

A history of children's rights: Australia and the World

By Thomas, Y10



Imagine you are working in the cramped confines of an underground coal mine, breathing in dust and mineral particles, covered in sweat and earthly grime, the whole scene lit only by dim oil lanterns, polluting the air with their nauseous stench. The air is cluttered with ringing metal and screeching tools. It's overstimulating, it's dangerous, it's terrifying. It's your everyday existence. You do this to survive. To have food to eat and a place to sleep.

This was a reality endured for centuries by children across the world, and that ended not too long ago. For many children it is still a looming threat. But since those days a hundred years ago in the dank confines of underground mines, children's rights have come a long way, and continue to develop to this day.

Timeline of children's rights, the past 100 years

Industrial revolution, child labour, children in war and limited access to services.



1924: Geneva declaration of the rights of the child

1946: Establishment of UNICEF



1948: Adoption of the Universal declaration of Human Rights

1973: The International Labour Organisation adopts Convention 138, setting 18 as the minimum age for working jobs hazardous to a person's health,



1989: Adoption of the Convention of the rights of the child by the UN

2002: Child delegates address the UN general assembly for the first time, marking a new era of child participation in the modern world



2015: Convention of the Rights of the child becomes the most ratified international instrument with 196 nations.

Today, continued development of children's rights and protection

Colonial Australia

Colonial Australia was a land pock marked and battlescarred with poverty and destitute families. In its early years as a penal colony, it existed under British common law, subjugating children to discipline and labour focused reform. Many children were put into institutions and orphanages due to the high rate of familial abandonment, a consequence of incredibly low wages and the difficulty of raising a child in a harsh world.

This was much the same around the world, especially in Europe and its other colonies, this system of mass systematic institutionalisation often ridden with corruption and little actual care for the children involved. Abuse, physical beatings and nutritional deprivation were common, and the children that came out of these systems were often left with poor life styles, poor paying jobs, and more often than not descended into criminal activity, which in itself led to the children being convicted and sent by ship to penal colonies such as Australia, where they were treated no better than their adult counterparts, as there existed no separate judiciary system of rights and laws for the youth.

The industrial revolution

The industrial revolution was a pivotal moment in human history and saw the transformation of not only the technological landscape, but also the social one. This period saw incredibly cruel working conditions thrust upon the majority of the population, and children were not exempt.

The youth were put to work in mines, textile mills and factories, and were paid a fraction of their adult co-workers despite sharing the same hours; a minimum of 14 hours a day, six days a week. Even outside of heavily industrialised states, children were put to work in agrarian fields and the farming industry.

Because of this, a vast majority of children did not attend school or other services, and though there did exist a slim number of children with noble upbringings who did have private tutors, less than 25% of children attended school or had any access to education.

However this began to change with the advent of the industrial age. The 1833 Factory Act and the 1842 Mines Act passed in the UK banned children under the age of nine from working in certain industries, limiting the hours children had to work, and requiring children under thirteen to receive at least 2 hours of daily schooling.

Federation & the stolen generation

Australian Federation in 1901 did little to immediately subvert the pre-existing rights, or the lack thereof, around children in the former colony. However it did much to lay the ground work for modern laws.

Schooling remained an individually managed subject among the states, but national discussion on education became more and more encouraged, and overall education and literacy expanded. Similarly, child labour was not immediately banned, but regulations were eventually put in place to regulate it, and national initiatives drove public welfare and family support that would develop throughout the century.

However these regulations were still extremely discriminatory and not accessible for all groups, and certain policies put in place by the newly federalised government led directly to the stolen generation. Thousands of indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families by the government and churches to integrate them into white societal life, attempting to kill off aboriginal culture. It is estimated between 10 and 33% of aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families and institutionalised in alien conditions in church and government missions. The ramifications of this inexcusable attack on children and their rights is still felt throughout Australia today.

The world wars

War is an indiscriminate thing, and the world wars were no different. In WW2 alone, of the roughly 80 million deaths an estimated 60% were civilian casualties, including tens of millions of children. Children on the front lines were at the most risk, especially in WW1 where mass evacuation was not well organised nor followed through with. In both wars there are instances of child conscription, units made up of underage boys and girls, who were depended upon as a legitimate fighting force. Instances of children working in factories was widespread, an incredibly dangerous position as they were often working on incendiaries, and the factories were prime targets for air raids and bombing runs. The youth were not safe from the atrocities of the holocaust either, with 1.5 million children dying in Nazi concentration camps.

In Australia, though far removed from the front lines and any immediate danger, children still under went harsh treatment, primarily in WW2. Many schools and coastal communities were uprooted and displaced, disturbing families and education. Though no longer a threat in Australia, it is a risk that persists throughout the world today.

“Every war is a war against children” - Eglantyne Jeb

In 1919, at the close of WW1, Eglantyne Jeb founded Save The Children, the largest non-governmental organization specifically dedicated to children's rights in the world.

One of the most influential humanitarians, she pioneered children's rights in the face of postwar starvation and reparations, laying the ground work for modern international child protection laws.

Post-war to today

Her greatest contribution came in 1924 when she presented the Declaration of the Rights of the Child to the League of Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. This declaration would be adopted and reformulated tirelessly throughout the century. It famously stated:

“The child that is hungry must be fed, the child that is sick must be nursed, the child that is backward must be helped, the delinquent child must be reclaimed, and the orphan and the waif must be sheltered.”

Australia played an important role in instating Save the Children, with one of the first global institutes opening in Melbourne in 1919. It played further roles in helping the UN expand the Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1959, and pushing the adoption of the new Convention on the Rights of the Child by the UN general assembly in 1989, ratifying it in 1990.

By 2015, this convention had become the most ratified international UN accord in history, with only the United States not having signed to this date.

This worldwide interest and duty to protect children and their rights is more than evident globally. UNICEF estimates that roughly 85% of youth aged 5-17 have access to some form of schooling. In Australia that number swells to 96.5% of children with about 4.2 million students across the country.





Unfortunately, not all is well. In numerous areas throughout the world, there is still incredibly dire inequity for children. Globally, 1 in 5 children live in an active conflict zones, roughly 520 million individuals.

An estimated 12 million children world wide live in conditions of child slavery, removed from families and exploited fro personal and financial gain.

450 million children live in areas of high water vulnerability, 1.3 million children in Australia live in food insecure house-holds, and 273 million youth are out of schooling worldwide.

This is why we must continue to support and innovate children's rights around the world and continue to protect the best interests of the youth, so that in the future every child can imagine working in the dank confines of a mine from the safety of their home and with the promise of schooling, food, drink, and protected rights, tomorrow.

