

Children's rights, adults' responsibilities

Professor Cathy Nutbrown discusses the implications of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child for early childhood settings...

More and more people are talking about what is referred to as 'children's rights' these days, but the term dates back more than 50 years, to 1959 and the Declaration of Rights of the Child by the general assembly of the United Nations. More recently, in 1989, governments that signed up to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child agreed that children have a rights to the following:

- prevention (of illness and neglect);
- provision (of education with specific references to children who are disabled);
- protection (from abuse and exploitation);
- participation (in decisions which affect them).

Such rights are only as useful as the actions they lead to, of course, and so for children to have any rights, adults need to take on the necessary responsibilities to bring those rights into practical and meaningful fruition. Around the world, work on children's rights has included moves to ban corporal punishment, end child poverty, consider children and the law, address issues of child labour, and enhance child health (including immunisation, food and the environment).

Rights in practice

There is a tendency, sometimes, to think that such issues apply only to situations in developing countries, but there is work to do on children's rights in the UK too. In a Save the Children study of young children's rights, Priscilla Alderson examined children's involvement in decisions which affected them. The study showed how children's contributions were often unrecognised by adults around the UK, and how many adults, due largely to their desire to protect children

from danger, denied children basic freedoms to play with their friends.

There are, however, examples of early years practice where children's rights are a fundamental and guiding principle of curriculum and pedagogy. Such an example can be found in the infant-toddler centres and pre-schools in Reggio Emilia in northern Italy. Here, as identified by Loris Malaguzzi, practitioners; central concerns include:

- The rights of children;
- The rights of teachers;
- The rights of parents.

In Malaguzzi's assessment, the fact that the rights of children are recognised as the rights of all children is the sign of a more accomplished humanity.

A second example is found in the argument of daily practice. That is to say, that although it is governments that have signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, thus declaring their commitment to working within their countries to realise and protect children's rights as enshrined in the Convention, much of the reality of putting children's rights into

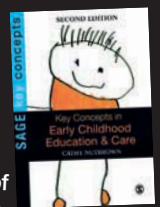
Know your rights

UN CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD:

An international convention listing 54 Articles of rights, designed to prevent illness and neglect; provide education; protect from abuse and exploitation; and ensure children's participation in decisions that affect them.

findoutmore

Cathy Nutbrown is Professor of Education and Director of Research at the School of Education, University of Sheffield. Further discussion of the issues of 'inclusion' can be found in Cathy's book, *Key Concepts in Early Childhood Education and Care (2nd edn)*, published by Sage. Visit www.uk.sagepub.com/books/Book234324



practice lies in the hands of individual practitioners working in services and settings for children and their families.

To put it simply, securing, upholding and protecting children's rights is the obligation of governments, and of every adult citizen, especially those who work with and for young children.

Your responsibilities

The need to safeguard children's rights requires those adults responsible for children's services, for housing, health and social services to ask deep and searching questions. Similarly, early years practitioners, health workers, teachers, social workers and parents can ask the following questions:

- Is every child in this setting seen as equal? Do we treat all children equally and according to their needs whatever their race, colour, religion, sex or nationality?
- Does every child have what he or she needs in order to promote their healthy mental, emotional and physical development?
- Is every child respected here? Do I say and spell their name correctly? Do I make efforts to know and understand their background and nationality?



Further reading

- Alderson, P *Young children's rights: exploring beliefs, principles* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2000)
- Malaguzzi, L *The right to environment* in Filippini, T and Vecchi, V *The Hundred Languages of Children: the exhibit* (Reggio Children, 1996)
- Jones, P and Welch, S *Rethinking Children's Rights: Attitudes in Contemporary Society* (Continuum)
- Lane, J *Young Children and Racial Justice: Taking action for racial equality in the early years – understanding the past, thinking about the present, planning for the future* (NCB, 2008)
- UNICEF *The Little book of Children's Rights and Responsibilities*: tinyurl.com/7skhxss
- UNICEF *Pocket Book of Children's Rights* (2011): tinyurl.com/7rzxb7q



- Do all children have sufficient nutritious food?
- Are all children living in a home which is safe and secure and promotes their wellbeing?
- Do all children have the medical treatment and care they need?
- Are children's diverse learning and development needs provided for?
- Are all children loved, understood and cared for in ways which meet their needs?
- Do all children have access to the play, learning, and recreation time and space they need?
- Are all children given protection from cruelty, neglect and exploitation?
- Do all children know what it feels like to grow up in a calm and peaceful community?

Some people still argue about whether there should be such a thing as 'children's rights', but, as UNICEF says, "Denying children's rights is wrong. Put it right."

