



# Principles to Practice:

Applying the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 'Reconnect', a Street Outreach Service in British Columbia, Canada  
1988-2002

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This report examines the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) through the 'Reconnect' program in British Columbia, highlighting the gaps in awareness and adoption across different levels of government and community organizations. It identifies the lack of uniform support for CRC principles within provincial and municipal systems, despite federal endorsement. The document emphasizes the need for increased local and individual awareness to truly embed CRC principles in services impacting children's lives and outlines challenges in achieving coordinated support for programs like 'Reconnect' that aim to operationalize these global standards at a community level.

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"The CRC is not just a legal document but a moral framework to guide our treatment of children—it is a reminder that every child deserves a childhood, an education, a future." Kailash Satyarthi, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

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## Preamble

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"The Convention on the Rights of the Child is a clear and comprehensive commitment by the international community to enhance the protection and well-being of all children everywhere." Carol Bellamy, Former Executive Director of UNICEF

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We are undeniably bound by the CRC (1989) and even if our governments are in a restrictive economic context. Youth and children have the right to have their basic needs met before business development and new ferries.

The CRC serves as an essential benchmark against which provincial practices can be evaluated and it seem logical to use it as a

measuring stick to hold up to our provincial practices.

'Reconnect', a street-outreach program based in British Columbia, Canada, leveraged the CRC both directly and indirectly to facilitate youth access to necessary services.



## Introduction

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"History will judge us by the difference we make in the everyday lives of children." Nelson Mandela

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The desire of any country to protect its children could be said to measure the level of national compassion. Hopefully all countries, governments and peoples recognize the youngest members of our populations as our greatest resource. It doesn't always appear to be the case but

what can't be denied is that there are some international priorities and expectations that have been designed and, to a limited degree, implemented.

The United Nations has developed a suite of tools and frameworks aimed at upholding respect for the rights of children and all individuals globally. The foremost among these, designed specifically for the safeguarding of children's rights, is the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Introduced during the 1989 United Nations General Assembly, the CRC is founded on four core principles: non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, rights to survival and development, and participation. This report endeavours to demonstrate how the Reconnect program has embraced and embodied these principles through its operational mandate.

In this analysis, I will explore the evolution of human rights, detailing the development of the UN's International Covenants and Conventions, and elucidate the four cardinal principles of the CRC. Subsequently, I will present an overview of the Reconnect Program, offer some historical context, and introduce the Reconnect Field Guide. Each principle of the CRC will be discussed in turn, illustrated through their applications as found in the Field Guide.

To conclude, I will reflect on the challenges and obstacles that impede the complete realization of the CRC at the grassroots level, offering insights into the practical complexities of implementing such a global standard in local contexts.



## Overview of Human Rights Movement

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"There is no trust more sacred than the one the world holds with children. There is no duty more important than ensuring that their rights are respected, that their welfare is protected, that their lives are free from fear and want and that they can grow up in peace." Kofi Annan, Former Secretary-General of the United Nations

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The origins of the human rights movement are often linked to the establishment of the United Nations in 1945. This institution's early priorities were encapsulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was proclaimed in December 1948. Member states endorsed the principle that "recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and unalienable rights of all

members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world."

To realize this philosophical goal, two pivotal legal instruments were crafted and adopted in 1966: The International Covenants on Human Rights.

The first of these, the **Covenant on Civil and Political Rights**, focuses on safeguarding individual rights, while the second, the **Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights**, is geared towards upholding collective rights. Together, these Covenants form the philosophical and legal bedrock for the protection of human rights globally.

Since 1966, four Conventions have been developed to complement and flesh out the Covenants. These Conventions are aimed at specific groups in need of protection and consideration. These Conventions are: International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of **Racial Discrimination**, (December 1965); International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of **Discrimination Against Women**, (December 1979); Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or **Degrading Treatment or Punishment**, (December 1984), and the UN Convention on the **Rights of the Child**, (November 1989). These Conventions are international treaties ratified by the required number of member states.

By agreeing to an international set of principles and priorities, member states commit to the primary goal equal rights for all individuals.

The **UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child** was unanimously adopted by the UN  
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General Assembly in 1989, and quickly became the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history. The primary principle of “first call for children” is the basis of the CRC. The principle states that the essential needs of children must be given the highest priority in allocating resources at international, national, community and familial levels. It also implies that the care of children should not be left to charity organizations, that children are full citizens of their countries and are entitled to full consideration by governments, and that governments are obligated to prioritize children’s needs in making decisions about national resource allocations and agendas.

When the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child met for the first time, they identified the four general principles of the CRC as being the guidelines that individual states should use when implementing the Convention.

These four principles are formulated in articles 2, 3, 6 and 12. All four principles contribute to the general philosophy that children have the same value as adults, and are equally important. The Convention also outlines areas where children are deserving of special protection befitting their state of development and level of vulnerability. The general principles are therefore an attempt to both recognize children’s rights, and provide for their protection.



## Overview of Reconnect

Reconnect is/was a front line outreach program designed to be a province-wide network of street workers in British Columbia, Canada. The Program was started in 1988, and there are then 34 Programs in a variety of communities across B.C. The original motivation for

Reconnect was to repatriate youth who had accumulated on the streets of Vancouver following Expo86. The goals of the program were to identify youth new to the street and assist them to “reconnect” to their families, communities and culture.

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"Street outreach workers provide people experiencing homelessness with multiple opportunities to say 'no' and make repeated offers of assistance as necessary throughout the engagement process" (USICH).

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## The Reconnect Field Guide

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At the beginning, there were guiding the Reconnect Program. In 1995, with the Reconnect Field Guide was written by the Provincial Steering Committee, including members from the Ministry of Children and Families and service providers.

The Field Guide serves as a philosophical framework for the street-level work conducted by Reconnect Programs and is a concise 10-page document that outlines the Program’s legislative authority, provides an overview and objectives, defines its mandate and guiding principles, describes the program, identifies high-risk youth, sets priorities for case management and Aboriginal youth, and clarifies the roles and expectations of workers, contract holders, MCF staff, and the Ministry of Children and Families.

The Reconnect Field Guide is distributed to all staff as part of their orientation to ensure they understand and adhere to its directives. Notably, the Field Guide, in its Guiding Principles of Services section, states:

*“In accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Canada and British Columbia are signatories, all children and youth have a right to live free from and be protected from emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, and neglect.”* (Field Guide, pg.3)

This explicit acknowledgment highlights how deeply the Field Guide philosophically aligned with the principles of the CRC, underscoring its commitment to protecting and upholding the rights of children and youth.



## The General Principles of the CRC and Corresponding Sections of the Field Guide

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### Article 2, Non-Discrimination

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"States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parents' or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status."

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This principle means that all children are entitled to consideration under the Convention. The principle of non-discriminations is addressed in the Reconnect Field Guide in several places.

The Field Guides address the basic considerations of differences when it states that;  
*" (intervention strategies will), respect cultural, religious, and regional differences... (and be) provided to aboriginal youth in a manner that recognizes their culture, heritage and traditions".*(Guiding Principles of Service, section 3 )

Additionally the Field Guide stipulates the rights of youth of all sexual orientations:

*"40% or more of youth become street involved resulting from family or*

*community rejection/discrimination. The two primary bases for discrimination include aboriginal/identifiable ethnic minority and sexual orientation (e.g., lesbian, gay, or bisexual). These youth - and those living with HIV or AIDS - have the right to services delivered in a non-judgmental, accepting manner. They have the right to choose not to be open about their sexual identity."* (Guiding Principles of Service, section 7)

This section adds the option for youth to retain confidentiality about their orientation. Additionally it is interesting to note that the B.C. Family Child and Services Act, acknowledges the recognition of youth who "identify themselves as aboriginal", not just those who are have official status.

The Field Guide further develops the guidelines in dealing with aboriginal youth when it says;

*"Reconnect programs will liaise with Bands, Tribal Councils and other Native organizations...to ensure appropriate planning and service delivery for street-involved Native youth. There should be a special sensitivity to familial, social, spiritual and cultural heritage."(Additional Services, Aboriginal Youth)*

These three sections of the Field Guide set out the expectation that Reconnect will deliver services that are equitable and fair and will consider the needs of youth who may be discriminated.

These sections specifically identify two groups, aboriginal and youth of alternative sexual orientation, but does not identify all the possible groups as outline in Article 2.

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## Article 3, Best Interests Of The Child

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"In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration."

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Article 3 of the CRC emphasizes the importance of considering children's interests in all environments that impact their lives, acknowledging that today's world, which we are shaping, will be their inheritance.

The Field Guide encapsulates this principle as follows:

*"Intervention strategies will promote the best interests and well-being of children and youth, and will be provided, wherever possible, on the basis of mutual consent, follow the least restrictive or disruptive course available and appropriate, respect the child and youth's needs for continuity and stability, and consider the individual child/youth's developmental*

*differences" (Guiding Principles of Services, section 3).*

Further expanding on this principle, Article 3.3 of the CRC mandates that states ensure the services provided to children are responsible and accountable. It specifically requires:

*"States Parties shall ensure that the institutions, services, and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children shall conform with the standards established by competent authorities, particularly in the areas of safety, health, the number and suitability of their staff, as well as competent supervision." (CRC article 3.3).*



This principle clearly demands the provision of competent services and service providers to meet the children's needs. It specifies that the interests of the child should direct the allocation and establishment of services, not merely when they align with what is already available.

The Field Guide aligns with the CRC's expectations by clearly outlining expectations for service assessment, design, and delivery. It states:

*"Through the use of street workers, youth care workers, and social workers, street youth are identified and offered counselling, core services, resources, and/or referrals that are compatible with their needs and available in their communities."* (Overview, paragraph 2)

Moreover, the Field Guide emphasizes that:

*"Services must be community-based, coordinated, and integrated, readily available, and accessible when and where youth need them."* (Guiding Principles of Service, section 5)

The Guide also delineates the nature and attitudes of service providers:

*"A helping relationship of concern, trust, mutual respect, and confidence with a youth is most effective when it is non-*

*judgmental and non-authoritarian, established on the basis of voluntary participation by the youth. Ideally, it will be provided by the consistent involvement of an appropriately designated worker. All interventions with or on behalf of a youth will be accountable and documented."* (Guiding Principles of Service, section 6)

Furthermore, the Field Guide insists on the importance of advocacy as a duty for all parties involved (Mandate, paragraph 2) and specifies the level of coordination needed to effectively meet the youth's needs through a case management model (Additional Services, Case Management).

The Guide proposes ways to better coordinate efforts to serve youth in community and regional areas (Additional Services, Case Management, section 3) and ensures that Reconnect personnel are properly qualified (Additional Services, Criminal Record Checks).

These guidelines support the individual programs to provide responsible programs but also to remain responsive to the evolving needs of youth, ensuring that services are appropriate, suitable, and competently administered.

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"The CRC is a promise to children that their rights will not be ignored, overlooked, or violated but will be respected and protected." Audrey Hepburn, UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador

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## Article 6, The Right To Survival And Development

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"States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child."(art. 6:2)

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The principle most directly related to children's economic and social rights is formulated in the right-to-life article. The article goes further than just granting children the right not to be killed, it includes the right to survival and to development:

This article goes further and defines the right to develop. The term "develop" relates to the individual child and should be interpreted in a broad sense. It adds a qualitative dimension to the article. Not just physical health but also mental, emotional, cognitive, social and cultural development. Article 6 is seen as the platform for all other articles in the Convention dealing with economic, social and cultural rights for children.

As the article was written to be applied at the broadest sense in the CRC, so too the Field Guide, attempts to address the needs of young people in the broadest sense. One of the objectives to the Program is stated as an expectations that Reconnect:

*".. provide relevant prevention, rehabilitation and support services to "at-risk" and "high-risk" street-involved children and youth to age 19 years; and to educate and facilitate alternatives that promote a safe, healthy lifestyle."*  
(Objectives, paragraph 1)

The Field Guide attempts to further develop this idea when it outlines:  
*"Strategies to protect street-involved children and youth will be based on risk reduction, constructive alternatives and practical assistance tailored to the needs of an individual youth based on what is effective, or likely to be effective, and appropriate in the circumstances."*  
(Guiding Principles of Service, section 2)

The Field Guide attempts to specify the youth in need of support and services in the section "Defining At-Risk and High Risk Youth", and the Appendix, which list risk factors associated with street youth; identifying that is harmful to youth, the Field Guide implies practices that will support youth to grow and thrive.

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"The real measure of a nation's standing is how well it attends to its children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies into which they are born." Graça Machel, Expert on Child Welfare

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## Article 12, The Views Of The Child

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"States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."

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The right to be heard is pivotal to the implementation of the Reconnect Program. As opposed to social workers, parents, and teachers, the aim of Reconnect workers is to be a non-authoritarian witness in the youth's life. Able to provide support and assistance, regardless of the youth's "compliance" with other's expectations of them in their lives. Often youth are unwilling to express their ideas and concerns to the authority figures in their lives based on past experiences. Reconnect workers are directed by the Field Guide to be cognizant of youth's voices and ensure that they are heard.

*"All children and youth are entitled to be informed of their rights, and to be treated with dignity and respect. They must be involved in and advised of all decisions that affect their lives. Youth have the right to accept or refuse services."* (Guiding Principles of Service, section 3)

and,

*"In developing the service plan, Reconnect and social workers ... will consult with and involve the youth in all decisions."* (Case Management, section 2)

and,

*"The youth must be involved in this decision, and...given the option to choose culturally appropriate services."*  
(Aboriginal Youth)

and,

*"The social worker in collaboration with Reconnect agency staff will involve Reconnect youth clients,... in all decisions and case service plans. "* (Additional Services, Repatriation)

These sections of the Field Guide make clear the need to respect youth's voices. By definition, the youth assisted by Reconnect are system-resistant. Often they have already experienced the government care systems and have not felt supported by their care givers.

These young people have experienced powerlessness and the sense that their concerns and views are not valued. Therefore the need for Reconnect to deliberately include youth's input, even if not "seen" as relevant by the adult oriented procedures that dominate our social service system, is doubly important.



## Conclusion

The implementation of CRC principles by the Reconnect Field Guide demonstrates how frontline programs can apply the CRC, yet several barriers hinder this approach from becoming widespread.

### **Awareness of the CRC**

While senior levels of the Canadian government, as evidenced by hosting the Winnipeg Conference on War Affected Children and the efforts of Senator Landon Pearson and Hon. Lloyd Axworthy, support the CRC, provincial, municipal, and community entities seem largely unaware of the Convention. It is rarely referenced or used as a foundation for program development, with many ministry workers unfamiliar with the CRC or unable to discuss its implications.

### **Agreement on the Universality of the CRC**

Some communities do not recognize the CRC as ratified by their governments, as shown by resistance to a UN-sponsored CRC questionnaire distributed among Canadian students in 1999. For example, the Abbotsford School Board, among others, prevented their community's youth from participating, reflecting a broader denial about the CRC's ratification and their obligations toward children under the Convention.

### **Lack of Government Commitment to Support CRC-Implementing Services**

Although the Reconnect Field Guide was crafted and disseminated, it has never received official support from the Province of British Columbia. Despite being active since 1988 and the distribution of the Field Guide beginning in 1995, the Reconnect program suffers from a lack of coordinated support from the Ministry of Children and Families, with no provincially coordinated priorities or direction as of this report.

While the Reconnect Field Guide may align with the CRC's guiding principles, this alignment does not reflect a broader, universal acceptance and implementation of the Convention. Until the CRC is recognized and prioritized at local and individual levels, it is doubtful that the principles championed by the CRC and mirrored in the Reconnect Field Guide will significantly impact children's lives.





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