

**“WE HAVE A VOICE”:
CHILDREN’S PERSPECTIVES OF THEIR RIGHTS AND THE UNCRC**

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Abstract

The Government of Canada ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1991, assuring that it will implement the terms into its domestic law. These rights include Article 42, which requires state parties to ensure that children and adults are aware of children's rights under the convention. This paper investigates how children aged 9-11 in Toronto, Canada, express their understandings and perspectives as they relate to children's rights and the UNCRC. Using a qualitative, participatory approach, the study engaged children through a range of child-centred methods, including focus groups, embodied tableaux, puppetry, poster-making, and draw-and-tell activities. The findings reveal children's understandings and interpretations of their rights. Through discussions and participatory activities, child participants reported limited prior knowledge of the UNCRC and children's rights, a recognition of children's reliance on adults to uphold and protect their rights, and feelings of personal responsibility in protecting their privacy rights online. Additionally, children proposed suggestions to further strengthen children's rights documents and better align with their experiences in the contemporary context, focusing on three main areas: outdoor experiences, opportunities for social interaction, and digital access.

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“We Have a Voice”:

Children’s Perspectives of Their Rights and the UNCRC

1. Introduction

The Government of Canada ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1991, assuring that it would implement the terms into its domestic law. Ratification of this document guaranteed that the rights outlined in the convention would be upheld (Covell et al., 2018). These rights include Article 42, which requires state parties to “make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known, by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike” (UNCRC, 1989). In both 2012 and 2022, the Committee directed the Canadian government to strengthen its awareness-raising programs and campaigns and ensure mandatory integration of the UNCRC into the school curriculum (Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children [CCRC], 2017; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2022). Despite this, there has been little effort to include children’s rights education in Canadian schools (Covell et al., 2018). Critics of the UNCRC also question its universal application of children’s rights. They contend that the convention is based on Global North cultural perspectives of children and childhood, which do not account for the diversity and cultures of young people in the Global South (Cregan and Cuthbert, 2014), while the very concept of children’s rights is Western and Eurocentric (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2017).

The integration of children's rights into public policy represents a shift from viewing children as objects under paternalistic control to viewing them as subjects with distinct human rights (Covell et al., 2018). However, in Canada, societal perspectives that emphasize parental rights continue to inhibit taking children’s rights seriously (Covell et al., 2018). Nevertheless, children have asserted that the ability to actualize their rights is important to their well-being

(Huynh & Stewart-Tufescu, 2019; Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2017). Research into children's perspectives and understanding of their rights is increasingly recognized as essential to ensuring their rights are upheld (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2017). Understanding children's views on their rights is also important because their perspectives may differ from those of adults (Fairhall & Woods, 2021). Additionally, children's cultures, values, religion, ethnicity, traditions, and the social and political context in which they live may influence their conceptions of rights (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2017).

This study explores the overarching research question: **How do children (ages 9-11) in Toronto, Canada, express their understanding and perspectives of children's rights?** In doing so, I investigate the following sub-questions: First, what do children know and understand about the CRC and their rights? Then, what are children's perspectives on their rights? In the opening, I will discuss the theoretical underpinnings that informed my research process. Next, I will briefly discuss some past research to situate my study within the existing scholarship on children's perspectives on their rights and the UNCRC. Then, I will provide an overview of my child-centred participatory research methodology. Following the methodology, I will discuss ethical considerations for conducting research with children, and afterward, I will explain my analytic procedure. Finally, I will share my research findings and concluding thoughts.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

This qualitative study takes a constructivist approach that understands "the child or young person as a subjective, contextual, self-determining, and dynamic being" (Greig et al., 2013, p.65).

Constructivism recognizes childhood as socially constructed, often employing qualitative methods to examine children's experiences and perspectives, as these often cannot necessarily be 'measured' or 'quantified' (Greig et al., 2013). This approach contrasts with a positivist framework that seeks to prove or disprove a hypothesis, and in a social research project, may risk universalizing the experiences of a single group of children as truths that apply to all children (James, 2007). In my research, I focus on the perspectives of my particular research participants, and do not intend to generalize the findings to represent all children.

This research project is situated at the intersection of critical childhood studies and critical children's rights studies. Critical Childhood Studies is an interdisciplinary field that recognizes children as social actors who play a role in everyday life (James & James, 2012). This discipline builds upon the 'new social studies of childhood' paradigm (Prout & James, 2015). Research within this field is child-centred, views young people as active participants, and positions children as subjects instead of objects of research (Christensen & James, 2017; Shabtay, 2021). In doing so, it recognizes that childhood is a space of 'being' rather than solely a space of 'becoming' (Berman & MacNevin, 2017). This perspective shifts the approach from research 'on,' to research 'with' children (Berman & MacNevin, 2017; Christensen & James, 2017). Traditionally, research on children and childhood was based on adult observations of young people's experiences and views. In contrast, child-centred research is interested in learning from young people about their perspectives and lived experiences (Christensen & James, 2017).

In undertaking this approach, I aim to amplify the voices of children who are the subjects of this research study.

Critical Children's Rights Studies is an emerging discipline aiming to go beyond the UNCRC to attain "a more profound and nuanced understanding of children's rights" (Llobet et al., 2025, p. 1). It recognizes concerns regarding the UNCRC, including that it may reinforce an adult-child binary, despite good intentions. Critics of the UNCRC's universalized understanding of childhood, and top-down approach to rights implementation propose context-specific alternatives to better reflect the diversity of children's experiences (Llobet et al., 2025).

Researchers in this area understand children's rights as an area that should be examined through a decolonial perspective, recognizing that Eurocentric and Western discourses dominate the UNCRC (Llobet et al., 2025). Although the UNCRC emphasizes the critical importance of listening to children's voices—a principle that has been embraced globally by policymakers, scholars, and researchers—children's voices remain inadequately and inconsistently represented (James, 2007). Drawing from these perspectives, I adopt a child-centred approach and a critical childhood studies lens to critically examine children's rights, emphasizing children's own perspectives.

3. Past Research

In this section, I share some previous scholarship on children's perspectives of their rights, examining relevant studies over the past fifteen years. Within the constraints of this project paper, I focused on studies that directly align with my research question, exploring children's perspectives and understandings of their rights more broadly, rather than looking into their knowledge of specific rights. In the subsections that follow, I briefly discuss research related to children's rights awareness in Canada, children's rights education, and Canadian children's views of their rights.

Children's Rights Awareness in Canada

While little research has been conducted in this area, recent studies have found that Canadian children's awareness of their rights is limited. In cases where this research has been conducted, it is typically done through rights organizations and advocacy groups, rather than by academic institutions. For instance, the Student Commission of Canada (2018) was contracted by the Canadian government to engage young people on their perspectives on the UNCRC. This project, which involved 500 young people aged 10-17, collected data through workshops, video conferences, social media posts, and a pan-national youth conference. The findings of this youth engagement project indicated a widespread lack of awareness among young people in Canada about their rights under the UNCRC (Students Commission of Canada, 2018). The participants in this study indicated that having awareness of their rights makes them feel empowered, and they wanted to share their new knowledge with others. Their increased awareness of children's rights also elicited positive feelings of empowerment, confidence, and validation. This study is also one of the few that explored children's perspectives on their rights and revealed that young people wanted to ensure that Indigenous Children's rights were better respected, increase access

to spaces where children's voices can be heard, and improve children's participation in decision-making.

More recently, a (2020) survey-based study was conducted by Children First Canada, exploring the views of children on their rights, their role in decision-making about returning to in-person school during the COVID-19 pandemic, and issues affecting Canadian children. As part of this study, researchers surveyed 750 young people aged 12-17 in Canada. The findings revealed that 53% of Ontario children were aware of their rights, which was slightly lower than the national rate of 56%. Adolescents were more aware of their rights than children aged 12-13. The rights that children were aware of included: the rights to education, food and water, safety and security, and freedom of speech. Only 26% of Canadian children reported knowing what to do if their rights were violated (Children First Canada, 2020). This study was limited to children and young people aged 12 years or older, thereby excluding the perspectives of younger children.

While both of these studies were conducted by credible organizations, it is important to note that these are not peer-reviewed academic studies. Nevertheless, I have included them because research in this area is limited, and these are the most recent studies examining Canadian children's broad awareness of their rights.

One recent Canadian academic study exploring awareness of children's rights and the UNCRC is a survey investigating knowledge of and access to children's rights in an inner-city neighbourhood in Vancouver, BC (Binda et al., 2025). The participants in this study included 18 youth, 16 caregivers and 11 community-based staff members. The survey found that 72% of youth participants were unaware of the UNCRC's existence. Binda et al. (2025) note that they experienced challenges in engaging youth participants due to perceptions among the academic community that children and youth are vulnerable and cannot provide informed consent. It is

also worth noting that the authors come from a medical science field, which may be why they experienced barriers related to perceptions of young people's capacity to participate in research. The authors correctly argue that excluding young people from participating in rights-based research further disempowers an already vulnerable population. Nevertheless, their challenges reveal the importance of conducting child- and youth-centred research that recognizes young people's capacity to participate as active research subjects.

Children's Rights Education

There has been research conducted exploring the implementation of children's rights education in international contexts, including the United Kingdom and Europe (Cole-Albäck, 2020; Isenström, 2020; Yel & Dönmez, 2022). This said, research focused on children's rights education in a Canadian context is still limited.

The research that has been conducted in this area suggests that the low levels of children's rights awareness among Canadian children is due to a lack of effort made to incorporate children's rights education into curricula (Shabtay, 2026). For example, Di Santo and Robichaud (2025) argue that limited awareness among young people and the professionals who work with them is a barrier to ensuring these rights are upheld. They note that the Ontario kindergarten program curriculum only briefly mentions children's rights, specifically the right to play (Di Santo & Robichaud, 2025). Studies have also found that early childhood education teacher programs often lack children's rights curricula in their training (Quennerstedt, 2025; Zanatta & Long, 2021).

Research on children's rights education also often focuses on adults' conceptions of children's rights and on their role in educating children about those rights. For instance, some research indicates that educators' actions can privilege certain rights in classroom settings

(Isenström, 2020). The application of children's rights frameworks in classrooms is explored in research examining educators' perspectives on children's rights and their understanding of how to uphold those rights in early childhood settings (Quennerstedt, 2025). These studies contribute to scholarship that aims to increase young people's knowledge of children's rights through education. That said, research in this area is limited, and where it does exist, it tends to focus on adults' roles, perspectives, and experiences. Thus, there is still much to be explored regarding children's rights education in Canada.

One study by Jones and Manion (2023) involving Canadian children was conducted in response to low levels of children's rights awareness globally. Through workshops with 34 first-grade students from Uganda and 22 second-grade students from Canada, researchers examined children's perspectives of their rights and responsibilities in these different geographical contexts. In the workshops, the researchers explained that children's rights are the things necessary for them to thrive, be cared for, and develop, and then sought to gather the participants' perspectives on what these should be. Jones and Manion (2023) integrated a critical literacy approach in their workshops, which they argue is complementary to children's rights education. Critical literacy entails questioning assumptions and prevailing narratives while examining what is considered legitimate knowledge. This approach helped children critically assess their own lived contexts and the links between rights and responsibilities. The study also exposed cultural and national differences among participants. These results underscore the importance of research in specific contexts, recognizing that children's experiences are shaped by their culture, ethnicity, and nationality.

Canadian Children's Views of Their Rights

While there is some international research exploring children's perspectives of their rights (Brunnberg & Visser-Schuurman, 2015; Harcourt & Hägglund, 2013; Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2017), there is limited scholarship focused on Canadian children's views about their rights.

One study that includes Canadian children's perspectives on their rights is a cross-national study by Lundy et al. (2015), which includes the perspectives of children aged 8-10 years from Canada, Australia, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The Canadian children in this study were immigrants living in Montreal. This study aimed to examine how the UNCRC would differ if children had been involved in its development, with a specific focus on the right to education. The findings showed that the child participants agreed with the aims and objectives of Article 29 (the right to education); however, they also identified areas for improvement, hoping for the inclusion of language regarding employment preparedness, technology use, and environmental education (Lundy et al., 2015). These findings suggest that changing circumstances, such as a global recession, technological advancements, and climate change, which have occurred since the creation of the UNCRC, have, and likely will continue to, influence what children consider important regarding their right to education.

Another recent study that focused on Canadian children was by Huynh & Stewart-Tufescu (2019). The aim of this study was to explore children's understanding of well-being among participants aged 8-12 years from Winnipeg, Manitoba. While the researchers did not explicitly address rights or the UNCRC in their questions, the children indicated that their ability to exercise their rights was connected to their subjective well-being. The participants in this study reported being aware that they were rights holders and perceived their ability to exercise their rights in Canada as linked to their well-being (Huynh & Stewart-Tufescu, 2019). The findings that these participants had awareness of their rights contrasts with the survey data

discussed earlier. This difference in rights awareness demonstrates a need for more contextually relevant and locally specific research, as different populations in Canada may have different exposure to children's rights education and awareness-raising media.

4. Methodology

My research approach recognizes children as competent, agentive social actors and active research participants (Berman & MacNevin, 2017; Coyne et al., 2021; Horgan, 2017). Child-centred research explores the lived experiences of young people by understanding their views and perspectives (Christensen & James, 2017). I have taken a child-centred participatory approach, which is best suited for this study because it upholds young people's right to participate in matters concerning them, as outlined in the UNCRC (1989).

Additionally, I engaged participants by using research methods compatible with children's communication cultures. Christensen and James (2017) state that researchers need to understand and account for young people's "cultures of communication" (p. 2), which are the cultural practices related to how children communicate through language, concepts, and actions. As part of this project, I facilitated a range of activities and methods that supported different communication styles, such as visual arts and drama-based methods, as well as focus group discussions. In doing so, I applied a mosaic approach by incorporating multiple participatory methods that allowed for verbal and visual communication of their ideas (Clark, 2010). This enables robust triangulation of data sources, thereby increasing the rigour of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Greig et al., 2013). My inclusion of varied arts-based approaches to examine children's perspectives sets it apart from many of the studies discussed earlier that used more traditional methodologies. In this way, this study also makes methodological contributions to the scholarship of research into children's perspectives on their rights.

Participants and Recruitment

I recruited six participants from the Greater Toronto Area, Ontario. These participants were between 9 and 11 years old. Previous research about Canadian children's perspectives of their

rights often focused on children and youth over the age of 12 (Binda et al., 2025; Children First Canada, 2020). I saw this project as an opportunity to begin filling the scholarly gap and to support younger children's right to participate and have their views taken seriously. While underrepresented in the literature, participants in this age group had attended at least three years of formal schooling, providing an opportunity to analyze and learn about the quality of the children's rights education that they had received up until that point.

I did not have any prior relationships with the participants or parents involved in the study. Participants were recruited through the use of a circulated digital poster, which my supervisor shared with graduate students outside of my program (to reduce the potential of peers feeling undue pressure to have their children participate), and it was then further circulated by recipients to other parents and children. The only inclusion criteria were age, availability, and willingness to participate (as demonstrated through ongoing consent and assent). This group size was selected as a feasible scale for a qualitative Master's-level project of this nature, enabling for an in-depth analysis of these children's perspectives. The goal of this qualitative research was to focus on participants' perspectives, rather than to yield generalizable results for a larger population (Butler-Kisber, 2018).

Research Setting

My research took place in a rented studio space on a local university campus. The setting was easily recognizable and accessible by public transit. This research was one project, organized as part of a summer initiative that I co-led with my supervisor (Dr. Shabtay), and another graduate student at York (Danielle Legerman). Two undergraduate research assistants were hired by Dr. Shabtay to support set-up, participant sign-in, safety, and accessibility support for the initiative. While we collaborated on space rentals, and accessibility support, each project focused on

separate goals and research participants, and there was no overlap in data collection or analysis for these projects. To be clear: the methods and findings discussed in this paper were designed, facilitated, and analyzed by me, and are representative of my own project, within the initiative.

The studio space that I used for this project was a wide-open room that allowed for flexibility to modify the set up for different activities. Tables were available and set to the side of the room when not being used, and later set-up with chairs and materials, as needed, for various arts-based activities. The tables also served as surfaces for the participants to build the sets for their puppet shows. Foam mats were available in the space and used by participants to sit on during focus groups and by participants who chose to sit on the floor during activities. The walls were fixed with a chalkboard and bulletin boards, which I used to post and present materials. This research location was also useful because it included soundproof rooms, which supported participant privacy, enabling participation without being overheard or observed by others outside of the project (Graham et al., 2013).

Procedure

For this project, I led a series of three-hour workshops over five days in August 2025.

Participatory workshops such as these required planning, flexibility in timing, and adaptation (Mitchell et al., 2018). Similarly, research with children requires flexibility, and the length of activities varied depending on the participants' needs. Scheduling three-hour sessions allowed for enough time to incorporate breaks for rest, washroom use, and snacks between the activities. The workshop design was also flexible in that participants were able to attend any sessions that they were interested in and available for but were not required to attend every session in order to participate.

Focus Groups. I led four focus group discussions over the week, with the first taking place before the participatory activities and the remaining three after the research activities to generate further discussion of their perspectives. Focus groups are beneficial because they provide researchers with insight into young people's knowledge through their conversations (Mayall, 2008). Aside from the first focus group, which lasted 25 minutes, the rest of the discussions ranged from 10 to 20 minutes, depending on the time taken for the preceding activity and participant engagement. I selected this length of time because it is recommended when conducting focus groups with children to avoid longer sessions and instead hold multiple 20-minute or shorter sessions, followed by breaks and activities to support children's engagement and prevent fatigue (Morgan et al., 2002). I recorded the focus groups with a digital audio recorder and then transcribed them afterward. As recommended by Morgan et al. (2002), I also took notes of the participants' comments, because audio recordings with children are not always clear depending on volume levels. I also ensured there was time for breaks before the focus groups and incorporated movement activities throughout the project to avoid prolonged sitting.

I began the project with a brief 5-minute discussion introducing the research. Then, during the first focus group, I led a short activity to introduce children's rights and generate discussion to learn what the participants already knew about the topic. For the activity called 'rights or wants?', I placed several cards with words and images, such as a computer, the park, internet, games, candy, and water, around the room and the participants placed the cards in a box labelled 'rights' or 'wants.' The participants were instructed to place the cards in the boxes based on whether they considered the item on the card to be a child's right or something they want but do not necessarily consider a right. I explained that there was no wrong answer, and it was based on their opinion. Then we sat down on foam mats on the floor, went through the cards, and

discussed why they thought each one should be a right or a want. This activity generated conversation that revealed some of the current knowledge and understanding of children's rights. I followed the recommendations of Morgan et al. (2002) that researchers facilitating focus groups sit at the same level as participants, by sitting on the floor, to promote a sense of equity and increase children's comfort. As they suggested, I grouped mats on the floor to create a unified space where participants and I could sit together during discussions. Morgan et al. (2002) also recommend allowing children to 'fiddle' or play with small toys during the discussions to increase their comfort by taking the attention off the participant. As such, one participant brought small Lego Duplo characters to a focus group and used them to participate in the conversation by engaging in role-playing with the figures.

Focus groups with children have limitations, such as managing group dynamics, especially when participants have pre-existing relationships that can lead to distractions, peer domination, disagreements, and approval-seeking (Morgan et al., 2002). I aimed to facilitate the discussion by ensuring that everyone who wanted to contribute had a turn to speak and that any disagreements remained respectful. Listening to conversations between children can provide an opportunity to learn from them about what it means to be a child (Mayall, 2008). Therefore, focus groups provided a space for explanations and further discussion of the topic, generating data that was analyzed alongside the arts-based methods.

Embodied Tableaux. I led participants in an embodied tableaux activity to explore their understanding of children's rights. Embodied tableaux is a method in which participants create frozen images using their bodies to express an idea or story. Shabtay (2023) recommends using open-ended prompts and allowing participants time in small groups to develop a frozen image. On the first day of the workshops, I introduced tableaux through two games: 'Frozen Rights' and

‘Jump-In’. During the ‘Frozen Rights’ game, the participants walked around the room and were given prompts based on children’s rights, such as “show me what the right to play looks like”, and they created a frozen image with their bodies showing what that right looks like to them (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: 'Frozen Rights' embodied tableaux game

For the “Jump-In” activity, participants created a frozen image of a children’s right in small groups. One at a time, the participants jumped into the scene and froze (see Figure 2). After performing their group tableaux, the participants had the opportunity to explain why they chose to portray the children’s rights as they did and why it was important. In addition to rapport-building, tableaux can prompt discussions that reveal the participants’ perspectives (Shabtay, 2023). Data was generated from participants' frozen images and from follow-up discussions that delved into the meaning of their images. Embodied tableaux was a useful method when conducting child-centred research because it allowed the participants to express complex ideas that are challenging to describe



Figure 2: 'Jump In' group embodied tableaux game

with words. Additionally, tableaux does not require acting experience, expertise, movement, or speaking, which makes it accessible for participants who are new to dramatic techniques (Shabtay, 2023). Although some participants were more engaged in the tableaux activities than others, these activities provided an opportunity for rapport-building and supported participants' understanding of children's rights.

Puppetry. Another method I facilitated during the research workshops was a puppetry activity. When introducing the method, I created and presented a short puppetry vignette for the children, to help them understand the activity and inspire them to create their own puppet shows.

Developing the puppet shows took two days. On the first day, the participants worked on writing their scripts. They were prompted to create a show with two scenes: the first showing what it means to them when a child's right is violated, and the second showing what it means to them when those rights are upheld. To support the participants, I used the bulletin boards in the room to display cards with the UNCRC rights, written in child-friendly language (see Figure 3). While the participants were writing their scripts, I spoke to each of them individually, during which they further explained their stories and why they chose the topic.

After writing the scripts, the participants created their puppet characters using people-shaped cut-outs, foam, yarn, markers, and sticks to hold them. Then they created their table-top



Figure 3: UNCRC in child-friendly language, developed by UNICEF

settings. Each participant had a section of a table where they created scenes using shoeboxes, wooden blocks, Lego Duplo, foam, construction paper, and pipe cleaners. Participants had time to play with their sets and puppets and rehearse their performances, as needed (see Figures 4-6).



Figure 4: Puppet-making activity



Figure 5: Puppets and table-top sets



Figure 6: Participants playing with sets

Once the participants had created their puppets and table-top sets, they performed their puppet shows for each other. Due to the small group size and the table-top setting, the audience stood around the tables while the participants performed their shows, using their written scripts, if/as needed. Like most activities, I led a focus group discussion about their puppet shows after the activity took place. I incorporated puppetry as a method because this approach allows children to express their thoughts and feelings through a medium that provides some distance between them and the topic (Teachman & Gibson, 2013; Quarmby, 2019). Children's association of puppets with play also makes puppetry an accessible medium to encourage communication (Quarmby, 2019).

Poster-Making and ‘Draw and Tell’. In addition to the discussion-focused and embodied methods, I also incorporated visual arts-based methods to provide more opportunities for participants to share their views. The first visual arts-based method for this project was poster-making with markers and poster boards (see Figure 7). To support their poster design, I provided written prompts / reminders of the rights we had discussed and the topics participants identified as important to them throughout the workshops. I also provided participants with poster paper, pencils, and a variety of markers. I gave the participants pencils to sketch their ideas first, then markers to go over them in bold colours.



Figure 7: Poster-making

While creating their posters, the participants discussed their ideas with me individually, and I made notes and recorded their explanations. The participants had additional opportunities to explain their posters during a focus group and a short showcase presentation for other children, helping clarify their meanings (see Figure 8). Mitchell et al. (2018) recommend that participants add captions and explain their drawings to support researchers’ understanding and analysis of the



Figure 8: Showcase presentation

drawings and to avoid researchers projecting their interpretations. Combining children’s

drawings with their words enriches the data and provides insight into their perspectives in ways that quantitative methods cannot achieve (Greig et al., 2013). Data was generated and analyzed through the drawings, captions, explanations, and follow-up group discussions.

In addition to poster-making, two of the children participated in a draw-and-tell activity on the final day of the workshops, while they waited for additional peers to potentially arrive. As part of this activity, they worked together to colour a large banner while discussing their perspectives on the week's activities and conversations. Incorporating drawing activities with discussion has also been found to stimulate more dialogue from less talkative children (Morgan et al., 2002). This draw-and-tell activity provided an opportunity to reflect and delve into the follow-up questions that arose. The relaxed nature of the draw-and-tell allowed a natural pace of discussion, and the participants disclosed what they liked or disliked over the week and posed questions about some of the children's rights we did not have as much opportunity to discuss.

Research also suggests that drawing can be a useful research method with young people because it can overcome language barriers, make difficult topics easier to explore and allow children to exercise agency, and support young people's expression of views on difficult topics with greater ease (Coyne et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2018).

5. Ethical Considerations

Like all research projects involving human subject, ethical implications had to be considered throughout all stages of the project. Ethics are an important aspect of research design and practice, because without these considerations, research has the potential to cause harm to children, such as personal distress or reprisals and retributions from home and community (Graham et al., 2013).

Prior to data collection, I obtained written informed consent from parents and guardians, and both written and verbal assent from the child participants. I obtained written assent from the children by providing them with a consent form written in child-friendly language. At the start of data collection, I obtained verbal assent by ensuring the participants understood the consent form by reviewing it with them to confirm their understanding of their rights, potential risks and benefits, the study's purpose and methods, and who would view my final project. I also reminded them of the project and consent form information at the beginning of each workshop day. In addition to regular research consent, I obtained participants' consent and assent to record videos and take photographs of them, their artwork, and their performances, to support data analysis and research dissemination.

Ongoing consent and assent was important to me. As recommended by Alderson (2005), I remained attentive to cues that may indicate the children no longer want to participate. Throughout the workshops, I listened to participants if they indicated they did not want to participate in an activity, and I also paid attention to nonverbal cues that may indicate unwillingness to participate. While I aimed to engage the participants in the activities, I let them know they were not required to participate in anything they did not want to. For instance, some participants chose to watch the group tableaux activity instead of joining in, and one participant

chose to create puppets but did not take part in the script writing and performing. In doing so, I applied a children's rights approach to research that includes children in the decision-making about their participation (Graham et al., 2013).

When conducting research with young people, ethical considerations also involve protecting their privacy and ensuring confidentiality. In embodied research and focus group research, there are limits to privacy and confidentiality, and I was transparent about these limitations when obtaining consent. I also obtained additional consent to include photography, video, and audio recordings as aspects of my project, and was transparent about how these components would be used (including that photographs would be shared in this paper and in presentations). Within the confines of a project that relied heavily on the inclusion of embodied and visual methods, I took precautions to support participant privacy to the extent possible.

As Greig et al. (2013) suggest, I have safeguarded participants' privacy by using pseudonyms and removing any references to identifiable information, such as their school or neighbourhood names. I saved the discussion recordings to a password-protected drive and deleted them from the recording device.

A potential risk of conducting focus groups was that I cannot guarantee participants' anonymity, or the confidentiality of the information shared, since there were other children present during the discussions. Being transparent about the limitations of confidentiality is an important part of being an ethical researcher. During the consent and assent process, I explained to the participants that they must keep discussions confidential, and I reminded them of this at the beginning of each workshop. However, I also cautioned them that I cannot ensure the other participants comply with this request, and they should not disclose anything they wish to keep

private. Additionally, I informed the participants of my duty to report if they disclosed that they or someone they know is at risk of harm.

Another ethical consideration is the power dynamic between adult researchers and child participants (Berman & MacNevin, 2017). I aimed to mitigate the power imbalance by building rapport with the participants through games, activities, and informal discussions to support the development of comfortable relationships with and among the participants. Throughout the project I also reminded the participants a research project was different from school and that there were no wrong answers. I assured them that their names wouldn't be included in my project paper and that the purpose of the study was to understand their ideas and opinions. I have also aimed to mitigate this power imbalance by selecting participatory methods and child-led data generation.

6. Analytic Procedure

I analyzed the findings using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), exploring how participants communicated their understandings of children's rights through their posters, tableaux images, puppet shows and focus group discussions. As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), I conducted thematic analysis by organizing data through identifying and analyzing patterns or themes. The benefit of this approach to my research analysis was its flexibility and that it is well-suited for varying types of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Specifically, I used an inductive thematic approach, which is data-driven rather than theory-driven (Braun & Clark, 2006). This approach meant the themes I found were from the participants' perspectives. This approach was also useful because inductive analysis is compatible with constructivism (Greig et al., 2013).

I began my analysis by becoming familiar with the data by transcribing the recordings while noting some potential patterns or themes. I then conducted a close reading to generate codes by highlighting patterns and similarities with different colours. Codes are categories of data which are united under a common theme (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). As I went through the data, I developed and refined codes using a legend to keep track of them. After the initial coding, I sorted the codes into broader themes, which were given a preliminary name and then refined through further analysis into the themes discussed in the findings section. I found the themes fit into two categories, which answered the research questions. My findings are discussed in the next section.

7. Findings

In this section, I will discuss the findings of my research, based on the ideas and perspectives shared by the child participants. I will share the study's findings in two parts. The first section examines children's existing knowledge and understanding of their rights. The second section will explore children's perspectives and their suggestions for updating the UNCRC to better reflect the contemporary context.

Children's Knowledge and Understanding of Their Rights

In this section, I will discuss findings related to children's understandings of their rights, including their prior knowledge of these rights and how they interpreted them. My findings suggest that child participants had limited awareness of the UNCRC and children's rights prior to the research; that the child participants indicated a strong reliance on adults to support access to their rights; and that the child participants felt a responsibility for safeguarding their own privacy rights in online contexts.

Limited Awareness of the UNCRC and Children's Rights. While participants in this study began with some awareness of children's rights, their understanding was limited, and most shared that they were unaware of the UNCRC. I began the workshops with discussions and activities to learn about the participants' current knowledge of children's rights. Out of the six participants, only Skye, age 11, had heard of the UNCRC. As Jayden, age 10, explained, "I didn't learn about this at school. The first time I learned about, like, that chart [pointing to a UNCRC poster] was here." Similarly, Nico shared, "I haven't learned a lot about children's rights, I don't think ... We didn't learn about the [UNCRC]", adding "I didn't know there was a whole convention like that chart" (Focus Group, August 2025).

When I discussed Article 42 of the UNCRC with the participants, which requires that children and adults be made aware of their rights under the UNCRC, Nico shared, “I think about children’s rights, like, everybody knows about it? Not really... And you need to know it, so if you need to know it, then why don’t you tell [children]? So, I don’t think they are doing a good job” (Focus Group, 2025). Jayden adds, “If [children] don’t learn about it, they won’t know about it” (Focus Group, August 2025). Overall, the participants indicated their education about children’s rights was limited. In addition to limited awareness among children, participants also reported that their parents were unaware of the UNCRC. For example, Nico said, “I want to share it with my dad because he doesn’t know anything about this” (Focus Group, August 2025).

One participant, Skye, had specifically heard of the UNCRC, although she expressed that her knowledge was limited. Skye’s knowledge of rights came from learning about a related issue at school. Skye explained she learned about it by “researching about kids who change the world” and heard of a child who spoke to the UN about their invention. Skye made the connection to children’s rights by using this as an example of adults listening to children about matters concerning them (Article 12).

While none of the other participants had heard of the UNCRC, they showed some awareness of their rights to education, play, food, clothing, water, housing, and protection from child labour when these articles of the UNCRC were discussed. Like Skye, the participants reported that they mainly learned about topics relevant to children’s rights at school through projects related to children’s issues. Alex, an 11-year-old participant, explained that although he had not learned specifically about the UNCRC or children’s rights, he had learned that child labour was a concern through a school project on the issue. He explained, “In grade 6, I had a project, I’m not really sure about this, but I had to research, uh, what’s it called? Like when

children work for no pay” (Focus Group, August 2025). Alex’s example revealed that he understood this issue concerned children’s rights, although he had not received formal education on children’s rights and the UNCRC protections.

Amaya, a 9-year-old participant, also revealed that her understanding of children’s right to have their views heard came from learning that “skin tone crayons was actually an idea that came from kids” (Focus Group, August 2025). Like Skye, Amaya made the connection that this was related to children’s right to be listened to in matters that affect them (Article 12). Again, like the other participants, Amaya did not have specific children’s rights education, but had learned about a topic that she felt related to a right.

While learning about these topics is valuable and important for young people and demonstrates their ability to connect issues affecting children to their rights, none of the children had been explicitly taught about children’s rights, or their protections under the UNCRC. It is evident that, based on their responses and knowledge, for these children, Canada had not lived up to its commitments under Article 42, which requires “States Parties undertake to make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known, by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike” (UNCRC, 1989).

Reliance on Adults. Throughout the research project, participants noted that they often depend on adults, such as parents, teachers, and older siblings, to protect and uphold their rights. When asked whether they knew what to do if their rights were violated, Jayden responded, “Not really? Like maybe [ask] friends, like people you know, like trusted adults” (Focus Group, August 2025). Nico added, “I would talk to my sister, because she’s been through this before... she knows a solution, probably” (Focus Group, August 2025).

Through their creation of puppet shows (where participants had creative freedom to design and tell stories that represented their understandings of their rights), the participants demonstrated how much children rely on adults to protect their rights. For example, Jayden created, scripted, and performed a puppet show that showcased a child character facing homelessness and food insecurity. While Jayden's puppet show focused on a child's experience, adults were central to his understanding of the child accessing their rights. The puppet show illustrated how adults might sometimes worsen the problem by refusing help, and also demonstrated how adults can assist children by providing essentials such as food and shelter (see Figure 9). Jayden expressed that children depend on adults for basic needs, which are an important aspect of their rights.



Figure 9: Jayden's puppet show.

The participants also demonstrated that they rely on adults to listen to them and advocate for their rights. For example, in Nico's puppet show, he portrayed his understanding of a child's right to play (Article 31) being infringed upon when other children excluded him. During his show, the main character, Max, speaks to the mother of the other children about feeling excluded by them. In doing so, the parent supports Max by talking to the other children, prompting them to apologize and play with him. In his puppet show, he demonstrated his belief that when adults listen to children, it can help them reach resolutions that protect their rights.

Similarly, during Skye's puppet show, the older sister supports the main character by speaking to their parents, who were not letting the children play outside alone (see Figure 10).

According to Skye, “because sometimes the parents stop us from going outside, because, like, we could get injured” (Interview, August 2025). Skye also mentioned that, at times, she feels her parents are too busy or tired to take them outside. Skye did not view her parents as intentionally trying to prevent her from



Figure 10: Skye's puppet show.

exercising her rights; instead, she understood they faced barriers such as limited time, fatigue, and safety concerns. Her puppet show revealed that, based on her understanding, children depend on adults to ensure they can exercise their rights, including their right to play. Skye's puppet show also showcased her view that children often rely on trusted adults, such as older siblings, to advocate for them if their rights are not being respected. In both Nico and Skye's puppet shows, the children depicted that support from older individuals can encourage others to listen to their perspectives. Their perspectives may stem from the understanding that adults have more power than children and, as a result, adult voices are more likely to be listened to.

In our discussions, participants also identified that sometimes adults (such as parents and teachers) can be viewed as barriers to exercising their rights. For example, Skye mentioned that she usually must ask her teacher to provide the class with opportunities for physical activity, and that it often depends on other students' behaviour. While participants felt they were positioned,

as children, to have to rely on adults to uphold rights, they did not always feel that adults were reliable in upholding them.

In further discussions, the participants pointed out that meaningful chances for children to be heard by adults are not always available or easy to access. For instance, Skye shared in our discussions that the topic of children's rights and advocacy was important to her. Sometimes, she felt dismissed by adults in her life, and wished for more opportunities to speak with politicians or the United Nations. She said, "My mom is like 'why do you always write about things like rights, rights, rights?'" (Focus Group, August 2025). Skye also shared that even when speaking with politicians who are supportive, there are barriers. She explained, "I spoke to one politician once, but don't know how to find them again" (Focus Group, August 2025). She explained concerns that while the UN sometimes allows children to speak, adults might dismiss their ideas because they do not believe that children are "smart enough" (Focus Group, August 2025).

Similarly, for Nico, the issue of adults listening to children was important. He created a poster focused on this specific children's right and said, "I'm making [my poster] on issues that affect you. Adults should listen and take your views seriously...because adults and kids think differently, and they do differently." In the poster, Nico drew a courtroom full of adults with a child speaking at the front, and the words "We Have a Voice" at the top (see Figure 11). Skye and Nico's focus on politicians and legal systems, demonstrate their view that in order for children to access their rights, they are reliant on adults in positions of authority. While under the UNCRC, children do have the

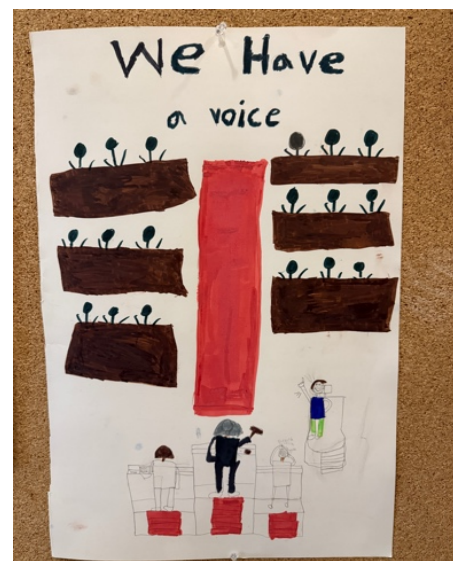


Figure 11: Nico's poster.

right to have their views heard on matters that concern them, the participants recognized that the only way to access this right was for adults to listen to them and to act on their behalf to protect their rights.

Responsibility for Safeguarding Privacy Online. Interestingly, online privacy was the only aspect of rights protection in which participants felt a responsibility to uphold their rights, rather than relying on the adults in their lives. All of the participants reported that, before this study, they were unaware that privacy was a child's right. However, they shared that they were already aware of the importance of safeguarding their privacy. Participants shared that their understanding of privacy protections in digital spaces strengthened their ability to protect this right.

Roblox, an online gaming platform and game creation system, was the primary digital platform discussed by the participants. Participants shared that it was the space where they felt their privacy rights were most at risk of violation. Participants explained that strategies for online safety were taught to them by family members and educators. Jayden explained, "My dad [and] my brother says, like, if I am playing Roblox and somebody sends me a friend request, and I don't know them, like, to not accept it. So, like, because something could happen" (Focus Group, August 2025). Throughout our conversation about privacy, the participants discussed actively protecting their privacy rights by subverting Roblox's requests for their personal information. For example, they took measures to safeguard their identities by changing identifying information, such as their names and birthdays, and reported unsafe behaviour to the platform. In the following excerpt from a focus group discussion, the participants explained how they protect their privacy by inputting different information:

Amaya: But Roblox asks for your private information when you're signing in!

Skye: That's why you don't use real information.

Nico: You don't give your information. I gave fake information.

Researcher: What information do they ask you?

Jayden: Name, age, birthdate. I just put like I'm 50 years old.

Skye: Why are they even asking this information in the first place?

(Focus Group, August 2025)

Learning about some aspects of privacy protection and online safety (including awareness of potential unsafe behaviour from other users and changing identifying information) positioned participants to feel empowered to independently protect their privacy rights online. In some cases, participants shared that they were often more informed about privacy policies for online platforms than their parents were. For example, Skye explained, "I had to read the privacy policy. I asked my dad if I had to, because it's going to know if I read it, and he said, 'just scroll and scroll and scroll'" (Focus Group, August 2025). Amaya also shared that her parent did not read the entire policy when setting up her Roblox account, saying, "My mom actually put all my information; she put my real name, and ...I got hacked....I scrolled down, and I saw you are not supposed to put your real name, but my mom already submitted everything in" (Focus Group, August 2025). The participants also felt that Roblox's privacy policy could be improved because it is very lengthy, as discussed in the following focus group excerpt:

Researcher: Have you read the privacy policy?

Jayden: No.

Skye: It's so long.

Jayden: Yeah, that's why I didn't read it.

Researcher (to Skye): Did you understand it?

Skye: Yeah, it's in kid language, so yeah.

Researcher: Nico, did you understand it?

Nico: It was long, so I only read half of it.

(Focus Group, August 2025)

In this passage, participants revealed a common issue with privacy policies: many users scroll past and click "agree" without reading the entire policy because it is too lengthy.

The participants' main safety concern about Roblox was the danger posed by other users, not the platform itself. They expressed fear of hackers accessing their accounts or strangers identifying, locating, and kidnapping them. Despite one participant questioning why Roblox asked for identifying information, overall, the participants did not express concerns about the platform having their information. Rather, they were mainly worried about how other users could use this information to harm them, either online or in person. Through his policy poster (see Figure 12), Jayden highlighted the importance of children's rights related to online spaces. He

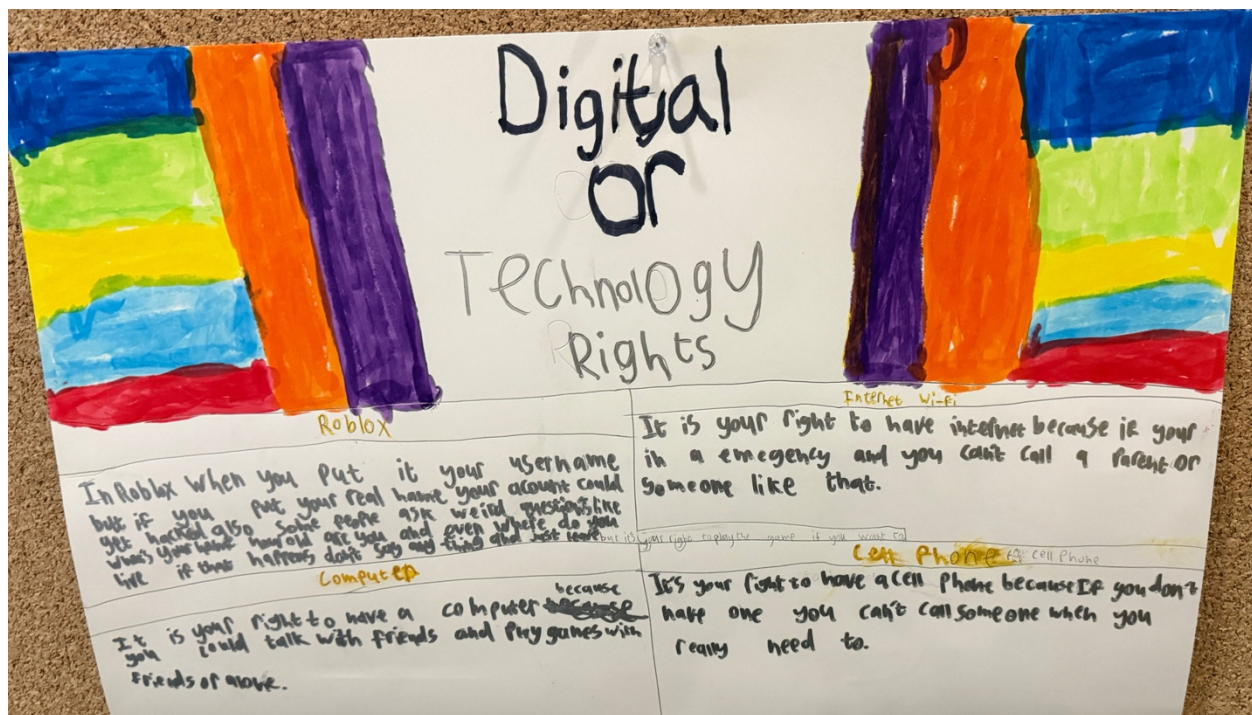


Figure 12: Jayden's poster.

explained, “For Roblox, I’m just writing about what you shouldn’t do. And if you do it, you might get like, hacked. If you do any of these, they might come to your house and kidnap you if you actually tell them” (Interview, August 2025). Jayden agreed, explaining:

If you have Roblox and put in your username, or if you put in your real name, you could get hacked. And some people ask weird questions on mics and say ‘Where do you live? What’s your name? How old are you? When were you born?’ and if they do this, you leave the game. (Focus Group, August 2025)

Nico said he had a similar experience and reacted the same way Jayden did by leaving the game. In doing so, the participants took steps to ensure their safety and privacy by applying their online safety knowledge while on the platform.

The participants’ actions to safeguard themselves (such as changing information, reporting other users, and leaving the game) demonstrate that when children are informed of the risks, they can take steps to protect themselves and uphold their rights. Nevertheless, despite participants feeling empowered to safeguard their privacy without relying on adults, their responses revealed that little is being done beyond this to ensure their rights are upheld in online spaces. As these spaces have little oversight, it is up to the children to ensure they are safe when online. Concerningly, the participants focused primarily on the privacy-related dangers posed by other users but did not express any concerns about protecting their privacy from the platform itself, which tracks their behaviour and sells their data. On Roblox, advertising surveillance technologies monitor users’ activity. Unlike traditional television and YouTube ads, the boundary between marketing and gameplay is unclear because advertising is integrated into the experience (Coulter, 2026). Although they understood the platform had measures to protect them from other users, they seemed unaware that the platform itself also posed risks to their privacy and collected

their data for profit. Based on what participants shared, they feel individually responsible for upholding their privacy rights, highlighting a lack of governance policies that actually protect children's online privacy.

Children's Suggestions for Updating the UNCRC

Throughout the research workshops, the children often commented that the UNCRC was old and outdated. They expressed that modern technology and diverse living conditions meant the convention did not always align with the challenges young people are facing in the present day. Based on our discussions, this section explores children's concerns about the UNCRC and offers suggestions for updating it to better reflect the contemporary context. Their concerns primarily revolved around three key areas: ensuring outdoor experiences, promoting social opportunities with other children, and supporting digital access. These conversations were child-driven, and as such, their views and lived experiences are context-specific and may not reflect those of all Canadian children or of children globally. Childhood is contextual, and as such, these suggestions are the participants' own and are not meant to represent a universal view of childhood. In some cases, these participants' ideas invite reconsideration of the ways that these rights are implemented in their context, and of opportunities to go beyond the confines of the convention to support children in accessing their rights.

Ensuring Outdoor Experiences. All participants indicated that the UNCRC should be strengthened to explicitly include the right to outdoor experiences, as this was beneficial for their health, well-being, and quality of life. During a focus group discussion, I engaged participants in an activity exploring children's rights. The participants selected cards depicting various objects and spaces, such as books, computers, food, parks, and schools, and placed them in boxes based on whether they believed the item on the card should be a child's right. They included all

outdoor spaces, such as playgrounds, parks, and beaches, as places children should have access to as a right. In a focus group discussion, when asked about their preference for outdoor or indoor play, Jayden said, “I would choose both, because sometimes if it's raining outside and I have to go outside, it's like, really? But inside, it's kind of boring, and I don't really have anything to do”. Nico agreed, “I think they are both important because you need to get some fresh air time and quality time outside.” Alex went on to say that he thought that playing outdoors was important, “because you are active and it's good for your body, instead of sitting around.” Likewise, Nico also shared, “I feel like it's a better benefit for your health, and it also helps me train for soccer” (Focus Group, August 2025). By sharing their desire for outdoor experiences, the participants also revealed that this was an area in which their opportunities were limited.

Throughout the workshops, participants identified the need to ensure the right to outdoor opportunities because they did not feel they have enough time outdoors due to existing barriers. Skye shared that perceptions of community safety can limit outdoor experiences. She expressed her view that, “The community might be a little bit more dangerous... If you're at home, your parents are there, you can lock the door, and nobody can get you there” (Focus Group, August 2025). Another participant, Jayden, had concerns that air and water pollution could prevent them from going outside, so they would not get sick. The participants also argued that they lack sufficient outdoor opportunities at school and wanted longer recess breaks. Jayden explained, “I get out, the place we play, I normally go to the back, and once I get there, the bell rings, and I have to go back” (Focus Group, August 2025). For these participants, perceptions of community safety, environmental pollution, and school policies all posed barriers to outdoor experiences.

The participants often used play as an example to communicate their thoughts about rights. Connecting their ideas and examples to play is likely because play is a significant aspect of their lives, where they often have more agency. For example, the participants shared that they enjoy playing in outdoor spaces because they can ride their bikes and scooters and participate in sports like basketball and soccer. Skye argued that the right to outdoor play should be a specific children's right, and her puppet show focused on this. Similarly, Amaya created a policy poster that emphasized children's right to outdoor play (see Figure 13). They all felt that opportunities for and access to outdoor experiences should be strengthened, and that outdoor spaces should be improved to be more child-friendly, with enhanced safety and engaging play and exploration spaces. While increased outdoor play can provide valuable experiences, these opportunities could also be expanded through outdoor education and community spaces designed for leisure and socialization.

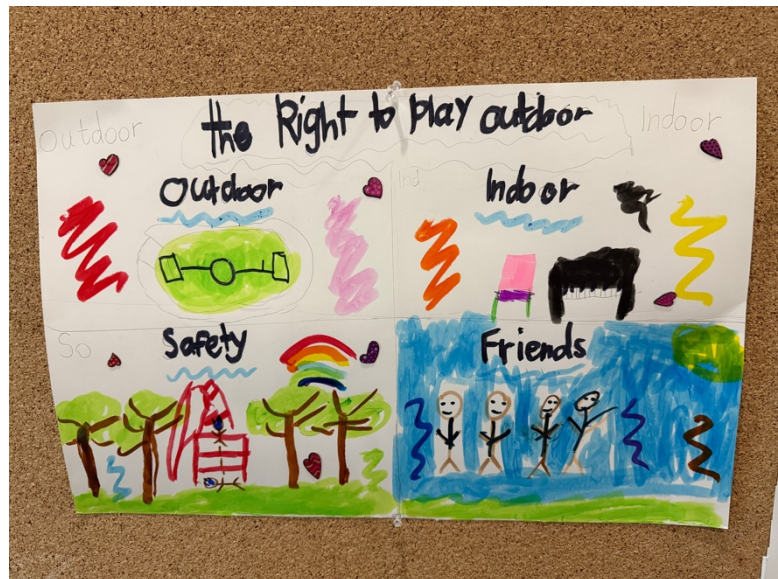


Figure 13: Amaya's poster

Promoting Social Opportunities with Other Children. The participants felt that something missing from the UNCRC was an article explicitly emphasizing the importance of social opportunities for children, beyond schooling. While the convention references social development through Article 27, which guarantees a standard of living that meets basic needs, the participants in this study felt that the right to social interactions with other children should be clearly specified. Participants raised this in a focus group discussion, where Jayden commented,

“playing with friends, I think it should be a part of the right to play” (Focus Group, August 2025). Nico agreed with Jayden on the importance of social opportunities with friends, but went further to say, “I definitely think it should be a right by itself” (Focus Group, August 2025). Socializing with friends was important to all participants, and they reported having insufficient opportunities for social interaction. All participants said they preferred playing with friends to solitary play and shared their experiences of isolation, particularly when at home or outside school hours. According to Nico, socialization with other children was important because he often feels lonely. He explained, “I have a bunch of board games at home. What’s the point of having them if no one is going to play with you?” (Focus Group, August 2025). The other participants agreed with Nico and revealed that they all play board games alone. They explained in the following focus group discussion:

Researcher: Does everyone play board games at home?

Jayden: Yes.

Skye: Yes.

Researcher: Who do you play with?

Skye: By myself.

Researcher: How do you play board games by yourself?

Nico: Sometimes I just pretend that there is someone there.

Skye: You just do both moves.

Researcher: You play both sides, against yourself?

Nico: Yeah, like that.

Through their puppet shows, participants also revealed that a right to social opportunities could support their other rights, such as the right to play. For example, Amaya's puppet show was about playing sports with other children (see Figure 14). Similarly, Nico's puppet show involved children playing together at a park (see Figure 15). Since rights are interdependent, having opportunities for social interaction with peers can uphold other rights and provide opportunities to interact with other children.



Figure 14: Amaya's puppet



Figure 15: Nico's puppet show

Isolation was a key point of concern for the participants. While Jayden shared that he has two friends in his neighbourhood, Nico and Amaya both said they often play by themselves. Jayden also explained that while he has a close friend in his neighbourhood, “he only comes out for 10 minutes” (Focus Group, August 2025). Their comments about having few friends in the neighbourhood may reflect the urbanization of their communities and may also tie into their concerns about community safety, which also posed a barrier to the outdoor opportunities mentioned earlier. Likewise, the participants also reported that they depended on their parents to arrange playdates, which connects to one of the earlier themes of relying on adults to ensure their rights are upheld.

Supporting Digital Access. The participants felt that the UNCRC should be updated to include the right to access digital technology, specifically cellular phones, computers, and wireless internet. They argued that certain technologies were necessary to protect their safety and, therefore, should be a right. The participants felt cellphones were necessary for safety

because they enable communication with parents and emergency services, and offer GPS navigation. For example, Skye, who sometimes babysits her younger siblings, shared:

Like I have two younger siblings, and sometimes I might have to take them home, and my mom has to work. So, I take them home, so how am I going to have to tell my mom that I am home if I don't have a phone? (Focus Group, August 2025)

Jayden mentioned that access to a cellphone is necessary in emergencies, and Nico agreed, stating, “if you don't have a cellphone, you can't call someone, even if you really need to” (Focus Group, August 2025). The participants also felt that the right to access technology should depend on its purpose. The participants distinguished between technology that was a ‘need’ and a ‘want’. According to the participants' perspectives, the technologies they considered essential included safety features, such as communication with parents, caregivers and emergency services, and GPS navigation. For example, Jayden stated, “If it's a PS5 or a Nintendo, you don't need it, just want it. But if it's a phone, sometimes you really do need it” (Focus Group, August 2025).

Participants noted that access to technology could also uphold other rights that were identified as important to them. For example, the participants stated that access to technology, such as computers and the internet, was necessary to support their right to information, and their right to education in the present day. For example, Skye explained that internet access should be a right in order to “use it for research” (Focus Group, August 2025). Similarly, speaking about access to computers, Jayden said, “You need [them] for school” (Focus Group, August 2025).

Furthermore, although the participants did not believe that access to video games and gaming consoles should be a child's right, they recognized that such access could support the right to play. For example, Jayden said, “If you have a computer, you could ... play games with

friends” (Focus Group, August 2025). Similarly, Amaya explained that internet access is important for the right to play because “you can use games on it” (Focus Group, August 2025). The participants also revealed that sometimes access to phones was necessary for social play, especially when friends live far away, as the phones allowed them to make plans. This perception that technology was necessary to arrange social play opportunities reflects neighbourhoods in which peers may not live as close to one another, which was mentioned throughout the study. Since participants felt that social opportunities should be a right for children, they felt that access to technology could help them uphold this right. In general, participants felt strongly that children’s technological and internet access was a necessity in the contemporary context, and that without it, they could face barriers to accessing other rights (including safety, access to information, education, and play).

8. Concluding Thoughts

The early findings of this study demonstrated that prior to this project, participants had limited knowledge of the UNCRC and their rights, suggesting that Canada is not fully meeting its obligation under Article 42 to make the convention widely known among children and adults. In addition to their limited knowledge and understanding (at the start of the project), participants also expressed that they were unaware of ways to address rights violations if or when they occur. The participants indicated a strong reliance on the adults in their lives to protect their rights to provision, protection, and participation, likely due to the hierarchical power imbalance between adults and children in our society. While adults, including parents and teachers, should help safeguard children's rights, the participants also indicated that these adults are not necessarily always informed or equipped to protect their rights, and that they also felt a responsibility to protect their own rights, as evidenced by their discussion of online privacy. Overall, their responses indicate that further rights-based education, for both adults and children, would help support children's access to their rights.

Relying on adults to support young people in asserting their rights can be challenging when they are unaware of how to contact figures beyond family and teachers, such as politicians and lawyers. Even when children trust adults to listen, they often expect those adults to actively help them exercise their rights, like the right to play. This reliance, combined with limited knowledge of self-advocacy and resource access, underscores the need for well-known, accessible procedures for children. Despite the Committee on the Rights of the Child's 2022 recommendations, a formal complaint system for children to address rights violations remains absent. Nevertheless, even formal mechanisms, such as tribunals, may be intimidating and fail to produce real change. In addition to a formal complaint system, smaller initiatives in schools and

communities that offer rights education and empower children to advocate for themselves could help bridge this gap. These processes should include adult support and be designed to be child-friendly and easily accessible.

Safeguarding children's privacy online emerged as an important skill for protecting their rights. The participants' responses revealed that in some cases, education can empower children with the tools to protect and uphold their rights. Although this often requires adults to support young people through education, once children have access to the information, they feel more empowered to exercise their agency to protect some of their rights, including their privacy rights. In cases where children have agency to protect their rights, they are only empowered to do so when and where they are informed of these rights and the processes available to them to protect themselves. This is evidenced in our conversation surrounding online privacy, where participants were mainly concerned about safeguarding their privacy from other users, rather than from Roblox or other platforms. While there is indeed a risk posed by other users, the children could benefit from greater awareness of how their data is collected and used by online platforms, as well as from the development of policies to make these platforms less exploitative.

Based on participants' experiences, the responsibility for protecting themselves online is largely placed on children, as policies and platforms fail to ensure real privacy and safety. While awareness of online safety practices is important, there remains concern that the participants were not aware of all the risks associated with being online, such as datafication and advertising surveillance. The participants did share that they thought Roblox could do better at protecting their privacy, even though they were unaware that they are tracked by the platform itself. This is important because, as Coulter (2026) suggests, "at the heart of change we need kids to be part of the discussion of how to design and regulate technologies geared for them" (p. 154).

Furthermore, despite not being fully aware of all the potential risks, the participants indicated that in many cases, they had greater awareness than their parents about how to protect themselves online. Privacy policies are lengthy, even when written in child-friendly language, and users (including adults tasked with protecting their children) often agree without fully reading or understanding them. Coulter (2026) argues that the UNCRC General Comment 25 (2021), which requires that children's rights be protected and upheld in digital spaces, must be applied across all digital contexts and ensure that these platforms are designed to recognize children's rights. Doing so would shift the responsibility for protecting children's privacy from children to the platforms themselves.

The participants frequently emphasized the significance of outdoor experiences. While part of their desire is connected to the ability to play outside, the opportunities for outdoor activities should extend beyond just play. In our discussions, participants often viewed their outdoor experiences as tied to adults, noting that teachers and parents often act as gatekeepers to these opportunities. Adults' concerns about children's behaviour and perceptions of safety reveal that many lack access to safe outdoor spaces that do not require direct adult supervision.

Although it is possible to draw on existing rights under the UNCRC to argue that children already have the right to outdoor experiences, this right is not explicitly stated. For example, Article 3 emphasizes that all actions involving children should prioritize their best interests, while Article 12 grants children the right to participate in decisions that affect them. Regarding education, Article 29 states that children's learning should foster "the development of respect for the natural environment" (UNCRC, 1989, para.1(e)). Furthermore, Article 31 affirms children's right to engage in cultural and artistic activities, as well as leisure, play, and recreation. As participants suggest, in some cases, access to outdoor experiences can be regarded as an essential

opportunity for children to exercise these existing rights, or could be considered a necessary ‘right’ of its own. Children’s rights are also interconnected, meaning a child cannot fully realize their rights without others being fulfilled as well. Recognizing the interdependence of rights, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, in General Comment No. 26 (2023): On Children’s Rights and the Environment, with a focus on climate change, highlights that a healthy, clean environment is fundamental to accessing and exercising other rights. Nonetheless, despite these provisions in the convention, the participants felt that the right to outdoor experiences should be explicitly included in the UNCRC in some capacity because they felt this was a right they did not currently have.

In considering their needs as they relate to the convention, participants all felt that social opportunities with other children should be a part of their rights. Although Article 31 ensures the right to play and Article 27 states that children have an adequate standard of living for their development, including social development, participants felt that this language did not sufficiently address their needs. Participants wanted these opportunities to be clearly and explicitly stated.

Finally, the child participants expressed their view that access to the internet and certain technologies (particularly those that support access to safety, information, education and in some cases play) were often needed for accessing and exercising their rights. Regarding the UNCRC, Article 13 states that children have the right to seek, receive, and share information and ideas “through any other media of the child’s choice” (p.4), which could be interpreted to include digital technology. Additionally, Article 17 affirms that children have the right to access information from diverse national and international sources. However, these articles specifically address the sharing and receiving of information. The UNCRC General Comment 25 (2021) on

Children's rights in relation to the digital environment does address children's right to participate in digital spaces by stating that "meaningful access to digital technologies can support children to realize the full range of their civil, political, cultural, economic and social rights" (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021, p.1). Nevertheless, while this is a starting point, it again requires knowledge of the UNCRC and the role of General Comments in amending gaps in the convention. Canada is already failing to meet its obligations to educate children and adults alike on the UNCRC and their rights, and as such, even children who are aware of the convention are unlikely to be aware of General Comments. Furthermore, it does not explicitly require states parties to ensure that children have access to these digital technologies; it merely maintains that the absence of access reinforces inequality. Instead, General Comment 25 (2021) primarily emphasizes the need to protect and uphold existing rights within digital environments, which is also essential. As the participants explained, this gap in the UNCRC highlights the need to modernize it for the contemporary context and reiterates their argument that their rights must be explicit and specific, so they are clearly understood by all.

By exploring the participants' perspectives on their rights, this study offered information on these child participants' understandings and perspectives related to their rights under the UNCRC. Their discussions led to several child-initiated recommendations for possible updates to the UNCRC that would better support their needs in the present day, including ensuring access to outdoor experiences, promoting social opportunities, and updating the convention to include access to technology. When sharing their views, the participants often discussed their ideas as they related to the right to play. While the right to play emerged as one of the most important rights for the children in this study, this may be because play is already a vital part of children's lives, as McDonnell (1994) suggests, "play is the lifeblood of childhood" (p. 28), and the only

space where children experience a “domain of personal power” (p. 31). The participants' recommendations also offer insight into how to strengthen access to children's rights. Although the UNCRC can be interpreted by some to already include rights to outdoor experiences, social opportunities, and technological access, doing so requires drawing connections among several rights and General Comments to argue that such rights already exist. Finally, because the UNCRC is not widely known among children and adults, awareness of these rights is limited, hindering children from fully exercising them.

Contributions to the Disciplines

My project falls within the politics and policy stream of the Communication and Culture graduate program by focusing on the Government of Canada's obligations to uphold children's rights in accordance with the UNCRC. In doing so, I explored how children communicate their ideas on political and policy issues that matter to them, which included findings related to digital, privacy, and social policies. This research also intersects with the program's media and culture stream because children's cultures, values, religion, ethnicity, traditions, and the social and political contexts in which they live influence their conceptions of rights (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2017).

This study contributes to the fields of critical childhood studies and critical children's rights studies by addressing gaps in the current scholarship about children's views and understandings of their rights. Despite the UNCRC articulating the importance of children's participation in matters concerning them, they were not involved in the development of the convention (Lundy et al., 2015). By exploring children's rights through the context-specific perspectives of young people themselves, this study challenges the universal approach of the

UNCRC. The participants' insights throughout the project suggest that they care about their rights, and they expressed their desire for me to share their ideas with other adults.

The findings of this study also reaffirm the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's profound concerns about the limited awareness of children's rights in Canada and reveal the Canadian government's ongoing inaction to ensure that children and adults are made aware of the UNCRC. Importantly, the Canadian government must submit a report to the UN by January 11, 2027 (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2022); as such, the timing of my study is relevant. The participants' recommendations also highlight the need to ensure that rights are clearly and specifically stated to avoid misinterpretation and ambiguity. Perhaps a 'Canadian Convention of Children's Rights' that is developed with young people themselves and enshrined into law could address some of the issues they identified with the UNCRC.

Finally, this study makes valuable methodological contributions to the disciplines of childhood studies, communication, and culture by adding to the scholarship and legitimacy of child-centred participatory methods. The methodologies drew on children's play cultures by involving participants in drama-based games and puppetry. Through activities such as scriptwriting, puppet making, set design, and performance, participants could express their ideas through written and oral language, as well as through visual means. With the policy posters, some participants relied primarily on written language, while others relied on drawing images. This method proved to align with children's communication cultures, as they had the freedom to choose their communication style. I found that the creative methods increased participant engagement and inspired deeper discussion of complex topics, while the focus group discussions allowed participants to share their ideas further. In this regard, my project demonstrates how arts- and drama-based methods support children's communication cultures, enabling researchers to

explore complex topics with young people and thereby increase their engagement and participation in scholarly research and political issues. In doing so, it establishes how researchers can take a rights-based approach by engaging children and youth through participatory methods. This research revealed the strengths of engaging children through a range of communication styles that align with their daily cultural practices and highlighted areas of need and future research related to children's rights policy and education in the Canadian context.

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