Full Citizenship for Canadian Children with Disabilities and their Parents Still Elusive – Reports

June 27, 2001 – The status of children with disabilities and their parents in Canada falls far short of full citizenship, and there is no apparent national vision to change that.

That's a major conclusion of a two-volume analysis of the state of the country's policies for children with disabilities and their families published today by Canadian Policy Research Networks.

In ***Enabling Citizenship: Full Inclusion of Children with Disabilities and their Parents***, Fraser Valentine provides an inventory and analysis of policies available to children with disabilities (up to the age of 18) and their families across Canada. The results point to a lack of coherence in approaches and vision, both within provinces and nationally.

Governing in an Integrated Fashion: Lessons from the Disability Domain, by Michael J. Prince, finds some of the reasons for the inadequacies of policies for children with disabilities in the governance and accountability of this policy sphere. Prince's paper calls for better integration between decision-making and service delivery and greater clarity regarding the roles of policymakers in the public, commercial, Aboriginal, voluntary and personal/informal sectors.

In the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *Canadian Human Rights Act* on the domestic front, and the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* internationally, Canada commits itself to fostering full citizenship for persons with disabilities.

Full citizenship entails rights and responsibilities, both of which can only be made real by ensuring *all* citizens have access to education, work, technology and social protection. Only then, will they experience the true sense of belonging that comes with inclusion.

"Despite their rhetoric, Canadian governments fail to provide to *all* children with disabilities and their families such essential supports as inclusive child care, education, recreational programs and accessible architectural environments," says Valentine.

"The effect is to deny the citizenship rights of the children as well as those of their parents and families, on whom the burden of care falls so inequitably."

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The Family Network's research on the *Best Policy Mix for Children* has identified three "enabling conditions" to ensure positive outcomes for children: adequate income, effective parenting, and supportive community environments.

"These are also essentials of full citizenship," Valentine says. "On all three counts, children with disabilities and their families are short-changed."

Prince describes what he calls the "déja vu discourse" – the circular repetition of analysis, advocacy and evaluation without progress - that has characterized disability policy over the past twenty years.

The current papers advocate a *disability perspective* for policy in this sphere. Unlike the old *medical perspective*, with its emphasis on disability as a deficit, the authors stress an approach that seeks to enable persons with disabilities to participate in and contribute to society in accordance with their aspirations.

"This requires far better integration of policies and activities of governments and public agencies, voluntary organizations, commercial firms, Aboriginal communities, families and informal support networks, than we have seen to date," says Prince.

Judith Maxwell, President of CPRN, sees this as another example of the challenge that lies ahead for Canadians as they work together to fashion a new inclusive citizenship for the 21st century.

"This country's future success will depend on its ability to make it possible for all citizens to achieve their goals and attain that sense of belonging that comes from being a part of our common enterprise."

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