

Children & Youth Bill of Rights

Children and youth well-being is a topic that we can all get behind right?

Each of us have some relationship with children – we have our own, we have grandchildren, we are aunts and uncles, we are caretakers.

Yet repeatedly, we as adults, as organizations, as government, fail to prioritize youth in our decisions and actions.

Case in point-In 2019, the federal government spent only about nine percent of the federal budget on children. This is consistent with the level of spending on children over the last several years. Over the next decade, all categories of spending on children except health are projected to decline relative to GDP.

The Surgeon General's Protecting Youth Mental Health [Report](#) released in early December 2021 urges us to proceed differently as it relates to youth and children. The report highlights recent national surveys of young people having shown alarming increases in the prevalence of certain mental health challenges. In 2019, one in three high school students and half of female students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, an overall increase of 40% from 2009. Additionally, the report shares that early estimates from the National Center for Health Statistics suggest there were more than 6,600 deaths by suicide among the 10-24 age group in 2020.

We are not exempt from these numbers here in Santa Cruz County. In 2019, 31% of Santa Cruz County students who participated in a California Healthy Kids Survey said they'd had feelings of chronic depression in the previous 12 months. Among the LGBTQ population, that figure was 64%, and 78% among students who identified as transgender.

The Surgeon General, Dr. Murthy, has given us a call to action: "This is the moment to demand change—with our voices and with our actions. Only when we do will we be able to protect, strengthen, and support the health and safety of all children, adolescents, and young adults—and ensure everyone has a platform to thrive."

As councilmembers and youth advocates have responded to this call and asked our City to prioritize children and youth through the City of Santa Cruz Children and Youth Bill of Rights. Aligned with similar efforts at the State and across the State, the City of Santa Cruz Children and Youth Bill of Rights will ensure that leaders keep the needs of young people at the forefront of decisions about budgets and government policies. In preparation for this initiative we reached out to hear the voices of the youth in our City. One student took the time to email us, which hearing from youth via email is few and far

between, and stated, “Investing in youth is important to me because it affects me personally as I, myself am a youth and it would benefit my younger sisters in the future. Thank you for prioritizing youth and investing in all of our futures.”

The Bill of Rights provides the foundation that helps our community make children and youth a top priority so that:

1. They have a healthy mind, body and spirit that enables them to maximize their potential.
2. They develop a healthy attachment to a parent, guardian, or caregiver and an ongoing relationship with a caring and supporting adult.
3. They have a safe and healthy environment, including homes, schools, neighborhoods and communities.
4. They have access to quality education that promotes future success in school, career and life.
5. They have training in life skills that will prepare them to live independently, be self-sufficient and positively contribute to their community.
6. They have employment opportunities with protections from unfair labor practices.
7. They have freedom from mistreatment, abuse and neglect.
8. They voice opinions in matters of interest to them, develop their leadership capacity and engage in their community.
9. They feel supported by the larger community and maintain a sense of hope for the future.
10. They are encouraged to explore and express their innate curiosity and creativity.

These Bill of Rights were unanimously approved by the Santa Cruz City Council on December 14th, 2021. The Bill of Rights will help us promote youth-adult partnership, amplify youth voice and integrate youth voice in City decision making, and foster youth leadership development. These efforts strengthen youth community connectedness and ultimately youth well-being. The Surgeon General’s report in fact highlights that school, family and youth [connectedness](#) “have been shown to promote positive mental health and reduce risk for violence, suicide, substance use, and sexual risk during adolescence and well into adulthood.”

The three of us have dedicated our professional careers to youth well-being in one form or another-as an educator, a community organizer, and a grant writer. We have brought this item forward and asked our city to demonstrate its commitment to proactively investing in future generations of leaders in our community.

“If we seize this moment, step up for our children and their families in their moment of need, and lead with inclusion, kindness, and respect, we can lay the foundation for a healthier, more resilient, and more fulfilled nation.” Dr. Murthy

When youth thrive we all thrive!

By,

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