

# 20 November - Universal Children's Day



Celebrated each year on 20 November, Universal Children's Day is observed throughout the world to promote the welfare of children. Understanding the needs of children, as well as ensuring that their basic rights are respected, is fundamental not only to safeguarding the well-being of children but also to creating a more secure, just and sustainable planet.

## All the children in the world = 2.2 billion

Childhood is the time between birth and becoming an adult. It is a time to learn, to play and be safe. But it can also be a time of vulnerability. In most societies, children are exposed to problems such as malnutrition, disease, poverty and inequality. They are also likely to suffer disproportionately during armed conflict and humanitarian disasters.

- Every second child, a whopping one billion, lives in poverty. More than 30 per cent of children in developing countries – about 600 million – live on less than £1 a day. In the UK, an estimated 1.7 million children were classified as poor in 2009, defined by measures such as not being able to afford three meals a day or birthday presents
- Every 3.6 seconds one person, usually a child under the age of five, dies of starvation
- At the beginning of 2010, at least 250,000 child soldiers were engaged in some 20 armed conflicts around the world, and more than one billion children live in territories affected by armed conflict

Children require special protection and support if they are to fulfil their potential. Healthy, educated children become healthy, well-informed adults: people who can create better lives for themselves, their own children, their communities, their countries and the wider world. Looking after the welfare of children is an investment in a better-functioning society and future for us all.

## Growing up can be difficult

Children are important members of society. Their participation at home, in school and in their wider communities is vital. But children, particularly in the world's poorest communities, tend to be the hardest hit in terms of income, health and opportunities. They can also find it more difficult to take action to ensure that their basic needs and rights are met.

**Education** enables children to develop their abilities and to access other human rights, for example, the right to work and to political participation. Yet factors such as the cost of education; a lack of facilities like pens, books, teachers and classrooms; the pressure to work and support their families; and social attitudes can hold children back from going to school.

- 72 million children are currently not enrolled in school.

**Health** is linked to several issues, including access to health care, clean water, protection against diseases, nutritious food and a safe environment.

- 270 million children have no access to health services (that's one in seven)
- 400 million children do not have safe drinking water (that's one in five)
- 640 million children (that's nearly one in three) are without adequate shelter

**Work** is a reality for many children in the world. Working as a child isn't necessarily bad – many children in the UK as well as in other countries work to support their family by looking after a relative, helping out in the family



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business or by seeking paid employment. But it is important that children work in safe conditions, that they receive adequate wages, are above the minimum age of employment and that they have opportunities to access education. Unfortunately, millions of children around the world are forced to work.

- The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that over 215 million children are currently involved in child labour that violates international standards, including some of the worst forms of child labour, such as slavery or trafficking.

## Protecting and empowering children

The United Nations (UN) works to promote the welfare of children worldwide. Founded in 1945 in the aftermath of the Second World War, the UN is an international organisation made up of 192 countries that strives to achieve international peace, development and human rights.

One of the most important aspects of the UN's work is the protection and empowerment of children. The UN recognises that children have rights too and that they require special protection. In 1989, it drew up a treaty called the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the first international legal document containing a set of children's rights and standards. These include the right to education, to shelter and an adequate standard of living, and the right to be free from torture and abuse. The right of children to participate in decisions affecting their lives is also included. Nearly all the UN's member countries – 190 in total, including the UK – have signed the Convention and agreed to make its contents a reality in their territories.

## What else does the UN do?

The UN's children's organisation, UNICEF, supports governments in fulfilling the provisions contained in the Convention. Helping the world's children survive and flourish is a core UNICEF activity, and improving health, safety and access to education is central to that. In the years since the Convention was adopted, UNICEF has led the UN's efforts to improve the lives of children, with some amazing successes:

- UNICEF has helped to distribute vaccines to over 40 per cent of children in developing countries
- The annual number of under-five deaths has fallen from around 12.5 million in 1990 to less than nine million in 2008
- Gender gaps in primary-school enrolment are shrinking across the developing world.

UNICEF also works for **children in the UK**, helping to combat problems such as child poverty and encouraging young people to learn about global issues such as climate change.

## What next?

The challenge for the next 20 years is to build on the progress achieved, working together to reach those children who are still being denied their rights to development, protection and participation. By celebrating Universal Children's Day, people all over the world can contribute to protecting and empowering the world's children.

### CASE STUDY

Ayyamma lives in the slums of Bangalore, India. "In the place I live, violence is a daily occurrence," says Ayyamma. "In my opinion, beating up a child is the worst form of violence." She has been working since she was eight, when she had to drop out of school after her father died. With the help of a local charity, she managed to continue her education.

Today she is one of the leaders of Bhima Sangha, a union which campaigns for the rights of 13,000 working children in India. In 2006, she travelled to New York to participate in the United Nations global study on violence against children. [http://www.unicef.org/voy/explore/violence/explore\\_3555.html](http://www.unicef.org/voy/explore/violence/explore_3555.html)



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