2025 Child Voice Project Report

October 2026

Children and Youth Planning Table
of Waterloo Region

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Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that the land on which the Child Voice Project took place is the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, Anishnaabe, and Chonnonton Peoples. We honour and respect the history, languages and culture of the diverse Indigenous peoples who call this territory home and who have been stewards to the land since time immemorial.

Table of Contents

Overview 4

What we did in 2025 5

How We Engaged Children 6

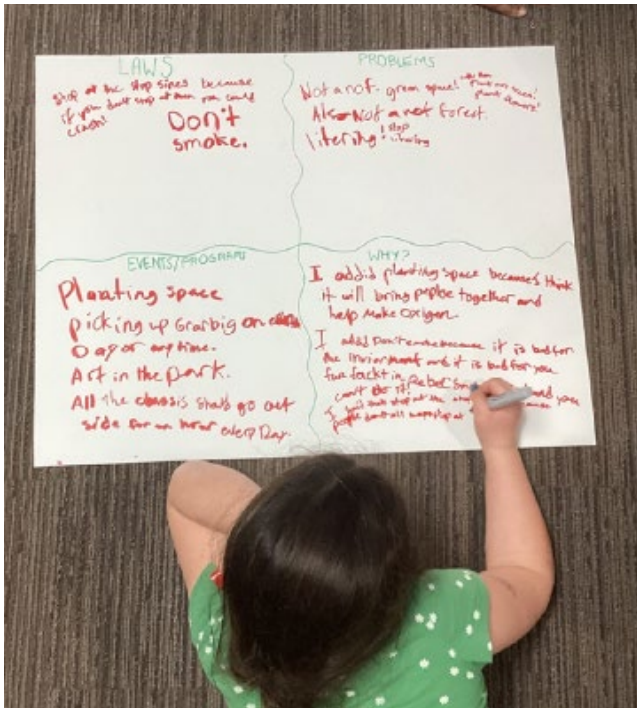
What Children Told Us 7

Overview

This report brings together what we heard from children during the 2025 **Child Voice Project** (CVP). It captures what we learned from all sessions into one clear and complete summary. The report explains what we did, what children shared, what it means, and where we go next. We also included a "what this could look like" statement to help service providers and decision makers identify potential ways to action children's requests.

The **Child Voice Project** (CVP) is CYPT's play-based project that creates space for children aged 8 and younger to share their ideas about their lives and communities. We believe that children are capable, thoughtful, and able to contribute to conversations that affect them. They provide unique insights that make our community better and if we don't hear from them, our consultations and strategies are incomplete.

The project is designed to listen to children, share what they tell us, use their ideas to guide action, and show that **children can meaningfully contribute to real conversations about their communities.** In 2025, the work focused on what a community that cares for children could look like. Some youth in the community helped us break this down into four topics:



- Allyship
- Community
- Equity
- Face-to-face connections

These topics guided the activities while allowing children to speak freely.

What we did in 2025

Between April and November 2025, we worked with child participation experts from Toronto Metropolitan University's International & Canadian Child Rights Partnership (ICCRP) and Carleton University's Landon Pearson Resource Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children's Rights (LPC). We also partnered with five community organizations across Waterloo Region:

- Adventure4Change
- Camino Wellbeing + Mental Health
- City of Kitchener
- Greenway-Chaplin Community Centre
- RisingOaks Early Learning Ontario

Using the LPC's 2025 framework "Building Our Communities of Care," we hosted six events/sessions and **heard from 75 children** about what a community that cares for children could look like in Waterloo Region. An important strength of this approach was the involvement of **young people and Early Childhood Educators as facilitators,** which supported children's comfort, participation, and openness during the sessions.

Participation was voluntary. Parents gave formal consent, and children agreed to participate through an informed ascent process. We reminded children they could pause or step away at any time.

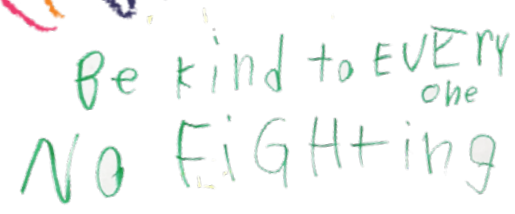
How We Engaged Children

We used a play-based format designed by youth for children aged 6-8. Children participated through singing, watching a child-rights video, games, drawing, and both group and individual activities. This approach did not rely only on talking. Children could share their ideas in different ways, such as writing, drawing and colouring, which helped include those with different strengths and comfort levels.

Facilitators guided the activities without leading children's responses. Questions were open-ended and gave children room to respond, which allowed them to share their own ideas in their own words.

The approach was simple, safe, and easy to follow. It respected children's rights and abilities, while the consistent structure across all sessions helped us compare what children said in different locations and still allowed space for local context.

Children's responses were captured and reviewed to identify common themes. This helped us understand not only what individual children said, but also the patterns shared across groups. Overall, the approach allowed us to gather children's ideas in a clear and careful way, while still leaving room to learn and improve.



What Children Told Us (Findings)

Across all sessions, children shared clear and consistent ideas about building communities of care. The top things children talked about were:

- Safety
- Kindness
- Inclusion
- Respect
- Belonging
- Fairness

These ideas came up repeatedly across different activities and locations.

Children also spoke about friendship, participation, food, and helping others. They were not only focused on themselves. They talked about their peers, families, significant adults, and their communities. This shows that children understand what it means to care for others and be part of something bigger.

Safety in Everyday Places

Children spoke clearly about safety in their daily lives. Many of their ideas focused on roads, crossings, and neighbourhood spaces where they spend time.

"Not enough crossing guards so you have to wait a really long time and it's scary."

What children are asking for: *"Lower the speed limit and add more stop signs".*

What this could look like: Make places where children walk and play safer by adding crossing support, slowing traffic, and reducing the perceived danger.

Belonging, Kindness, and Not Feeling Lonely

Children described community through relationships. They spoke about how people treat one another and how that affects how they feel.

"When you see people being lonely you should be with them so maybe when you are lonely they will be with you."

"Even if you don't know someone, [it] does not mean you can't be friends."

"Friends make us not feel lonely."

What children are asking for: *"Help someone who is lonely."*

What this could look like: Create more chances for children to connect through shared play, welcoming spaces, and activities that help them make friends and include others.

Fairness and Meeting Different Needs

Children showed a strong understanding of fairness. They explained that fairness means people getting what they need.

"Everyone has to have $1 so they can buy something."

"Everyone gets equal food and water."

What children are asking for: *"Make sure everyone gets what they need."*

What this could look like: Design programs and spaces so all children can take part, no matter their needs.

Helping and Standing Up for Others

Children talked about helping others in simple but meaningful ways. They shared how to respond when someone is left out or treated unfairly, and how they would use their unique abilities or "superpowers" to help others.

"If someone is bullying somebody else, like why don't you just go over and say hey, would you like to play with me to the person getting bullied."

What children are asking for: "Ask how you can support someone."

What this could look like: Teach simple skills for friendship, support, and stopping bullying in programs for children and families.

A Community Designed for Children

Children imagined communities that are fun, safe, and fair for everyone, not just children. They shared ideas about both spaces and rules. They named libraries, playgrounds, water play, green spaces, entertainment, and healthy or affordable food. While designing communities, one child explained, *"Because we think it will have something for everyone."*

Children also talked about rules that help keep people safe and cared for. They enjoyed sharing ideas about how communities should work and connected rules to fairness, safety, and well-being. One child said, *"I liked being able to make my own laws."*

What children are asking for: *"Fruit trees so everyone can have food."*

"More outdoor space to play."

What this could look like: Support safe, child-friendly spaces and make it easier for children and families to access food, play, and learning.

What This Means (Insights About Engaging Children)

- Children see community through people. They spoke about their peers, families, and adults in their communities. Their responses showed how strongly relationships shape the way children understand their world.
- Children raised similar issues to what youth and adults care about, including safety, equity, and well-being. They shared thoughtful ideas about how communities should work and how people should treat each other. Their responses showed that children want to contribute to conversations about their communities.
- Children moved from ideas to action. They did not only name problems, but they also offered solutions. This shows they are thoughtful and capable contributors.
- This work clearly demonstrates child competence. Children reflected on their experiences, explained their ideas clearly, and contributed thoughtful suggestions throughout the sessions.
- Listening directly to children matters because they offer perspectives on their lives and communities that cannot be fully understood through adults alone. When only adults speak about children's experiences,

important insights can be filtered, softened, or missed altogether.

What We Learned About the Process

- Play-based approaches supported engagement and comfort. Children shared more when activities were interactive and varied.
- Providing different ways to participate helped include all children. The presence of young facilitators, Early Childhood Educators, and familiar activities supported trust and connection.
- We also learned what to improve. Planning needs to start earlier. Partners benefit from seeing how sessions work, actual demonstration should help. Ways questions are asked and notes taken need to be more consistent. Sessions need enough time to avoid feeling rushed.

Reflections and Conclusion

- This work shifted how we think about children's voices. At the start, we set out to confirm that children can contribute to conversations about their well-being and community. The results confirmed this clearly.
- Children did not only speak about

themselves. They spoke about their communities, about safety, fairness, and care. These are not small ideas. They are the same issues adults work to address.
- This shows that **children are already thinking about these topics. The gap is therefore not as much in their ability, but in whether we create space to hear them.**
- This work also reminded us to step back and listen. Not to lead too much. Not to assume. As one child said, **"Sit down and listen."**

Next Steps

- CYPT will continue to build on this work and deepen our understanding of children's well-being. The lessons from this phase will help guide future Child Voice Project activities and strengthen how children's perspectives inform our work.
- We will connect this work more clearly to key areas of child well-being through UNICEF Canada's Index of Child and Youth Well-being.
- We will create more activities and improve how we ask questions to help more children participate in different ways.
- We will create more opportunities for a wider range of children to share their ideas.
- We will put more focus on sharing back what we heard and showing children how their ideas were used.

Further Considerations

- This work points to an opportunity for further exploration of how children's experiences and responses may differ across communities and populations, including by race and other identities, to support more inclusive and relevant approaches.
- Researchers, community organizations, service providers, educators, and public sector partners may wish to build on these findings through further exploration of these differences and what they mean for inclusive engagement and program design.

Appendix: All Quotes from Child Participants

At the Children and Youth Planning Table of Waterloo Region, we are committed to centering the voices of children and youth. In this section we compiled all the unfiltered quotes from participants and present them in the children's own words. We know that the process of knowledge mobilization risks distancing the final product from the original voices and intentions of the children themselves. This section offers a chance to hear directly from the participants without additional framing or interpretation.

Sub-theme 1: Equity

- "Use talent to protect others."
- "Equity means using your strengths to make things fair."
- Friend 1: "Girls are more flexible." Friend 2: "Boys can too."
- "In community, it is important to talk to each other."
- "My cousin let my family stay in their basement when we first came to Canada."
- "When my friend was hurt, I brought them inside to get ice."
- "Helping others when they need help."
- "My teacher helps me in math."

Sub-theme 2: Community

- "In community, it is important to talk to each other."
- "Friends make us not feel lonely."
- "Community is not just the people around you, your friends and family."
- "Neighbours, so you're not lonely when you walk outside."
- "Friends, so you can grow up with other people and not feel lonely."
- "Be you, be different; everyone is different in the community. If we were all the same no one would have special personalities."
- "Leaders are important for giving instructions."
- "After school we have crossing guards like everywhere so they help stop, but during daytime, some people don't stop at the stop sign."
- "Lower the speed limit and add more stop signs, "people don't like to stop at the stop sign."
- "Not enough crossing guards so you can cross streets and you have to wait a really

long time and it's scary."

- "If someone is bullying somebody else, like why don't you just go over and say hey, would you like to play with me to the person getting bullied."
- "You can tell them to stop and if they don't stop, you can walk away. If they follow you then you can tell the teacher cause you have to look for solutions before you tell the teacher."
- "A lot of people smoke in my neighborhood and it's bad for them and the community. It's bad for plants and you, when you breathe it in, it's not good for your lungs."
- "They banned smoking in Quebec, that should be a law here too."

Sub-theme 3: Face-to-Face Connections

- "Shine bright."
- "You are who you are."
- "I learnt that we should be a connection and work together and that I should care about others."
- "I learned that I have to give good reasons and not just say things because then no one will listen to me or believe me."

Sub-theme 4: Allyship

- "I want someone to support me so that I know that I am okay."
- "Someone to answer the question before me so that I know I won't be judged."
- "I would want to answer the question with someone also answering it with me."
- "Ask something you can do to support them."
- "I don't want people staring at me when I ask a question so I will ask it in the hallway and I know my teacher will help me, because people staring makes me feel weird."
- "I want to see more BBQ or gardens and field trips at school or fundraisers" because "we can get things done when we work together like kids and grown-ups."
- "Allyship is people caring about me."
- "Teamwork makes the dream work."
- "Working together makes the world a good place. If people on earth weren't allies, the world would be boring."
- "Allyship is not only about friendship it's about caring and learning about other people and how important teamwork is."
- "Caring about others/ teamwork makes dream work."
- "Being nice to people, even if you don't know them."
- "Teamwork is explaining it together and learning together."
- "Without people the world would be boring."
- "Not laughing at people."
- "Listening to do the work."
- "Be kind."
- "It will be more easier for them to do the work if I describe and that's helping."

CHILDREN'S VOICES MATTER

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