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*Children's Libraries Ensuring Access to Information and Creating a  
Culture of Understanding in a World of Violence and Conflicts*

## Children's Rights and Library Best Practices

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### *Abstract*

*For all who are concerned with children and young people, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child offers support in library policy and practice. This is a central message for the Section of Libraries for Children and Young Adults, IFLA's office for Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) and other professionals concerned with e.g. children's right to have access to information, especially in very difficult circumstances.*

*Libraries, and especially children's libraries should have as its goal "to advocate for the children's right to information, according to the United Nations' Convent on Children's Rights".*

*A closer look will be taken to what this right to information actually means and how libraries can help children to realize their rights. References can also be found in the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto.*

*Children's rights should be guaranteed for every individual child and also regardless of circumstances.*

*It means that especially in hard times, in difficult circumstances, it becomes even more important that children are respected as human beings, and are supported in their need for a safe and reliable environment in which information is an important factor. In war times, in refugee camps, after violent conflicts, children need information of all kinds.*

*A number of examples of library services in these circumstances will be presented. The paper will also address what libraries can do in practice of less violent situations.*

## **Paper**

We do not live in an innocent world. At an increasingly earlier age, children have to experience that the world is not a safe place. Threats may come from an unhealthy environment, with pollutions in the air, in the water and the soil; from the human environment which is caught in conflicts and violence; from within where diseases are inherited or have already affected the body; from within where the brutal noises and vibrations of a warlike world influence the nerve system, consciousness and the peace of mind.

### **Children in this world**

Would you like to be a child in this world?<sup>1</sup>

Were you one of the millions who died under the age of five? Or are you one of the millions affected by HIV/AIDS? Are you one of the millions of girls not going to school? Instead doing heavy family jobs? Are you one of those many children not being able to learn to read or write? Those who do not have access to even the simplest book or piece of information?

### **What do children think, and what are they concerned about?**

A recent survey of 40.000 children, between 9 and 18 years of age, in 72 countries have shared their opinions. The majority of them reported good relationships with parents and teachers, feel happy most of the time and are deeply concerned about a range of economic, social and environmental issues. Far too many children spoke about harsh realities:

- The violence they experience in their homes, at school and in their neighbourhoods;
- Discrimination against the poor, disabled and minority children;
- Anxiety about unemployment and economic conditions;
- The lack of information about their rights, about drugs, HIV/ADS and sexual relationships;
- The need for government to give greater priority to quality education;
- The lack of opportunity to voice their opinions and participate in decisions affecting their lives;
- Their disenchantment with traditional politics and politicians.

We do not live in an innocent world. Are libraries innocent places? Are librarians innocent about what is going on in the world and what happens to children all over the globe?

As we know from children's literature, children are described both as innocent and naughty persons: angels and small devils at the same time. From Peter Pan to Struwwelpeter. We know these images also from the media. For many years we have heard and read about the poor situation of children, the eternal victims of life and conflicts on this globe. Media and charity organisations have stressed the innocence of children. In recent years, the other image of children has also been exploited: children as soldiers and criminals. Still, there is a different view emerging, if we allow it to develop. Children as fellow human beings who also want to contribute to the world they live in, on condition that they are heard; that they are listened to. This requires a radical shift in adult thinking and behaviour, from an exclusionary to an inclusionary approach to children and their capabilities.

“Authentic child participation must start from children and young people themselves, on their own terms, within their own realities and in pursuit of their own visions, dreams, hopes and concerns.

Children need information, support and favourable conditions in order to participate appropriately and in a way that enhances their dignity and self-esteem.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Library’s mission for children’s rights**

For all who are concerned with children and young people, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child offers support in library policy and practice. This is a central message for the Section of Libraries for Children and Young Adults, IFLA’s office for Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) and other professionals concerned with e.g. children’s right to have access to information, especially in very difficult circumstances.

Libraries, and especially children’s libraries should have as its goal “to advocate for the children’s right to information, according to the United Nations’ Convent on Children’s Rights”.<sup>3</sup>

A closer look will be taken to what this right to information actually means and how libraries can help children to realize their rights. References can also be found in the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto.

Information and development are closely related. Children seek information from the moment they are born. The early stimulation helps to start a process of lifelong learning. Especially information which helps the child to develop as a human being, supports her or his psychological and spiritual well-being, must be accessible and protected as a human right. Almost all countries in the world have recognized these fundamental human rights of children and are committed to realize them as they ratified the Convention.

What libraries can do in this respect is manifold. Librarians must show respect for the child in their services and activities, protect his or her privacy, stimulate the distribution of children’s books, encourage children with their right to social and cultural participation and make the rights of the Convention known to children and adults alike. All this is written in the 54 articles of the Convention and must be part of the library’s policy. Have a look at:

[www.unicef.org/crc](http://www.unicef.org/crc)

UNICEF and many other child organisations have also adopted the Rights of the Child as the foundation for all their work. It means there is ample opportunity, also in developing countries to combine efforts for children’s rights, for support of children in information seeking, and for libraries in various forms.

### **Library services to children in special circumstances**

Children’s rights should be guaranteed for every individual child and also regardless of circumstances.

It means that especially in hard times, in difficult circumstances, it becomes even more important that children are respected as human beings, and are supported in their need for a safe and reliable environment in which information is an important factor. In war times, in refugee camps, after violent conflicts, in unhealthy environments, children need information of all kinds: where to get food, with whom to live? Where is my family? Why are people

fighting? How can I protect myself from being beaten<sup>4</sup> or being affected? Why do they hide the mines? When will we go home?

Access to information is a matter of survival in many situations. To give an example: more than 50 percent of young people 15-24 years of age have serious misconceptions about how HIV/AIDS is transmitted. A basic good education, basic literacy in the widest sense of the word is needed. It will help children to build self-esteem, and decision making skills and gives the information which children need to protect themselves.

‘Perhaps the most important aspect of access to information is how it empowers those who have it. Access to information informs the entire developmental process protected by the Convention and is a critical factor in both the personal development of a child into adulthood, as well as the social development of that child into full membership in his or her community.’<sup>5</sup>

What can librarians do? Some have started to bring libraries and books closer to children during the war, by all possible and impossible means.

There are examples of portable libraries in Lebanon and book mobile services in Palestine<sup>6</sup>. Afghan and Kurd children in refugees camps in Iran are eager to receive more books, as they have read most titles at least five times!<sup>7</sup> Librarians have set up reading hours and activities as a form of bibliotherapy in Croatia, and showed that libraries can be reliable partners for UNICEF projects. Librarians work together with children to create a club or group where they can express their views, which will help children to understand the world and ‘the other’, which is necessary especially in a world of violence.

### **Children’s rights in daily life**

What can be done in practice of less violent situations? In general we say: before starting programming, listen to the children. Have a talk with them, a panel or an open session. Have them interviewed by peers to ask them about their interests, worries and views in general, including comments on the library and how they think the library could support them in carrying out plans, having their voice heard in the community or setting up an activity. One could use this as a preparation for an activity plan during the year, with a special focus on the 20 of November as this is the International Day of the Rights of the Child. The Convention was adopted on this date in 1989. This day should be celebrated by and with children in the library as their place for free thought and development. In cooperation with other organisations in the field of children’s rights and activities the library could set up an exhibition, information market or talk show. Children can be invited to give a talk in school about a child’s right, or make a script for a local media station about children’s rights.

In the Netherlands the Dutch Public Library Association has contacted some child organisations and prepared a newsletter, including posters, leaflets and postcards for all public libraries to support them in celebrating this day. An example is given by librarians who are very committed to the children, have set up a children’s panel and new ways of communication. In one library children made a forum and discussed various matters including their views on the library and new design and services. In another one, children held a peer survey – to collect their views on customer service, reference service etc. Children discuss proposals for acquisition, have set up a book quiz for school classes, recruit peers for activities etc. The older ones have set up a computer training course for the younger ones about: how do I make my paper on the computer? When the papers are presented and accepted in school, they are taken up in the library catalogue on loan. Children are proud and

committed to their library. This is child participation in the sense the Convention recommended. Librarians are committed to children and their rights.

### **International commitment**

It is now up to the international library community, librarians and other professionals to show commitment.

- to start partnerships between IFLA and e.g. UNICEF; and vice versa on the local level.
- to include children's rights in national library policies and statements;<sup>8</sup>
- to give training to librarians on children's rights; and include references in their code s of ethics;
- to include the right to information and library services in UNICEF-projects;
- to implement widely protection of children's rights in library practices;
- to adopt the 20 November as a day of activities in the library on the Rights of the Child;
- and first of all: to listen to children and every individual child!

These are just a few suggestions. Speakers at this workshop have presented other best practices. More are to come: depending on you!

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<sup>1</sup> Bellamy, C., *The state of the world's children 2003*, UNICEF, New York, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, p. 5

<sup>3</sup> See Koren, M., *Tell me! The right of the child to information*, NBLC, The Hague, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> *Young voices*, Opinion survey of children and young people in Europe and Central Asia, UNICEF, Geneva, 2001, p. 39

<sup>5</sup> Bellamy, C., *The state of the world's children 2003*, UNICEF, New York, 2002, p. 54.

<sup>6</sup> Wit, A. de, Bibliobus helpt kinderen ontsnappen aan wereld van geweld, in: *BibliotheekBlad* 25/26, 2002, p. 18-19

<sup>7</sup> Ansari, N., "Didn't you say you would come back?" Refugee Camp Libraries in Iran, in: *Bookbird* 35, 3 (fall 1997) p. 38-39.

<sup>8</sup> A modest example is 'Start with the child', Report of the CILIP Working Group on library provision for children and young people, (CILIP, London, 2002) has at least a reference to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, p. 26, but not yet a strong programme based on it.