Factfile: The Convention on the Rights of the Child

Thirty years ago world leaders adopted the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) an international agreement on childhood. Now the most ratified of all international treaties, this historic commitment to the world’s children has radically transformed young lives across the globe. It sets out the rights that must be realized for children to develop to their full potential.

The Children's Convention offers a vision of the child as an individual and as a member of a family and community, with rights and responsibilities appropriate to his or her age and stage of development, as well as special needs. Children are neither their parents' property nor passive recipients of adult protection. From birth children are equal members of the human family and the subject of their own rights, which must be realized for them to develop to their full potential.

As a legally binding treaty, the CRC establishing standards that the governments that ratify it are committed to uphold. The Committee on the Rights of the Child, a body created to monitor the CRC, has established a systematic process for gathering and responding to reports from UN member states concerning their progress towards meeting the standards set forth in the convention. It also offers expert understandings on how the CRC is to be interpreted and implemented, which are available at http://www.unhchr.ch.

History of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948, states that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" and also stresses that "motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and protection". However, the UDHR is not a legally binding treaty; nor was the 1959 Declaration on the Rights of the Child.

With growing international consensus about the need for a separate convention on child rights, which would carry legal obligations, the government of Poland submitted a draft convention to the United Nations in 1978. A working group was set up to coordinate ideas from governments, religious groups, and organizations involved in children’s welfare and draft the convention, a process that took nearly ten years. On 20 November 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly.

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The CRC is a legally binding treaty. Once countries ratify the CRC, they must submit a report on the status of children’s rights in their country to the Committee on the Rights of the Child within two years, and every five years after that. The Committee reviews the reports and makes recommendations.

**What makes the CRC unique?**

While social and political changes impact children directly, children have little or no voice in decision-making processes. The CRC expresses a vision of children as individuals with dignity equal to that of adults. It shifts from treating children as property of their parents, or objects of charity, to seeing them as actors in the process of development, their own and that of their communities.

**Core Principles of the Children’s Convention**

1. **Nondiscrimination** on any grounds (Article 2);
2. **Protection: The Child’s Best Interest**: Enables systems to protect children from abuse or infringement on their rights, including the right to legal representation (Article 3);
3. **Provision**: Affirms the obligation of the State to ensure the child’s survival and development, including rights to adequate housing, food, and education (Articles 6+);
4. **Participation**: Rights to express views and be taken seriously (Articles 12 and 13);
5. **Primacy of the role, authority, and responsibility and Family** (Articles 5, 7, 18);
6. **Evolving Capacity**: Acknowledges that as children mature, they need less protection and a greater capacity to take responsibility for decisions affecting their lives. (Article 5).

**Why Children’s Rights?**

Because children are especially vulnerable to abuse, children need a separate treaty that define and protect their rights and obliges governments to see that they are fulfilled.

The actions, or inactions, of government impact children more strongly than any other group in society: Policymaking that fails to take children into account has a negative impact on the future of all members of society.

Many changes in society are having a disproportionate, and often negative, impact on children: Transformation of the family structure, globalization, climate change, digitalization, mass migration, shifting employment patterns, and a shrinking social welfare net in many countries all have strong impacts on children, especially armed conflict and other emergencies.
Children's needs and views should be heard and considered in the political process. Without special attention to the opinions of children – as expressed at home and in schools, in local communities and even in governments – children's views go unheard on the many important issues that affect them now or will affect them in the future.

The healthy development of children is crucial to the future well being of any society: Because children are especially vulnerable, the effects of disease, malnutrition, and poverty threaten the future of children and therefore the future of the societies in which they live.

The costs to society of failing its children are huge: Children's earliest experiences significantly influence their future development. The course of their development determines their contribution, or cost, to society over the course of their lives.

The CRC Changes Children’s Lives

The CRC establishes international acknowledgement of the dignity of every child and standards for how governments are to fulfill, protect, and respect children’s human rights. It has inspired governments to change laws and policies and make investments so that more children get the health care and nutrition they need to survive and develop, and there are stronger safeguards in place to protect children from violence and exploitation. It has also enabled more children to have their voices heard and participate in their societies. The lives of millions of children have been improved as a direct result of the CRC.

Children need to know their rights. So do parents and teachers!

The fifty-four articles in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child constitute the broadest set of international human rights standards ever developed for children. As evidence of its worldwide significance, only one world governments had not ratified the CRC: the United States of America. For this reason, most Americans are unfamiliar with this most recognized of all UN human rights documents.

Use this 30th Anniversary year of the CRC to learn and teach about the CRC. Learning activities, resource lists, and ideas for actions are available on the HRE USA website: https://hreusa.org/every-child-every-right/