

**Estelle Alexander**  
**YCRH OP-ED**

### **Decisions Are Being Made About Us Without Us**

The experiences, circumstances, and outcomes throughout a child's upbringing help create a strong foundation for the rest of their lives. The earliest years of life are supposed to provide a child with the support, knowledge, and resources to prepare them for their futures. Childhood experiences can have the most influential impact on one's overall vitality and well-being.

In the Fall of 2021, I began working on my health promotion honours thesis under the supervision of Dr. Sara Kirk at Dalhousie University. Dr. Kirk and her colleagues from the Department of Pediatrics and Healthy Populations Institute produced a data profile on child and youth well-being in Nova Scotia called *One Chance to Be a Child*. The report focuses on current efforts to measure well-being in children and assess what actions are needed to catalyze change for future generations to eliminate child poverty and other threats to child health and well-being. For my thesis research, I explored youth perspectives by inviting feedback from young people on the *One Chance to Be A Child* data profile and its recommendations for child and youth well-being in Nova Scotia. This qualitative study used guided interview questions to examine feedback from a virtual focus group of ten diverse participants aged 11-18 years. I wanted to learn more about how young people interpreted, understood and related to the information provided in the *One Chance to Be A Child* data profile and through assessing how the data profile might promote their health and well-being now and in the future.

This research study produced genuinely authentic and raw data that helped capture the reality of child and youth well-being in Nova Scotia. I heard loud and clear that there needs to be stronger prioritization of child and youth well-being by the provincial government. Rather than observing how the situation for children and youth is only worsening, there is a significant push to see these plans translated into long-lasting actions that end with practical and positive results. Nova Scotia has yet to prioritize the needs of child and youth populations, having not yet met the key directions outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Some of the goals that are yet to be met include providing resources and support for children and youth to help them succeed in adulthood. The supports and resources currently used in the decision-making process are causing significant implications for the next generation of Nova Scotians, such as causing high child poverty rates, food insecurities, poor mental health, and inadequate access to education, social services and healthcare. Children and youth represent the future of Nova Scotia, yet too many of them are not experiencing some degree of well-being. The health and well-being of children are not being prioritized enough, not just in Nova Scotia but across all of Canada as well.

My study demonstrated how the *One Chance* data profile resonated with the lived experiences of young people in Nova Scotia. It ignited a discussion regarding future recommendations on eliminating child poverty and promoting health and well-being by creating

agenda-setting plans to see the proposed recommendations enacted into legislation and community action. It illustrated that young people want to be involved in decisions being made about their lives and be consulted by governments and stakeholders through mechanisms like youth-led panels.

Throughout the focus group, there was one common theme: they all were passionate about and eager for everyone to hear their voices. Despite their varying ages and diverse backgrounds, they all agreed that if they could emphasize one message, it would be that they just want to be heard and given a voice regarding their ideas, their well-being and their one chance to be a child. Out of all the themes and conversations that were during the focus group, almost all of them incorporated the need for children and youth to have a voice. The passion and desire for their voices and ideas to be heard were reiterated time and time again. This was the focus group's most significant takeaway and finding and became the primary recommendation from the results.

*“The best people to give feedback or accurate information on what it's like, is us, not just a bunch of adults who think they know what it's like. I just want someone to ask me what I think or what I would like to see change. It is crazy that we don't have a say in how we're going to grow up. There needs to be some sort of way to access information so kids are not left in the dark about decisions being made about them without them.”*

If the province of Nova Scotia and its communities want to see change and improvements in child and youth well-being, they need to involve youth in the conversation. The findings of this study and the *One Chance to Be A Child* data profile aim to stimulate a discussion among policymakers, governments, and educators about how to improve the lives of children in the province by better measuring and monitoring their overall well-being. The health and well-being of children and youth are critical to their overall livelihood. The vulnerability and sense of helplessness that children experience are caused by their rights, voices, and needs not being heard. The participant's hope from the *One Chance to Be A Child* data profile and the study results is that youth will be given their one chance to be a child and have a positive trajectory for the future. Future research should assess how we can begin establishing and creating youth-led committees and panels and look at the various ways we can implement these groups in schools and communities.