

25 YEARS

OF THE CONVENTION ON
THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD



**Things that matter:
Small voices hold a
powerful message**

By UNICEF Australia Young
Ambassador Catherine Yen

A young girl with long brown hair and freckles, wearing a light blue polo shirt, is smiling and holding a large blue sign in front of her. The sign has the words "EVERY CHILD" written in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. The background shows a large tree trunk and some greenery.

**EVERY
CHILD**

Cover:

UNICEF Australia spoke to more than 1500 children and young people about the things that matter to them, including Pearl Riley-Murray, 12, of Byron Bay Public School.
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THINGS THAT MATTER

Small voices hold a powerful message

by **CATHERINE YEN**



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Photo credit:
Casey Cunningham

Catherine Yen, 18, is studying a Bachelor of Philosophy (Honours) majoring in political science and Asia-Pacific politics at the Australian National University. Catherine believes all children have awesome potential that requires basic human rights to be fulfilled. Furthermore, she thinks young people have many important insights about these rights. Catherine is committed to advocating for equitable access to education. Catherine Yen is a 2014 UNICEF Australia Young Ambassador.

CHILDREN should be able to have a voice and it should be loud enough to hear.

The words of 11-year-old Lexie of Bolwarra, north of Sydney, Australia, are plain and powerful, yet a generation or so ago, they would have been lost in a cacophony of adult voices.

Today, and for the past 25 years, the voices of Lexie's generation are protected by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – a human rights platform simple in its vision of care and protection for every child, yet powerful in that it views children as equal citizens with unique, complex and diverse needs.

And, as equal citizens, one Article – of 54 in the Convention – offers children a simple, plain and powerful right.

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child gives all children, under the age of 18, the right to be involved in decisions

“ I think people need to stop viewing us as little kids that can't make decisions.

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that impact them, and with it, the right to have a say, to voice their thoughts and fears and ideas and to participate in the very things that may change their future.

Emily, 11, of Little Bay, offers an explainer: “I think people need to stop viewing us as little kids that can't make decisions.”

Pretty simple.

Jennifer, 13, expands. “I think Australia should pay more attention to the young people of Australia because we are the next generation... [decisions] affect us, not you.”

Jennifer, Emily and Lexie's voices are among the thousands child rights organisation listen to each and every year, but this year, UNICEF Australia has been listening to children to learn about the what matters to them and has taken these things that matter to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, in Geneva.

Collectively, more than 1500 Australian children and young people – myself included, as a UNICEF Australia Young Ambassador – have shared our thoughts on how our rights are realised.

Australian children and young people, like me, have been asked seven questions. We have been asked what's most important to us. We have been asked what worries us and whether there are groups of Australian children we worry about more. We have been asked whether we felt safe in our communities and what could be done to make us feel safer. We have been asked what we thought the government could spend its money on and, lastly, we have been asked what children would like communicated to key-decision makers in Australia, in particular, what we'd say to our National Children's Commissioner.

But why go to all this trouble to ask so many questions of so many children and young people? Why is it so important that decision-making bodies listen to children?

Though children are not old enough to vote, to do paid work or to drive, they are, by virtue of living their own lives, best positioned to know how best to get the full enjoyment of this unique set of human rights.

Adults may agree they want children to be happy, healthy and safe but what's important to an adult does not always reflect what is most important to a child.

For example, while talking about to children about child rights at a local primary school I learned only half the class felt safe in their local community. After talking to the students, the class teacher approached me to express real surprise at the low levels of security felt by the children around her. It's moments like these that can properly inform adults and help them to ensure children survive, thrive and have their rights realised.

What else have we learned from listening to children?

We learned Aussie kids are acutely aware of, and concerned for, children experiencing inequality and disadvantage. One young girl told us the Government needed to help more refugees. She told us keeping children in a 'prison' was "not a good idea". She knows that, because she's a child and she's putting herself in the place of a child refugee. She isn't concerned with the 'how' and the 'why' of our immigration policies; she's only concerned with the 'what' she can imagine living with.

We've also been reminded that some children in Australia are directly connected to things happening in other parts of the world, thanks to



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UNICEF Australia Young
Ambassador Josh Goddard, 15,
of Adelaide, South Australia.

Australia's rich multicultural society. An event in a faraway place can impact on the ability of an Australian child to be with their family, to be happy and to enjoy the full extent of their rights.

Bashir, a young refugee told us he had two worries in his life. "I worry because my family is in Iraq - my uncle, my grandpa and my aunties. Iraq it's not safe for them, it's so dangerous. And I am worried for my future, what will happen for me in the future. I have many things to do and I feel scared."

Natalia, another young refugee, said she was worried about her mum. "I don't know if she's still alive. I know in my life, if I don't know where mum is, my future is not good. I hope the government can help me find her. I can't have any peace without my mum."

But what does a child missing her mum, and a young boy uncertain about a future away from his family mean in the context of child rights, and, in particular, Article 12, of some 25-year-old United Nations Convention?

When considering the responsibilities of Australians, children do not define human dignity through borders: they see that Australians are members of a larger humanity. The children I spoke to do not hold self-centred 'either/or' attitudes - for example, that our country should address domestic homelessness, or overseas development. For them, poverty is poverty, inequality is inequality. It's always wrong, no matter where it's occurring.

When UNICEF Australia spoke to a young Khaliq, he said the most important thing to him, right now was peace: "Because if you have peace, you can make a situation for other things all around the world".

Clever thing, that Khaliq, and like Khaliq, Australia's children do have a clear vision for their future. It's a future rooted in the very things that form the foundation of both child rights and human rights – if we care to listen to the things that really matter.

NOTES

This essay was developed from a speech given by UNICEF Australia Young Ambassador Catherine Yen during National Children's Week at Parliament House Canberra.