

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF CHILDREN IN EARLY 20TH CENTURY TORONTO

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Many reformers and public figures who advocated for social change within Toronto's urban core used the needs of (urban) children as their central focus. These campaigns tended to represent children as vulnerable and at risk within the growing, dirty and dangerous city. However, as some historical sources and photographs exemplify, children were active, vital and often very capable participants in the daily functioning of Toronto.

SWAT THE FLY CONTEST

Some early reformers actively engaged city children in efforts to improve conditions in neighbourhoods such as the Ward. For example, Charles Hastings, the Medical Officer of Health for Toronto, in conjunction with the Toronto Star, initiated the "Swat the Fly Contest". This citywide fly collecting contest encouraged children to become aware and help solve the problem of the spread of bacteria and disease, by eliminating what was considered the source.



Over the summer of 1912 children were enlisted to collect flies and bring them to City Hall for counting. A cash reward of \$200.00 was split among the children who collected the most flies. Fifteen year old Beatrice White was the resounding winner having collected more than half a million flies over the six week contest.

At the end of the contest in August, 3.5 million dead flies had been collected by the city's children. Beatrice had collected 543,360 herself using traps she constructed. For her efforts she was awarded \$50.00. Children were central actors in this public health initiative and contributed to improving health conditions in a unique way.



William James Photo of White with her traps, City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 1039

ELIZABETH NEUFELD AND ORGANIZING CHILDREN OF THE WARD TO SOCIAL ACTION

Elizabeth Neufeld was the first head worker at Central Neighbourhood House, a settlement house in the heart of the Ward, also engaged children in community social action. In the early 20th century, playgrounds along with most stores and municipal services were closed on Sundays. As a result, children of the Ward, many of whom were Jewish and did not celebrate Sunday as their Sabbath, had only the streets as play space. Neufeld organized weekly "Sunday Parades". The parades acted as rallies calling for the opening of the Elizabeth Street Playground on Sundays. The children from the Ward would meet and march the streets playing musical instruments including pots and pans as drums. On one occasion the parade marched to City Hall demanding that the park be opened. Unfortunately, it was another decade before changes were made to Sunday Park Closure rules but the parades were nevertheless important community-building activities.



Boy Band in the 1910s. Courtesy of CNH Records

In 1912, Neufeld made her first efforts to have the city approve the modification and use of an old school house on the Elizabeth street playground property for Central Neighbourhood House activities. This request led to other charitable organizations demanding that they also be provided with public funds to expand their facilities. The initial request by CNH and Elizabeth Neufeld was not successful. A few years later Neufeld once again organized the community to pressure city officials to approve a city generated plan to build a shelter house on the Elizabeth Street Playground property. While this plan was not connected to CNH, Neufeld believed the project would benefit community residents. On the day the plan was to be addressed in council, Neufeld rallied 200 neighbourhood children to march to City hall. The children met with the Board of Control consisting of several aldermen and the Mayor.

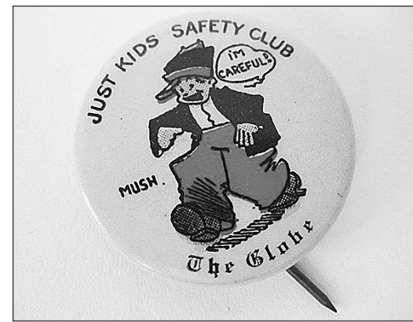
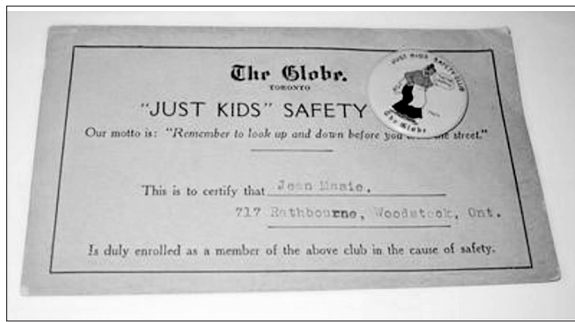
A ten year old, Jonny Senson, delivered a speech to the city officials stating,

“Mr. Mayor and members of the Board of Control. We the children of the Ward are asking for a playhouse on the Elizabeth Street playground. We need a place where we can have baths, gymnasium and entertainments. Mr. Chambers (the park commissioner) said we might have it, so we thought we had better come and ask you to give it to us”.

In May 1914, the City passed the necessary documentation to build the recreation house on the Elizabeth Street Playground site. City official, Controller McCarthy reported that “It was the most interesting deputation the Board had ever heard”.

JUST KIDS SAFETY CLUB

In 1928, the public and the city officials were increasingly concerned about motor vehicle accidents that involved children in Ontario cities. The Globe newspaper in conjunction with local community organizations introduced a campaign to raise awareness about the dangers on city streets. Originally, an offshoot of the U.S. National Safety Council, this movement was initiated by the author of a popular children’s comic strip called “Just Kids”, Augustus Daniels “Ad” Carter, a reporter and artist in Brooklyn, New York. The club was started following one comic story line in which Mush Stebbins, a regular character, was knocked down by a passing truck resulting in a broken arm. A police officer at the scene asked Mush to promise to “look both ways before crossing”.



The club encouraged children to become members, and in exchange for joining, children made a pledge to be safe when crossing the streets and in exchange were given a membership card and badges, and could collect a series of pins with characters associated with the club. The club motto was "Remember to look up and down before you cross the street". The premise was that this club was exclusively for children and promoted by children through contests and activities like safety essay competitions, submissions of drawings etc.

Just Kids Safety Club

The Globe

Toronto, Ont.

Please enrol me as a member of the Just Kids Safety Club. I promise to remember to look up and down before crossing the street.

Name

Street

Town

I hereby certify that this is the first application submitted by or for the above applicant.

.....

Signature of Parent or Guardian.

Schools and community groups encouraged children to join and participate in the growing conversation about street safety. By October 2nd 1928, the club had 275, 847 members and was growing fast. Businesses and government leaders endorsed and actively promoted the expansion of the campaign. J.F.H. Wyse the General Manager of the Ontario Safety League along with the League secretary P.B. LaTrobe visited 50 institutions across the province promoting the Club. The Globe regularly profiled children who were participating in public education activities between March 1928 and Sept 1932.

These three examples of children's civic engagement provide a glimpse into the dramatic changes taking place in the early 20th century urban centres. Education related to germ theory was being passed to children and in turn to their families. Public health was a community effort in which children were active participants.

The increasing presence of motor vehicles on the streets led to safety education initiatives promoted by public and private institutions such as newspapers, safety commissions and local schools and police departments. Finally, local settlement houses such as the Ward's Central Neighbourhood House worked to inspire community children to advocate for their needs within their neighbourhood.

What is striking is the range or contrasting perspectives reformers employed to address public health, safety and child welfare. On one side they portray children as weak, vulnerable and in need of supervision and rescuing by adults. Simultaneously, however, they embraced the autonomy and independence of children, encouraging them to take an active and independent role within their community.



JUST KIDS SAFETY CLUB
Here's Where We Meet

J. K. S. C. Membership 257,119

THE MEMBERSHIP ROLL:

Previous enrolment	256,559
Added yesterday	560
	<hr/> 257,119

BUTTONS DISTRIBUTED.

Previous announcement	251,828
Mailed yesterday	2,000
Total to date	<hr/> 253,828

"Just Kids" Have Another Girl Cartoonist



"Dear Editor J.K.S.C.: I received my button. I got 'Mush,' which I think is very nice. I drew pictures last week, but did not get them sent. I am sending them today. They are 'Chun Pal Moy Sen Sung,' 'Pato,' and 'Mush.' I drew them large, so if you can't put them all in your paper, put one of them in. Wishing your Club the greatest success.
 "Bethany, Ont."
 Evelyn Bigelow."

The Globe, July 7, 1928, p.15

Globe and Mail: March 30, 1928; March 31, 1928; April 2, 1928; April 4, 1928; May 4, 1928.

Irving, A., Parsons, H. & Bellamy, D. F., (1995). *Neighbours: Three social settlements in downtown Toronto*. Canadian Scholars' Press.

New York Times June 26, 1957, Pg.31, AD Carter, (Creator of 'Just Kids' Comics).

O'Connor, P. J. (1986) *The story of Central Neighbourhood House 1911-1986*. Toronto Association of Neighbourhood Services, Toronto.

Toronto Star Online Article, Sat Aug 8, 2015 *Beatrice White, the girl who killed half a million flies for Toronto*. (Katie Daubs).

Toronto Star, July 6, 1912, Pg.8, (*Contest Rules*).

<http://www.virtualmuseum.ca> - Central Neighbourhood House Historical Highlights Year By Year: 1912.