

“TOWARD A WORLD FIT FOR CHILDREN”

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BUILDING A WORLD FIT FOR CHILDREN

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“We are the world’s children.

We are the victims of exploitation and abuse.

We are street children.

We are the children of war.

We are denied good-quality education and health care.

We are victims of political, economic, cultural, religious and environmental
discrimination.

We are children whose voices are not being heard: it is time we are taken into
account.

We want a world fit for children, because a world fit for us is a world fit for
everyone.”

This statement was made by the child delegates representing the Children's Forum at the opening of the United Nations General Assembly's Special Session on Children in May of 2002. It was a plea directed at the world's leaders on behalf of millions of silent children who see life not through the bright and excited eyes of childhood, but through world-weary eyes that have surveyed a reality truly unfit for children.

It is a global human impulse to nurture and protect children. Parents everywhere seek the best for their children.

Yet, the facts demonstrate that millions of children are denied the kind of childhood we believe should be the norm. Nearly 11 million children die each year before their fifth birthday, mostly from preventable causes. That's 30,000 children a day. It's an ongoing, silent emergency that can't seem to summon a swift and engaged response from the world community.

Some 150 million children are malnourished. That's one in four children under five. About 600 million children live on less than \$1.00 a day, and one billion children – that's more than half the children in the developing world – suffer from one or more forms of extreme deprivation of essential goods and services, such as nutrition, safe drinking water, sanitation, health, shelter, education, and access to basic social services.

But it is not just a matter of deprivation. War has killed more than two million children and driven another 20 million from their homes. More than 300,000 children in over 30 countries, some as young as eight, have been pressed into service as child soldiers. An estimated 1.2 million children are trafficked each year, and two million children, mainly girls, are exploited through the commercial sex trade.

Through the accident of birth, children do not face a consistent reality in this world. They are not in a position to shape their circumstances – they must depend on adults to protect their childhood.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 referred to childhood as “entitled to special care and assistance.” Over the decades, culminating in the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, a global consensus has emerged that childhood is a state of human life that must be accorded its own space apart from adulthood. Children are not simply “small adults”; they are entitled to a childhood that is protected from peril, want, and exploitation.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child basically says that children are to be guarded and nourished not as simply a matter of kindness or charity, but as a matter of right. Some contend that this is a dangerous formula, because “rights lead to entitlements.” That’s the wrong way to look at it: rights lead to justice.

The dialogue is fundamentally altered when you adopt a rights-based approach to children’s issues. Suddenly, we aren’t talking about getting around to helping and protecting children if we have a surplus and are feeling charitable. No, we are saying children have a right to childhood and a first call – as a matter of justice – on the world’s attention and resources.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly recognizes that the family is the basic unit of society and has primacy in children’s lives and development. But it calls upon governments as a matter of obligation – and justice – to create a child-friendly environment

that respects the role of parents and families, and that creates the social conditions to protect children and to help achieve the fulfillment of basic human needs.

It's not a matter of the state supplanting the family, it is a matter of the state supporting the family and making sure that all children are nurtured, protected, and allowed to develop. The child may be raised in a loving and caring family, but what is the village that awaits that child outside the home?

The theme of this conference is "Building a World Fit for Children." To make that a reality, the political will must be generated to develop the appropriate policies and dedicate the appropriate resources. In seeking to move national policy in Washington, coalitions and networks are formed on the issues involved, whether it is domestic matters like health care and education or international matters like child trafficking and AIDS orphans. These battles tend to get fought in isolation, without an overarching theme or context.

The rights-based approach under the Convention on the Rights of the Child offers that missing context. Acknowledgement that these policy and funding efforts spring from rights that children have – rights that are recognized on a global scale – brings a new urgency to the process. And it demands a higher accountability since the struggle is one for basic justice for children.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child has often been misunderstood and unfairly characterized. The challenge before this conference is to explore how the Convention on the Rights of the Child can be presented in the United States as a tool to advance children both here and in the world community. The Convention on the Rights of the Child and the rights-based approach need to be seen as a foundation for a better

America for children and families, and a foundation for American leadership to create a world fit for children.

The goal of eventual ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is not an end in itself; rather, it is part of a dynamic process at home and abroad to save and to improve the lives of children. It creates a standard for our advocacy and allows us to share a common understanding with the rest of the world about the principles we acknowledge regarding the treatment of children. Working from that common understanding, we can expect more from each other in the way we behave toward our children. And it enables us to create benchmarks for progress and to challenge each other to achieve them. Perhaps most importantly, it provides a framework for child survival, development, protection, and participation.

The challenge, of course, is to make the Convention on the Rights of the Child relevant to the needs of America's children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child does not impose "foreign" views or standards upon the American reality; rather, it places that reality within a truly universal human understanding about the obligations of a nation to their children. The principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child are nothing alien; indeed, they reflect in good measure the American experience and American values about children and families.

At a time of so competing domestic priorities, the Convention on the Rights of the Child reminds policymakers that justice requires that the rights of all children in the country be observed through their protection and the fulfillment of essential human needs. If we profess to love children and families, how can we do anything less?

As the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral has written:

“Many things we need can wait. The child can not.

Now is the time his bones are being formed,

his blood is being made,

his mind is being developed.

To him we cannot say tomorrow,

His name is today.”

The children speaking at the Special Session on Children echoed this in their concluding remarks to the adult delegates:

“We are the children of the world, and despite our different backgrounds, we share a common reality.

We are united by our struggle to make the world a better place for all.

You call us the future, but we are also the present.”

Indeed, they are the present, and they deserve our action now. They cannot wait for tomorrow. May that urgency encourage all of us to respect children’s rights by working to make this a world truly fit for all children.

Thank you.