

A Conversation About Children's Rights

by Ellen Hall and Alison Maher • Response by Pam Boulton

Quoting the Campaign for US Ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) website: "The CRC recognizes all children's rights to develop physically, mentally, and socially to their fullest potential, to express their opinions freely, and to participate in decisions affecting their future." Further, "The CRC provides a vision of children as individuals and as members of a family and community,



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Alison Maher is a co-director of Boulder Journey School, where she has been employed since 1993. Alison has a BA in Psychology from the University of Virginia and a MA in Educational Psychology from the University of Colorado, Denver. She coordinates and instructs a

graduate program in Education in partnership with the University of Colorado, Denver and the Colorado Department of Education and over the past decade, through this program, has worked with more than 150 graduate students. Alison currently serves on the board of Hawkins Centers of Learning and the Boulder County Association of the Education of Young Children. In the past, she has been a board member at Friends School in Boulder, Colorado, and a committee member for the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance. In addition, Alison has worked as an educational consultant in a wide variety of public and private preschool and elementary schools in the United States, Canada, and Ireland.

with rights and responsibilities appropriate to their age and stage of development" (childrightscampaign.org). To the authors of this article, as well as many others, this recognition and vision should be a reality for all children. However, we realize that not all people believe that children should be afforded rights as specified in the CRC.

Do Children Have Rights?

Some adults believe that children do not have inherent rights, but rather must earn specific rights as rewards for appropriate behavior; rights, once afforded, can also be taken away. This makes us question: "Should adults have to earn the right to be parents?" "What other rights currently afforded to adults merely based on age should be earned, with the caveat that they can also be taken away?"

Some adults worry that affording children rights as individuals and as members of a family and community equates to a loss of rights for adults. In response, we ask, "Can we replace this zero-sum mentality with the idea that rights can be negotiated — that all thoughts, questions, and opinions can be welcomed and respected without actually being adopted? Can we

embrace the idea that offering children opportunities to have their voices heard does not mean that the adults involved become voiceless?"

Child Development and Young Children's Rights

If we can begin by agreeing with the CRC that all children have the right to develop physically, mentally, and socially to their fullest potential and that rights and responsibilities should be appropriate to a child's age and stage of development, the questions become, "How can adults support children's understanding of their rights and responsibilities, as well as the rights and responsibilities of others? How can adults support children's development of the interests and abilities necessary for active participation as members of their families and communities?" Educators at Boulder Journey School have been engaged in a long-term investigation of children's rights that addresses these and other questions surrounding this important topic.

Children as Active Participants in a School Community

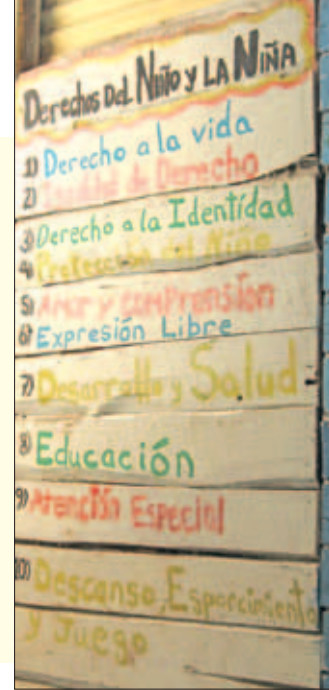
Boulder Journey School is a full-day, year-round school that welcomes over

"Rights of Boys and Girls"

1. Right to life
2. Equal rights
3. Right to an identity
4. Protection of children
5. Love and understanding
6. Free expression
7. Development and health
8. Education
9. Special attention
10. Rest, leisure, and play

Sign on Fundacion Educarte, in Ciudad Ancienne, Guatemala

PHOTOGRAPH BY KIRSTEN HAUGEN



200 young children, ages 6 weeks to 6 years, and their families. As a result of our ongoing study of the schools for young children in Reggio Emilia, Italy (since 1995), and our strong connection with the World Forum on Early Care and Education (since 1999), we have made a commitment as a school community to maintain a culture that values children's rights. We recognize children as citizens; not future citizens, but rather citizens of the present, with inherent and irrefutable rights, which include the right to participation in communities that afford them visibility and voice. We think that children's contributions are essential. Their ideas and opinions are expected, invited, acknowledged, and respected.

When issues arise, as they often do when people interact in shared spaces, adults and children work together to resolve them. An example is the issue of toys from home: Can they be brought to school? Where are they kept while there? When can they be shared? What are the parameters around sharing? What if they are lost? What if they are broken? If we believe that children have the right to bring objects to school that have personal meaning, give them comfort and make connections between school and home, rather than prohibit them, children, with the support of adults, take responsibility for ensuring that their toys are not stolen or lost, that they are shared with peers, and that they don't distract others from their work.

A second example surrounds violent play. If we believe that children have the right to develop an understanding of violence in an environment that assures their safety, then rough play is permitted, with caveats developed by all of the protagonists. In a prekindergarten classroom at Boulder Journey School, as a result of a long-term investigation surrounding violent play, the children created a book for the school commu-

nity entitled, *Playing Rough*. The book includes a list of reasons the children like playing rough, such as: "We won't know how, so we have to practice here." "Because this is our last chance; because we cannot do it in kindergarten; because we will get sent to the office." The book also contains a list of rules for rough play, such as: "If you call time out, that means everyone has to stop." "If someone doesn't listen to you, you can just not play." Featured in the book are a series of photographs, staged by the children, with the caption, "Safe or unsafe?" On the following page, the photographs are repeated, with the children's reasoning behind the safety or lack of safety in the scenes portrayed.

Another example concerns the sharing of community spaces. If we believe that children have the right to be involved in decision-making that affects them, then rather than arbitrarily limiting the number of children allowed in a space, teachers engage children in discussions that result in the establishment of agreed upon rules. When children in a prekindergarten classroom at Boulder Journey School designed a moon buggy, which was built by a parent for the outer space hallway, the result was instant popularity. As a consequence of its use by multiple groups of children, parts of the moon buggy were lost. Subsequently, the design team took on the responsibility of developing rules for play that ensured the safety of the moon buggy and the children using it, while also considering the impact on other classrooms and assuring that using the moon buggy would continue to be fun. The list of rules included: "Please sit in the seats . . . not on the back or the front of the buggy." "Don't jump on it; don't spit at it."

A commitment to children's right to participation in a school community that includes infant, toddler, preschool, and prekindergarten classes requires finding innovative solutions to prob-

lems posed by age and ability. When children and adults at Boulder Journey School designed an all-school mail system, children assumed responsibility for delivering the mail. When the infants were deliverers, older children partnered with them, reading room numbers on envelopes and leading the infants, who crawled from classroom to classroom.

Conclusion

Childhood is a time for learning through numerous and varied experiences, in relationships with other children and adults. In supportive settings, children can offer their ideas and listen to others' ideas, question and debate, negotiate and compromise, over and over again. The elements of time and opportunity are critical. Children require time and opportunities to develop their abilities to formulate, present, and defend their ideas while being open to the ideas of others. Children require time and opportunities to build the knowledge and courage necessary to recognize and counter situations and persons that impose social injustices. Children require time, as well as opportunities, to be active, contributing citizens of democratic communities.



Pam Boulton's Response:

At the World Forum on Early Care and Education in Belfast, Northern Ireland in 2009, the topic of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was addressed frequently and passionately by a number of speakers. As an early childhood educator, I was affirmed in my understanding of the importance of the rights of children. As a citizen of the United States I found myself deeply disturbed by the fact that the U.S. along with Somalia are the only two countries in the UN that have not ratified this important treaty, while 193 countries have been willing to make this commitment to their children. I believe that ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is an important part of being a global citizen.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is a good place to begin this discussion. The Convention's four underlying themes are: the right to **Survival**; the right to **Develop** to the fullest potential; the right to **Protection** from abuse, neglect, and exploitation; and the right to **Participate** in family, cultural, and social life. (www.childrightscampaign.org)

As I read Ellen and Alison's article, I had several questions. I wondered if the issues of 'rights' to survival, a place to live, food, clean water, and protection could be seen as 'trumping' developmental and participatory rights. How do we embrace the 'whole' of the rights discussion? Can our work with young children help to replace the 'zero-sum mentality' with an understanding of the interconnected and interdependent world we live in?

This article is a call to engage in reflective inquiry about children as citizens within our programs and to build rights and responsibilities into our programs with commitment and intentionality. It is time to see the issue of rights and responsibilities for both children and adults as a family, program, community, national, and global issue.

Because of our mutual interest, Ellen Hall and I joined together to develop opportunities for serious dialog about children's rights at the World Forum in Hawaii in 2011. As a keynote speaker, Ellen introduced her book, *Seen and Heard: Children's Rights in Early Childhood Education*. During the World Forum, a group of delegates began talking about the possibility of developing a Working Group on Children's Rights. We are initiating this Working Group with a Global Working Initiative. Goals for the initiative include researching the work of existing groups surrounding children's rights, determining the mission and goals for this World Forum Working Group, and planning strategies for accomplishing these goals. The initiative will be held in Moss, Norway, from June 1-4, 2012.

Let this article and the Working Group on Children's Rights be the beginning of an ongoing dialog about the issues of rights, responsibilities, struggles, and growth — for the children, and for the adults who care about them.



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To learn more about the
Children's Rights Global Working Initiative in Moss, Norway,
see World Forum in Action on page 75 in this issue.
To connect with the work of Children's Rights, go to:
<http://worldforumfoundation.org/childrensrights/>