UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER



The shield of children's rights

Because even wars have rules: A guide to your rights

A child-friendly version of:

2025 Report to the Human Rights Council on the rights of the child and violations of the human rights of children in armed conflicts

A/HRC/60/51

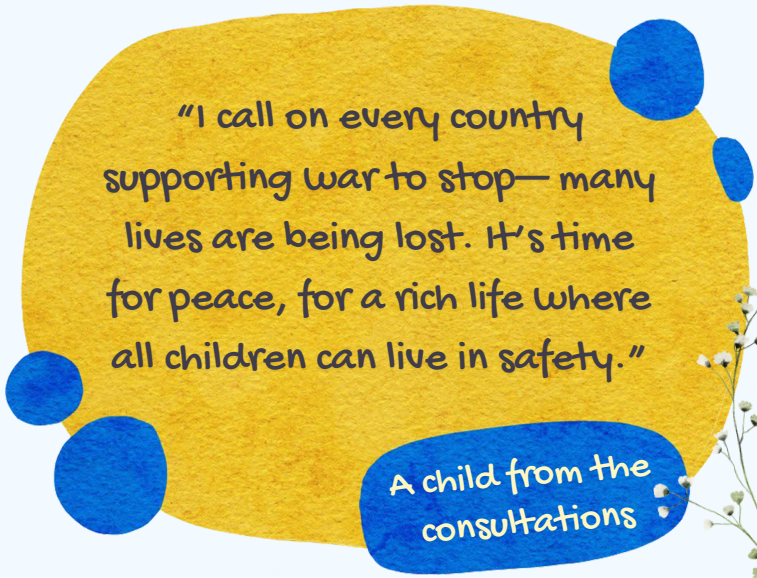
Acknowledgment to the children

The elaboration of this report would not have been possible without the courageous voices of all the children who, despite living amidst the devastation of war, have so generously shared their lived experiences, their bravery, and their hopes with us. Every story, every word, and every reflection you offered has been carefully read and considered in the creation of this guide.

At the United Nations, we treat the violations of children's rights with the utmost seriousness. No child should ever be robbed of their life, their safety, their family, their happiness, their hopes, or their dreams—in essence, their childhood, and their future. Your voices are a call to action, and we stand with you in the commitment to ensure a world where every child can grow up free from violence, fear, and injustice.

Thank you for trusting us with your truth.

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A GUIDE TO YOUR RIGHTS

SPOT THE STAR!

If you see a word with a ***star**, you can check the **Glossary** at the end to get a clearer idea and extra information.

1 THIS GUIDE IS FOR you

2 WHO ARE We ?

3 THE voices BEHIND THE SHIELD

4 DISCOVER THE power IN YOUR SHIELD

5 A SHIELD AS unique AS YOU ARE

6 HOW CAN countries MAKE SURE EVERY CHILD GETS A SHIELD ?

7 YOU HOLD THE power WITHIN YOU!

Note for educators and other supporting adults

This guide is designed for children and teenagers, including those affected by armed conflict. It is most suitable for older children, but with adequate support, everyone can engage with the guide. It helps young learners understand their rights before, during, and after armed conflict, as well as their role as agents of change, in line with international human rights law, international humanitarian law and other international child protection norms and standards. By empowering children with this knowledge, we aim to support their ability to participate in discussions about their rights and advocate for their protection.

1 THIS GUIDE IS FOR YOU



Children's contributions from consultation

More and more, wars are reaching schools, playgrounds, and homes where **children should be – and feel – safe.**

But here's the most important thing:



EVEN WARS HAVE RULES

No matter what: **children's rights must always be protected** — everywhere, all the time.

DID YOU KNOW THAT...?

In 2024, 473 million children were living in places affected by war.





That is almost one out of every six children in the world.

Check this VIDEO to learn more about YOUR RIGHTS!

"NEVER THINK WAR IS NOT A CRIME. IT IS THE BIGGEST CRIME AGAINST CHILDREN"— Children's consultation



Every child in the world has a SHIELD OF RIGHTS.
It is made of laws and commitments that states* have made to protect you, **especially during war.**

Every country must use them—no exceptions.
But **many children still feel unprotected**, because their shields are not being put into action and they are oftentimes broken.





You have the right to access information. This guide is your shield too.

Articles 13 and 17 of the CRC*

The goal of this guide is to give you **knowledge about your rights** — so you can hold your shield high and ask your government to keep the commitments they made.

2 WHO ARE We?

We are the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, also known as the **United Nations* (UN) Human Rights Office.**

Our job is to **make sure all people are treated fairly**, kept **safe**, and able to **live with dignity.** We watch what is happening in the world, listen to people who are not being treated right, and speak up to governments and other decision-makers to help create change.

Hello!
I'm Volker Türk

I am the **High Commissioner* for Human Rights**, and I work with my team at the **UN Human Rights Office** to make sure that every person's rights are respected, no matter what.



Every year, my team and I write a **report** about children's rights to **help those in power understand what they need to do better.**

A report is...

A document with an important message to all governments and decision-makers in the world.

This year, the **Human Rights Council*** asked me and my team to prepare a special **report** about **how wars affect children and their rights**, and how countries can do more to **keep children safe** and **protect** their rights.

***The Human Rights Council (HRC) is a group of 47 countries that meet three times a year** to talk about human rights and **make sure that all countries keep their promises** to protect people's rights.



Room XX of the Human Rights Council in Geneva



Human Rights Council asked High Commissioner for Human Rights and his team (That is us!) to write a Report

This guide is a **child-friendly version of the report**, made so that you can understand this important information too— **because it is your right!**

3 THE VOICES BEHIND THE SHIELD

To create this guide, **we listened to many people**, like:
Governments, United Nations experts, organisations representing children's rights...

But most importantly, we listened to you, children — children who have lived through armed conflict and bravely shared their stories.

YOUR VOICES MATTER!

Article 12 of the CRC

Every child has the right to be heard and taken seriously — especially when it's about their own life. **That's why we made sure this report is built from your own words and experiences.**

We also want to **thank those who are in this difficult situation** but couldn't contribute to the report.



"Before the war, we dreamed of becoming doctors, teachers, and engineers. Now our only dream is to live for tomorrow. We don't know if the future will even exist for us. Every day, life feels like it's slipping away little by little."

"Children have no reason to know about wars, about deaths, it is unfair for us, we are children who are just living and it seems to me an injustice that they also take our lives at such a young age."

"We want real participation in advocacy spaces — that we have a voice and a vote, to help build a world without violence against children."

"We don't just need food and water — we need to feel safe; to believe we have a future, and to live a life like other children. There must be schools, there must be toys, there must be medicine, and there must be care for all children, without discrimination!"

Quotes from the children who participated in the consultations

4 DISCOVER THE power IN YOUR SHIELD

Every child has a shield of rights.

Your rights are written in **laws**. These are **rules that every state and every armed actor have to follow**, WITHOUT EXCEPTION, to protect you — not just in peaceful times, but **especially when there is war.**

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW

— protects all your rights, **all the time**

UN CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD (CRC)

Almost all countries in the world (196) have agreed to these special rules to protect all the rights of **every person under 18.**

- It says that every child's rights must be respected, **including in armed conflict** (***Article 38***).
- It also says that countries must help children who are hurt by war to recover and **rebuild their lives** (***Article 39***).

EXTRA PROTECTIONS:

OPTIONAL PROTOCOL* ON THE INVOLVEMENT OF CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT (OPAC)

It makes it very clear that **no child can be forced to join armed groups or be used in wars in any way.**



INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

— special protections **during armed conflict**

THE GENEVA CONVENTIONS AND THEIR ADDITIONAL PROTOCOLS

They are a set of rules which try to **limit the effects of war.**

Protect people who are not (or are no longer part) of the **fighting** — like children, families, teachers, doctors, and wounded and sick people.

Set limits on how wars can be fought.

For example: Schools, hospitals, or people's homes cannot be attacked.

They also say **children are entitled to special respect and protection.** They:

- Must not be recruited to fight
- Must be kept safe
- Must be able to access food and education
- Have the right to reunite with their families

DID YOU KNOW THAT...?

There are also **other important tools and agreements** that make your shield **stronger**:

- **Rome Statute***
- **Safe Schools Declaration***
- **Vancouver Principles** on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers*
- **Paris Principles and Guidelines** on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups*
- Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas **(EWIPA Declaration)***
- **UN resolutions***

5 A SHIELD AS unique AS YOU ARE

Every child is different, and so are the challenges they face in war.

That's why every child needs a shield that fits their own needs. **Age**, **sex** and **gender**, **disability**, **ethnicity**, **migration status** or **being away from home** or **separated from their family** can make war even harder for some children.

Boys and girls have different experiences in war

War hurts every child. Boys are often used to fight and are more likely to be injured by weapons, while girls are more often recruited for sexual exploitation or for domestic work.



States and armed actors have a duty to **protect them both in ways that meet their needs.**



Children who flee war

Millions of children are forced to run from war, sometimes without their families. They have a right to safe shelter, health care, and education – even without identity documentation.

States must **prevent arbitrary or forced displacement** of children and protect them.

They have the right to access health care, education, and **special, accessible, urgent support** to live with dignity.

Children with disabilities

War makes it harder for children with physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory **disabilities** (sometimes caused by war) to get help and access services.



Child survivors of sexual violence



War increases the risk of sexual violence. Survivors—including children born from it (who states have the obligation to officially register so they have a legal identity*!)—must be treated with dignity, receive medical and legal support and be protected.

Children have the right to heal and to **be seen as survivors rather than victims.**

Children recruited or used to fight

No child should ever be part of war. But some are unlawfully recruited* into armies or armed groups and used to fight. These children are victims, not criminals, even if they are linked to groups called "terrorist".

States must **protect these children, help them escape danger, support their recovery**, and address the problems that put them at risk.



Children without their parents

War can tear families apart in an instant. Taking children away unlawfully is a serious crime. States must take steps to prevent children from being separated from their families in the first place, for example through careful planning of evacuations.

If separation does happen, **states must act quickly** to find these children, protect them, and reunite them safely with their families.



Children detained in conflict

Thousands of children are detained because of their connection to armed groups, often without reason. But detention must always be a last resort, and all children must be treated with dignity and kept safe.

States must make sure they: remain in **contact with their families**, get **legal support**, are **separated from unrelated adults** and have ways to **speak up** if they're mistreated.



6 HOW CAN Countries MAKE SURE EVERY CHILD GETS A SHIELD

Protecting children in war is not just a promise — it's the LAW

Every country must work together with others to protect children from violence, help them recover, and make sure their rights are respected **ALWAYS.**

Including:

Before war:
Protecting children **early**

States should work to **prevent children from being harmed** by war in the first place. **This means:**

- Stopping the **use of schools and hospitals** for fighting
- Making sure children are **never taken or used by armies** or fighting groups.
- Supporting families so children are not forced into **child marriage, dangerous work**, or worse.
- **Signing and putting into action world rules** that give children stronger protection in war.

During war:
Keeping children **safe**

When war happens, **children must never be targeted** or used in fighting and have the **right to special respect and protection.** **States must make sure:**

- **No attack is launched against civilian* objects**, including homes, schools, or playgrounds.
- **Humanitarian aid**—like food, medicine, and clean water—reaches children in time.
- No child should ever, under any circumstances, be **tortured or mistreated.** Children must also **never be detained without reason.**

After war:
Helping children **recover**

When war ends, **children need support to heal. States must help children:**

- Return to **school safely** and in **adequate conditions**
- Access **health care**
- Receive **mental health support**
- **Go back home** and live safely **with families** and loved ones

No child should be left behind, especially those who had to flee their homes.

Recovery must respect children's dignity and allow them to **feel safe, seen, and heard.**

Justice and accountability

If anyone hurts children during war, **states must:**

- **Investigate**
- Hold wrongdoers **accountable**
- Give **support** to survivors

Children have the right to:

- **Speak up** and be heard
- Have access to **child-friendly justice systems**, where trained people and special processes make sure children can safely share their stories in ways they understand.

DID YOU KNOW THAT?

Some countries are already taking important steps to protect children in war. They've made laws to stop child recruitment, trained soldiers to respect children's rights, or supported global efforts to keep schools safe during wars. **But we need strong shields to reach every child.**

Children have the right to life, education, health, play, and protection—also during war.

7 YOU HOLD THE power WITHIN YOU!

First of all, it's important to say this:

No child should ever experience war.

You deserve to live in peace, go to school, play, and dream freely.

The responsibility to protect you belongs to adults — governments, leaders, and the international community.

But your voice matters too!

When you know your rights, you become stronger.

Now that you understand how children must be protected during war, you can use this power to demand the world confidently that they use the shields you own to keep you safe. **The world needs to hear you.**



Draw your own shield of rights or write a letter to a government leader to demand the protections all children deserve!

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

Change happens together

You are not alone. You are part of a global movement of people who want a better, safer world for every child. When children, communities, and leaders work together, **change becomes unstoppable.**

You can **learn more** clicking the circles:

- UN Office for children and armed conflict
- CRC Committee Information for children

You have the right to ask leaders and decision-makers to:



glossary*



State – Another word for a country that we use in international law, which are rules that countries agree to follow in dealing with each other.



CRC (Convention on the Rights of the Child) – A set of rules all countries agreed on to make sure children have rights like protection, education, and health.



United Nations (UN) – A big team of almost all the countries in the world working together to make the world safer, fairer, and better for everyone.



High Commissioner – A person chosen by the UN (like a leader!) to make sure everyone's rights are respected.



Optional Protocol – A special extra part of an international agreement that countries can choose to follow.



Rome Statute – A law that created the International Criminal Court, which punishes people who commit very serious crimes. It says that recruiting or using children under 15 in armed conflict is a war crime.



Safe Schools Declaration – An agreement where countries promise to protect schools and students from attacks during war.



Vancouver Principles – Guidelines for UN peacekeepers to prevent children from being forced to join armies or armed groups.



Paris Principles and Guidelines – Rules that help countries protect children who have been involved with armed groups and support them to return safely to their communities.



EWIPA Declaration – An agreement where countries promise not to use explosive weapons in places where civilians live, to keep children and families safe.



UN Resolutions – Decisions or rules agreed on by the UN about important problems, like protecting children in war.



Legal Identity – Official proof that a child exists, usually from a birth certificate, which lets them go to school, get healthcare, and be protected by the law.



Unlawful Recruitment – Forcing children to join armies, armed groups, or gangs, which is illegal.



Civilian Objects – Places and things that are for regular life, not for fighting—like homes, schools, hospitals, and playgrounds.

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