



Children's rights



Universal Children's Day takes place on the 20th November every year. It was established by the United Nations in 1954, but the original idea for a 'day of the child' came from Reverend Dr Charles Leonard, way back in 1856, in Massachusetts. The first country to make it a national holiday was Turkey, in 1929.

The aim of Universal Children's Day is to make the world aware of the rights of children, as set down by the UN in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1959. The Declaration says that no child should be discriminated against, and that their ideas and opinions should be heard with respect. These rights may seem very straightforward and logical, like the right to health, education and play, but unfortunately they are not always respected.

The reality, as everyone knows, is quite different. In many parts of the world, diseases like malaria are still widespread and AIDS is a huge problem in underdeveloped nations. Medicines are not only expensive, but also sometimes impossible to find. Added to that is the worry that antibiotics are no longer as effective as they used to be in treating many illnesses. Children are the first to pay the price.

The highly publicised case of Malala Yousafzai, who defied the Taliban in Pakistan and demanded that girls be allowed to receive an education, shows us that in some cases children's rights are contested with extreme violence. In many societies, girls in particular have to face near insurmountable difficulties in order to attend school, something we tend to take for granted.

Every child loves to play, and children are geniuses at making up games and using their fertile imagination. However, many children have to play in bomb sites, areas where water and land are polluted, rubbish tips and so on – the list of dangerous 'playgrounds' is endless.

The number of countries where children have very few, if any, of the rights stated in the Declaration is growing. We tend to think of underdeveloped countries when we talk of the rights of the child. But is everything perfect in developed countries? Look around you, take note, read and listen. Then decide.