



What young people are saying about

Young people and the world of work

Over 2,500 messages from 100 countries provide a look into what young people are thinking about with respect to work. Messages posted to the Voices of Youth Children and Work web discussion, from 1997 to 2001, cover issues ranging from exploitative labour to the need for socially responsible business practices. Young people also wrote passionately about the dignity of work and the need to have the opportunity to become who they want to be through work. Their views help to confront a difficult situation: mitigating the exploitative aspects of work while enhancing its transformative power. Below please find a summary of young people's comments which are as insightful as they are concrete and provide a powerful reminder that young people are an amazing resource for our work.

Exploitative forms of child labour

Young people are aware of the how important it is to develop and strengthen a legal context that is vigilant in its prosecution of those who engage in the worst forms of child labour. They also realize how difficult and long term this process can be and suggest that citizens' action, in the meantime, can help. For this they need, information and ideas on how to help eliminate the worst forms of child labour. Young people suggest the following:

- they need to know what laws are on the books in any given country. Here they stress the importance of national statutes. They recognize the importance of international conventions but estimate that real action will come with the enforcement of national laws;
- stronger and more severe punishments where laws protecting children have been passed;
- hefty fines issued to companies and organizations violating laws with the proceeds going to help child labourers;
- country specific black lists of companies and organizations that exploit children in the production of their goods and services. The lists would be valuable as a local advocacy tool and internationally;
- Finally child labour is seen as symptom of a bad system of government not just bad business practice.

Socially responsible business practices

Young people are also aware of the role that the private sector plays in the use of children in profit making. Their discussion suggests the following:

- the need for better product labelling. The Rugmark name is mentioned many times as an example of a positive initiative. Young people want to know if this can be strengthened and extended;
- targeting consumer companies who have reputations to protect and list companies that exploit children in the production of their goods. This will allow young people with disposable income in the industrialized world to make better choices about what they buy;
- illustrate how companies are exploitative on both ends. For example, how do they get away with using the poorest of the poor in developing countries to produce sports gear and then market \$200 tennis shoes to low income adolescents in rich countries who cannot afford them. This is a circle of exploitation;
- developing fundraising campaigns to help kids in other countries. For example young people could raise money for organizations that combat child labour by recycling and help the environment at the same time.

Dignity of work

Young people understand that work is also a positive force. It helps one to find a place in society, to lead a responsible life and become a productive citizen. Young people suggest that there are positive instances of child labour. Maybe it is also helpful to define positive instances of child work not just negative. They suggest the following points for consideration:

- Is work transformative? Does it help people out of poverty?
- What are the root causes of poverty and their effects on families, parents, friends, etc.
- What is the connection between education and work?
- The need to think more clearly about career paths and have an idea of how to build toward goals. For example, one can desire to become an architect or doctor but how does one actually get there?

Health Issues

On the subject of health, young people were not only interested in the immediate physical effects of exploitative labour but in the long term mental health of children who are in these situations. Many wondered if exploitative labour contributes to developing a life long “slave mentality”. Also, young people were equally aware of the damaging mental effects of long term unemployment. Young people suggest:

- Follow up studies on physical and mental health of child labourers. What shape are they in? What is their trajectory in life?
- What are the effects on a child's mental health for the rest of their lives?
- Drug abuse among young people is connected to conditions around exploitative work or not having any work at all.
- What are the mental effects of prostitution?—which, young people say, should be called child labour instead of seen as something that children turn to when they have no work.

Education

Young people also realize that the key to breaking the cycle is better paid jobs and that education is needed to get those jobs. They seem to grasp that the promise of an education and better job prospects is a long term goal.

They suggest:

- giving today's children a decent education so that they can get better paid jobs and benefit in the future. In turn their children will also benefit because they will not have to work, but can instead go to school and learn. The vicious cycle must be broken.
- Education and other services must be set up at places where children work, if not the cycle will never be broken.
- School based awareness activities such as letter writing campaigns, company boycotts, and other practical, realistic projects can be carried out.
- Invite former child workers to schools to talk about their experiences.
- Start a campaign that says “the only labour children should be focused upon is education”.

Historical and cultural issues

There were a range of insightful comments that are historical, cultural, and almost philosophical in nature. Young people suggest the following:

- looking at the history of child labour especially in industrialized countries
- looking at the history of commercial boycotts, are they effective?
- examining to what extent kids in wealthy countries are allowed to do what they want. Many young people saw this as eventually leading to the exploitation of others.
- it would help to characterize exploitative forms of child labour as slavery
- consider peer pressure to work in societies where working kids encourage others to drop out of school for a quick buck

- Work with adults to denounce harmful labour practices
- Start a neighbourhood watch against child labour

In conclusion young people believe that children should have a choice regarding work and most seemed to think that 14 to 16 was a reasonable age range for beginning some sort of work outside the home. They clearly recognize the positive and negative aspects of work and want to find ways to act locally to mitigate the negative effects of the worst forms of child labour. Young people feel globally connected on this issue and show a lot of solidarity. From this solidarity, there is a clear recognition that their actions could have an effect on the overall situation and thus they constantly ask, "what can we do to help?" Young people are also motivated to help out of a sensitivity to inequality--that kids in other countries might not be as "lucky" as they are. Very few mention international documents like the Convention on the Rights of the Child. If the CRC is mentioned it is in the context of not being enough to protect children.

Act. The exploitation of child workers is a vicious global disease running rampant and unimpeded in our world today. Its monstrous tentacles know no boundaries, no limits. It snakes its way into every society regardless of race, religion or ethnicity leaving behind a gaping hole in the blanket of our humanity revealing the horror and terror, the abuse and agony that its victims must bear. I wish the answers were simple...to a child they are. I remember as a child overhearing an argument between two adults over who should drive the car, it sounded so ridiculous to me because the solution was simple...let them share the car, take turns and cooperate. The solutions I have to offer are shared by many, implemented by some yet all have failed. Let communities become active in the fight against child exploitation by forming organisations which speak out against this evil. Let each individual report child exploitation cases and expose companies and organisations which do so. Allow the children in the community to be aware of their rights as children and how to ensure that their rights are not violated...sounds simple in theory but what are you going to do about the community whose I-mind-my-own-Business attitude all but ignores this decimation of our children. Tell me what are you to do when the outdated colonial legislations have no provisions to stop child exploitation or if they do, it takes months sometimes years of endless paper work and judicial hearings before any action can be taken. Tell me someone please what can YOU do when the kids who are exploited can look you in the eye and say "There is no other way, bills must be paid my brothers and sisters must eat, I have NO CHOICE." Sadly the only solution I can find is to never stop, never stop trying to fight child exploitation even when all seems lost never stop. FIGHT TO THE BITTER END for to give up would mean the destruction of humanity itself.

Kathy, 16, Barbados

Slavery was suppose to have ended when Abraham Lincoln passed the Emancipation Proclamation. We could help child laborers by not living in the past.

Janesse 14, USA

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Voices of Youth

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