

A Beginning

Images of Rights: Children's Perspectives Project

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World Forum Working Group on Children's Rights



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The United Nations ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989, a point in history in which the effects of rapidly expanding global population and rapidly expanding resource demands had just started to become clear for many. What do the rights of the child look like today in 2016, almost three decades past the declaration of the CRC? Application of children's rights is as varied as the contexts in which children live: a child fleeing war in Syria; a child living in Attawapiskat; a child displaced by a gold mine in Guatemala; a child living in inner-city poverty in Chicago, Mumbai, or Sao Paulo.

We know that there has never been a larger generation of young people in the world than there is today. We also know that the world is, and will be, profoundly affected by their actions and decisions for years to come. Protecting the rights of all children to live and grow in safety and security, then, is of utmost importance for present and future generations and for the planet. After all, it is the dreams and aspirations of the children alive today, which are "shaped by circumstances into which they are born and which surround them as they grow up, that will give the century its final definition" (Pearson, L., 2004, p. 9).

We wonder, then, why almost 30 years past the ratification of the UNCRC, there is still so much ground to cover in understanding and protecting the rights of the child. To better understand how children and their caregivers envision and live their rights, the World Forum Working Group on Children's Rights (WGCR — see sidebar) is launching the *Images of Rights: Children's Perspectives Project*, focused on how children express their realities through their artwork. This article, the first in a series of three, introduces the project, provides context and background, and invites your participation.

What are the Rights of the Child?

It is in the best interests of all people around the globe that the children of today grow up and develop in conditions of safety and security (where they are protected from deprivation, want, fear, and injury) within their families and community (A Canada Fit for Children, 2004, p. 5). Children's policies and programs in most national contexts have been primarily guided by an understanding of child protection in which childhood was conceived as a period of "socialization in or preparation for adulthood or a growth towards autonomy and children were in need of tutelage" (Reynaert, Bouverne-de Bie,

& Vandeveld, 2009, p. 522). However, in the late 1980s and 1990s, a different set of ideas about children's rights began to emerge and were embraced by the United Nations and embodied in the 1989 UNCRC. This child rights model presents an alternative way of understanding children and childhood, in which children are viewed as "social actors, as active agents and autonomous, independent human beings in constructing their lives in their own right" (Reynaert, Bouverne-de Bie, & Vandeveld, 2009, p. 521).

Alongside this rights perspective, the idea of children's 'well-being' emerged as a more contextualized view of children's growth and development. While a precise definition for well-being does not exist, the concept of children's well-being is an emerging theme of global exploration and research in the area of early childhood development. Most attempts at defining it include both psychological and physical well-being. As a descriptor, well-being is best understood in the context of a child's interactions with others and their place in the community. Often linked to the poverty agenda, discussions about well-being frequently focus on compensatory models of provision (for example, in the areas of education, social skills, finances, and emotional health) designed to support impoverished children and their families. Sometimes well-being is also considered in the context of a child's right to empowerment, support and realization of their aspirations for themselves, their families, and community.

The assurance of children's optimal well-being — where children realize their full potential — is the goal of the WGCR. The UNCRC sets out 54 rights. These rights, as experienced by children on a daily basis, generally fall into what is known as the "3P's": provision, protection and participation.



The World Forum Foundation Working Group on Children's Rights

The mission of the World Forum Foundation is to promote an on-going global exchange of ideas on the delivery of quality services for young children in diverse settings. This mission is accomplished through convening gatherings of early childhood professionals around the world and by promoting the continuing exchange of ideas among participants.

Much of the work of the World Forum Foundation takes place in its Working Groups — each established and coordinated by World Forum community members, who share a desire to address a particular global early childhood issue at a deeper level. Each Working Group has a Leadership Team to guide the development of its mission and projects.

In 2012, a group of committed delegates formed the Working Group on Children's Rights (WGCR), with a mission to promote the rights of the child through study, reflection, and dissemination of information about the multiple perspectives and contexts for children's rights. The WGCR is currently leading two complementary projects related to its mission:

- Images of Rights: Children's Perspectives Project
worldforumfoundation.org/images-of-rights/, introduced in this article
- Voices of Children Video Documentary Project
worldforumfoundation.org/voices-of-children/

The Voices of Children Video Documentary Project supports adults' understanding of young children's diverse perspectives on their rights. A core goal is to create a video documentary that explores how children experience their rights in cultural contexts worldwide. This documentary project is embedded in the values of the UNCRC and our belief that young children are competent and capable human beings, who realize and are able to communicate their rights. As such, the Voices of Children documentary will provide a powerful resource for children's rights advocates to initiate a dialogue with educators, legislators, and leaders throughout the world. Visit: worldforumfoundation.org/voices-of-children to learn more.

Finally, for 2016 and beyond, WGCR leaders have organized a series of *Exchange* articles on Children's Rights in diverse contexts. Following this article, look for two more articles to deepen our discussion of children's rights associated with provision, protection, and participation and how children's experiences of the 3P's are situated in the goal of realizing each child's 'full potential.'



- **Provision** is the right of access to resources, skills, and services that are necessary for children to survive and thrive.
- Rights of **protection** stipulate that all children be free from exploitation and abuse by adults or institutions that seek to threaten their health or dignity.
- Rights of **participation** acknowledge that children should be actively involved and engaged in their communities, including the processes that lead to the realization of their rights, and thus have a direct impact on decisions that affect them.

While these 3P's may look different from one family, community, or cultural context to the next, their basic underlying principles remain consistent and can be better understood by giving visibility to the experiences of children and their families and caregivers.

Global Indicators of Children's Well-being

Children's access to their rights can be partially understood by measurements of their well-being, contained in studies and reports such as UNICEF's 2013 *Report Card 11*, (www.unicef-irc.org/Report-Card-11/). *Report Card 11* ranked 29 economically developed countries across five dimensions of children's well-being, including material well-being, health and safety, education, behaviours and risks, housing and environment (Adamson, 2013, p. 5). The highest-ranked countries are European (particularly Nordic) countries with high investments in social support services (top five ranked in order: Netherlands, Norway, Iceland, Finland, Sweden), while the lowest-ranked countries tend to be those with less investment in health, early childhood development, and other social services (the bottom five



Chicago Story

Chicago, Illinois, United States, is a city embedded in a western cultural perspective. Labeled the most violent city in America, it is a city in crisis and has recently become the hub of controversy around police violence. So, the idea of rights is very relevant to the teachers and children in this urban American community. In one diverse Chicago neighborhood, a group of teachers, later joined by families and children, began a grassroots exploration of what it means to 'live our rights.'

As teachers, we began by examining our own understanding of children's rights, and then met with children and families. When asked to articulate what their children's rights were, families responded, "We don't know what you mean." Shocked, we realized this would not be as easy as we first thought, and thus chose to make educating families about the UNCRC and the 3P's our year-long project.

Over the next year, we addressed rights from the ground up, exploring how families, teachers, and children live their rights in their homes, community, and school. Together with families we worked on identifying and supporting the individual daily needs of the children within the family, school, and community (provision). We looked at what helped children feel safe and what gave them a sense of belonging at home, in school and in the community (protection). And finally, we looked at how to make sure children really had an impact on decisions that impacted them (participation).

Participation was the one area that families and teachers alike felt we did not fully understand. We came to agree that it did not mean asking children to choose: "I'm not going to school today," but it did mean that, as teachers and families, we increasingly considered where we could offer more choices and how we could value children's ideas more in the classroom. Even though the families and children originally involved in this project have moved on to elementary school, asking families about children's rights and reflecting daily on how we can support children in living their rights in the classroom have become part of our curriculum. This is at its heart a grassroots rights project, but our hope is as both children and families involved grow through the educational system they will work to keep children's rights at the forefront of their educational experience.

ranked in order: Greece, United States, Lithuania, Latvia, and Romania).

Since the 2000s there has generally been widespread improvement in most, but not all, indicators of children's well-being, but UNICEF reporting tends to

focus primarily on indicators related to older children and young teenagers. Among economically developed countries, only Canada and Australia regularly monitor well-being in early childhood — a critical stage of physical, mental, and emotional development in

which genetics interact with experience to construct the neural pathways and connections that become the foundations for all later development (Adamson, 2013). The rights of young children to protection, provision, and participation are thus of crucial importance, and the failure to protect these rights can increase risk in later life outcomes ranging from “impaired cognitive development to lower levels of school achievement, from reduced skills and expectations to lower productivity and earnings, from higher rates of unemployment to increased dependence on welfare, from the prevalence of antisocial behaviour to involvement in crime, from the greater likelihood of drug and alcohol abuse to higher levels of teenage births, and from increased health care costs to a higher incidence of mental illness” (Adamson, 2013, p. 4).

It is the assertion of the WGCRC that the protection and promotion of children’s well-being is thus not only a moral imperative — it is essential to good policy-making, on both social and fiscal levels. Investment in well-being is an investment in a child’s right to express individuality, to become a respected and respectful member of the community, to have the opportunity to engage and be engaged, and to fully participate in society without fear of recrimination or discrimination. Implementation of the UNCRC offers one way to achieve these vital goals.

The UNCRC is a powerful statement about respecting children. It is also a living document that is interpreted differently around the world. Given that the integrity of culture and family form the basis for respecting children’s rights globally, it is important to be able to understand and appreciate diverse lived realities and experiences of those rights. The Chicago story (see text box) provides one example of the process of coming to think about and

understand children’s rights in an inner-city setting.

Images of Rights: Children’s Perspectives Project

Children’s daily experiences of provision, protection, and participation form the fabric of their lives. These rights are not experienced as the political, debated processes through which adults make decisions and form policies, but in a more elemental way. Feeling safe, having food and shelter, having a sense of place and community and family, are all integral to a child’s sense of well-being. When these basic needs are lacking or insecure, children are aware of it. Whether or not they can verbally articulate their rights, children experience the presence or absence of rights viscerally in their everyday lives, and they have the capacity to express these experiences and understandings through the images they make and the stories they tell.

By collecting photos of children’s art in any media from around the world, the *Images of Rights: Children’s Perspectives Project* will give visibility to how children express their experiences of rights. With each photo, we will ask for the child’s story about his art and a significant adult’s interpretations on how it relates to the 3P’s. Once collected, we will make the photos available through the World Forum website and other media, as a tool to engage families, educators, politicians, UN and nongovernmental organization officials, and community leaders. By giving visibility to the ways that children experience their rights to provision, protection, and participation, we hope to initiate deeper dialogs on children’s rights, and in doing so, better understand how to provide for children’s well-being through the application of the UNCRC.

We invite you to contribute. Please visit: worldforumfoundation.org/images-of-rights to learn more.

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