

UNIVERSAL CHILDREN'S DAY

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Photo: Screenshot from the video [Let's Go to Ang Galing!](#) by ATD Fourth World Philippines.

It has been over 60 years since the United Nations General Assembly adopted Universal Children's Day to promote worldwide an awareness of the importance of improving children's lives. It is celebrated each year on November 20, because it was on that day that in 1959, the UN General Assembly first adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, and then on November 20, 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹

Over these years, one of the most sustained efforts to improve the lives of children has been devoted to ensuring that all children receive an education. For it is widely recognized that education is key to children's development, and to their ability to contribute to the society in which they live. Families living in extreme poverty are acutely aware of this fact, repeatedly emphasizing that education is critical to ensuring a better future for their children, to enabling them to lift themselves out of poverty.

And children themselves are aware of this reality. When in 2010 the [Tapori network of](#)

[children](#), which is part of ATD Fourth World, invited children to explain what they needed and what they already do to learn and help others to learn, over 4,500 children responded. They made it clear that they learn from their families and the people around them as well as from school, and that education forms an essential and important part of all their daily lives. But certain conditions have to be met for them to be able to enjoy their right to education. Simply enrolling a child in school does not guarantee he or she will be able to stay there and learn.

Many children, like Boris from Mauritius, pointed out that the right to education is not respected because of poverty:

“Some children don’t go to school because there’s nothing to eat, no money.”

Others, like José from Peru, talked of loneliness and even exclusion:

“I love being at school. But if the others make fun of me I get upset and feel bad, and it’s possible I might not come back to school again.”

They stressed the important role of the teacher, and their need for an atmosphere of peace and mutual support in the classroom. But many also recognized the role they can play in ensuring the right to go to school, sensitive to the fact that family poverty keeps certain of their friends from going to school. As Boris also said,

“We can help our friends, we can give them bread if they don’t have any. The ones that can go to school should teach the ones who can’t how to read.”

The Tapori group from the Democratic Republic of Congo also recognized the importance of ensuring that every child feels accepted:

“A lot of children fail at school because they are shut out by the others or because they are bullied. Everyone needs to be spoken to. To learn, everyone must get together, everyone must have a place.”

When asked about what the school of their dreams would look like, this is what Karamba from France said:

“The school of my dreams is marvelous. It’s beautifully decorated. You listen to your teacher. She explains things, she doesn’t tell you off, she makes you laugh. The children are kind to each other and learn well. We have the equipment we need. We learn vocabulary, grammar, maths, science, and citizenship. ...At 4 o’clock our families are waiting for us.”

All quotations in this article are from [“Yes, I love to learn!”](#) Editions Quart Monde, 12, rue Pasteur 95480, Pierrelaye, France.

1 Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that governments will

strive to "Make primary education compulsory and available free to all." In Article 29, governments "agree that the education of the child shall be directed to: (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential; [...] (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin."