



THE FOUNDATIONS · POST 3

Meet the Convention

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

The agreement behind your rights.

THE RIGHTS COMPASS

Helping children navigate their rights



What is it?

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is a very long name for something quite simple.

UN United Nations

C Convention

R Rights

C Child

An international human rights treaty (a treaty is a written agreement between countries about rules they agree to follow) about children's rights, and what governments that have agreed to it must do.



What's inside it?

54 articles, but they don't all do the same job.

Some set out children's rights. Others explain what governments must do, and how the Convention works.

Together, they cover many different parts of children's lives: from family, education and health to protection, play and having a say.



PROMISE → PRACTICE

What it doesn't mean

Agreeing to children's rights doesn't automatically make them happen.

When a country ratifies the Convention (ratifying means officially agreeing to be legally bound by it, not just saying it sounds like a good idea), it makes a legal commitment. But making that commitment, and making sure every child actually experiences their rights, are not the same thing.

A right can exist on paper and still be missing from a child's life.





Why did it take until 1989? More than ten years of work.

The UN had already agreed a Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1959. A declaration sets out what should happen. It does not bind any country in law.

Poland proposed a draft Convention in 1978. The next year, 1979, was the International Year of the Child, and countries began working on the text together. It took ten more years of discussion and negotiation to agree the final version.

DID YOU KNOW

They finished in 1989 and chose 20 November: thirty years to the day since the 1959 Declaration.



Who has the rights, and who has to act?

CHILDREN ARE THE RIGHTS-HOLDERS

The Convention recognises children as people with rights of their own.

STATES TAKE ON THE LEGAL OBLIGATIONS

An obligation is something a State has to do, not something it can choose to do. When a State ratifies the Convention, it agrees to take action to respect, protect and fulfil children's rights. That can mean laws, policies, funding, services and decisions that affect children's everyday lives.



Who checks whether it's actually happening?

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child monitors how States are putting the Convention into practice.

A committee is a group of people given a particular job to do. This one is eighteen independent experts in children's rights, not people representing governments.

- Governments report to the Committee on what they have done.
- The Committee can also receive information from other organisations and hear from children about their views and experiences.
- It examines the evidence, asks questions, and publishes its conclusions.



What the Committee can and can't do

It has no police force. What it has is scrutiny, and a public record.

SCRUTINY

Looking closely and asking hard questions in public, so the answers sit on the record where anyone can read them.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Having to explain what you have done and being answerable for whether you have done what you agreed to do. The Committee is one part of that. Laws, courts and institutions inside a country matter too.



AGES 6-8

FOR PARENTS, CARERS AND TEACHERS

How to explain it

“Children everywhere have rights. Countries around the world have made a promise to respect and protect those rights. That promise is written down in something called the Convention on the Rights of the Child.”

TRY THIS TOGETHER

Ask them: why do you think it matters that children's rights are written down?



AGES 9–11

FOR PARENTS, CARERS AND TEACHERS

How to explain it

“The UNCRC is an agreement about the rights children have, and what governments that have agreed to it need to do to make those rights real.”

TRY THIS TOGETHER

Choose one right they already know. What would actually need to happen for children to experience that right in real life?



AGES 12–14

FOR PARENTS, CARERS AND TEACHERS

How to explain it

“When a country ratifies the UNCRC, it agrees to be legally bound by it. But recognising a right, and making sure every child actually experiences it, are not the same thing.”

TRY THIS TOGETHER

Choose one right. If it were being realised, what would you expect to see? What might you see if it wasn't? And what would you need to know before deciding?



AGES 15–17

FOR PARENTS, CARERS AND TEACHERS

How to explain it

“Ratification creates international legal obligations for a State. But States can sometimes make reservations or declarations when joining a treaty, subject to rules about what is permitted.”

TRY THIS TOGETHER

Choose a country and find its record in the UN Treaty Collection. Did it make any reservations or declarations? Have any changed? What has that State actually agreed to?



WHEN A RIGHT ISN'T HAPPENING, YOU CAN ASK

Words you can use

“Which right is this about?”

“What has my country agreed to do about this right?”

“Who is supposed to make this happen?”

“Where is that written down?”

“Who checks whether it’s actually happening?”

Knowing that you have a right is one thing. Knowing what to ask when it isn't happening is another.



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