

Minute for Reconciliation – Bear Witness Day

Jordan River Anderson was born on October 22, 1999 with complex medical needs and had to remain in hospital in Winnipeg. Jordan's family lives in Norway House Cree Nation in Manitoba. Norway House is 800km from Winnipeg – an 8-and-a-half-hour drive one way.

When Jordan was three years old, his doctors let his family know that he could go home with them, provided he had at-home care. The federal government and Manitoba provincial government could not agree on who would pay for his at-home care.

Federal and provincial or territorial governments often cannot agree on who should pay for services for First Nations children, even when the service is normally available to other children. The result is that First Nations children are left waiting while governments argue about payment.

Jordan was never able to experience living in a loving family home because of the deep systemic barriers preventing First Nations children from accessing needed services and supports. Jordan died in hospital, in January 2005, at the age of five. Jordan's death ignited a movement to uphold human rights for all First Nations children.

In February 2006, the First Nations Child & Family Caring Society, issued a report, titled "Wen:de: We are Coming to the Light of Day," documenting equitable funding options for First Nations child and family service agencies in Canada. The report contains the following recommendation:

In keeping with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, we recommend that a child first principle be adopted in the resolution of inter-governmental jurisdictional disputes. Under this procedure the government (provincial or federal) that first receives a request to pay for services for a Status Indian child where that service is available to other children, the government will pay for the service without delay or disruption. The paying party then has the option to refer the matter to a jurisdictional dispute resolution table. In this way the rights of the child come first whilst still allowing for the resolution of jurisdictional issues. In honor and memory of Jordan we recommend the child first principle to

resolving jurisdictional disputes be termed Jordan's principle and be implemented without delay.

The House of Commons unanimously passed a motion in 2007 supporting Jordan's Principle. Jordan's Principle is a child-first principle to ensure First Nations children get the services they need when they need them. Cindy Blackstock, Executive Director at First Nations Child & Family Caring Society, said "Jordan could not talk, yet people around the world heard his message. Jordan could not breathe on his own and yet he has given the breath of life to other children. Jordan could not walk but he has taken steps that governments are now just learning to follow."

On May 10, 2016, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal issued its first non-compliance order against the Canadian government for failing to implement Jordan's Principle. Following this landmark legal ruling, Bear Witness Day on May 10 was established. Ten years later, in February 2026, the Canadian Senate formally recognized Bear Witness Day as a National Day of Action.

Jordan's favorite toy was his teddy bear so the logo for Jordan's Principle is a blue teddy bear. Canadians are encouraged to carry a Teddy Bear with them on Bear Witness Day as a conversation starter to share awareness. Here in Regina, Regina Native Outreach Ministry, is requesting that you donate a Teddy Bear to their Mother and Baby Welcome Bag project. The Welcome Bags are given to Indigenous new mothers giving birth at Regina General Hospital. The bag contains everything a mother needs to look after her baby and herself for baby's first days. You can leave the Teddy Bear at any Regina United Church and they will contact Regina Native Outreach Ministry.

Bear Witness Day is to remind us that Jordan's Principle is more than a policy – it is a powerful expression of children's inherent human rights. At its core, Jordan's Principle affirms that no child should suffer or be left behind because of systemic inequalities. It is a tool of justice, designed to uphold the dignity, health, and wellbeing of children by placing their needs first – always. Honouring Jordan's Principle and the memory of Jordan River Anderson means confronting the legacy of colonialism and working actively to ensure fairness and equity for First Nations children who deserve nothing less than the full protection of their rights.

Jordan's Principle provides comprehensive, free support for First Nations children (on or off-reserve) to ensure equitable access to health, social, and educational services without delays due to jurisdictional disputes.

Examples of support available in the area of Health are mobility aids, wheelchair ramps, medical equipment, specialized assessments, mental health services and traditional healers.

In the Social Services area examples of support are respite care, social workers, land-based activities and cultural programs.

Examples in the area of Education are special education supports, tutoring, speech therapy, psycho-educational assessments, and school supplies.

Non-Medical Supports such as travel costs, food, clothing, and funeral expenses are included.

Although Jordan's Principle has been in existence since 2007, nineteen years, it is by no means running smoothly. There is a significant backlog of requests, the rejection rate for requests is increasing year by year and the federal government's financial allocation for Jordan's Principle in 2026 is less than what is needed.

How can you support Jordan's Principle?

You can raise awareness by educating others about the principle. That includes Indigenous people, although the principle has been in effect for several years, don't assume that people know about it or understand what it is for. How much did you know before today?

You can support advocacy efforts by following and supporting organizations like the First Nations Child & Family Caring Society, which advocates for the full, non-discriminatory implementation of the principle.

You can provide support and assist Indigenous families with submitting a request to Jordan's Principle. If an Indigenous person is stressed about the needs of their child, they could probably use your help to guide them through submission. If the need is urgent, there is a 24hr-hour Jordan's Principle Call Centre.

Communities or organizations can submit group requests to support multiple children with shared needs, such as school-based programs or community health

initiatives. If you know of group that could be eligible, you should suggest that they submit a request to Jordan's Principle.

You can write to your Member of Parliament or the Minister of Indigenous Services, Mandy Gull-Masty, to advocate for long-term reform and sustainable funding for these essential services.

If you are a health, social, or educational professional, you can provide detailed letters identifying a child's specific, unmet needs to accompany funding requests.

If you'd like to learn more there is a documentary of Jordan's life by the National Film Board called Jordan River Anderson, The Messenger. It is available on Youtube.

And First Nations Child & Family Caring Society has a webinar you can view called Know your rights under Jordan's Principle. Also available on Youtube.

This information was compiled by Regina Native Outreach Ministry, a ministry within the United Church of Canada. If you would like more information, please email reginanativeoutreachministry@gmail.com .