

# CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

## Attitudes and Perceptions

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Currently, the movement for children's rights represents an important part of this century's human rights campaign. We have been witnessing a growing interest in establishing exactly what the rights of children are, or should be.

Most statements about the rights of children are written in generalities which are easily accepted by everyone. For example, there are rights to free education, to adequate nutrition, housing, and medical care, and to freedom from neglect, cruelty, and exploitation. Most of us have no problems accepting these basic rights of children; however, when examined at a more specific and concrete level, considerable controversy has arisen concerning the interpretation, extension, and application of these rights.

A controversy concerning children's rights has developed, in part, because child advocates take different views regarding the goals of the movement. Farson, for example, has identified two types of advocates—those interested in protecting children and those interested in protecting children's rights.<sup>1</sup> Worsfold has similarly distinguished between the paternalistic view of children and that which upholds children's rights to self-determination.<sup>2</sup>

The paternalistic orientation of the "child protectors" or "salvationists" emphasizes the responsibility of society to provide its children with the necessary resources. This view typically adopts an image of the child as vulnerable, dependent, and essentially incompetent relative to adults. In contrast, the advocacy position of the "child liberators" or "equalists," is one extending adult rights to children. In this view, the child does not possess special status, is not held to be incompetent, and is instead regarded as autonomous and fully capable of decisionmaking and self-determination in all spheres of life.

While debate continues between the salvationists and the liberationists, surprisingly little research has been conducted on children's rights. A notable exception has been the work of Rogers and associates,<sup>3,4</sup> who examined adults' perception of the rights of children in five domains which they labeled: education, health, economic, safety, and legal. This was an important initial effort, leading the researchers to conclude that popular sentiment favored children's rights to nurturance over rights to self-

determination. Two reservations concerning that research must be made, however. First, it examined the perceived rights of only one restricted age group—10 to 14 years old. One might expect that the age of the child would influence people's judgments regarding rights; that is, what is felt to be the right of a teenager may not be held to be the right of a very young child. Second, the statements judged by the subjects in this research involved clearcut rights—for example, right to free schooling; right to vote. That is, child rights were categorized by the researchers on *a priori* grounds into two extremely different types, essentially building-in the nurturance versus self-determination distinction, without effort to determine whether individuals would make such distinctions. Our present research sought to remedy these shortcomings.

The purpose of our study was to establish the dimensions of the rights and responsibilities recognized as a function of the age of the child in question. An additional goal was to assess whether demographic variables, such as, age, sex, and ethnicity of respondents, influenced their acknowledgement of children's rights.

## Method

In order to investigate people's conceptions of children's rights, we needed to construct some kind of instrument less transparent in its focus than a mere listing of the noncontroversial platitudes and widely-accepted moral/philosophical truisms found in the various existing children's rights bills and treatises. We wanted to address specific issues requiring application of personal norms and values of our respondents that were pertinent to a child's needs, rights, and responsibilities. Using the literature on child rights in the legal and social science fields as a basis, our research team generated attitude statements covering such areas as child versus parental responsibilities, school problems, court intervention, discipline, and decisionmaking by the child. From the various attitudinal statements that were proposed, 64 statements were selected and randomly ordered into a questionnaire. In the final questionnaire, each statement was accompanied by a seven-point Likert scale that ranged from "strongly disagree," (1), to "strongly agree," (7); with "neither disagree nor agree," (4), in the middle. In addition, the instructions for the questionnaire required that respondents make four ratings for each of the 64 attitude statements, one for each of the following age groups: 0-5 years, 6-11 years, 12-14 years, and 15-17 years old.

This children's rights questionnaire was then administered to a total of 832 respondents who were recruited from high schools and colleges, representing both sexes, various ethnic groups, and a wide age range—15 to 59 years old. Most of the respondents were single, childless, and of middle-class socioeconomic status.

## Results

Preliminary examination indicated that some child rights were highly endorsed regardless of the age of the child, while other rights were more highly endorsed as the age of the child increased. Thus, for example, a child's rights to legal protection and to basics such as food, shelter, and medical care were highly endorsed irrespective of the age of the child being considered; while a child's right to choose his own bedtime was increasingly endorsed as his age increased. The interests of the present study concerned child rights held to be age-dependent, for these are the rights surrounded by greatest controversy and greatest variability among respondents. Therefore, those attitude statements receiving extreme endorsement across all age groups of children by the full sample were identified, i.e., items with an overall average rating of six or more for the four age groups. These rights, then, were *age-independent* in that respondents strongly supported these rights for children regardless of the child's age. They included children's rights to legal protection of all kinds, and rights to basic human commodities and nurturance, such as a child's right to be raised with respect and without fear. Approximately half of the 64 attitude statements were identified as age independent and set aside. Attention turned then to an investigation of those rights held to vary as a function of the child's age.

To analyze the children's rights which are *age-dependent*, that is, granted as a function of the child's maturation, the difference between a respondent's ratings of each age-dependent attitude statement for the youngest and oldest age groups was computed. These differences were then factor analyzed by a principle components method. Four factors were extracted with a screen test and then rotated to a varimax (orthogonal) criterion, with each

factor representing a group of attitudes toward child rights which increased or decreased together as the child matured from toddler to teenager. Weights greater than .34 were considered in the interpretation of factor patterns.

Factor I, Child's Right to Independent Choice, consisted of statements advocating a child's right to choose his own home, church, schooling, diet, friends, etc. Examples of these statements are (1) "In case of parents' death, children should be allowed to choose their own foster parents;" (2) "Children should be left alone to encourage independence;" and (3) "Parents are wrong to interfere with their child's choice of friends." This factor thus is related to a child's prerogative of self-determinism, with an emphasis on the child's right to independent choice, particularly where the child's exercising of this right does not unduly infringe upon the rights of others, such as parents. As the referent child matured from youngster to adolescent, the respondents were more willing to give the child his right to independent choice, endorsement going from slightly disagree to slightly agree.

Factor II, Child's Responsibility for Self, was also concerned with self-determinism, but here the emphasis was more on the child's right to take responsibility for himself, to speak up for himself, and to accept the consequences of his actions. Statements loading high on this factor included (1) "Duties should be given to children so they learn responsibility;" and (2) "Children should be kept at home so they don't get into trouble." There was greater endorsement of these rights for the older than the younger children,

from neither agreement nor disagreement at 0-5 years to moderate agreement at 15-17 years.

Factor III was best conceptualized in terms of nurturance, in that it entails the responsibility of adults for providing a basic, sound, nurturing socialization of the child. Items loading highly here included such things as (1) "Parents should be responsible for their child's good health," and (2) "Parents should make the final decision about whether a child attends school or not." With this factor, Adult's Responsibility for Providing Basic Socialization to the Child, there was greater agreement on these items with the younger than older children, endorsement going from moderate agreement to slight agreement.

Factor IV also concerns nurturance, although here items address the rights of adults to discipline and punish as part of their socialization efforts and thus was labeled Adult's Right to Discipline and Punish. Illustrative examples include (1) "A child should never be scolded harshly," and (2) "Teachers should be able to use physical punishment when a child is a real problem." For this factor there was not much of an overall difference between the youngest and oldest children being considered. This might be due, in part, to certain subgroups, such as males and females canceling each other out. In general, however, we found that there was slight disagreement with the items of this factor which indicates an unwillingness to permit adult use of harsh disciplinary techniques with children.

The second part of this study involved assessing the influence of demographic factors on the recognition of these child rights. For each attitude statement on a given factor, an individual respondent's

four age-specific ratings were averaged, and scale scores across items on a factor were generated. This score thus represented an individual's overall endorsement of each of the age-related child rights components. Each of the four scale scores were then subjected to a 2x2x2 analysis of variance. Both sexes were represented, and respondents were divided by age in terms of legal minors under 18 years and legal adults, those 18 years and older. Finally, for purposes of this study, only the two large ethnic groups, Japanese-Americans and European-Americans, were employed (N = 519). The overall pattern of results suggests that demographic variables do indeed differentially influence each of the child rights dimensions.

Highly significant sex differences ( $p < .005$ ) were found, with females endorsing somewhat more strongly than males Factor II, Child's Responsibility for Self, and males endorsing much more strongly than females Factor IV, Adult's Right to Discipline and Punish. These sex differences are not altogether surprising, and are in general accord with popular stereotypes and earlier research findings suggesting that women are more liberal than men *vis a vis* children's freedom to give their own opinions, make their own decisions, and take the consequences of these decisions, while men are generally more discipline-oriented than women.

Similarly, highly significant age differences ( $p < .001$ ) were also found, with legal adults endorsing somewhat more strongly than legal minors Factor II, Child's Responsibility for Self, and Factor III, Adult's Responsibility for Providing Basic Socialization to the Child. It appears that while adults were more willing than minors to give children self responsibility, the adults still wanted to maintain their responsibility for socialization.



Finally, significant ethnicity effects were also found, with Japanese-American and European-American respondents differing in expectable directions in their endorsement of Factor I, Child's Right to Independent Choice ( $p < .05$ ), and Factor III, Adult's Responsibility for Providing a Basic Socialization to the Child ( $p < .001$ ). These results suggest that ethnic groups do differ with respect to the power granted to the child versus the socializing adults, again a finding in accord with previous cross-cultural research on child-rearing attitudes.

### Discussion

These data are generally supportive of the distinction between nurturance and self-determination rights already present in the literature, as discussed earlier.

Furthermore, the implied conclusions converge with those reached in other efforts by this research team.

First, the present findings suggest the importance of distinguishing between those abstract moral rights which are perceived to hold regardless of a child's age and those which vary with the child's development. This developmental aspect of child rights conceptualizations was also apparent in other research.<sup>5,6</sup> On the basis of our work to date, it is recommended that future research on the rights of children in fact consider carefully the maturation of the child in question.

A second conclusion concerns the importance of reciprocity, put forth by Baumrind as the basic idea of responsibilities accompanying rights.<sup>7</sup> She has recognized the reciprocal balance between the rights and responsibilities of children, and the rights and responsibilities of adults, asserting the salience of the child's developmental stage in this balance. The present findings of the four corresponding factors of the child's and the adult's rights and responsibilities roughly covarying over time serve to underscore the dynamic equilibrium of rights within the family context. Our overarching research strategy requires recognition of both the developmental nature and the necessity of reciprocity in any conceptualization of children's rights.

A last conclusion concerns the variation in attitudes toward child rights as a function of demographic characteristics of the respondent. The present study demonstrated the differential impact of people's age, sex, and ethnicity on their orientation toward children, their rights and their needs. In a separate investigation,<sup>8</sup> we attempted to see

whether the actual conceptualization of child rights differed for Japanese-American and European-American persons by comparing the factor structures for the two ethnic groups. Insufficient evidence was found to warrant concluding different dimensionalizations. In the present study, however, Japanese-Americans were found to uphold more strongly than their European-American counterparts the Adult's Responsibility for Providing Basic Socialization to the Child, and in other research, Marshall Islanders were found to feel even more strongly about this than either of the other American subgroups. Cultural variation in views of child rights promises to be a rich topic for future exploration. As shown in the present study, not only ethnicity, but sex and age of the opinion holder affect his views. In other work, we have shown that court workers may differ from those less familiar with court procedures over which problems should be brought to Family Court. Such demographic and cultural differences have important implications for the kinds of cases brought to court, the kinds of court decisions that will be made, the quantity and quality of social services which are employed by any particular group, and the sort of child rights legislation which is supported.

It is important that we recognize the variation in conceptions of child rights that exists, and that we do our best to ensure that the bills of rights for children and changing policies of child advocacy emerging from the current examinations of child rights be informed of these differences in attitudes. Finally, we have seen that the term "children's rights" is multifaceted, and advocates of this movement would undoubtedly do well to identify specific issues of concern rather than argue for children's rights in general.

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup>Farson, R.E. *Birthrights*, New York: Macmillan, 1974.
- <sup>2</sup>Worsfold, V.L. "A Philosophical Justification for Children's Rights," in *Harvard Educational Review*, 1974, 44, pp. 142-157.
- <sup>3</sup>Parks-Rogers, P. and C.M. Rogers. "Children's Rights: Attitudes as a Function of Intrinsic Developmental Perspective," paper presented at meeting of the American Psychological Association, New York, 1979.
- <sup>4</sup>Rogers, C.M. and L.S. Wrightsman. "Attitudes Toward Children's Rights: Nurturance or Self-Determination," in *Journal of Social Issues*, 1978, 34, pp. 59-68.
- <sup>5</sup>Parks-Rogers and Rogers, *op. cit.*
- <sup>6</sup>Wong, B.J., T.L. Morton, R.A. Dubanoski, D.D. Blaine and E.M.C. Lee. "Cultural and Age-Dependent Differences in Child Rights," paper presented at meeting of the Western Psychological Association, Honolulu, 1980.
- <sup>7</sup>Baumrind, D. "Reciprocal Rights and Responsibilities in Parent-Child Relations," in *Journal of Social Issues*, 1978, 34, pp. 179-196.
- <sup>8</sup>Dubanoski, R.A., T.L. Morton and D.D. Blaine. "Cross-Cultural Investigation of Perceptions of Child Rights," paper presented at meeting of the American Psychological Association, New York, 1979.

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