

## Our Children, Our Future

The SGI-USA's exhibition on children's rights recently opened in Oklahoma City. Now halfway through a 15-city, two-year tour, the exhibition has been seen by more than 10,000 people.

Great. But how does that help children? After all, look at these statistics:

- In the past decade, some 2 million children have been killed, 4–5 million disabled, 1 million orphaned and 12 million left homeless by war.
- In many countries, children are routinely sold into servitude — for example, children as young as 6 work as maids in Bangladesh.
- More than 2 million girls between ages 4 and 12 undergo genital mutilation every year.

Staggering, isn't it? But if you hadn't read these statistics, would you be as moved at this moment to take a stand for children? That's the purpose of the SGI-USA's exhibit — to inform and to motivate.

After all, children are our future. And what we teach our children today is the kind of future we can expect.

The key is education. Not just the kind that students get at school but the learning process that goes on every day, all day. Children are constantly learning from everything around them. And we are their teachers. What our children learn is our responsibility. Each of us. Whether we are parents or not. Whether we are directly involved with children or not.

In SGI President Ikeda's novel *The New Human Revolution*, during the ravages of World War II, when the Japanese government literally conscripted children into working for the military, Soka Gakkai President Josei Toda said: "If [children] continue to be tainted with xenophobia and come to regard fighting and dying for their country as the highest virtue, then their whole lives will be ruined. The country's future will also be extremely bleak" (vol. 1, p. 211).

Abuse the education of our children, and the future is hopeless. One leads to the other. It's that simple. And it's frightening when we realize that the conscription of children continues today in many war-torn countries around the world.

The world situation may seem overwhelming, but you can start with your part of it. Embrace the children around you. Support their right to be children: to be sheltered and cared for, to be properly fed, to be educated, to play. And never to be exploited in any way.

Even in our everyday dealings with children we can have great effect. Speaking to members in Thailand, SGI President Ikeda said:

It is important to respect each child as an individual, as a person in his or her own right. We must never treat children casually or patronizingly just because of their young age, thinking "they wouldn't understand" or "this will be good enough for them."

Within each child exists a fine adult. It is important that we speak to that adult. This will lead to the development of the child's character. At the same time, those who interact with children in an adult manner will themselves grow and develop as people.... Children have far keener perception than most adults imagine.

We are today witnessing a worldwide groundswell of effort, of emotion, of commitment and conviction for children's rights:

- Oct. 25, 1996 — Thousands of Colombian schoolchildren march in Bogota as part of a national referendum on children's rights.
- July 6, 1997 — Mexican children vote for their rights alongside adults in a federal

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election.

- Jan. 17, 1998 — Three parallel Marches Against Child Labor begin and will eventually wind through Asia, Africa, Latin America, North America and Europe.

In addition, the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child — a document that declares children have the right to life and the right to be heard, that children's rights are *human* rights — broke all records as the most widely ratified human rights agreement in history (all but two countries, Somalia and the United States, have ratified it to date).

Efforts like these and the SGI-USA's exhibition are significant, but only as far as we learn for ourselves the crucial importance of children's rights, what this issue means in our lives, and what action we can take.

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