

A World Fit for Children*

Senator Landon Pearson, who is retiring this fall, has worked tirelessly in both Canada and abroad to put in place a compelling and powerful vision – a world fit for children. The theme derives from the efforts of the United Nations to which Senator Pearson has acted as a special envoy.

A world fit for children affords the best possible start in life. It provides opportunities for all to develop to their potential within safe and supportive environments. A world fit for children recognizes the need for healthy minds in healthy bodies. All children must have access to the basics: nutritious food, clothing, shelter and health care. It is a world without hunger and disease. It promotes mental and emotional development through opportunities for learning and play. It is a world that respects the integrity of children as human beings – free from neglect and abuse, physical and sexual exploitation.

Unfortunately, although Canada has made some progress in alleviating child poverty,

2003 statistics show that one in eight Canadian children under the age of 18 (or 12.4 percent of Canadian children) is growing up in a low-income household. Ours is not yet a world fit for children. Sadly, most nations still have a long way to go to meet this vision.

Because children are nurtured by families, a world fit for children creates supportive environments for families. Communities play a significant role in making real this vision – in the schools, streets, parks and neighbourhoods of every nation.

Healthy communities ensure that basic needs are met. No child would go to school hungry or cold for lack of proper clothing. There would no family without a roof over its head. A roof affords more than physical protection. It is also a foundation for social stability and emotional well-being.

But families require more than just a home. They also need to feel that they belong to their neighbourhood. Healthy communities

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welcome diversity in race, religion, language and colour. They make a concerted effort to ensure that all children, including those with special needs, have access to public amenities. Healthy communities recognize that the parents of children with disabilities may require additional supports and occasional relief from their caregiving responsibilities.

Healthy communities promote opportunities for learning at all ages and stages of life, particularly early on. The first few years of life are critical for brain development and affect children's subsequent performance at school. Children who do not receive the nutrition and stimulation necessary for good development in the earliest months and years of life may have difficulty overcoming deficits at a later time.

Supportive initiatives for children and parents should begin as soon as possible – not just for low-income households but for all families. These include early childhood nutrition, stimulation and development; high quality affordable child care; and local resource centres for information on child development and programs for families. Parent and child play groups offer important socialization for children and support for parents. Respite through formal services or informal means, such as babysitting co-operatives, can provide vital occasional relief for caregivers. Toy- and book-lending libraries enable access to valuable resources for low-income families.

One way to create these healthy neighbourhoods is to build the capacity of local schools to become embedded in the life of the community. Some neighbourhoods explicitly identify their school as a 'community hub,' a concept long championed by Senator Pearson.

Unfortunately, far too many schools are being closed or their facilities are placed off limits in the evenings and weekends in order to

save costs. Neither do school boards want to assume liability after hours. These policies are short-sighted: Schools can offer nutritious breakfast or snack programs for all children so that no one child's learning is impaired by hunger. Health and wellness centres within schools, including information and counselling, can serve all families in the neighbourhood. The school as hub can provide space for preschool child care and after-school care so that working parents can leave their children in a safe place. School facilities can be made available for teens in the evenings and on weekends.

The school as hub can act as a base for parents to learn skills, such as language training for new Canadians. Schools can promote literacy; family reading circles, for example, encourage parents and children to read together. The school can serve as the locale for community events and for cultural and recreational programs for the entire family. These celebrations are invaluable because they help build the bonds and bridges that serve as the foundation for safe and healthy neighbourhoods.

The school as community hub also supports families by addressing diverse needs. It makes no distinction on the basis of family income, size or type. It is there for all – to bolster family capacity, deliver supports when required, provide care for children and promote learning for children and parents. The hub role is particularly critical in rural communities, which typically lack the range of supportive resources that families require.

It is clear that a world fit for children is a world fit for everyone. Thank you, Senator Pearson, for your efforts over the years on behalf of us all.

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