

The Bible and Children's Rights

What is the UNCRC?

Almost every government around the world has signed and ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as a commitment to improving the lives of children. Originally conceived in the early 1900s by a visionary Christian named Eglantyne Jebb, the document went through many revisions before finally being adopted by the United Nations in 1989. This document has developed into the most influential global legal instrument for ensuring that children are protected and have all they need to thrive and flourish, and achieve their God-given potential.

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

There are four guiding principles which underpin the UNCRC:

Non-discrimination (Article 2): The UNCRC applies to all children, whatever their race, religion or abilities; whatever they think or say, whatever type of family they come from. It doesn't matter where children live, what language they speak, what their parents do, whether they are boys or girls, what their culture is, whether they have a disability or whether they are rich or poor. No child should be treated unfairly on any basis.

Best interests of the child (Article 3): The best interests of children must be the primary concern in making decisions that affect them. All adults should do what is best for children. When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect children.

Right to life, survival and development (Article 6): Children have the right to live. Governments should ensure that children survive and develop healthily.

Respect for the views of the child (Article 12): When adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account. The convention encourages adults to listen to children's opinions and involve them in decision-making—not to give children authority over adults. The level of a child's participation must be appropriate to the child's level of maturity.

The rights outlines in the Convention can be helpfully divided into 4 categories (**survival, protection, development and participation** rights). The full convention in child-friendly language is included at the end of this document.



Rights, Responsibilities and God's heart for children

In the Bible, God reveals his heart for children. Our attitude towards children should reflect God's own attitude and our actions should reflect his character. Children are precious to God and are made in his image, and our work must reflect this value for each individual child.

As Christians it is important that we understand children's rights in the context of God's heart for children as expressed in the Bible.

A rights-based approach does not mean that children take on a role of simply demanding what they want and stop respecting adults. In fact, Christian community is the ideal environment for recognising children's rights but also teaching them about the responsibilities that accompany rights. For example, where children have a right to be listened to, they also have a responsibility to listen to others; where they have a right to go to school, it is their responsibility to attend school and to do their best. We can give children a chance to express both their rights and their responsibilities in community.

As Christians we are able to view these rights in the context of God's deep love for children and the high value he places on their wellbeing, and the contribution they can make. When we understand the rights in this context they can become a useful tool as we care for and work with children. The following pages give some examples of Bible passages which show the way that God sees children and how we should treat them, in light of the four main categories of children's rights.

Survival Rights (My basic needs are met)

Case study: Moses

The story of Moses' birth in Exodus 1-2 shows how God uses all kinds of people to ensure the survival of a child. The statement in Exodus 1:17 that 'the midwives feared God... they let the boys live' shows that God values the lives of children. God already has plans for Moses' life and when Moses is born he is protected by his mother, his sister, and even the daughter of Pharaoh (Exodus 2). God's heart is for children to live and have all they need to survive and to thrive.

KNOW THE RIGHTS

- To be alive (6)
- To have healthcare (24)
- To have enough and healthy food (27, 24)
- To have clean water (24)
- To have a safe place to live (24)

Children's lives are valuable to God and they are worth saving

The Bible contains many stories of children whose lives are in danger and who are enabled to survive with God's help. Look at the story of a widow's son brought back to life by Elijah (1 Kings 17) and by Elisha (2 Kings 4). In both of these cases God is also concerned for the physical provision for these children, meeting their needs with flour and olive oil. This story is mirrored again in the New Testament where we see Paul bringing a child back to life; 'Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him' (Acts 20:10).

Mark 9:26-27 'The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.'

Jesus shows us this again through his ministry, where he heals children and brings them back to life when they have died. See Luke 8:54, Matthew 9:25, Mark 5:41, Luke 9:42, Matthew 17:18 and Mark 9:26-27.

In Matthew 18:14, Jesus informs his listeners that, 'In the same way, your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.' Jesus' own life is protected when he is taken to Egypt for safety as an infant (Matthew 2:13).

There is a sense of horror in verses which speak of children being deliberately killed (e.g. Amos 1:13 and Psalm 94:6), and God's heart is clear in Isaiah's prophecy that 'Never again will there be... an infant who lives but a few days.' (Isaiah 65:20)

Children should be given everything they need to survive

The book of Lamentations contains a number of descriptions of the painfulness and injustice of situations where children are dying because their basic needs are not met. (See Lamentations 2:11-12, 2:19, and 4:4).

'My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within; my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed, because children and infants faint in the streets of the city. They say to their mothers, "Where is bread and wine?" as they faint like the wounded in the streets of the city, as their lives ebb away in their mothers' arms.'

Lamentations 2:11-12

God's dream for all children to survive is also expressed in Isaiah 65:23: 'nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune.' All children should have the opportunity to thrive.

God is angry when the value of children's lives is not recognised

The Old Testament has particular references showing how angry and shocked God is when people deliberately take the life of a child. Jeremiah 7:30-31, 19:5, and 32:35, Ezekiel 16:20, 20:31, and 23:37-39 all make explicit reference to God's displeasure with people who have deliberately sacrificed children. In light of these verses it is important not to see God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 22) as an endorsement of child sacrifice; God prevented the sacrifice from taking place and gave the command as an opportunity for Abraham to demonstrate his obedience (James 2:21-23).

'The people of Israel and Judah have provoked me by all the evil things they have done... they built high places for Baal in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to sacrifice their sons and daughters to Molek, though I never commanded — nor did it enter my mind — that they should do such a detestable thing and so make Judah sin.'
Jeremiah 32:35

While these verses are especially relevant in contexts where child sacrifice remains a real phenomenon today, they also speak to us of God's anger when a child's life is needlessly or deliberately cut short, and indicate to us how precious the lives of children are to God.

Protection Rights (I am kept safe from harm)

Case Study: Ishmael

The story of Ishmael told in Genesis 21:8-20 shows us how important protecting children is to God, and how he can be intimately involved in keeping children safe. In this story, God 'heard the boy crying' (Genesis 21:17), and provides for the child's needs (21:19). God also continues to be alongside Ishmael as he grows up (21:20) showing that simply being there with and for children is another important aspect of protection. Like God, we should seek to be aware of children in need of protection, to meet their needs, and to be there for them.

KNOW THE RIGHTS

- Not to be hurt, neglected or abused in any way (4, 11, 19, 34, 22, 37)
- Not to work too much or to be exploited (32, 35, 36)
- To be protected from harmful drugs and the drug trade (33)
- Not to be used as a soldier in wars (38)
- To be helped if they have been hurt, neglected or badly treated (39, 40)

Children should not be exploited

Joel 3:3 'They traded boys for prostitutes, they sold girls for wine to drink.'

The Bible clearly speaks out against the mistreatment of children. Where children have been sold as slaves or traded like commodities, the Bible shows this is very wrong (see Job 24:9, Nehemiah 5:5, and Joel 3:3.)

Vulnerable children are particularly mentioned as deserving protection, with warnings against oppressing and mistreating the fatherless (Isaiah 10:2, Ezekiel 22:7, Jeremiah 7:6 and 22:3, Zechariah 7:10 and Malachi 3:5). Jesus again makes this point clear in Matthew 18:6, Mark 9:42 and Luke 17:2 when he says, 'It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble' (Luke 17:2).

Vulnerable children should be protected

The Bible also makes it very clear that it is our responsibility to protect children. Deuteronomy 24:17-21 gives the Israelites instructions on ensuring that vulnerable children are provided for, and Psalm 72:4 and 82:3, Isaiah 1:17 and James 1:27 all give a command to look after the most vulnerable.

Psalm 82:3 'Defend the weak and fatherless.'

God himself will defend children

God himself acts to protect children. Hosea 14:3 says, 'In you the fatherless find compassion,' and Psalm 10:14 says, 'You are the helper of the fatherless,' with v.17-18 adding, 'you, LORD, hear the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry, defending the fatherless and the oppressed.' In Matthew 18:10, Jesus says, 'See to it that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.'

God will not turn a blind eye to those who try to exploit vulnerable children. In Exodus 22:22-24, God commands: 'Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused...' Proverbs 23:10 advises, 'Do not move an ancient boundary stone or encroach on the fields of the fatherless, for their Defender is strong; he will take up their case against you.' In Isaiah 49:25, God says, 'I will contend with those who contend with you, and your children I will save.'

Keeping Children Safe: The whole community

Protecting children is not only the responsibility of parents or those who work with children. Leviticus 20:22-5 shows that God wants all of us to be part of ensuring that the children around us are safe and being protected from harm. God talks about how someone who has sacrificed his child should be punished, and says, 'If the members of the community close their eyes when that man sacrifices one of his children... and if they fail to put him to death, I myself will set my face against him...' All of us need to make sure we are not 'closing our eyes' to situations of abuse and exploitation of children.

Development Rights

(I access education and experience that enables me to grow up well)

KNOW THE RIGHTS

- Adults do what's best for children and think about how decisions affect them (3, 5)
- To be cared for by their parents or by those who will care for them best, in a family if possible (18, 9, 10, 20, 21, 25)
- To have a good quality education (23, 28, 29)
- To play and rest, and have privacy (31, 16)
- To have access to information which will help them, and to be protected from harmful information (17, 24)

Children belong in families

The model of families is a constant theme in most of the stories throughout the Bible. God desires children to be part of a family. Psalm 68:5-6 says, 'A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families.' Esther is adopted by Mordecai as a child (Esther 2:7), and Job speaks of the way that he cared for orphans; 'from my youth I reared them as a father would' (Job 31).

People are also seen in terms of families in Nehemiah 4:13 and Jeremiah 31:1.

'I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they will be my people.' Jeremiah 31:1

In the New Testament the imagery of our adoption into God's family (Galatians 4:5, Ephesians 1:5) shows how important family is to God, and he knows us by families (Ephesians 3:15).

Education and play

Adults have a responsibility to transfer important information to children (Isaiah

'Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation.' Joel 1:3

38:19, Psalm 78:4-6, Joel 1:3, 2 Timothy 1:5). God himself wants to teach children; 'All your children will be taught by the LORD, and great will be your children's peace.' (Isaiah 54:13). Through education and other input children grow mentally, physically and spiritually and all are important (Luke 1:80 and 2:52). Play is also crucial for children; when God imagines the restoration of a city, he says, 'The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there.' (Zechariah 8:5).

Case Study: The Good Shepherd

Proverbs 13:24, 'Whoever spares the rod hates their children,' is often used as a justification for corporal punishment. Yet in Psalm 23:4 we read, 'Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.' The shepherd does not use the crook (his rod) to beat the sheep, rather to guide them and keep them on the right path, going in the right direction and sometimes to rescue them from danger. As adults we have responsibility to equip our children with respect for authority, and to help them learn discipline, guiding and protecting the children in our care to ensure that they are able to develop well.

Adults do what's best for children

When God speaks about his relationship with his people, he often uses the image of child with a parent, showing us a model of how we should also treat children (see Jeremiah 31:20, Hosea 11:1-4 and Malachi 3:17). Both Malachi 4:5 and Luke 1:16 show that adults should be concerned for children with the prophesy that John the Baptist will 'turn the hearts of the parents to their children'. Genesis 33 shows children's needs being taken into account when Jacob tells Esau that he needs to move more slowly at the pace of the children (Genesis 33:13-14).

Responsible Parenting

As parents we should recognise that children are a precious gift to us (Psalm 127:3-5; Psalm 144:12). God is our model for loving parenting (Isaiah 66:13) and we should follow his example (Ephesians 5:1, Titus 2:4). Parents should take pride in their children (Proverbs 17:6, 23:15, and 23:24). God is able to help parents to bring up their children (Judges 13:8).

A key part of parenting is teaching children what is right (Proverbs 1:8, 4:1-3, 6:20-22, 10:1, 13:1, 22:6). Parents are also responsible for helping their children to make good choices; in 1 Kings 1:6, Adonijah's disobedience is attributed to David's lack of involvement as a parent; 'His father had never rebuked him by asking, "Why do you behave as you do?"' Many verses speak about the importance on discipline (Proverbs 13:24, 19:18, 22:15, 23:13-14, 29:15 and 29:17, Hebrew 12:7, and 1 Timothy 3:4 and 3:12). Discipline should be seen more broadly as a way of caring for children and creating an environment which can help them to develop to their full potential. Verses such as 2 Corinthians 12:14, Ephesians 6:1-4 and Colossians 3:20-21 show that a positive parent-child relationship involves commitment and care on both sides and that children should be encouraged. Our own behaviour as adults also has a significant impact on our children's wellbeing.

'Whoever fears the LORD has a secure fortress, and for their children it will be a refuge.' Proverbs 14:26

Participation Rights

(I take part in society and my voice is listened to)

Case study: Naaman's servant girl

In 2 Kings 5:2-3 Naaman's servant girl who he had taken captive from the Israelites, is the one who gives the advice that by going to see Elisha, Naaman's leprosy could be cured. Sometimes God works through children and it is up to us to choose whether we listen or miss out on what they have to offer.

Children are a valuable part of society

When God paints a picture of restoration of society, it often includes children (Numbers 14:31, Isaiah 49, Jeremiah 30:20, Joel 10:9). When things are wrong, one of the signs is that children are missing from

community life: 'Death has climbed in through our windows and entered our fortresses; it has removed the children from the streets and the young men from the public squares' (Jeremiah 9:21).

Jesus clearly valued children and enjoyed being with them. When the disciples try to stop people from bringing children to Jesus, 'he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them."' (Mark 10:13-16 and also Luke 18:16-17 and Matthew 19:14). In Mark 9:36-37 Jesus takes a child and places him in the centre of everyone (also Matthew 18:2-5). Children are a blessing to a community and should be valued as such (Ruth 4:15, Psalm 37:26, Isaiah 29:23). Children are also a significant part of the religious community, participating along with adults (Deuteronomy 31:12-13, Joshua 8:35, Nehemiah 12:43, Psalm 148:11, Joel 2:16 and 10:7, Matthew 21:15, John 4:46-53, Acts 16:33, 18:7, 21:5). We should be actively involving children and allowing them to ask questions (Joshua 4:6). The praise of children is powerful (Psalm 8:2).

KNOW THE RIGHTS

- To have a name and an identity (7, 8)
- Not to be discriminated against e.g. because of religion, gender, economic status, or disability (1, 2)
- For people to listen to their opinions (12, 13)
- To practice their religion, language and culture and be free to meet with other children (30, 14, 15)
- To learn and know about their rights and responsibilities, and adults should also know them (42)

God does not see age as a barrier to using children for his purposes

The Bible gives us many examples of children being used by God: Joseph was only 17 (Genesis 37:2), David was 'little more than a boy' when he fought Goliath (1 Samuel 17:41), Samuel served God as a child and God chose to speak through him (1 Samuel 2-3), Josiah was 8 years old when he became King (2 Kings 22) and Uzziah was 16 years old (2 Chronicles 26). It is a child who provides the five loaves and 2 fishes which Jesus uses to feed the

5,000. Children and young people are encouraged to lead and to speak, and not to see their age as an obstacle (Jeremiah 1:7, 1 Timothy 4:12) and children are given a role in God's Kingdom (Joel 2:28, Isaiah 11:6-8). God also uses children as a prophetic sign (Isaiah 8, Hosea 1). Our ultimate example of God's willingness to use children is Jesus—God chose to restore our relationship with Him by coming to our world as a baby (Matthew 2:11, Luke 2:8-40).

God also includes children that others might overlook: in Judges 11 we see that God chooses Jephthah, a prostitute's son, and God also values girls as we see in Job 42 where the daughters of Job are mentioned by name and valued.

'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders' Isaiah 9:6

Children are known and valued by God even before birth

Psalm 139:13-16 shows us that children are known and precious to God even in the womb, and that God has plans and purposes for them already. Elsewhere in the Bible we see again that God already knows children before their birth (Isaiah 44:2, 46:3, 49:1, 49:5, and Jeremiah 1:4-5). John the Baptist has a purpose known even before his conception (Luke 1:14 and 1:76) and even as a baby in the womb John is able to recognise the presence of Jesus (Luke 1:44).

Children are able make their own choices

Children are able to choose to follow God from a very young age. Paul writes to Timothy that 'from infancy you have known the holy scriptures' and the Psalmist says that 'you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast. From birth I was cast on you; from my mother's womb you have been my God' (Psalm 22:9-10). Again, the example of Jesus shows us that children can also have wisdom (Luke 2:47).

God also holds children responsible for their own decisions to follow him or not—he makes it clear that children should not be punished for the sins of their parents (Deuteronomy 28:61, 2 Chronicles 25:4, Ezekiel 18:4). Sadly, like adults, children can choose to turn away from God (Jeremiah 6:11, 7:18, 13:14 and 17:2). But God also sees when children choose to act differently from adults around them who are choosing to disobey him; In 1 Kings 14 God says that the son of Jeroboam is 'the only one in the house of Jeroboam in whom the LORD... has found anything good.'

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in Child-Friendly Language

“Rights” are things every child should have or be able to do. All children have the same rights. These rights are listed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Almost every country has agreed to these rights. All the rights are connected to each other, and all are equally important. Sometimes, we have to think about rights in terms of what is the best for children in a situation, and what is critical to life and protection from harm. As you grow, you have more responsibility to make choices and exercise your rights.

Article 1: Everyone under 18 has these rights.

Article 2: All children have these rights, no matter who they are, where they live, what their parents do, what language they speak, what their religion is, whether they are a boy or girl, what their culture is, whether they have a disability, whether they are rich or poor. No child should be treated unfairly on any basis.

Article 3: All adults should do what is best for you. When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect children.

Article 4: The government has a responsibility to make sure your rights are protected. They must help your family to protect your rights and create an environment where you can grow and reach your potential.

Article 5: Your family has the responsibility to help you learn to exercise your rights, and to ensure that your rights are protected.

Article 6: You have the right to be alive.

Article 7: You have the right to a name, and this should be officially recognized by the government. You have the right to a nationality (to belong to a country).

Article 8: You have the right to an identity – an official record of who you are. No one should take this away from you.

Article 9: You have the right to live with your parent(s), unless it is bad for you. You have the right to live with a family who cares for you.

Article 10: If you live in a different country than your parents do, you have the right to be together in the same place.

Article 11: You have the right to be protected from kidnapping.

Article 12: You have the right to give your opinion, and for adults to listen and take it seriously.

Article 13: You have the right to find out things and share what you think with others, by talking, drawing, writing or in any other way unless it harms or offends other people.

Article 14: You have the right to choose your own religion and beliefs. Your parents should help you decide what is right and wrong, and what is best for you.

Article 15: You have the right to choose your own friends and join or set up groups, as long as it isn't harmful to others.

Article 16: You have the right to privacy.

Article 17: You have the right to get information that is important to your well-being, from radio, newspaper, books, computers and other sources. Adults should make sure that the information you are getting is not harmful, and help you find and understand the information you need.

Article 18: You have the right to be raised by your parent(s) if possible.

Article 19: You have the right to be protected from being hurt and mistreated, in body or mind.

Article 20: You have the right to special care and help if you cannot live with your parents.

Article 21: You have the right to care and protection if you are adopted or in foster care.

Article 22: You have the right to special protection and help if you are a refugee (if you have been forced to leave your home and live in another country), as well as all the rights in this Convention.

Article 23: You have the right to special education and care if you have a disability, as well as all the rights in this Convention, so that you can live a full life.

Article 24: You have the right to the best health care possible, safe water to drink, nutritious food, a clean and safe environment, and information to help you stay well.

Article 25: If you live in care or in other situations away from home, you have the right to have these living arrangements looked at regularly to see if they are the most appropriate.

Article 26: You have the right to help from the government if you are poor or in need.

Article 27: You have the right to food, clothing, a safe place to live and to have your basic needs met.

You should not be disadvantaged so that you can't do many of the things other kids can do.

Article 28: You have the right to a good quality education. You should be encouraged to go to school to the highest level you can.

Article 29: Your education should help you use and develop your talents and abilities. It should also help you learn to live peacefully, protect the environment and respect other people.

Article 30: You have the right to practice your own culture, language and religion - or any you choose. Minority and indigenous groups need special protection of this right.

Article 31: You have the right to play and rest.

Article 32: You have the right to protection from work that harms you, and is bad for your health and education. If you work, you have the right to be safe and paid fairly.

Article 33: You have the right to protection from harmful drugs and from the drug trade.

Article 34: You have the right to be free from sexual abuse.

Article 35: No one is allowed to kidnap or sell you.

Article 36: You have the right to protection from any kind of exploitation (being taken advantage of).

Article 37: No one is allowed to punish you in a cruel or harmful way.

Article 38: You have the right to protection and freedom from war. Children under 15 cannot be forced to go into the army or take part in war.

Article 39: You have the right to help if you've been hurt, neglected or badly treated.

Article 40: You have the right to legal help and fair treatment in the justice system that respects your rights.

Article 41: If the laws of your country provide better protection of your rights than the articles in this Convention, those laws should apply.

Article 42: You have the right to know your rights! Adults should know about these rights and help you learn about them, too.

Articles 43 to 54: These articles explain how governments and international organisations like UNICEF will work to ensure children are protected with their rights.