



UNICEF New Zealand and Action for Children and Youth Aotearoa Inc submission to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child day of discussion on implementing child rights in early childhood.

1 Introduction

UNICEF New Zealand

UNICEF New Zealand is mandated by the United Nations to promote children rights and interests throughout the world. In New Zealand, in addition to fundraising on behalf of UNICEF's international aid, development and disaster relief work, UNICEF advocates on behalf of children in New Zealand. Key areas of interest for New Zealand are consistent with UNICEF international priorities and include "Integrated Early Childhood Development" and "Reducing Violence, Exploitation, Abuse and Discrimination".

Integrated Early Childhood development is about giving children the best possible start in life and two of the key determinants of a good start are absence of poverty and protection from all forms of violence and neglect

Action for Children and Youth Aotearoa

Action for Children and Youth Aotearoa Incorporated (ACYA) is a coalition of non-governmental organisations, families and individuals.

ACYA's constitution states that it will seek to promote respect for children and youth and their rights through:

Promote understanding and implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: In order to do this it will:

- Promote action on the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- Provide reports from NGOs in Aotearoa New Zealand to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.
- Promote opportunities for the voice and participation of children and youth.
- Anything else that will further these aims.

The values that underpin ACYA are respect for all people, respect for Te Tiriti O Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) and respect for the rights of children and youth.

Submission on Early Childhood

This submission is being written from the perspective of children's rights and needs in a developed country and we recognise that these will be vastly different from the

needs and rights of children in developing, or strife-torn countries and in countries affected by major epidemic of illness and famine. Although New Zealand is used as an example to illustrate some of the points made the submission not intended as an up to date report on New Zealand's current performance for young children but rather to illustrate points that may also be relevant in other developed countries.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has divided discussion under two sub-headings:

- “Starting sound practices early” (guaranteeing the rights to survival and development of young children, including the rights to health, nutrition and education and of guaranteeing rights to rest leisure and to engage in play and recreation activities).
- “Young children as full actors of their own development” (participation in the family, in the school setting and in the community and the role of day cares, early childhood programs, pre-school, pre-primary, and first years of primary education in promoting the child as a right holder).

These two themes are closely connected and not discussed separately in this submission.

It is also noted that the aim of the “Day of Discussion” is to raise awareness about the rights of the youngest children in order to facilitate their full implementation by States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other concerned parties.

2 Children’s needs and rights in developing countries

In a developed country like New Zealand there is considerable information available on the needs and rights of young children but nevertheless these needs and rights are not always fully addressed. In New Zealand evidence that needs are not being fully addressed and rights not fully respected comes from information available about outcomes such as the following:

- the number of children living in relative poverty
- the number of children abused and neglected
- the number of children experiencing preventable health problems and
- the number of children not benefiting from the educational opportunities available. (Action for Children and Youth Aotearoa, 2003; Child Poverty Action Group , 2003; UNICEF 2002; UNICEF, 2003; De Souza & Wood, 2003).

We suspect the situation may be similar in some other developing countries.

3 The importance of early childhood

Early childhood is a critically important time in a child’s life. Some of the issues of critical importance in early childhood are summarised in the following quote:

There is increasing evidence that a child’s experiences in the early years are critical in shaping outcomes across health, education and welfare throughout that individual’s life span. The evidence comes from many methods of inquiry including longitudinal studies (Bynner 2001; Hobcraft, 1998; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Fergusson & Horwood, 1995, Fergusson & Linksey, 1995; Rutter, Giller & Hagel, 1998; Tremblay 1999) and neurobiological research (Keating & Hertzman, 1999; Perry, 2001; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Attachment, security and stimulation have long been known to affect the healthy development of infants (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1969), and now there is increasing research evidence that:

- *Children need to be bonded to their carers and feel secure in their care (Belsky, 1997; Seigel, 2001)*
- *Children need protection from inappropriate discipline and violence (Glaser, 2000, Hertzman, 2000; Perry, 2001; Straus, 1991, 1996, 2000, Straus & Mouridian, 1998; Straus, Sugarman, Giles-Sim, 1997)*
- *Children who are stimulated with attention and encouragement to learn are more ready to learn when they start school than those who are not (Hertzman, 2000)*
- *There are critical periods where the brain develops optimally in regard to specific functions (Glaser, 2000; Hertzman, 2000; Perry, 2001).*

The following factors influence the quality of nurturing that young children receive:

- *Parenting style – Demonstration of warmth and affection, consistent and non-abusive parenting practices, and provision of social and cognitive learning opportunities are associated with more positive outcomes for children (Hertzman, 2000; Shirley, Adair & Anderson, 2000).*
- *Family income – Poverty negatively impacts on outcomes for children (Blaiklock, Kiro, Belgrave, Low, Davenport & Hassall, In press; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Hertzman, 2000; Huston, McLoyd & Garcia Coll, 1997; Ministry of Health, 2000; Roberts, 2000a; Shirley et al., 2000; St. John, Dale, O'Brien, Blaiklock, & Milne, 2001).*
- *Housing – Inadequate housing and homelessness negatively impact on outcomes for children (Dibiase & Waddell, 1995; Lynch, 2000; Masten, Miliotis, Graham-Bermann, Ramirez & Neeman, 1993)*
- *Neighbourhoods – Outcomes are influenced by the quality of neighbourhoods and community life as distinguished by a range of social and economic indicators such as physical and social infrastructure, as well as factors such as safety, neighbourhood cohesion, social capital and access to adequate community resources (Coulton, Korbin & Su, 1999; Chase-Lansdale, Gordon, Brooks-Gunn & Klebanov, 1997; Hertzman, 2000; Shirley et al., 2000). This includes access to quality day care and other early childhood education (Hertzman, 2000; Smith et al., 2000; Zigler, 1998). (From Davies, Wood & Stephens, 2002)*

Other issues of critical importance to children in early childhood in developed nations include:

- protection from discrimination (on grounds of age, ethnicity, religion or disability) and
- preservation of identity (both ethnic and cultural identity and biological identity) – this includes the rights of indigenous, minority, refugee and migrant children to maintain their mother tongue. For example, there are provisions in New Zealand for indigenous children (Maori) to attend early childhood education and care facilities where only the Maori language is spoken.

4 Allocation of resources

The well-being of very young children is largely dependent on the quality of care their parents and/or caregivers give them. This care in turn is dependent on the resources

available to their parents and their ability to access high quality services in areas such as health, education and childcare. Children's well-being is also dependent on societal attitudes. Political will to invest in supporting less advantaged families by sharing the countries wealth equitably, in investing in services for children and families that enhance children's start in life and to address all forms of discrimination are critical factors in the well-being of young children.

As an example of political impact on children we refer to the period of economic and social reforms in the mid 1980s and 1990s in New Zealand which included extensive deregulation and privatisation and markedly reduced both the welfare state and the direct role of the state in the economy. The effect on children was a widening in equality between ethnic and income groups and deterioration in outcomes for many children. Although advances have been made since the mid-1990s (including significant new spending on families in a recent Budget) the effects of that period are still being experienced (Blaiklock et al 2002).

Although there are some restraints on resources available to children in developed countries some countries do much better than others in making children a priority in allocation of financial resources.

Stephens and Bradshaw (1995) made international comparisons of child benefit packages paid to families among 18 OECD countries and found considerable variation in expenditure on children. A more recent international comparative study using 2001 data for 22 countries, shows that New Zealand, alongside Japan, Spain, Holland¹, Portugal and Greece, lags behind the majority of OECD nations in providing investment in child benefit packages. The best performing countries include Austria, Finland, Norway and France. It does not appear to be the level of a nation's wealth that produces these differences between nations, but more the overall level of social expenditure and the proportion of this expenditure that goes to families with children rather than to the elderly (Bradshaw & Finch, Draft).

Countries that experience low rates of child poverty such as Austria, Finland, Norway and France all have extensive public assistance programmes (eg., paid parental leave, affordable quality childcare and more equitable income distribution) that ensure that young families do not experience overwhelming poverty. (From Davies, Wood & Wilson, 2003)

5 Recommendation

UNICEF New Zealand and Action for Children and Youth Aotearoa recommend that in facilitating the full implementation of the rights of very young children by States Parties (from developed nations) to the Convention on the Rights of the Child the UN Committee.

- Recommend that States evaluate and monitor the development and implementation of social and economic policy to ensure that it contributes positively to outcomes for all young children within a nation.
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- Recommend that States parties make the needs of young children and their families a priority in development of social and economic policy and allocation of a country's financial resources.
- Recommend that States make elimination of child poverty and all forms of violence to children (including physical punishment) key policy and programme priorities.
- Recommend that State parties put in place measures to ensure that the identity of indigenous, minority, refugee and migrant children is maintained by facilitating their learning their mother tongue at an early age.

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