

Universal Children's Day: The key to progress lies in commitment and collaboration

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Universal Children's Day is observed on the 20th of November. This day, too often overlooked, is the ideal moment to remember that all children have rights, and that it is our responsibility, as adults, to ensure that these rights are respected and enforced.

In 2011, this day will mark the 52nd anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child and the 22nd anniversary of the signing of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by 191 member countries of the United Nations. With this convention, the signatories recognize that every child coming into this world has the right to be loved, protected, cared for, housed, and fed. Expressing oneself freely, playing, and learning in adequate conditions, regardless of social, cultural, or economic conditions must also be considered part of the fundamental needs of children.

Why talk about children's rights?

"Mankind owes to the child the best it has to give" states the preamble to the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. These few words are a critical reminder that nothing is more precious and valuable to our future as our children.

The fundamental right to eat healthy foods to satisfy one's hunger is dear to long-time partners the *Club des petits déjeuners du Québec*, Breakfast Clubs of Canada, and Danone. Unfortunately, this is not a reality for all children and we are convinced that this responsibility must be assumed collectively.

We believe that every child, whether a son, niece, or neighbour is a developing individual in his or her own right, and needs the support, presence, and attention of committed and caring adults to better grow and develop.

Despite the efforts made in recent years, we still have a lot of work to do to fulfill our duties. Figures provided by the OECD are enough to realize that child abuse, infant mortality, and malnutrition are commonplace in our country. The work to be done to eliminate them remains enormous.

Learning on an empty stomach

Many children in Canada make their way to school in the morning on an empty stomach. The goal of *the Club des petits déjeuners du Québec* and Breakfast Clubs of Canada is to provide a growing number of children with two essential tools for learning, a healthy breakfast and a nourishing and friendly environment. Throughout the 2010-2011 school year, the Clubs served six million breakfasts to almost 110,000 Canadian children. In Quebec alone, 2,500,000 breakfasts were served to 18,000 children in the same period. How many more families facing complex and difficult realities

such as poverty, single parenthood, or a difficult work-life balance could benefit from the support of the community to help them?

According to the *2010 Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in Canada: 1989-2010*, one in ten children, or approximately 610,000 young Canadians, and their families lived below the poverty line even before the recession. The situation is not likely to improve.

We simply cannot say it enough; breakfast is a very important factor in the learning process and scholastic achievement. A healthy breakfast restores energy after a long overnight period of fasting so that a child's brain and muscles are well prepared for the day's activities. It is therefore not surprising that studies have shown that eating a nutritious breakfast promotes long-term concentration and superior scholastic performance. Teachers in schools where the Clubs' breakfast programs are in place have confirmed that these can add at least 30 minutes of effective teaching to each day. Over the course of one school year these minutes add up.

Improving the overall nutritional profile must also be considered. Recent studies have shown that young children and adolescents who skip breakfast are likely to have a higher body mass index and are twice as likely to be overweight than those children who eat breakfast every day.

All of this information is also easily applicable to adults, many of whom neglect to eat a healthy breakfast as part of their morning routine. The *Tracking Nutrition Trends VII* study, conducted by the Canadian Council of Food and Nutrition, shows that less than two-thirds of Canadian adults eat a daily breakfast (58%) or lunch (62%). Yet, eating breakfast is a healthy habit that helps adults and children maintain a healthy body weight and start their day off on the right foot.

How can we improve the situation?

The key to progress lies in commitment and collaboration. Breaking the cycle of poverty with each gesture and each decision we all make in our own way is the only way forward.

This can be done in a number of ways, starting with each of us getting involved in the most appropriate way we see fit. We can give of our time, make a donation, ensure that members of our family eat a nutritious breakfast, or offer to help a family in need in our community. And we can simply refuse to turn a blind eye to children whose rights are neglected or abused.

The opportunities for partnerships and alliances are many and we must encourage all members of society – individuals, companies, not-for-profit organizations, local and national officials – to combine their efforts to improve this deplorable situation. For *the Club des petits déjeuners du Québec* and Breakfast Clubs of Canada, as for Danone, commitment is guided by passion and heartfelt values. This involvement is reflected in many ways and goes well beyond financial support and food donations. Danone's contribution has evolved throughout the years, and now includes the involvement of many employees as volunteers. A strong partnership must be built with constant

support that evolves and keeps pace with the needs of the organization.

What matters above all else, is that this type of partnership resonates in society and that this clear and balanced model of commitment continues to multiply rapidly for the well-being of all of our children.

“Neglect the children, and we destroy ourselves. We exist in the present only to the degree that we put our faith in the future,” wrote Paul Auster in *Leviathan*.

The future starts today.