

EDUCATION IS A HUMAN RIGHT

Why children need to be literate and educated

RISKS OF ILLITERACY: SHOULD WE BE WORRIED?

The Convention on the Rights of the Child states that all children have the right to receive free and compulsory primary education.

Yet, it is estimated that some 4% of Malaysian children aged 6-12 are not going to school, or learning to read and write. Is this a cause for concern? Should people in one city worry if children in another city or village are not in schools? **Yes, we should be worried!**

Children who cannot read and write have far fewer opportunities to seek self-improvement, especially in the increasingly modernised and globalised world they live in today. Here are some of the risks that children will be exposed to, if they are not educated:

- **Life on the streets:** Without the educational foundation to pursue higher studies that enable a good career, children are further discriminated against and may be forced out on the streets at a much younger age to earn a living. Without the ability to read or write needed for gainful employment, these children may be forced to petty criminal activities such as pick-pocketing to feed their hunger and to survive.
- **Exploitation:** Children on the streets are not only at greater risk of suffering violence and abuse, they are also often too easily lured into gangs, and exploited by adults for sex work and drug peddling. Children who sell and use drugs expose other children to drugs as well. As a result of gang activity, these children inadvertently also contribute to the crime statistics of a city, town or village.
- **Health risks:** Sex work and drug abuse are the two biggest risk factors for HIV infection. Uneducated children who are HIV-positive are even more vulnerable, as they do not know how to manage their infection, are unable to demand for medical care, are unable to support themselves, and, most chillingly, do not know how to prevent spreading the virus.

BENEFITS OF LITERACY

Reading and writing, or literacy skills, have benefits that go beyond school grades, and have consequences that will last for lifetimes to come. This is because children who are literate can learn and acquire more knowledge, attain life skills and gain self-confidence in their own abilities. They can share their knowledge with others, and may even be able to convince someone else of the value of an education for every child.

Ensuring that every single child in our country is able to read and write to benefit from education, helps us protect all children and society from being exposed to crime, violence and HIV infection.

- Educating all children is the first step towards reducing poverty, reducing disparities and reducing crime opportunities.
- Educating all children is the first step towards increasing life opportunities, increasing capacity and increasing the nation's economic capability.
- Educating children is the first step towards empowering them to protect their own health and improve their standards of living. (Research indicates, for example, that one additional year of schooling for 1,000 women will help prevent two maternal deaths¹.)
- Educating all children is the first step towards building a better world for their children.