

**The United Nations
General Assembly
Special Session on Children**

A Guide for Young People

**WANTED:
YOUNG PEOPLE'S VOICES AND PARTICIPATION**

WHAT DO YOU THINK....

are the biggest problems young people face today?

would make the world a safer place?

can be done to give children a healthy start?

must happen to stop wars and violence?

could help lift more children out of poverty?

are the best ways young people can contribute to their communities?

These are just some of the questions that Governments from around the world will tackle at the Special Session on Children in New York in September of 2001. **And they need your ideas and involvement to find the right answers.**

Children and young people have the right to be informed, to have their opinions heard and to participate in all matters that affect their lives. Governments need to hear what you think they should be doing.

We hope that *The United Nations Special Session on Children: A Guide for Young People* will help get you informed about the issues, what is happening and how you can get involved.

The Special Session of the UN General Assembly for Follow-Up to the World Summit on Children in 2001

What is the Special Session?

On September 19, 20 and 21, 2001, world leaders will gather at the United Nations in New York City for a Special Session on Children— a three-day meeting all about you, the children and young people of the world. At this session, governments from around the world will work together to find ways to give all children the opportunity to grow up healthy, educated, and equipped with the skills they need to fully participate in their communities.

Who Will Attend the Special Session?

The Special Session is an official United Nations meeting, so Heads of State and Governments will be the main participants. But many other people and groups have been invited to both the meetings that will plan what will happen at the Special Session, as well as to the Special Session itself. These include non-governmental organizations (NGOs), children's organizations, advocates for children, and children and young people themselves.

What Are the Goals of the Special Session?

- To look closely at the **progress** made during the past ten years to improve the lives of children and young people throughout the world.
- To discuss the most **important issues and challenges** ahead.
- To pledge to help children get a **good start** in life, obtain a **quality education**, and obtain the **skills** they need to become full and active **participants** in their communities.
- To agree on specific ways that governments, working together with concerned people and groups in their countries, will improve the **quality of life** for children and young people during the next ten years.

Children's Rights

A global movement to protect the rights and improve the lives of children has been underway for more than a decade. In 1989, the United Nations passed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states the ways that adults and governments must protect children and support their health, education, and development. For example, the Convention says that children have **the right to an education. The right to health care. The right to have a home and enough food to eat. And the right to protection from abuse and neglect.** The Convention also states that children and young people have the right to participate: **The right to information. The right to be heard. And the right to express themselves.**

How Did We Get to the Special Session?

The 1990 World Summit for Children

The Special Session is a follow-up to the World Summit for Children in 1990 that—with the Convention on the Rights of the Child—inspired worldwide support for meeting the urgent needs of children.

“We ourselves hereby make a solemn commitment to give high priority to the rights of children, to their survival and to their protection and development.”

-1990 World Summit for Children

At the World Summit for Children, Governments pledged to give every child a better life and promising future. To ensure that they kept their promises, Governments signed the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children and a Plan of Action for Implementing the World Declaration. These documents outlined the areas of children's lives most in need of attention during the next decade, including poverty, health, nutrition, and education, and included specific goals that governments felt could be achieved by the year 2000.

The Goals of the World Summit for Children What Governments Promised to Do for Children from 1990-2000

Reduce the number of children who die before the age of five.
Reduce the number of mothers who die during pregnancy or childbirth.
Reduce the number of children and young people who do not have enough nutritious food.
Ensure that everyone has safe drinking water and good sanitation.
Ensure that all children can attend school.
Help more adults learn to read and write.
Protect the lives and rights of children and young people living in especially difficult circumstances, including victims of war and natural disasters.

What Progress Has Been Made Since the World Summit for Children?

The good news is that, although not all the goals have been achieved, there has been much progress in improving the well being of children worldwide in the last decade. ♦ In many areas of the world, more children are surviving their first five years of life. ♦ Vaccines reached more children and helped saved millions of lives. ♦ An increase in consumption of micronutrients, such as Vitamin A and iodized salt, helped prevent blindness and mental retardation.

What Are the Biggest Challenges for Children Today?

At the same time, there are many challenges ahead and much work to be done. Children and young people throughout the world still experience far too many hardships in their everyday lives. The lives of millions of children have been shattered by extreme poverty, armed conflict, AIDS, and discrimination.

Consider:

- 160 million children under the age of five are malnourished. About 10 million severely malnourished children die each year.
- 110 million children do not attend primary school, two-thirds of them girls.
- 600 million children, live on less than \$1 a day.
- 1.4 billion people do not have safe water in their communities.
- 13 million children have been orphaned by AIDS and 8,500 children and young people each day are infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

What Must be Done to Improve the Lives of Children and Young People?

The Special Session will ask the world community to work to improve the lives of children and young people. A special paper, currently called *A World Fit for Children*, spells out commitments that Governments will make and details specific actions they will take.

The document, which will be discussed at the Special Session, envisions a world where the best interests of children and young people are always taken into account. A world that protects children's rights. A world that treats boys and girls equally. A world where children play and learn, and grow to adulthood in health, peace and dignity. It is a world that regards young people as valuable resources—and involves them in making decisions about their lives and finding ways to make the world a better place for all. To make this vision a reality:

- **All children must have a good start in life.** Helping children get the best start possible begins with good health care for their mothers even before the children are born. In order for young children to survive and thrive, they

must have good nutrition, immunizations, and grow up in a safe and healthy environment.

- **All children must have a quality education.** Primary schools should be free so that all children—boys and girls, rich and poor—can attend. All schools should be safe and friendly places and children must have teachers who have been trained properly and who encourage them to learn.
- **All adolescents—young people between the ages of 10 and 19—must have the opportunity to develop the skills they need to participate in and contribute to their communities.** Governments and societies must make sure that young people—by the time they are 18—are physically and mentally healthy. They must protect young people from violence. They must ensure that young people obtain an education that prepares them to earn a living.

Young People's Participation and the Special Session

How Are Young People Getting Involved?

Some young people have been invited to the planning meetings or to the Special Session itself take part in a variety of activities, forums, and panels.

Governments, for example, may include at least one youth representative in their official delegations and many NGOs are expected to bring young people to the Special Session to share their opinions, experiences, and suggestions for solutions to the problems that they face.

How Can You Have Your Voice Heard?

There are many other ways you can get involved so that your ideas and solutions will be considered in the debates and final recommendations of the Special Session.

- Contact the department or ministry in your government that handles education or youth services to discuss what has been happening to children and young people in your country. Let the people there know what you want the Special Session to discuss and recommend for the future.
- Contact children's organizations and local and national youth groups in your community. There are many organizations working for and with young people to make sure that their voices are heard loud and clear at the Special Session.
- Contact the UNICEF office in your country to get more information about the Special Session and how you can get involved.
- Raise the issue of the Special Session in your school, youth center or organization and ask for a discussion about what is going on.
- Join in the debate at youth conferences, forums, and other meetings and events where Special Session is being discussed.
- Lend your support for the goals of the Special Session. One way to do that is through an international campaign called *Say Yes to Children* that will be launched in March 2001. *Say Yes to Children* will bring a message of support for action on behalf of children from you and millions of other young people and concerned citizens to the governments attending the Special Session. Look out for information on this campaign in your community.

If you have access to a computer and the Internet, you can visit "www.unicef.org" and "www.unicef.org.voy" for more information and discussion about the Special Session.

Meeting in Cyberspace

Young people worldwide are invited to participate in the UNICEF youth rights web project, *Voices of Youth* (VOY). On the Internet at www.unicef.org.voy, you can explore issues like HIV/AIDS, gender discrimination, child labour, the environment, armed conflict, and youth rights through quizzes, photo essays, and case studies. Give your opinions using the web discussion forums and hear how other young people in the world feel about the issues. The "Take Action" forum encourages participants to share their experiences about getting involved and making a difference in their communities.

VOY is also the place to go for the latest news on the Special Session and other important conferences for and with young people. All the materials are available online in French, Spanish, and English.

Beyond the Special Session: The Global Movement for Children

The real work of meeting the needs of all children and young people is not done at the Special Session. It will be done in communities, villages, towns, and cities in countries around the world. Meeting the goals of the Special Session will require a huge commitment from governments and partnerships with all parts of societies— youth activists, civic leaders government agencies, nongovernmental organizations and private corporations.

The Global Movement for Children is a worldwide campaign to help make sure that governments keep their promises to children and have the resources they need to do this. It is a partnership of concerned and committed people and organizations whose *number one priority* is taking action to improve conditions and ensure the well being of all children and young people in the world.

The Leadership Initiative

The Leadership Initiative is an important part of the Global Movement for Children. Spearheaded by Nelson Mandela and Graca Machel, renowned world leaders and advocates for children, the Initiative aims to increase public awareness and support of the goals of the Special Session. The Leadership Initiative calls on governments and leaders from all segments of society to increase their investments in children's health, education, rights and protection so that the goals of the Special Session can be realized for all children and young people.

“We can not waste our precious children. Not another one, not another day. It is long past time for us to act on their behalf”
--Nelson Mandela and Graca Machel