

# CHILDREN'S RIGHTS: WHAT CHILDREN THINK ABOUT THEM

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## Abstract

Child abuse and neglect can be thought of as violations of children's rights. Declarations of children's rights have been formulated by adults; they are intended to be internationally valid, but little attempt has been made to find out what children themselves think about their rights, in any country.

This study compared the views of Malaysian children and young adults with those of Australians. In both countries the right to love, affection and understanding ranked highly. Few children ranked highly their rights to freedom from fear of harm, or to protection; young adults ranked them more highly than the children. Most young people perceived schools as holding views very different from their own on children's rights. If schools are to perform a useful function in preventing abuse and neglect, children's views of schools may need to change, perhaps through changes in the schools.

## Introduction

Recognition of childhood as an important and distinctive period of life has developed only in recent centuries, at least in Western countries. Nonetheless, people recognised that infants and children had special needs, for care and food, for example, and that they were especially vulnerable to disease and accident (e.g., Aries, 1979; De Mause, 1976). Because of the high mortality rate among children, parents protected their own feelings by not investing them in their children until each child showed clear signs of survival, which might have been quite late in childhood. The notion that each child was born as a tabula rasa, a blank slate, on which parents and other caregivers could write what they pleased, reinforced the view that a child was passive, to be moulded and formed to the liking of adults. An extreme form of this view made it the responsibility of

caregivers to force children into the mould set by the parent generation. When this view was allied to a primitive religious notion that, blank as the slate might be, each child was born naturally and deeply sinful, caregivers' responsibilities became heavy indeed, and the lot of children very grievous. If children had any recognised rights, they were rights only to receive discipline. Social institutions weighed in: the church already had a disciplinary function; schools proved to be effective means by which children could be licked into shape.

In this century, knowledge about children has undergone dramatic changes, in particular through research in medical, behavioural and social sciences. Improved child health practices have made it emotionally safer for parents to invest affection in babies; increased knowledge about developmental sequences and the correlates of favourable development has led to quite dramatic changes in child care; national consciousness and increased affluence have led to increased national resources being devoted to child care and education.

After World War II, the United Nations espoused these developments, especially in the forms of UNESCO, UNCF and WHO. In 1959 the United Nations issued a Declaration of Rights of the Child, intended to be internationally valid and to provide a standard towards which nations would strive in providing care for their children.

## Rights of Children

United Nations Declaration of the Right of the Child 1959

### The Right to

- ...Affection, love and understanding
- ...Adequate nutrition and medical care
- ...Free education
- ...Full opportunity for play and recreation
- ...A name and nationality
- ...Special care, if handicapped
- ...Be among the first to receive relief in times of disaster
- ...Learn to be a useful member of society and to develop individual abilities
- ...Be brought up in a spirit of peace and universal brotherhood
- ...Enjoy these rights regardless of race, colour, sex, religion, national or social origin.

This Declaration states conditions which are inconsistent with child abuse and neglect. It may be that increasing worldwide awareness that children are, in too many instances, abused, exploited and neglected, arises partly from an increasing acceptance of the principles of this Declaration. Nonetheless, the Declaration still remains a standard which few countries have reached.

The United Nations declared 1979 the International Year of the Child. A small group, established in the United States by school psychologists (now known as the International School Psychology Association), considered that the UN declaration needed expansion, and they produced a Declaration of the Psychological Rights of the Child.

Psychological Rights of the Child July 1979  
A Child has a Right to Love and Freedom from Fear

- ...to love, affection and understanding
- ...to freedom from fear of psychological and physical harm or abuse
- ...to protection and advocacy

Personal, Spiritual and Social Development

- ...to personal identity, independence and the freedom to express these
- ...to opportunities for spiritual and moral development
- ...to satisfying interpersonal relationships and responsible group membership

Education and Play

- ...to formal and informal education and any necessary special resources
- ...to full opportunity for play, recreation and fantasy
- ...to optimum physical and psychological development and encouragement towards this

These rights give more attention to the inner world of a child than the UN Declaration, but both declarations attempt to set out tangible standards for the proper treatment of children.

Abuse and neglect are violations of children's rights. Abuse may include physical, sexual, emotional, social and mental ill-treatment or exploitation. Neglect may include failure to provide adequate physical sustenance, proper clothes and behavioural supports, adequate opportunities to learn and to achieve, and encouragement to do so. The two institutions primarily responsible for the care of children are the family and the

school. School attendance in many countries is a legal requirement between certain ages. Children enter school at an early age, when they are highly dependent upon school staff and administration for their needs. They spend more time at school than in any other activity (except, perhaps, watching television). Until the age of 16 or 18 years, school attendance is an overriding requirement for young people. In what are called the formative years, schools provide models of authority, of administration, and – perhaps most important – of interpersonal and intergroup behaviour; these models must influence the children in significant ways.

#### Aims of Cross Cultural Study

The Malaysian component of this work began when the medical directors of a clinic in a squatters' kampong (village) on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur invited us to investigate "what the kampong children think about their rights".

The study had three specific aims:

- (i) to examine relative support for the rights of children amongst Malaysian school, college and university students;
- (ii) to examine relationships between the Malaysian young people's views about the relative importance of their rights and the views that they attributed to their schools;
- (iii) to compare Malaysian with Australian results.

#### Method

Participants in Malaysia were 104 school pupils and 98 trainee teachers, and in Australia 141 school pupils and 41 trainee teachers (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Participants in Study of Children's Rights**

University of Malaya, January-February 1986

	Education Level	n	Religion
Squatter Kampong	Grade 5-6	6	Islam
	Form 3	29	Islam
Secondary School	Form 3	29	16 Buddhist
	Form 5	40	28 Buddhist
TOTAL		104	
Islamic TC	Year 2 <sup>1</sup>	51	Islam
Univ. B.Sc.Ed.	Year 2 <sup>1</sup>	18	9 Islam/8 Buddhist
Univ. Akademi Islam	Year 1 <sup>1</sup>	29	Islam
TOTAL		98	

Monash University, 1981

Group	Education Level	n
Primary School	Grade 6	57
Secondary School	Form 2	41
	Form 4	43
TOTAL		141
University	Dip.Ed. <sup>1</sup>	41

<sup>1</sup> Trainee teachers

**Material:** Declaration of the Psychological Rights of the Child, arranged alphabetically, with short explanations of each principle, in English, and translated into Bahasa Malaysia; a list of Ad Hoc Rights (see Table 2), based upon the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child and the Declaration of the Psychological Rights of the Child, translated into Bahasa Malaysia; a graphic scale from 0 to 4 which allowed children to respond by pointing, and the following interview schedule translated into Bahasa Malaysia:

- (i) How important is ... to you?  
(0: Not important at all, 4: Very important)
- (ii) Should children have other rights?
- (iii) How much right do you have to ... at home/in your family? (0: No rights, 4: As much as anyone could have)
- (iv) How much right do you have to ... at school? (0: No rights, 4: As much as anyone could have)

**Table 2. Ad Hoc Rights used in Interview at Kampong**

A.	To go to school . . .
B.	To have a home/A place to study
C.	To have enough good food . . .
D.	To be loved . . .
E.	To be a good person . . .
F.	To have good friends . . .
G.	To be strong and healthy . . .
H.	To be able to play . . .
I.	Not to be frightened or hurt . . .
J.	To have your own name . . .

**Procedure:** Data from Australian participants had been collected previously (Nixon, 1981). The six 11-12 year old boys were individually interviewed at the kampong clinic by the second author using the Ad Hoc Rights (Table 2) and the interview schedule. Other participants ranked the Psychological Rights of the Child (from 1 to 9) twice: first, according to the importance the respondent attached to each one (Self), and second, according to the importance the respondent attributed to the school best known to him (School). The secondary school, college and university students did this in their classrooms; the kampong Form 3 students did so in an after school classroom at the kampong clinic. Written and oral explanations ensured, as far as possible, that respondents adequately understood the Rights and the task before them.

#### Results

**Interviews:** The six boys who were interviewed at the kampong judged nine of the ten rights as important, three of them judging the right to *be able to play* . . . as not very important. Two reported no right to play at home and three reported little or no right to play at school. All six rated the right *not to be frightened or hurt* . . . as very important, yet two reported no such right either at home or at school, and a third reported only limited rights both at home and at school. But for the other eight rights, the six boys reported that they had "as much right as anyone could have", both at home and at school, to those components of a secure and satisfying life.

**Rating Scale results:** Using the data from secondary and tertiary students, ranks 1, 2, and 3 were tallied for each psychological Right, separately for Self and School, and separately for males and females in each group of participants. The number of times each Right was ranked in the first three was then computed as a percentage of the number of times all Rights were ranked in the first three for that group. No consistent age or sex trends appeared. The data were then combined (i) for school pupils and (ii) for trainee teachers.

Tables 3 and 4 show the three or four Rights which received the highest percentages, for Self and for School.

If participants believes that their schools shared their views about children's rights they would have ranked the Rights in similar way for Self and School. This would be shown in statistically significant positive correlations for the individuals pairs of rankings and for each group's mean correlation. Table 5 shows the obtained correlations.

**Table 3. Support for Rights by Self: Pupils (SP) and Trainee Teachers (TT)(Mean%)**

Rights	Self			
	Australia		Malaysia	
	SP	TT	SP	TT
A. Formal and informal education			22	14
B. Freedom from fear of . . . harm . . .		18		
D. Love, affection and understanding . . .	18	24	20	28
E. Opportunitis for spiritual and moral development			13	16
G. Personal identity . . .	17	23		
H. Protection and advocacy . . .				14
I. Satisfying interpersonal relationships . . .	16		13	

(Three or four highest percentages only)

**Table 4. Support for Rights by School: Pupils (SP) and Trainee Teachers (TT) (Mean%)**

Rights	School			
	Australia		Malaysia	
	SP	TT	SP	TT
A. Formal and informal education . . .	29	24	29	30
C. Full opportunity for play . . .		15		
E. Opportunities for spiritual and moral development . . .	19	15	15	17
F. Optimum physical and psychological development . . .			11	13
G. Personal identity . . .	12			

(Three highest percentages only)

**Table 5. Spearman Rank Difference Correlation Coefficients between Individual Rankings for School and Self**

Group	Mean rho	Range
Malaysian		
Kampong Form 3	+.37	-.40 to + .88
Secondary School Form 3	+.10	-.47 to + .92
Secondary School Form 5	+.45	-.42 to +1.00
Trainee teachers		
B.Sc.Ed.	+.35	-.18 to + .83
Akademi Islam	+.25	-.60 to + .98
Islamic teachers college	+.85*	-.85 to + .92
Australian		
Primary School Grade 6	+.24	-.80 to +1.00
Secondary School Form 2	+.15	-.80 to 1.00
Secondary School Form 4	+.07	-.80 to + .80
Trainee teachers Dip.Ed.	+.05	-.80 to +1.00

\*p1 .05

While the range in Table 5 shows that some individuals in each group reported similar or the same rankings for Self and School, none of the Australian and only one of the Malaysian groups produced mean correlations which were statistically significant. The exception was the Islamic teachers college, and even there 26 of the 51 participants produced zero or negative individual correlation coefficients.

### Discussion

The squatters' kampong presents some serious social and health problems: poverty, lack of playing areas, malnutrition, and a range of infectious or contagious disorders. Despite these conditions, the children appeared clean, well dressed, healthy, and very responsive. Those from whom data were obtained attended

supplementary classes out of school hours at the kampong clinic; their families may well look upon education as a means towards improved living conditions.

Neither the Australian nor the other Malaysian participants ranked *Full opportunity to play . . .* highly for Self; only the Australian teacher trainees ranked it highly for School. The rhetoric of Western child care and education present play and recreation as important sources of intellectual, social and emotional development; children appear to regard them as trivial, perhaps by contrast with "work".

Neither the Malaysian (except the boys interviews) nor the Australian participants ranked the Right to *freedom from fear of psychological or physical harm or abuse* highly, although teacher trainees ranked it and *Protection and advocacy* somewhat more highly than younge participants did. Either the school children were unaware of their vulnerability or considered themselves quite secure.

The lack of relationship between ranks for Self and School leads to a number of tentative conclusions:-

- (i) young people perceive schools as holding views very different from their own about children's rights;
- (ii) since, on the whole, young people don't regard themselves as in need of protection from harm, they may be unlikely to turn to their schools for help, or to be ready to accept help from school, in case of abuse, exploitation, or neglect from some source outside the school.

Despite living under quite undesirable conditions, the kampong children apparently accepted the care that they received as a proper standard of care. If that is so, it implies that they may consider that that standard of care is appropriate for their own children when they become parents. That is, the standards learned in childhood may be applied in later life, and may be highly resistant to change - another aspect of the observed generational incidence of child abuse. But we should note a comment from a Malaysian college lecturer, that the kampong (any kampong) is a loving, protective place for children; they would not therefore see their need for protection.

The two institutions which carry the greatest responsibility for children's development, learning, social and emotional states, for good or ill, are the family and the school. Because these two encompass so much of children's time and so many facets of physiological and psychological functioning, they have the capacity to translate children's rights into actualities. For the same reasons, they both have the capacity to neglect, exploit and abuse children. Our traditions make us reluctant to intervene in either families or schools, and both families and schools

resist external intervention or observation. In these circumstances, the lot of a child suffering maltreatment is a sorry one. It cries out, not only for increased public education, but for increased systematic training in principles of human development, physiological, social, emotional and intellectual, especially for school staffs.

Through their rankings the young people made clear the Rights that they judged central to their wellbeing. We asked the Malaysians whether they wanted other rights. The kampong Form 3 children asked for access to counselling, a voice in school affairs, encouragement to study

instead of punishment for failure at school, and fair treatment in school. Others asked for rights to be trusted, to be responsible, to be safe on the road, and to freedom for individual expression; they pointed out that parents and teachers need to be good models. Their additional suggested rights not only seem sensible, they also show that these young people understood the task before them and took it seriously.

Malaysian results were broadly similar to Australian results. The objective of international validity for the Declaration of Psychological Rights receives some support in this study.

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\* Portions of this article have been Adapted from Maluccio, Fein & Olmstead 1986.

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