

## CLASSROOM CHARTERS

### Building the shared values of a rights-respecting classroom

#### Introduction

Creating a classroom charter is a good way to include students in decision-making processes of the classroom and to nurture a positive classroom atmosphere. The collaboration between children and adults in age and ability-appropriate ways to agree a charter for a rights-respecting classroom has proven to be a very valuable part of the process of making the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (the Convention) a real and meaningful guide to action at a day to day level.

#### What is a class charter?

Children and adults of a class select those rights they agree are the most important in relation to what is done in that classroom. The process of developing a charter is as important as the end product. The process must be participatory, inclusive and build on the prior learning about the difference between wants and needs.

For very young children rights may need to be reworded. As children move beyond their early years, they will learn that their rights under the Convention are based on their needs to thrive as human beings. These are the rights to:

- their health and safety (be healthy),
- their protection from harm and abuse (be safe),
- the development of their potential and (be yourself) and
- their inclusion and participation in the life of the society around them (be heard).

In learning that these rights are universal, children understand that this means that their rights are connected to respecting the rights of others. Some like to refer to this reciprocity as rights and responsibilities.

#### What is the aim of a class charter?

Creating a charter is a way of making the rights of the child real and meaningful to students based on where they are now in their own lives. The process of developing the class charter can serve to unite the class. It develops a sense of ownership of the classroom and learning. Once developed the charter becomes a point of reference for the class and once signed by both teacher and students it signifies a shared activity and acts as the 'social glue' which binds everyone together.

### In what way is a classroom charter different from ‘Classroom Rules’?

The class charter is not a direct behaviour management tool. Rules are something which are often externally imposed, whereas charters are democratically negotiated using an internationally agreed values framework. It should begin a process of replacing rules.

*“We know how to respect each other...we actually know why and how we are respecting that person, we are listening to what they are telling us, we are being kind to everyone. It’s pretty awesome.”*

Allie, Grade 5 Cape Horn

### How do you approach the linking of rights with responsibilities?

The main point to remember is that ***the rights of the child are not conditional on responsibilities. Rights do imply but are independent of responsibilities.***

- A right cannot be withdrawn as a punishment but what can be withdrawn is the opportunity to infringe other people’s rights.
- Adults working with children or youth need to model rights-respecting behaviour and use rights-respecting language in order to reinforce the benefits of this values system.
- A child or youth needs to see and hear how rights neglect /denying behaviour is identified by an adult and how the adult uses the language of rights to help student understand how they have failed to respect the rights of others and how this choice has negative consequences.
- Reasoning with a child or youth may still lead to a child being removed from their classroom to have their right to education experienced alone or in a different setting, but the rationale is clearly rooted in the rights-respecting framework.

### Do charters vary with the age of children?

With very young children charters may be very simple and use images instead of or in conjunction with words. As children become older it would be more common for references to be made to articles in the Convention.

In secondary schools, student groups or councils can generate charters at the beginning of the year. Secondary schools should determine ways for whole school input, having all students, teachers, and administrators sign onto the charter to create a whole school focus point for their rights-respecting culture.

### Creating Your Class Charter

1. Review the aims of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (the Convention) with your students.
2. Select the articles from the Convention that specifically relate to students lives in school (eg, Articles 3, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 19, 23, 24, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 37, 39).
3. Discuss with the students how these articles related to their lives at school. With younger students, this discussion can occur using Rights, Wants, Needs cards and with older students Rights Cluster Cards.
4. As a class, select the six most popular and reasoned articles for the class charter.
5. As a class, identify the reciprocal behaviour/responsibility linked with the six most popular articles.
6. Students work together to develop the wording of the charter in a way that is linked to the articles in the Convention.
7. As a class, vote democratically on the design, and placement of the charter
8. Discuss any other issues, such as students who do not want to sign, how new students are included in the charter.
9. As a class or school, all students and adults sign the charter.
10. As a class link the Charter to rewards and sanctions, discussing and agreeing as a class how this link into the classroom.
11. Review the charter with students throughout the year.