

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and young children

Built on varied legal systems and cultural traditions, the Convention on the Rights of the Child is a universally agreed set of non-negotiable standards and obligations. It spells out the basic human rights that children everywhere – without discrimination – have: the right to survival; to develop to the fullest; to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and to participate fully in family, cultural and social life. Every right spelled out in the Convention is inherent to the human dignity and harmonious development of every child. The Convention protects children's rights by setting standards in health care, education and legal, civil and social services. These standards are benchmarks against which progress can be assessed. States that are party to the Convention are obliged to develop and undertake all actions and policies in the light of the best interests of the child.

(UNICEF www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm)

The CRC does not contain a dedicated section that addresses the rights of children from birth to eight specifically. Rather it encompasses the rights of all children, up to the age of 18, or whatever age a State designates for the entry into adult status. Yet the world's young children (aged zero to eight years) demand special attention: they are the most vulnerable and therefore most in need of the benefits and protection that the States Parties that have ratified the CRC guarantee. In addition, children's earliest experiences have the most potential to influence

them and their families, communities and societies – for good or ill – in later life. If, therefore, they can grow within the kind of secure development environment that the CRC implies for them; and if, as they grow they can come to understand how the CRC has contributed to their safety, well-being and development; their early experiences will travel in and with them, thereby helping the letter and the spirit of the CRC to permeate their societies.

The United Nations Special Session on Children on 19-21 September 2001 in

New York, provides an unmissable opportunity to review the CRC with young children in mind. This meeting will bring together government leaders, heads of state, NGOs, children's advocates and young people. Its general purpose is to review the agenda for implementation set at the World Summit for Children in 1990, to move children's rights up the world agenda and to make a renewed commitment and pledge for specific actions in the coming decade. The Special Session is also expected to produce a global agenda for children and young people

containing goals and action plans to ensure the best possible start in life for children; a good-quality basic education for children; and the opportunities for all children, especially young people, for meaningful participation in their countries. However, given the obvious importance of early childhood to the CRC (and *vice versa*), the Special Session must do more: it must directly address three key areas related to early childhood:

1. it must build up its currently limited focus on the rights of the youngest

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- children so as to provide a platform for rights-based early childhood programming;
2. it must recognise and promote the work that has been developed to ensure that the CRC does indeed impact significantly on the youngest children; and
 3. it must map out what still has to be done.

In doing so, it can readily draw on the fact that, throughout its text, the CRC espouses the values and principles which underlie good ECD practice: that children are whole individuals with multiple potentials; that children grow into their rights and responsibilities gradually, through processes of physical, mental, and social development that are their birthrights; and that young children have the right to be active participants in their culture and society.

This edition of *Early Childhood Matters* provides arguments, examples of work at all levels, and analyses to contribute to the discussions that are needed to elevate the CRC to its rightful place in ECD programming – and indeed to justify ECD programming as a key strategy in realising the aspirations of the CRC. In the first part, Feny de los Angeles-Bautista leads an exploration of the inextricably intertwined relationship between the Convention and early childhood development as a field (page 8). This is countered by Robert Myers’ discussion of the shortcomings of the CRC from an early childhood perspective (page 22). To show that even now documents associated with the CRC do not sufficiently deal with early childhood, the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development (CG) then critically considers ‘A World Fit For Children’. This is the Outcome Document that has been prepared by

the Global Movement for Children, for the UN Special Session on Children. The CG suggests additions to several sections of the document. (page 26).

The first part concludes with a contribution from Dr Sham Sunder Ads (page 30) that explores the complexities of national legislation that attempts to support children’s rights in India. The article is based on painstaking, detailed and diligent work to bring out the strengths and weaknesses of current laws, and to show what more must be done.

The second part of this edition is about practice: what can be done by those engaged in work with young children and their families and communities. It starts with a survey of the principles that underlie good practice in early childhood work that integrates the aims and spirit of the CRC. Caroline Arnold

(page 36) demands that early childhood programming is based on a holistic understanding of early childhood development. Her article introduces a study of good practice derived from these principles: parents supporting their children’s holistic development through encouraging participation in the normalities of day to day family life (page 40).

The edition concludes with three articles that show how the CRC can systematically influence early childhood practice. In Venezuela, CECODAP has a long record of successfully developing processes to enable children to come together, explore and discuss matters that concern them, and go on to develop activities that allow their voices to be heard and their actions to make a difference. The article that starts on page 45 discusses the CECODAP-initiated democratic mechanisms that led to the

establishment of children's organisations and shows how these organisations impacted directly on the drafting of new legislation about child rights in their country.

From Zimbabwe comes a selection of practical exercises for children that introduce them to their rights and help them to promote them. (page 50) The selection is drawn from *We are also human beings: a guide to children's rights in Zimbabwe*, that was produced for UNICEF by the African Community Publishing and Development Trust by working participatively with about 500 children aged from 3 to 18 years. The book generally aims to encourage and motivate them to promote children's rights in Zimbabwe.

The concluding article (page 52) is a discussion of work in Australia that helped children to reveal their ideas

about their rights through art. The work covered both the joyful and the sober sides of children's perceptions – and sometimes more significantly – their realities; and it produced some potent and graphic images. The article concludes with a set of five practical lessons from the work.

Each edition of *Early Childhood Matters* is a collaborative effort in that it depends on authors producing the articles and then on a small team in the Foundation bringing everything together. This edition needed more because of the scope of its theme. Unusually therefore, the work of the authors has been assembled, moderated and complemented by a kind of informal editorial group that included Feny de los Angeles-Bautista and Ellen Ilfeld, as well as the usual in-house team. ○

Jim Smale, Editor

