

**WHAT ARE HUMAN RIGHTS?** Human rights are the rights and freedoms that we all have. Our rights include: the right to life, to be free from torture and abuse, to go to school and to work. We have the right to shelter and to food, the right to practise a religion, and the right to think and say what we want as long as we don't hurt anyone. Every person has every human right because we are all born equal and should be treated with equal dignity and respect.

## WHERE DO RIGHTS COME FROM?

Human rights are based on fairness, dignity, justice, equality and respect. These are values that everybody can understand, and that have existed for hundreds of years in different societies all over the world. Human rights were officially recognised as universal values by the world when the United Nations (UN) was set up.

## WHAT IS THE UNITED NATIONS?

The UN is an international organisation made up of 192 countries known as 'member states'. It was created in 1945 as the world emerged from the Second World War. Its founders were shocked by the destruction of the war and the horrors of the Holocaust. They wanted to create an international organisation that they hoped would be able to prevent such catastrophes from happening in the future. So promoting human rights, along with maintaining international peace and reducing poverty, became an aim of the UN.

**WHY DO HUMAN RIGHTS MATTER TO CHILDREN IN THE UK?** Human rights matter to us all, even if we sometimes feel that they are only important to people in other countries. There are plenty of children in the UK whose rights are not being respected: one child in three lives in poverty, one child in four is physically abused, and one child in seven does not have a proper home. Children may not know that their rights are being ignored or how they can change their situation. All young people should know their rights and understand how they can use their rights to protect themselves. All adults have a responsibility to uphold the rights of all children.

**"Children are not mini-people. They have rights – not mini-rights."** Maud de Boer-Bouquiccio, Deputy Secretary General, Council of Europe

## ARE CHILDREN'S RIGHTS DIFFERENT FROM HUMAN RIGHTS?

No! Children's rights are not different from those held by adults. But children can be more vulnerable than adults and require special protection. Adults therefore have special responsibilities towards children. As a result, the UN decided that the rights of children should be spelled out in a human rights treaty created just for them. The result was the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

## THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD (CRC)

Child rights first became an issue in the mid-1800s, when child labour was used all over the world. A number of countries began to pass laws to protect children against working in harmful conditions. For example, in 1842 the UK Mines Act was created to stop children under the age of ten from working in mines. But it took another 100 years for child rights to really take shape. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights – the most famous international human rights agreement – states that childhood is special and requires special protection. It inspired many campaigners – including children – to push for a special child rights treaty. Decades later, in 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was born.

## WHAT'S SO GOOD ABOUT THE CRC?

One of the reasons it was so long in the making is that the CRC completely changed the way that children are viewed. Unlike previous treaties dealing with children, the CRC does not treat children as passive objects but as individuals who have rights, including the right to express opinions. It says that countries should involve children in all decisions that affect them, not only at the local level, but at the national and international levels too.



UNA-UK  
www.una.org.uk



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



UNESCO Associated Schools  
www.unesco.org.uk



UNIVERSAL  
DECLARATION  
OF HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
Dignity and justice for all of us

## The CRC is groundbreaking because it is:

- **Universal** – every child should enjoy all the rights in the CRC
- **Unconditional** – all governments have to take action to protect the rights of all children
- **Innovative** – the CRC was the first major human rights treaty to say that people with disabilities and from minority backgrounds need special protection
- **Holistic** – the CRC combines all human rights with the special needs of children, for example, the rights to a name, nationality, and family reunification. The CRC also has two ‘add-on’ agreements (called ‘optional protocols’) on preventing child exploitation and protecting children in armed conflict



## HOW DOES THE CRC PROTECT CHILDREN IN THE UK?

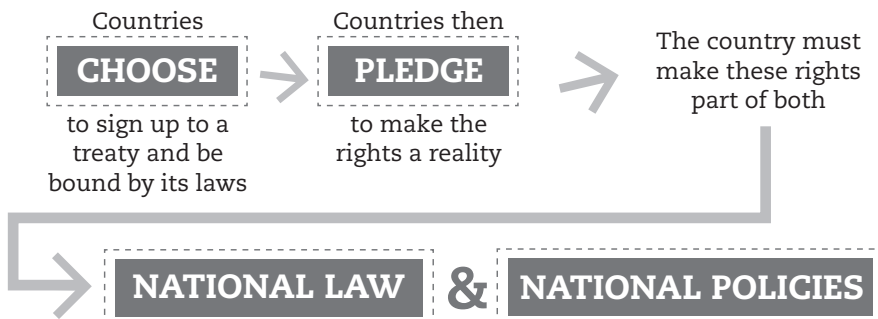
The UK signed up to the CRC in 1991. By doing so, it pledged to take all necessary steps to make children’s rights a reality. Steps taken so far include:

- the Children Act 2004, which aims to transform children’s services so that their rights can be fulfilled.
- Youth Capital Funds, which give young people the chance to decide how money should be spent on youth activities and facilities.
- Children’s Commissioners, people whose job is to improve communication between the government and young people.
- the Human Rights Act 1998, a British law that makes the UK’s international human rights responsibilities part of British law. Until the Human Rights Act was created, British courts did not have to consider international human rights when making decisions. This meant that people whose rights had been abused had to travel all the way to Strasbourg, France, to the European Court of Human Rights, to have their cases heard.

*your notes*



## WHO MAKES SURE THAT THE GOVERNMENT FULFILS ITS PLEDGES?



Even though the government has *by law* the responsibility for protecting children’s rights, we all have to help. Protecting children’s rights needs active participation by all parts of society: families, schools, social services, local and national government, and the international community, **as well as every child**.

Knowing your rights is the first and most important step. Using your right to participate is the next. By actively participating in your school and local community, you can make a huge difference. Many young people already do – for example, by speaking out against racism and knife crime. This in itself is an enormous step towards achieving children’s rights for all.

**Voice is an organisation led by young people from across the UK. It aims to make the views of 16-25 year-olds heard.** The group encourages young people to take a stand against carrying weapons and promotes an honest debate on drugs. It looks at what opportunities exist for the homeless young and campaigns for balance in reporting on teenagers. Voice also offers practical help to young people who want to develop skills like public speaking. **Read more on [www.ukyouth.org](http://www.ukyouth.org)**