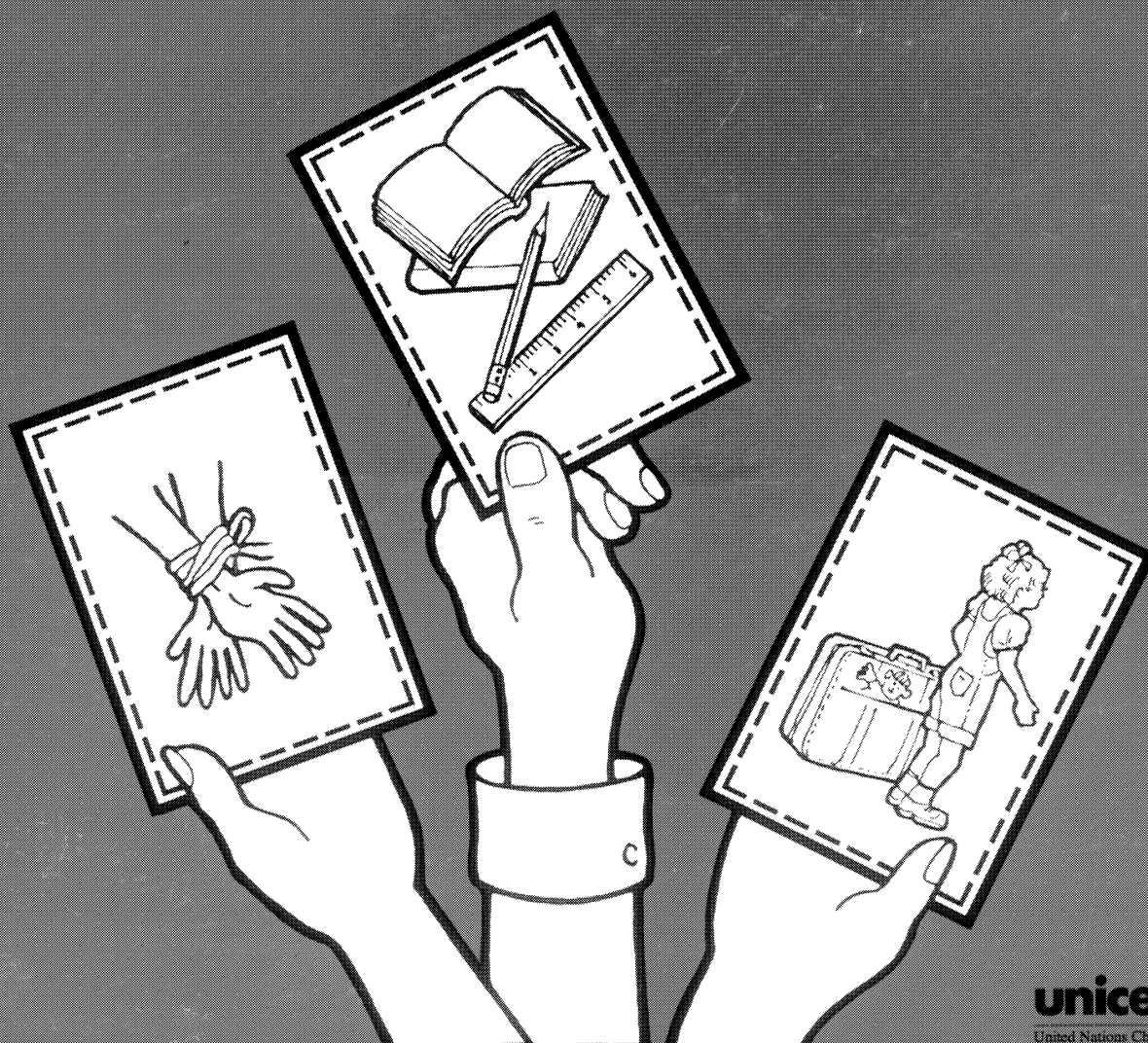


It's Only Right!

A Practical Guide to Learning About
the Convention on the Rights of the Child

by Susan Fountain



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Introduction

Why should children learn about their rights?

Every society hopes and expects that its children will grow up to be capable and responsible citizens who contribute to the well-being of their communities. Yet around the world, children are denied the rights that would enable them to survive, develop fully and participate actively.

In both developing and industrialized countries, children cope daily with street violence, pressure to use drugs, and sexual exploitation and abuse. They work long hours at jobs that are often damaging to their health, without the opportunity for rest and recreation.

Millions more who begin school never finish. Even in countries where enrolments are increasing, children of ethnic and linguistic minorities, girls and children with disabilities may find that their chance to receive an education is limited or non-existent.

Too many children still die of preventable diseases. Malnutrition has yet to be eradicated; access to clean water and sanitary facilities remains a luxury in many places. In industrialized and developing countries alike, pollution and environmental damage take a toll on children's health that is only beginning to be measured.

And in some parts of the world, children of school age face conscription into the armed forces, torture, unjust punishment, imprisonment and lack of legal guarantees.

Children whose basic needs and fundamental rights are denied cannot be expected to mature into caring, productive adults who will respect the rights of others. Rights violations are not only the cause of personal suffering; they also sow the seeds for political and social unrest, even for violent conflict. Rights issues touch everyone's life, whether directly or indirectly.

For the sake of both individual and global development, children around the world need to understand the concept of rights, to know what rights they are entitled to, to empathize with those whose rights have been denied, and to be empowered to take action on behalf of their own rights and those of others.

Learning about the Convention on the Rights of the Child is one way to begin.

What is the Convention on the Rights of the Child?

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is a United Nations agreement that spells out the range of rights that children everywhere are entitled to. It sets basic standards for children's well-being at different stages of their development. Countries that ratify the Convention (thereby becoming 'States Parties' to it) agree to be legally bound by its provisions. They report regularly to an expert Committee on the Rights of the Child as to steps they have taken to comply with the provisions of the Convention.

This Convention is the first universal legally binding code of child rights in history. It brings together in one treaty all the relevant child rights issues, rather than having them scattered among a number of international treaties.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child contains 54 articles, each of which details a different type of right. These can be broken down into four broad categories:

Survival rights cover a child's right to life and the needs that are most basic to existence; these include an adequate living standard, shelter, nutrition and access to medical services.

Development rights include those things that children require in order to reach their fullest potential. Examples are the right to education, play and leisure, cultural activities, access to information, and freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

Protection rights require that children be safeguarded against all forms of abuse, neglect and exploitation. They cover issues such as special care for refugee children, torture, abuses in the criminal justice system, involvement in armed conflict, child labour, drug abuse and sexual exploitation.

Participation rights allow children to take an active role in their communities and nations. These encompass the freedom to express opinions, to have a say in matters affecting their own lives, to join associations and to assemble peacefully. As their abilities develop, children are to have increasing opportunities to participate in the activities of their society, in preparation for responsible adulthood.

How did the Convention on the Rights of the Child come about?

In 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Implicitly, this ground-breaking document included children's rights, but an international consensus that children's special needs should be articulated followed rapidly.

In 1959, a Declaration of the Rights of the Child was adopted by the United Nations. It consisted of 10 rights, and was not legally binding on the countries that signed it.

In 1978, a draft convention on children's rights was submitted to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights by the Government of Poland. During the International Year of the Child in 1979, the Commission set up a working group to coordinate the range of ideas on the draft convention being submitted by governments around the world. Ten years of painstaking negotiations followed.

On 20 November 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child was completed and adopted by the General Assembly. While preserving the spirit of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, the Convention reflected contemporary issues and concerns that had emerged in the past 30 years, such as environmental protection, drug abuse and sexual exploitation. The Convention entered into force in 1990, after being ratified by 20 countries. As of 1 December 1999, 191 countries have demonstrated their commitment to the future of their children by ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

How can young people be helped to learn about their rights?

Knowledge of the provisions of the Convention is an essential first step, but knowledge alone will not ensure that young people develop a sense of personal involvement and commitment to action on rights issues. Ideally, a three-step learning process should take place, which includes:

- **exploring** the topic of children's rights — gathering, analysing and synthesizing information on the issues;
- **responding** to the information gathered — becoming familiar with a range of perspectives, becoming sensitized to the human dimension of rights issues, cultivating a sense of empathy, and developing interest in becoming involved;
- **taking action** in a concrete and practical way, usually in one's own locality; through action on the local manifestations of global rights issues, children can become linked to worldwide efforts to promote justice and constructive change.

Throughout this process, it is important for young people to understand that rights issues are not something that affect only people in far-away places, but are alive and relevant in their own communities.

Children's rights and parents

While the Convention on the Rights of the Child upholds a number of basic rights, it does not infringe on the rights of parents to decide what is best for their children. Instead, it specifically states that governments shall make every effort to keep families intact, and shall provide support and assistance to parents in fulfilling their primary responsibilities with regard to the upbringing and development of their children. The promotion of children's rights is not a matter of placing children in conflict with the adult authorities in their lives, but of encouraging all citizens to work together for a safe, healthy and productive future for children.

The type of climate in which examination of children's rights issues takes place is an essential part of the learning process. Children may learn **about** rights through methods in which the adult imparts information. But learning **for** rights involves creating a group atmosphere in which each individual is valued and respected, where bias and discrimination have no place, where democratic participation is encouraged and where responsible expression of opinions is the norm. In short, learning will be most effective when young people not only grasp cognitive concepts, but also practise the skills and experience the attitudes relevant to the promotion of rights.

In working with young people, adults need to be aware that there are many rights issues that will be highly sensitive and personal. In any group, there may be young people who have experienced or are experiencing poverty, abuse, neglect, separation from one or both parents, or discrimination. Their need for privacy must be respected; in no circumstances should they be compelled to discuss these issues against their will. On the other hand, adults would do well to inform themselves in advance about the appropriate resource people or agencies in their school or community that could intervene in serious matters of rights violations. Should the need arise, they would then be prepared to refer those children who might need specialized support.

Who is this guide for?

This guide is intended for youth group leaders and teachers working with young people aged 13 and older, in both industrialized and developing countries. It can also be used by facilitators working with adult groups, such as UNICEF volunteers. It is divided into three main sections.

The first section, **Activities for Learning About the Convention on the Rights of the Child**, offers a range of activities that will help children get to know the Convention in depth and consider its impact on their lives and the lives of others.

Some activities in this section require the use of worksheets or cards. These follow the activity descriptions and may be duplicated as necessary.

The second section, **Planning for Action**, suggests activities that can be used, either alone or in sequence, to help young people plan ways of taking realistic action on a rights issue.

The third section of the guide, **In and Out of School: Different Ways of Using the Activities**, suggests activities appropriate for a variety of settings, from a one-session introductory workshop to a unit of study in a secondary school curriculum.

Stories of action projects from around the world are included throughout the text; it is hoped that they will inspire teachers, youth group leaders and young people to expand their vision of how they might become involved in promoting children's rights in their own communities.

The complete text of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, with an unofficial summary of its main provisions, is included in the back of the guide.