

Briefing on human rights for children



What are human rights?

Human rights are universal rights and freedoms that everyone has regardless of nationality, sex, national or ethnic origin, race, religion, language or other status. They are inalienable, which means that they cannot be taken away. All human rights are interrelated and interdependent. Upholding human rights means respecting the dignity and worth of every person.

The cornerstone document setting out these rights is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948. It has paved the way for countless national and international documents protecting human rights. It continues to represent the aspirations of the international community for a better life for all.

What are children's rights?

Children have rights, just like adults. In 1989, world leaders decided that children needed a special convention just for them because people under 18 years of age often need special care and protection which adults do not. The leaders also wanted to make sure that the world recognized the fact that children have human rights too. The Convention on the Rights of the Child protects children's rights by setting standards in health care, education, and legal, civil and social services. It spells out the basic human rights to which children everywhere are entitled: to survival; to develop to the fullest; to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and to participate fully in family, and cultural and social life. The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes four core principles:

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- *Non-discrimination*—all children have the same rights, regardless of their race, religion or abilities, regardless of what they think or say, regardless of what type of family they come from, where they live, what language they speak, what their parents do, regardless of whether they are boys or girls, what their culture is, whether they have a disability or whether they are rich or poor.
- *The best interests of the child*—all adults should do what is best for children and must consider the impact of their decisions on children.
- *The right to life, survival and development*—all children have the right to life and governments should ensure that children survive and develop healthily.
- *Respect for the views of the child*—children should have the right to say what they think and have their opinions taken into account when adults are making decisions that affect them. This does not mean that children can tell their parents what to do, but according to their age and ability, form and express their opinions. Adults should give weight to the views of children.

Who protects human rights?

It is everyone's duty. Everybody has to protect human rights. It is the responsibility of parents, public institutions and the states we live in. Adults should help children to know their rights. Children themselves should also learn to speak out and seek assistance against violations of their rights.

The United Nations has been asked by the international community to promote and protect human rights in various ways. For example, it has established the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, which heads the United Nations human rights efforts.

The main United Nations body responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe is the Human Rights Council. It is an intergovernmental body within the United Nations system made up of 47 Member States with the main purpose of addressing situations of human rights violations and making recommendations on them. Every four years it reviews the international human rights commitments of all United Nations Member States and makes recommendations on them.

In protecting human rights, the United Nations also cooperates with regional organizations such as the Council of Europe and the European Union. Respect for human rights is also prescribed by international human rights conventions such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Limitations of human rights

One person's human rights cannot infringe on another's. That is why everyone needs to be treated with the same respect and dignity as we expect from others.

In times of public emergency which threaten the life of the nation, states may take measures to limit certain human rights. This can be done strictly only in so far as the emergency situation requires and while respecting other obligations to protect its citizens. Limitations should not be discriminatory on the grounds of race, colour, sex, language, religion or social origin. Some rights can never be limited even in times of emergency: the right to life, protection from torture, protection from slavery, the right to recognition as a person before the law, right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.