

## BOOK REVIEW

### Young children's rights

Exploring beliefs, principles and practice

Priscilla Alderson

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This book is one of a series concentrating on the theme of children's rights, the *Children in Charge* series. The articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child are at times discussed in terms of the three Ps, rights to *protection*, to *provision* (resources and services) and to *participation* (being heard and being given responsibility). Commissioned by Save the Children, this work explores the challenging topic of 'participation' for younger children (birth to eight years of age). The central theme emerges with the author's suggestion that we have become over-protective of children in the belief that we are looking after their best interests, denying them the freedom to be expressive, creative and active. A central concern is the ability of adults to communicate with children as a step in the direction of redressing the balance which has eroded some important rights.

The book opens by making the point that in recent years commercial interests have 'locked up' many safe, free access areas, substituting them with treats such as swimming pools, sports and music sessions, the zoos and theme parks – enjoyable but sometimes not affordable. When children are asked what they most enjoy, the responses tend to identify such activities as 'time with my friends', 'playing games in the park', 'messing about on the beach or by the river', and 'taking my dog for a walk'.

The book is organised into nine chapters over its 176 pages. The first discusses children's rights and, in particular, Article 12 of the UN Convention. This charges States to ensure that the child who is capable of forming his or her own views has the right to express those views freely, in all matters affecting the child. Some interesting examples are provided of children giving clear views on important issues with a powerful and pertinent slant. For example, seven-year-olds surveying concerns with bullying chose to ask where and when bullying took place, rather than who bullied whom. The result was better directed supervision and less bullying.

Following chapters explore the tension between protecting children and respecting them. Common beliefs for and against consulting children are examined and a plea is made to see children as human 'beings' rather than human 'becomings'. Methods of listening to and working with children, including research, are discussed in very practical ways, supported by interesting anecdotes. Videos, focus groups, drama, art and various forms of play are touched on,

with some interesting discussion of levels of participation from local to international, and from tokenism and manipulation to child initiated and directed activity. There is an interesting discussion of the overlap between work and play and the potential for mistaken interpretations of what is going on – 'Whereas adults tend to use play for other purposes, children see play as an end in itself' (p.96).

A chapter titled 'Risk and control, conflict and violence' tackles in some depth those adult concerns which engender doubt about allowing children freedom and shared responsibility. There are some telling observations about the distortions and dilemmas in the overly risk conscious society – 'accidents are believed not to exist, someone must always be found to blame' (citing Green 1997) (p.101). There is a useful discussion of conflict and violence and steps which can be taken with children, such as peer mediation, to handle things better. A chapter titled 'Working together: Sharing decisions and responsibility' provides useful insights into how much children can be involved in consultative processes and how much they understand about serious concerns, including life-threatening illness and death. The concluding chapter, 'The key messages from the evidence and experience', points up a range of imbalances and perceptions which impede including children as people with rights and obligations and having respect for their abilities. Traditions which denigrate and infantilise children need rethinking as much can be learnt from children about creating a better future.

This is a useful book filled with rich insights and practical examples from an author experienced in work with children. Parents, workers, and policymakers will find much food for thought, guidance and suggestions for action.

Reviewed by:

Lloyd Owen