

# Getting it Right Together:

Strengthening Understanding of  
Children's Rights Through  
Partnership with Parents and  
Families

by Dr Diane Delaney



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# Introduction

*This blog was prompted by a post on [LinkedIn](#) by Professor Laura Lundy, a leading children's rights expert, who shared Harry Shier's (2018) article [Towards a New Improved Pedagogy of Children's Rights and Responsibilities](#). In particular, Professor Lundy shared a quote stating, 'children's rights are not contingent on their responsibilities'*

*This sparked a discussion within the Connect team about how schools, parents, children and families can work together to disentangle these concepts in real life for families and professional practice for educators. It also prompted thinking about how school rules, expectations, charters, visions, and policies are constructed in ways that genuinely uphold children's rights, while keeping the focus on the responsibilities of duty bearers (the adults).*

*This discussion highlighted the opportunity this topic area creates for shared learning across school communities: supporting the development of environments that are accessible, welcoming, rights-led and enjoyable for all children and families.*

*Below, Dr Diane Delaney, Connect's Training Associate, shares some reflections and draws together evidence and ideas about rights, responsibilities, and partnership working with families.*

Children's rights are sometimes easier to agree in theory than to apply consistently in practice. One area where this can emerge in schools and wider education discussions is in how children's rights, as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) are positioned alongside the construction of school rules, policies and expectations, sometimes framed as 'responsibilities'.

Children's rights and idea of responsibilities often sit closely together. However, they are not the same, and maintaining clarity between them is an important part of rights-based practice.

# What do we mean by children's rights

Children's rights in Scotland are defined through the UNCRC, now incorporated into Scots law. This gives them a clear legal and ethical status. These rights are:

- Universal
- Unconditional
- Legally protected.

They apply to every child at all times, regardless of behaviour, context or circumstance.

This distinction is important because in professional practice, rights can sometimes become entangled with expectations or rules centred on children's behaviour. While this is often unintentional, it can shift how rights are understood, particularly when language implies that rights depend on or are associated with meeting certain conditions.

## Rights, responsibilities, and where confusion can arise

Evidence from practice and wider professional reflection suggests that confusion can sometimes arise in how adults understand and connect children's rights with responsibilities in everyday language, documentation, and discussion.

Children's rights are defined through the UNCRC, and are fixed in Scottish law. In contrast, responsibilities and expectations are often determined locally, set out in school rules, policies, values, charters and frameworks. Typically, these are constructed through an adult centric lens, underpinned by education or policy jargon.

Confusion can emerge when narratives about the UNCRC and children's rights are discussed alongside or blended with narratives about expectations of children's behaviour or effort in school. This can lead to the idea that children must behave in a particular way for their rights to apply. A common example relates to access to play being linked to behaviour.

In these instances, expectations or rules designed to support positive learning environments can become unintentionally positioned as conditions for the exercise of rights. A rights based approach does not mean the absence of expectations, routines or approaches that support positive behaviour and relationships. Schools can and do develop supportive cultures where children's actions and interactions are guided in ways that promote rights, safety and inclusion.

A helpful way of addressing this confusion is to re-centre adult responsibility as duty bearers. In a rights based approach, the focus is not on what children must do to access their rights, but on what adults will do to ensure those rights are respected, fulfilled and protected. This shift matters. It moves emphasis away from framing rights as being associated with children's behaviour or effort (i.e. hard working and responsible), and towards recognising that adults are the duty bearers who hold responsibility for creating the conditions in which rights are upheld at all times.

## **Strengthening understanding through partnership with parents, children and families**

A consistent understanding of children's rights is most likely to be effectively developed when schools, children and families work in together in partnership.

Parent Councils and the Parent Forum can provide valuable spaces for shared dialogue, where educators, children and families can explore ideas together, including:

- What the UNCRC means in everyday life at home, in school and the community
- How rights are upheld in real life
- Where confusion and contradiction emerge
- The distinction between rights and school expectations (i.e. policies, rules, charters)
- How language influences everyone's understanding of concepts such as rights and responsibilities.

An important part of this partnership is being open to and valuing what children and parents are saying about how these ideas are understood in real life. This includes recognising their experiences of where language or practice feels confusing or contradictory.

This type of collaborative feedback provides an opportunity to revise language and strengthen consistency in action, reflecting that partnership working is as much about listening and responding as it is about sharing information.

Where children receive consistent messages across home and school, their understanding of rights becomes clearer and more secure. Where messages differ confusion can arise. For example, where rights such as the right to play are stated but then appear to be removed as a consequence of behaviour, or where broad values such as being 'hard working' are not clearly defined. In these situations, expectations can become subjective and may privilege certain behaviours over others, which can misalign with the UNCRC and create confusion, inequity and inconsistency for children and families.

This is why partnership working with children, families and schools is so central to consistently applied rights based practices and positive experiences in real life.

## **Moving forward together**

Embedding children's rights is an ongoing action, involving shared reflection and learning for the adult duty bearers. It involves refining language, revisiting assumptions, and strengthening consistency between home and school.

It requires making changes, actively listening, and hearing the contradictions and confusions experienced by children and families about the differing uses and application of phrases and concepts.

By working in partnership with the Parent Council, the Parent Forum and children, schools and local authorities can build a shared understanding of the UNCRC that supports everyone involved in a child's education.

Children's rights are not constructed or conditional, they are established in law and must be upheld in all contexts.

## **Key take-aways**

- Children's rights are not the same as their responsibilities and should not be linked to behaviour
- Children's rights must be consistently reflected in both what is stated in policies and charters and what children experience in everyday life
- Adults, and duty bearers, hold responsibility for protecting and upholding children's rights in all circumstances
- Improving practice and more inclusive, rights based environments and outcomes are built through partnership between schools, children and families, with shared understanding and consistent, accessible language

Resources:

[The UNCRC](#)

[Children's rights and the UNCRC \(Scottish Government, 2021\)](#)

[Myths and Misconceptions about the UNCRC](#)

[Towards a New Improved Pedagogy of "Children's Rights and Responsibilities" \(Harry Shier, 2018\)](#)

[Young children's right to be heard on the quality of their education: Addressing potential misunderstandings in the context of early childhood education \(Laura Lundy, Colette Murray, Kylie Smith and Carmel Ward, 2024\)](#)

[In defence of tokenism? Children's right to participate in collective decision-making \(Laura Lundy, 2018\)](#)

[Voice is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, \(Laura Lundy, 2013\)](#)

[Primary school resources, \(Together\)](#)

[Dignity in School \(Children's Parliament\)](#)