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# Why a book on Children's Rights?

As human beings, children have inherent rights and fundamental freedoms. The United Nations recognises this, and in 1991 drew up the Charter of Children's Rights as a way of bringing the world together in defence of these rights and freedoms.

And yet, countless children throughout the world today continue to fall victim to the worst kinds of physical and mental abuse. There are governments and individuals who ignore the rights of children, and who continue to subject them to abuse, discrimination, neglect, or to treat them as property to be bought or sold.

In order to stop the ongoing cycle of violence and abuse in nations, in communities and in homes, children need to know their rights. We adults have a special responsibility to help children to **understand** and **embrace** the values that underlie human rights – values like respect, fairness and tolerance. But, as adults, we also need to practise those selfsame values ourselves, and respect the rights of the children who look to us for love, care and guidance.



To many children, these are foreign concepts. Yet for democracy to flourish, they need to become familiar concepts – and not just concepts, but a part of the prevailing culture. Only in this way can today's children grow into the kind of adults to whom 'human rights' is more than a phrase, but a way of thinking and acting towards one's fellow human beings.

# The Convention on the Rights of the Child

## Key messages

**Endorsed by the United Nations in 1989**

A child is defined as any person under the age of 18.

- Every child has the right to:
  - a name and a nationality
  - protection from physical or mental injury, neglect, exploitation and sexual abuse
  - freedom of thought, expression and religion
  - access to both parents
  - access to quality health care
  - free, compulsory primary education
  - protection from participating in armed conflict
- No child may be subjected to torture or other cruel or degrading treatment. Neither capital punishment nor life imprisonment may be imposed on a child.
- The mentally or physically disabled child has the right to a full, decent life with dignity, self-reliance and participation in community life.
- The child temporarily or permanently separated from his or her parents has the right to special protection and assistance by the state. The state must ensure alternative care, with regard for the child's cultural and religious background. Such care must be reviewed periodically.
- The refugee child, whether accompanied by an adult or not, has the right to protection and humanitarian aid, and assistance in procuring all the rights enjoyed by other children.
- A child belonging to a minority group, whether ethnic, religious or linguistic, has the right to enjoy and practise his or her culture, religion and language.
- The education of the child shall be directed to:
  - developing the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities
  - teaching the child respect for his or her own parents, culture and language, as well as the culture and language of the country where he or she lives
  - preparing the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of the sexes and friendship amongst all peoples.



# TEACHING CHILDREN RIGHTS

The South African Constitution enshrines the Bill of Children's Rights. We know the phrase – but do we know the meaning?

This book is an attempt to familiarise children with the concept of rights – and with the values that underlie all human rights. Values such as respect, fairness and tolerance are at the heart of all human rights. They form the cornerstone of our democracy. Yet many children are growing up with very little understanding of, or appreciation for, these values. Television, computers and the pace of life generally are robbing children of opportunities to learn. We need to focus consciously and consistently on these values if we are to grow into the kind of society that we and our children wish to live in.

This book approaches the topic of rights and values in a fun, practical way. The book addresses children, and may be used at home, informally, with the whole family. Indeed, it is in the family setting where most real learning takes place. It may also be used in the school, where it may form part of a life skills programme in the Junior Primary phase.

Wherever it is used, the book acts as a starting point. Parents or teachers using this book are encouraged to develop further activities based on the topic, and to use whatever opportunities present themselves to drive home the message that human rights matter. We all are bound by respect for human rights. Let us discuss them, explain them, live them – and in this way raise children who will respect and uphold the value of every human being. The message of respect for human beings is a much needed one in our society – let us teach it to our children now.



**"Let's talk about human rights at home – not only at school!"**

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