

International Summer Course on the Rights of the Child

10th edition

August 15 to 20, 2021 - Université de Moncton, Canada

Child's Rights in Times of Pandemic: placing the best interests of the child at the heart of the COVID-19 response

The International Summer Course on the Rights of the Child (ISCRC) is a forum for professionals who work with children. This event promotes better professional practices and promotes children's rights as fundamental rights of human beings pursuant to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). It also aims to encourage decision makers to develop public policies and programs to protect the best interests of the child and improve the quality of education in New Brunswick, across Canada, and around the world. The 10th edition of the Summer Course will focus on a collective reflection on the issues and problems raised by the COVID-19 pandemic with regard to the rights of the child.

Each State Party to the UNCRC is legally bound to respect, fulfill and protect the rights of each child as enshrined in the Convention. According to Article 4, States, « shall undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative, and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognized in the present Convention ».

As the first international legally binding text for signatory states in this area, it is also the most widely ratified human rights treaties in history. The Convention responds to the need to grant children specific rights due to their vulnerability and dependence. In addition, the current situation of a global pandemic makes children and young people particularly vulnerable. UNICEF Canada has said that this « is not only a health crisis, but also a children's crisis (...) There is a perception among many that because children are less likely to experience severe symptoms of COVID-19, they are less affected. Canada's children and youth are not the generation that is most likely to fall ill from Coronavirus, but they will carry the impact the longest ».¹

Decisions currently made in response to COVID-19 could indeed have lifelong impacts on children and their rights. Article 3 of the UNCRC establishes that the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. More than ever in times of crisis where decisions made in response to COVID-19 could have lifelong impacts on children and their rights, the best interests of the child must come first in decision-making. This is also the thrust of recent direction provided by the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

In a context where children and youth are particularly vulnerable, what policies and strategies should be developed and implemented to enable the exercise of the right to education for our children? What are the mechanisms that make it possible, in the formal or informal sectors, to offer an educational response in crisis situations to meet the physical, psychological, cognitive and affective needs of children? What are the standards and practices that promote quality education? The Organizing Committee invites professionals from around the world and from Canada to share initiatives or thoughts that seek answers to these questions in order to be able to discuss during this special edition of the Summer Course.

The scientific committee and organizers of this course invite researchers and professionals to propose sessions that include conceptual analysis, practical methods and/or policy approaches that deal with this year's theme. This multidisciplinary discussion forum on children's rights is envisaged in its usual format of conferences held at the University of Moncton, Canada, but the possibility of an online hybrid form of the Summer Course remains open depending on of the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic. Professionals and researchers are invited to talk about the following themes:

¹ UNICEF Canada "Canada's Kids in Lockdown: Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Well-being of Children in Canada" (May 2020) at 1, online (pdf): One Youth <oneyouth.unicef.ca/sites/default/files/2020-05/COVID19_RapidImpactAssessment_UNICEF%20Canada_May2020.pdf>.

THEMES

1: Civil and political rights of children during a pandemic

Among others, the UNCRC guarantees the civil and political rights of children in articles 12, 13 and 15, offering them the right to freedom of expression, the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas, as well as the right to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly.

Faced with the isolation and quarantine measures put in place to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, the exercise of these rights by children has been limited, or even prevented, in particular by measures banning assembly, restricted access to information or problems of disinformation or incorrect information.

And yet, children and youth still manage to be on the front lines and make their voices heard in the demand for their civil and political rights, as shown by the many initiatives carried out during this period of pandemic regarding causes defended by Greta Thunberg and the Black Lives Matter movement, among others.

Furthermore, internet use has grown significantly during this pandemic period, increasing the risks regarding privacy and safety of children and youth on the internet. These risks include online sexual exploitation, cyberbullying, online risk-taking behaviour, [exposure to] potentially harmful content, inappropriate collection, use and sharing of data, and limited child safeguarding online².

What protection is offered to children? Have new measures and initiatives emerged from the crisis to improve this protection?

Proposals outlining the situation of children's civil and political rights facing the crisis in different countries around the world in these areas, or in related areas not mentioned, are particularly requested.

2: Children's rights relating to family environment during a pandemic

The rights of the child relating to family environment during a pandemic may, for example, refer to children living apart from their families, or to the increased risks of neglect or abuse towards them during this period.

Article 9 of the UNCRC guarantees to the child who is separated from one or both parents the right to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child's best interests. The measures taken to contain the pandemic undoubtedly run up against this right offered by the Convention.

The crisis context also increases the possibility for the child to be separated from his parents because of the hospitalization of the child and/or his parents, because of quarantine or isolation measures when the child does not live with his parents or because of border closures/travel restrictions, ... The child's family environment then becomes significantly damaged at a time when the child's best interests would suggest that his family environment should be a privileged source of security and stability.

Article 19 of the UNCRC protects the child from a potentially hostile family environment by offering child protection against all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse. However, quarantine and isolation measures constitute a particularly worrying risk for children who may be confronted with violence, knowing that children are more likely to suffer maltreatment from their caregivers than from anyone else³.

² UNICEF, "Covid-19 and its implications for protecting children online" (15 April 2020) at 1-2, online (pdf): reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/COVID-19%20and%20its%20Implications%20for%20Protecting%20Children%20Online.pdf.

³ UN, "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on children," *supra* note **Error! Bookmark not defined.** at 10.

Thus, the increase in time spent at home, alcohol consumption during the pandemic, stress, and the difficulty for children to access help services during this time of crisis is just as many factors likely to make the child's family environment a potentially harmful one.

Proposals dealing with these different themes and reporting on the efforts of States to reconcile these rights with the health measures of the pandemic are specifically welcome.

3: Balance between right to education and health risks

This section focuses on the balance between the right to education and the health risks of children faced with decisions to close / open schools.

Global Covid-19 pandemic has caused the closure of schools in 191 countries⁴, and at least 1.5 billion students and 63 million primary and secondary teachers are affected by these disturbances.

Currently, schools' reopening is still the subject of much debate as to the courses of action and the concrete steps to be taken to resume school activities. The guidelines of the Committee on the Rights of the Child put the best interests of the child first.

Do the best interests of the child lie in a return to school to obtain an education, along with special accommodations if the child is experiencing academic failure or learning difficulties, or in the need for him to maintain contact with all the members of his family in times of crisis, and to protect his health and that of those around him?

Also, by the time of the Summer Course in August 2021, a school year will have ended, which will allow participants to offer a first assessment of the effectiveness and relevance of responses to the crisis.

Papers that advance thinking about global challenges and the balance of children's rights in this context are encouraged.

4: The rights of minorities and populations of vulnerable children during a pandemic

This period of crisis has revealed with more intensity the inequalities faced by children from minority groups or populations of vulnerable children.

Poverty, economic instability and social exclusion are all factors that can place children in a vulnerable situation. The number of individuals and families affected by job loss, unemployment, and the resulting financial backlash has increased dramatically as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting closure of many businesses and organizations. As a consequence, many children are confronted with a new situation of vulnerability or the worsening of their already precarious situation, especially as the closure of schools may have resulted, for many of them, in the loss of a vital safety net of nutrition, protection and emotional support.

These risks are increased in the case of children from certain minorities, indigenous children, refugee children, migrants and street children, among others.

Another population of vulnerable children affected by the crisis is the one of children and young people deprived of their liberty, detained, imprisoned, or placed in a private or public childcare establishment or in a rehabilitation centre.

These children and youths face many risks due to the current health crisis. Social distancing can be extremely difficult, if not impossible, in these settings, thus putting children and youth at a higher risk of infection. The already reduced access of these populations to health and hygiene care, legal services, education, and their relatives are also further restricted by the pandemic and the measures taken to stem it.

The Organizing Committee invites professionals from around the world to share initiatives or reflections that seek to respond to these concerns.

⁴ UNESCO, « Fracture numérique préoccupante dans l'enseignement à distance », <https://fr.unesco.org/news/fracture-numerique-preoccupante-lenseignement-distance>, consulté le 6 septembre 2020.

5: Various Themes

The above-noted themes are not exhaustive. Other papers and conference proposals will be considered if they align with the main subject of the Course.

TYPES OF PRESENTATION

Please specify the presentation format in your application.

There are four formats available:

- **Round tables:** 1- to 3-hour presentation by several presenters. Please submit a title, a summary of the presentation, the names of the other participants, and the time needed, accounting for periods of discussion and the number of participants.
- **Oral presentation:** The length of each presentation (from 20 to 30 minutes) is determined by the Organizing Committee depending on the number of presentations received.
- **Workshop:** Workshops (from 60 to 90 minutes) can be about techniques for using a tool, an approach or a practice. Workshops are more effective with a smaller group of participants.
- **Poster Communication:** This format provides the opportunity to present the results of research, an approach, a tool or a practice in the form of a poster. Poster dimensions should not exceed 60 cm x 120 cm (2 ft x 4 ft) in portrait format or 120 cm x 60 cm (4 ft x 2 ft) in landscape format. You must submit the abstract of your poster communication.

The Committee will do its best to respect your choice of formats but reserves the right to use a different format if necessary.

SUBMISSION METHOD AND POSSIBILITIES OF PUBLICATION

Anyone who wants to submit a proposal for an oral presentation in one of the two official languages of New Brunswick and Canada is invited to do so.

Your presentation proposal must respect the following criteria in order to be reviewed:

The summary can be no longer than half a page in length. Please specify which of the themes you will address, the presentation format, and the title.

Your proposal must include a small biography (250 words maximum) and a picture of you, sent as two separate Word or PDF documents. In order to maintain anonymity, your proposal (Word or PDF) must not contain anything that could identify you personally.

Please specify if you want to be published in the *Revue de l'Université de Moncton*. The rules for publication will be sent to authors who are confirmed as participants.

Please submit your proposal **before February 15, 2020**. The Organizing Committee will assess proposals and evaluate their ability to enrich the dialogue. You will receive a response to your proposal sometime in March 2021.