

Rights of the Child

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The Baha'i International Community is pleased to offer, on behalf of a number of non-governmental organizations, comments under this agenda item on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. We would like to focus attention on the importance of this Convention and the critical role of moral education in making the rights guaranteed by the Convention a living reality for all children.

Implementation of this Convention should be given high priority by governments and non-governmental organizations alike. Children are one of the most vulnerable groups in society and, at the same time, the most important. They have no voice in the government; they have no power of their own. Therefore, every society has the responsibility to safeguard the well-being of all children and the obligation to promote the full development of their physical, mental and moral capacities. To neglect this responsibility is to court the destruction of the foundations of society itself, for the destiny of all future generations depends on the attention given to children now.

Among the rights set forth in the Convention, one of the most important is often overlooked: the right to moral education based on the principle of the oneness of humanity. The sad results of the current lack of moral education are evident everywhere. Many of today's children and youth are understandably restless and aimless. They are inhabitants of a rapidly changing world in which old paradigms and assumptions have fallen to the wayside, but have yet to be replaced by new paradigms and values. In such a morally vacant environment, children can easily be lured by the superficial attractions of excessive materialism, on the one hand, or succumb to old racial, national or religious prejudices, on the other. Only moral education based on the oneness of humanity can give children and youth a vision of a better future and inspire them to build it; a vision that can provide a socially productive channel for their unbounded energies.

Article 29 of the Convention calls for educating children to respect the rights of others and to appreciate their own cultural identity. Children who learn to accept themselves and others will be able to envision a world in which diversity need not be a source of conflict. Respect for human rights creates the possibility for peace and provides a realistic foundation for an all-embracing, cooperative social order based on justice. Those who will translate the possibility for peace into the reality of a just society must possess such essential virtues as truthfulness, compassion, fair-mindedness, humility, and kindness to all people. These fundamental human values are not the exclusive province of any particular religion or set of beliefs. They are the moral foundation for all societies everywhere. This moral attitude must be extended now to include the entire human family. When children see themselves as members of one human family in which they have both rights and

responsibilities, they will understand that their rights are dependent upon other people fulfilling their responsibilities, and, conversely, that they have the responsibility to grant and uphold the rights of others. Thus, implementing this Convention becomes a major step toward implementing all other human rights instruments.

Moral education in classes or schools is most likely to take effect if the environment reflects and reinforces moral values and encourages children to apply these values in their daily personal and collective lives. Article 28 of the Convention asserts the right of children to be taught in an environment that respects and promotes their human dignity. Children who respect their own nobility will easily learn to regard all others as deserving of the same. Creating a moral environment for children is critical to their development because children are deeply affected by their surroundings. New to the world, children are particularly susceptible to the diseases of materialism, prejudice, and extreme nationalism that have infected our present-day society. Yet, on the positive side, having been born without prejudices, they are receptive to learning about different peoples and cultures, finding in their hearts a place for the love of all people.

The mass media, a significant part of a child's environment, must share responsibility for providing moral education. Too often the mass media provide negative information to children - perpetuating negative stereotypes or encouraging violence and cruelty. Yet, as suggested by article 17 of the Convention, these same media, if they resolve to carry out their missions within a moral framework, can have a powerful impact on the moral and spiritual development of children, and ultimately, of the whole of society.

We applaud the efforts of many schools, non-governmental organizations, governments and international organizations such as UNESCO and UNICEF to develop curricula and other materials aimed at fostering respect for human rights and a sense of global solidarity. Governments should encourage schools and the media to make use of these materials and to produce their own educational materials which foster knowledge and understanding of other cultures; highlight the lives of individuals who have promoted inter-cultural understanding and exemplified high moral standards; and debunk negative racial or ethnic stereotypes. Moreover, games and toys should be developed which encourage cooperation over competition.

All adults and social institutions, including governments, are called upon by the Convention to help create a morally healthy environment in which children can be nurtured and educated. Article 17 calls on the mass media to disseminate information to children that is consistent with moral well-being, that promotes understanding among peoples, that respects the child's cultural background, and that does children no harm. Articles 28 and 29 speak to the providers of education at every level. Article 28 asserts every child's right to learn in an environment that respects his or her human dignity. Article 29 states that education should develop the child's personality and talents, prepare the child for responsible life as an adult, foster respect for basic human rights, and

develop respect for the child's own cultural and national values and those of others.

We are pleased that implementation of all international human rights instruments, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, has been mandated by the General Assembly, in resolution 45/155, as a primary objective of the upcoming World Conference on Human Rights. In preparation for that Conference, we the undersigned NGOs recommend that the Commission give high priority to considering ways in which governments and all elements of society can encourage moral education, for moral values are the foundation for all human rights.

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