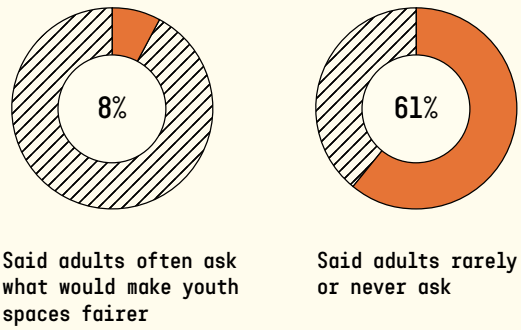


Gender Equality Recommendations

Young People

Young people can help promote gender equality by challenging stereotypes, supporting others and creating inclusive spaces in their schools, communities and online.

- **Challenge gender stereotypes.** Speak up when you hear stereotypes about what people of any gender can or should do (UN Women, 2025).
- **Educate yourself and others.** Learn about gender equality, discrimination, consent and healthy relationships, and have respectful conversations about these topics with your peers (UNICEF, 2025).
- **Support and include others.** Encourage equal participation and make space for people whose experiences may be different from your own, especially in leadership and community activities (UNICEF, 2025).
- **Speak up against discrimination.** When it is safe, challenge harmful gender stereotypes, bullying, harassment and other discriminatory behaviour (UN Women, 2025).
- **Use social media.** Safely and positively share accurate information, challenge harmful stereotypes and help create respectful and inclusive online spaces.



Source: U-Report Canada, National Child Day Poll, September 2026

Adult Allies

Adult allies can help advance gender equality by creating environments where young people feel safe, supported and able to take part in decisions that shape their lives. This means truly listening to what young people have to say, questioning gender stereotypes and making sure all young people, no matter their gender, have equal access to education, health care, mental health care, nutritious food and safe spaces. Adolescents should be involved in identifying and tackling the gender inequalities that affect them directly (UNICEF, 2025).

Adults also have a role in changing the systems that keep inequality going by expecting young people to fix everything on their own. Schools, families, workplaces and community groups can adopt gender policies that offer mental health support that is easy to access, teach about healthy relationships, and protect young people from gender-based violence and online abuse. Adult allies should also encourage boys and young men to be part of the solution. Real change happens when all genders challenge harmful norms (UN Women).

Lastly, adults should give young people a real voice in decision-making. Youth councils, advisory boards, student leadership roles and programs like the Prime Minister's Youth Council and SENgage show how young people can help shape conversations and influence policy (Prime Minister's Youth Council, 2025; SENgage, 2026). Instead of speaking for youth, adults should step back and create spaces where young people can speak for themselves, and listen to and respect their ideas. When this happens, gender equality becomes a part of the systems that help young people grow and succeed.

Gender Equality Recommendations

Decision-Makers

Federal gender equality policies struggle to address young Canadians' needs due to a lack of youth representation on key decision-making bodies. Accordingly, policymakers must establish, and in some cases re-establish, youth-centred consultative bodies within the House of Commons and Senate.

- **Reinstate the Youth Working Group on Gender Equality (YWGGE).** Disbanded in 2021 (Women and Gender Equality Canada, 2021), the YWGGE must be reinstated within the Department of Women and Gender Equality Canada.
- **Re-establish the Prime Minister's Youth Council (PMYC).** Dissolved in 2025 (Prime Minister's Youth Council, 2025), the PMYC must be re-established and expanded to include multiple working groups, including one on gender equality.
- **Create a Youth Advisory Circle (YAC) within the Senate through SENgage.** The Senate must form a YAC featuring multiple working groups, including one on gender equality, through SENgage, the Senate's youth outreach program (SENgage, 2026).



"STANDING UP AGAINST GENDER BASED VIOLENCE MEANS SPEAKING UP AGAINST THE ATROCITIES AND WORKING TO ELIMINATE HARASSMENT, ASSAULT."

U Report by UNICEF

How does Gender Equality connect to the bigger systems that help young people thrive?

At the current rate of progress, gender equality is projected to take 171 years to achieve globally. The World Health Organization has conceptualized gender equality as one of the core social determinants of population health and health inequalities within the social determinants of health (UN News, 2026). Gender inequality is embedded into our society in numerous ways, including the following:

Health & Nutrition:

Globally, women and girls are twice as likely to suffer from malnutrition compared to men and boys, and 63.5 million more women experienced food insecurity than men each year. Malnutrition in pregnant women and adolescent girls poses increased likelihood for maternal mortality, premature births, low-birthweight infants and intergenerational cycles of nutrition. Because gender norms influence women's food intake, domestic and caregiving responsibilities, and broader policy environments, these perspectives exacerbate the social determinants of health that hold gender inequality in place (Nutrition International, 2020; Thomas-Mambwe et al., 2026).

Climate Resilience:

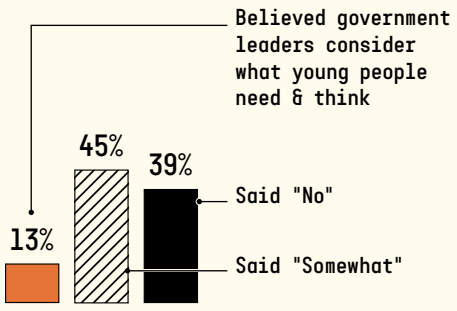
The climate crisis is arguably one of the most pressing issues of our time, and UN Women posits that climate change affects women and girls the most, amplifying gender inequalities. Notably, climate change may correspond to one in every ten cases of intimate partner violence (IPV) by the end of the century, and instability and poverty that follow climate conflicts predispose women and girls to sexual violence, human trafficking and child marriage (UN Women, 2025). Furthermore, climate change is also detrimental to maternal and neonatal health, with extreme heat increasing incidence of stillbirth and warming global temperatures spreading vector-borne diseases such as malaria, dengue fever and Zika virus (UN Women, 2025).

Mental Health:

Social media enables anti-feminist rhetoric and fosters unhealthy relationships, bullying, eating disorders and dissemination of non-consensual intimate images.
If improperly handled, social media can ingrain false perceptions over gender, including norms, roles and stereotypes, that influence how individuals may behave and conform to their perceived gender. Enhancing media coverage of gender-related issues, gender-responsive reporting and gender equity can aid in dismantling harmful ideologies placed upon women and men (Rabbitt, 2023).

Gender Based Violence:

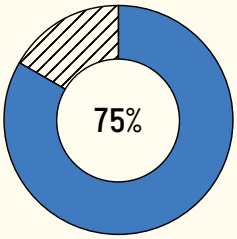
Nearly one in three women globally have survived partner or sexual violence in their lifetime, and in the past 12 months alone, 316 million women experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner (UN Women, 2026).



Source:
U-Report Canada, Government Accountability Poll, February 2026

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS





Said it is very important that Canada support people affected by global issues

Source:
U-Report Canada, Global Justice Poll, July 2026

The Current State of Children's Rights

For millions of children, the impacts of war do not end when the war stops. In Syria, 14 years of war have killed more than 250,000 children and left over 7 million in need of humanitarian assistance, while one in three schools can no longer be used because they've been destroyed, damaged or repurposed for military use (UNICEF, 2025; SNHR, 2025). In Sudan, a war entering its fourth year has created the world's largest child displacement crisis, with 3.5 million children under age five at risk of acute starvation (UNICEF Canada, 2026). In Gaza, UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO) report the highest number of child amputees per capita in the world, and, as of September 2025, not a single fully operational rehabilitation service remained in the territory (United Nations Relief and Works Agency, 2025).

Canada has a role to play in ensuring the safety of children impacted by war. Canada has endorsed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the Safe Schools Declaration, and since 2015 it has welcomed and resettled tens of thousands of refugees, many of them children living with war-related disabilities and trauma (IRCC, 2016; Global Affairs Canada, 2017). Yet for children affected by conflict, support can still be difficult to access and navigate across humanitarian, resettlement, health and education systems. The gap is not only in whether services exist, but also whether rehabilitation, mental health care, disability support and inclusive education are coordinated around a child's long-term recovery.

This is a priority for young people because we are the generation watching this gap happen in real time, to children our own age, in our own communities. Children's rights do not end at survival. We are calling on Canada to ensure that support for children affected by war extends beyond the immediate humanitarian response to include their longer-term recovery and resilience, in line with every child's rights.



How Young People Are Experiencing Issues Surrounding Children's Rights

One of our group members grew up in Syria, which meant experiencing childhood not as it should be lived but through constant vigilance. Survival meant learning at a young age how to move through their own street without being seen, how to recognize the sound of a bomb, how to keep walking when blood was on the pavement. School, which should be one of the safest places in a child's life, became a source of fear rather than learning. Childhood experiences included the death of loved ones, including a close friend who never came back to the classroom, and the slow erasure of an entire circle of childhood friendships through displacement. No goodbyes, no closure, just absence. Many of those absences remain unresolved to this day.

This is not an individual story. Millions of children have lived through similar experiences. It is part of what neuropsychologist call a condition far deeper than standard post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), marked by severe chronic anxiety and periods where fear and flashback trauma take over a child's life, preventing them from living anything close to a normal childhood (USA for UNHCR, 2021). Children of war, especially those living with disabilities caused by war, carry not only that weight but also the added weight of being bullied, discriminated against and targeted simply for being refugees by systems that are supposed to protect them but instead offer no real support.

That lived experience informs this call to action. What is needed is not only aid funded from a distance but also greater investment in Syrian-Canadian and Canadian humanitarian teams working directly within affected communities. Those who have lived through war who bring unique understanding are often best placed to help rebuild the affected communities.

> "CANADA SHOULD CONTRIBUTE TO THE RIGHTS OF INNOCENT PEOPLE ACROSS THE WORLD."
>
> U Report by UNICEF

The effect of exposure to war does not end when the fighting does. Children who experience war-related injuries, disabilities or psychological distress may require sustained support long after their immediate medical needs have been addressed.

The consequences can be lifelong. Survivors of chemical exposure, such as those who survived the 2013 chemical attack in Ghouta, Syria, live for decades afterward with permanent lung scarring and neurological damage from a night they were too young to understand (SNHR, 2025). In Gaza, child amputees are told to wait indefinitely for treatment abroad because no rehabilitation infrastructure remains in the territory (UNICEF/WHO, 2025). War can also profoundly disrupt the relationships, routines and experiences that are fundamental to childhood, with consequences for children's well-being, development and sense of belonging. Survival is only the beginning. Children affected by war have the right not only to immediate protection and life-saving assistance, but to the sustained health care, rehabilitation, education and psychosocial support they need to recover, participate fully in their communities and realize their rights.

The burden of living with the physical and mental trauma of war is not shared equally. Refugee children who reach resettlement countries may also experience discrimination, racism, Islamophobia, xenophobia and bullying in their new communities, which can compound the impacts of war and displacement and affect their well-being, inclusion and sense of belonging (Fazel et al. 2018). Children with visible disabilities are excluded twice over, first by the war that caused the injury, then by schools and systems that were never built with them in mind. And war-affected children are rarely given a say in their own recovery: Their pain is often used in fundraising imagery without their consent, while decisions about their resettlement, treatment and care are made entirely without them.

Children's Rights Recommendations

Young People

Young people can play an important role in protecting children's rights, especially by using their voices to bring attention to children affected by war and disability. Their actions can help create awareness and encourage others to take children's rights seriously.

- **Raise awareness about children's rights.** Educate others about the experiences and rights of children affected by war and disability through conversations, social media and community activities.
- **Use your voice to advocate for change.** Participate in campaigns, events and youth advocacy opportunities, and speak directly to decision-makers about the need to better protect children's rights.
- **Make children's voices heard.** Listen to and respectfully amplify the experiences of children affected by war and disability, ensuring that their perspectives are included when solutions and policies are being developed.

Adult Allies

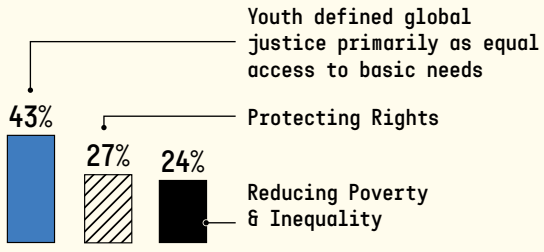
Adult allies have the ability to turn young people's concerns into meaningful support and action. They can help create spaces where children and young people are heard, protected and included in decisions that affect their lives.

- **Give young people meaningful opportunities to be heard.** Create safe spaces where young people can share their experiences and ideas, and take their contributions seriously when making decisions.
- **Protect and strengthen support for vulnerable children.** Help ensure that children affected by war and disability can access education, health care, rehabilitation, mental health support and safe environments without discrimination.
- **Use your influence to demand meaningful change.** Adults should use their positions, connections and influence to raise children's rights issues with institutions and decision-makers and push for concrete action.

Decision-Makers

Decision-makers have the authority and resources to create policies that protect children's rights during and after war. Their decisions can determine whether children with disabilities receive the protection, services and opportunities they need.

- **Protect children with disabilities during war.** Strengthen measures that protect children with disabilities from violence, displacement and loss of access to essential services during conflict.
- **Invest in accessible education, health care and rehabilitation.** Ensure that children affected by war can access inclusive schools, medical care, rehabilitation and mental health support, including when rebuilding communities.
- **Include children and young people in decisions that affect them.** Create meaningful opportunities for young people, including those affected by war and disability, to share their experiences and influence policies and programs designed to protect their rights.
- **Ensure Canada's humanitarian funding supports strong child safety and responsible data practices.** Humanitarian partners supported by Canada should have clear safeguards for how children's images, stories and data are collected, stored, shared and used so that children's privacy, dignity, safety and best interests remain central.



Source:
U-Report Canada, Global Justice Poll, July 2026

How does Children's Rights connect to the bigger systems that help young people thrive?

From a youth perspective, children's rights are the bonds that hold together every system a young person needs to survive and thrive. For a child harmed by war, protection does not end at survival; it extends into their health (such as whether they get a prosthetic refitted as they grow), their education (such as whether they can return to an accessible school with teachers equipped to support children affected by war), their privacy and dignity (such as whether their images and stories are shared responsibly), their mental health and psychosocial well-being, and their safety, including from explosive remnants of war that can continue to threaten children long after the war ends.

The step most forgotten in this protection process is a young person's right to have a say in and control over their own story. War-affected children are among the least consulted and most exposed, and their images, stories and data can be shared in ways that do not always give enough attention to security, dignity, privacy or meaningful participation. Decisions about their recovery and resettlement get made without them. This is why children's rights ask for system change, not charity.

> "HAVING ACCESS TO SUPPORT FOR AS LONG AS NEEDED WOULD BE BENEFICIAL INSTEAD OF HAVING SUPPORT 'RUN OUT'... OVERALL, WELCOMING, CULTURALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENTS IS KEY FOR NEWCOMER YOUTH."
>
> U Report by UNICEF



52% Identified safety as the highest priority for children affected by war or conflict

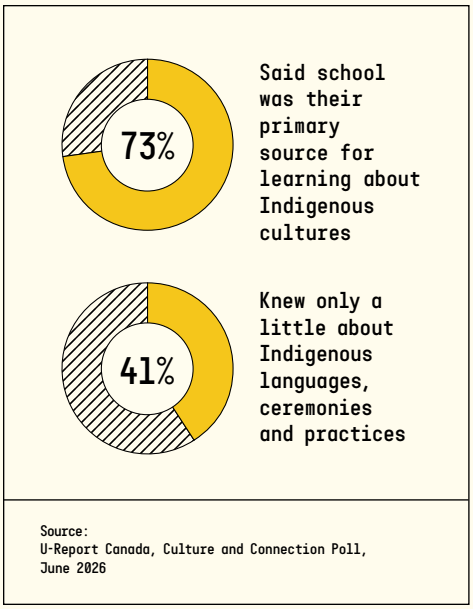
23% Food & Basic Needs

12% Mental-Health Support

Source: U-Report Canada, National Child Day Poll, September 2026

SOCIAL JUSTICE





The Current State of Social Justice

Social justice is about fairness, basic human rights and assuring no minority is pushed into the margins. Every child deserves a fair start in life, yet where you are born in Canada still dictates the quality of education you receive. In Canada, the unequal funding and support for Indigenous students in education systems is a clear example of ongoing systemic injustice. This issue goes beyond the classroom; it's at the intersection of systemic racism, colonial history and economic inequality. Youth care about this because equity cannot exist in its essence in our country when our Indigenous peers are being systemically denied equal basic opportunities, fair resources and safe learning environments.

The current state of Canadian school systems reveals continuing challenges. While Canada's current funding approach provides First Nations schools on reserve with provincially comparable base funding and additional funding based on specific needs, students still face barriers in remoteness, infrastructure, language, culture and student supports (Indigenous Services Canada, 2023). According to Statistics Canada, in 2016 and 2021, 46 per cent of First Nations youth living on reserve had completed high school, compared with 91 per cent of non-Indigenous youth (Layton, 2023). Additionally, some students in northern and remote First Nations communities have had to leave their families and communities to access secondary education, separating young people from their culture and support systems (Layton, 2023). Decision-makers must focus on improving the education system for Indigenous students so that they may maintain their cultural identity while preparing to pursue future prospects.

This area is a priority for youth advocacy because true reconciliation requires us to fix the systems that still harm marginalized communities today. Demanding equitable funding policies, culturally appropriate mental health care and supportive approaches to education directly connects with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action. It's an urgent fight for human rights, racial justice and equality for all youth (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Ultimately, dismantling these systemic barriers is not just a policy requirement, but a crucial, moral obligation to ensure that every indigenous youth has the opportunity, safety, and cultural support needed to shape a fair and equitable future for all young Canadians."

How Young People Are Experiencing Issues Surrounding Social Justice

Across Canada, many young people feel the systems around them were not built with them in mind. Social justice is personal and connected to advocacy work carried out in the community. A second generation immigrant with a father from Jamaica and Indigenous roots on their mother's side, and questions of identity, race, culture and belonging have always carried particular significance. Growing up in a culturally diverse family meant navigating identities that did not always fit neatly into categories imposed by society.

That personal experience and work with and for African, African diasporic and Indigenous communities and other marginalized groups has reinforced the understanding that social justice extends far beyond race. Poverty and housing insecurity. Students from lower-income families often attend schools with older textbooks, fewer clubs and less equipment, and may take on caregiving or work that leaves little time or energy for school. Mental health. Culturally safe, timely services do not exist in many regions, so Indigenous youth may travel long distances for care or go without it, which can mean lost school time and growing anxiety. Employment. Without the same educational foundation, young people enter the workforce at a disadvantage

Young people are often expected to navigate these systems while simultaneously figuring out who they are. We can recognize injustice, but recognizing a problem and having the power, resources and support to change it are very different things.

This is especially important in Nova Scotia. We live in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq, and social justice cannot be separated from the ongoing realities of Indigenous Peoples. Issues surrounding treaty rights, cultural preservation, language, education, health care, housing and systemic racism continue to affect Indigenous communities.

These issues can impact almost every part of a young person's life, including whether they feel safe, can afford housing, can access health care, see themselves represented in leadership and feel that they belong. However, young people are not simply recipients of these challenges. We are advocates, organizers, leaders, researchers and problem solvers. When given meaningful opportunities, we can help identify problems and create solutions based on lived experience.

This perspective is also grounded in a belief that intersectionality is essential to understanding social justice. No issue exists in isolation. Everything is connected. Housing insecurity can intersect with gender-based violence, race, sexuality, poverty, disability, immigration status and health care access. An Indigenous youth may also be 2SLGBTQIA+, disabled, living in poverty or living in a rural community with fewer services which affects their access to education in multiple ways. These barriers overlap. An Indigenous student may also be living in poverty, have a disability, or live in a rural community with fewer services, and each barrier makes finishing school harder. No single issue explains the gap on its own.

> "ACCESSIBILITY IS LIMITED... I THINK THERE COULD BE MORE EMPHASIS ON THESE ASPECTS OF INDIGENOUS CULTURE WITHIN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM AND GREATER COMMUNITY."
>
> U Report by UNICEF



Social Justice Recommendations

Young People

In the world that we inherit, we must decide what matters most: Investing in Indigenous education is not just about righting the wrongs of the past, but constructing our future. The world that we build must be one with equal rights and opportunities.

- **Speak up and raise awareness.** Use student councils, youth organizations, community groups and other platforms to raise awareness of educational inequities and support Indigenous-led solutions.
- **Educate yourself and others.** Seek out Indigenous-led educational resources and perspectives. Understand the inequities impacting the system today and discuss them at school, community groups, advocacy spaces and any other platforms you have access to.
- **Create space for Indigenous youth voices.** Support opportunities for Indigenous students and youth to share their experiences and priorities in schools, communities and youth-led advocacy spaces.
- **Write to your federal and provincial representatives.** Let them know that this matters to you. Advocate for further coordination of the federal and provincial governments when providing funding for Indigenous students and on-reserve schools.

Adult Allies

Educators, school administrators, community organizations and families – we need you to get involved, too. You have the ability to help create educational environments where Indigenous students feel supported, respected and meaningfully involved in decisions that affect them.

- **Support culturally relevant, Indigenous-led education.** Work with Indigenous educators and communities to broaden access to Indigenous languages, cultures, histories and perspectives while ensuring they maintain Indigenous self-determination over their educational priorities.
- **Connect students with needed supports and resources.** Help Indigenous students access academic, financial, mental health and other supports without placing the burden of identifying or accessing those resources solely on the student.
- **Challenge discrimination and inequity, particularly in educational settings.** Recognize and address systemic barriers, discrimination, and policies or practices that disproportionately affect Indigenous students through the necessary administrative channels and any platform available.

55% said schools should do a lot more to make learning fair and culturally safe for Indigenous students

Another **26%** said somewhat more

Source: U-Report Canada, National Child Day Poll, September 2026

Decision-Makers

Young people strongly encourage decision-makers to work in partnership with Indigenous communities to address systemic inequities in education while ensuring respect towards Indigenous Peoples' rights, priorities and self-determination.

- **Ensure equitable, adequate and predictable funding for Indigenous students across education systems.** Funding should provide a strong educational foundation comparable to non-Indigenous education systems, while accounting for unique needs such as remoteness, culture, infrastructure and student support needs. Canada's current First Nations education funding approach already recognizes the need for additional, needs-based funding beyond a comparable base.

- **Strengthen coordination between federal, provincial and Indigenous governments.** Review funding policies and arrangements to identify funding gaps between education systems and ensure that Indigenous students do not lose access to support because of jurisdictional confusion. Previous provincial agreements and approaches that have been proven to improve Indigenous educational outcomes can provide a foundation for further collaboration.

- **Fund research focused on deconstructing and analyzing systemic inequities.** Support research that examines the factors shaping Indigenous educational outcomes, with Indigenous youth and communities deeply involved in determining research priorities, methods and interpretation.



"INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE OR STORIES... ARE OFTEN TAUGHT BY NON-INDIGENOUS INDIVIDUALS... THE BEST EDUCATION COMES FROM TALKING TO THOSE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE..."

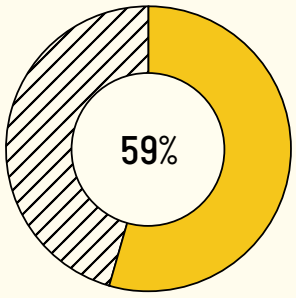
U Report by UNICEF

How does Social Justice connect to the bigger systems that help young people thrive?

Education does not stand alone. It affects young people's access to employment, income security, mental health, culture, community and future opportunities. For Indigenous youth, where they live can make these connections even stronger. In 2021, 27 per cent of First Nations people and 76 per cent of Inuit lived in remote or very remote communities, compared with 11 per cent of Métis and 3 per cent of non-Indigenous people. Location and household income were also linked to high school completion (Layton, 2025).

These differences can follow young people beyond high school. In 2021, 49.2 per cent of Indigenous adults aged 25–64 had a postsecondary qualification, compared with 68 per cent of non-Indigenous adults. Among those with a bachelor's degree or higher, however, employment rates were nearly identical: 82.6 per cent for Indigenous adults and 82.5 per cent for non-Indigenous adults (Layton, 2023). Indigenous-led institutions also point to housing shortages, mental health supports, infrastructure and culturally grounded education as barriers connected to student success (Josephs, 2025).

This is why change does not stop in classrooms and schools. Access to education shapes the opportunities young people are offered and their quality of life long after graduation, yet for Indigenous people it has historically come at the cost of disconnection from family, community, language and culture. That is why equity means looking at the whole person: we cannot talk about education without poverty, housing and mental health, or about Indigenous well-being without acknowledging colonialism. Ultimately, we need to ask not only "Are we treating everyone the same?" but "Who is still being left out, why, and what can we change?" Indigenous youth must have the resources and support to succeed, and young people should not simply inherit the systems that exist; we should have a voice in rebuilding them.



Source: U-Report Canada, Culture and Connection Poll, June 2026



TURNING YOUTH PRIORITIES INTO ACTION

This Playbook brings together what young advocates know, experience and want decision-makers to act on. Across children's rights, education, gender equality, social justice and youth mental health, young people identify interconnected systems that need to change and offer practical recommendations to help every child grow, learn, participate and thrive.

These priorities connect directly to UNICEF Canada's advocacy work and to the rights set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Young people call for safer and more equitable learning environments, stronger protection and recovery supports for children affected by conflict, meaningful youth participation in public decision-making, and public systems that respond to children's real lives.

Now governments, education systems, civil society organizations, funders, youth-serving organizations and adult allies must act. Decision-makers must create clear pathways for youth input to shape policies, budgets and programs. Organizations must resource youth-led advocacy and open accessible spaces for participation. Adult allies must listen, share power and show young people how their ideas influence real decisions.

Young people already bring the knowledge, creativity and urgency needed to build better systems. The responsibility now rests with leaders, organizations and adult allies to take their lead from young people and ensure sustained investment, transparent accountability and genuine partnership.

Take these calls to action seriously:

Work with young people, invest in their leadership and demonstrate how their ideas shape decisions. As you reflect on this Playbook, identify one concrete commitment you will make going forward and one way you will partner with young people in the decisions that affect their lives. Together, we can build a Canada where children's rights guide policies, budgets and programs, and where every young person has the support and opportunity to thrive.



CARE HARD

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UNICEF is the world's most powerful force for children. With a presence in more than 190 countries and territories, our commitment is global because we're trusted by governments, as well as partners and donors from almost every sector. Undaunted by war, disaster, disease or distance, we work tirelessly to bring lifesaving aid and long-term support to children and their families while ensuring the rights of every child are realized.

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