

**Gianfranco Zavalloni** offers another perspective on children's rights, that goes beyond the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child

**W**orking as a teacher and then as a school administrator, I had realised that almost any well-off child in Europe enjoys the rights established in the UNCRC (education, health, play etc). And still, these and other children do not enjoy what I call 'natural rights'. My "natural rights manifesto" is addressed to adults also, because children grasp it at once. It is just like Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince says: "adults always need an explanation for what children immediately understand".

Recollecting our childhood, that is to say thinking about ourselves as children, is necessary to understand childhood. To do so, we should ask some questions: What did we like doing? Where did we use to play?

Starting from these questions, I think it useful to analyse the relationship between the world of childhood and modern society, from the perspective of what to me are completely neglected rights.

### 1. The right to leisure

In today's world everything is planned, reported and computerised; the children's week is virtually planned by their family or by the school. There is no way to improvise. There is no way for children to do something independently, to play on their own.



Time for being on their own, for learning how to manage small conflicts is much needed. This is the only way to become sane adults.

### 2. The right to get dirty

"Don't get dirty" is typical parental

# Children's na



advice. I believe children should have the right to play with natural materials such as sand, earth, grass, leaves, pebbles and little branches. Messing about in a puddle is such a joy! Let us try and observe children during a pause in organised play. We will see they get so much enjoyment in playing for hours with just a few things found on the ground.

### 3. The right to smell

Nowadays we risk vacuum-packing everything, in the process doing away with olfactory differences. Let us think about the bakery, the bike-mechanic's workshop, the shoemaker's shop, the



chemist's shop. Every place has its own smell. A school, a hospital, a supermarket, a church: these days all of them have the same smell of detergent. There are no more differences. And yet, who among us does not love smelling the scent of the soil after a downpour and does not feel a sense of well-being while going through a wood and smelling the typical scent of humus mixed up with wild herbs? Learning as children to enjoy smelling and recognising nature's scents are

experiences that will accompany us during our lifetime.

### 4. The right to dialogue

Everyone must realise how sad is a one way communication and information system. We are all mass media's passive spectators, television in particular. People eat, play, work, invite friends while "the telly is turned on". Cultural models are conveyed by



television, which moulds passive consumers. The telly ends up inhibiting words. Telling stories, relating legends, creating a puppet-show make communication, conversation and dialogue possible.

### 5. The right to use hands

The market trend is to offer ready-made articles and disposable objects that cannot be repaired. Industrial toys are so perfect and complete, that children do not need to add anything. To introduce children to the PC, the school itself suggests its play use, thus leading them to videogame habits. At the same time, there are no opportunities to develop manual dexterity, in particular fine movements.



# tural rights

Finding children who are able to hammer a nail, to saw and file wood, to use sandpaper, to stick is not easy, just as meeting adults who buy presents for their children at the ironmonger's shop is difficult. The use of hands is one of the less considered rights of our post-industrial society.

## 6. The right to a well beginning

I am referring to the problem of pollution. The water is no longer pure, the air polluted, the soil contaminated. It is said to be the undesired consequence of development and progress. So it is important to "go backwards" and discover again the pleasure of walking around the town,



of staying together in a convivial atmosphere. And many times it is what our children ask for. Hence the importance of eating wholesome food, drinking fresh water and breathing clean air from birth.

## 7. The right to the street



Streets and squares are designed for people to meet and get in touch. Nowadays, they are filled with traffic

and parking and, paradoxically, they now keep us apart. It is virtually impossible to see children play freely in a square. Old people are always at risk in these places. We really have to bear in mind that these places, just like every other common area, belong to everyone.

## 8. The right to the wilderness



Even leisure time is organised. The live in an age of "enjoyment". Every detail is settled in playgrounds; it's the same in schoolyards, green areas, even urban planning. But where can you build a shelter in the woods, play hide and seek, climb trees? Man's manipulation should leave room for the wild, for children also.

## 9. The right to silence

Our eyes can close and therefore rest, but our ears are always open and constantly subjected to external stimuli. I believe we are so used to noise that we fear silence. More and more frequently during children's parties there is noisy music, and at school as well. People going for a walk in nature with their Ipod are an



## Children's natural rights

### 1. The right to leisure

to live periods of time which are not planned by adults

### 2. The right to get dirty

to play with sand, earth, grass, leaves, water, pebbles, little branches

### 3. The right to smell

to sense the pleasure of smell  
to recognize nature's scent

### 4. The right to dialogue

to listen to and have the opportunity to speak

### 5. The right to use their hands

to hammer a nail, to saw and file wood, to use sandpaper, to stick, to mould clay, to tie up ropes, to light a fire

### 6. The right to a good beginning

to eat wholesome food from birth,  
to drink fresh water and breath clean air

### 7. The right to the street

to play freely in the square,  
to walk in the street

### 8. The right to the wilderness

to build a shelter in the woods,  
to play hide and seek among canes,  
to climb up trees

### 9. The right to silence

to hear the wind blow, birds sing, water gurgle

### 10. The right to nuances

to see the sun rise and set,  
to admire the moon and stars at night

example of this development. We lose opportunities to hear the wind blow, to hear the birds sing, to hear the water gurgle. The right to silence means education to silent listening.

## 10. The right to nuances

We are used to the city lights, even when there is no light in nature. Electric light allows us to live the night just like the day, preventing us from perceiving the transitions: few of us see the sun rise and set. And this is the worst thing: we are no longer able to perceive the nuances, even when using colours with children, and we therefore risk seeing things in black and white. The risk is fundamentalism. In an increasingly multi-faceted society this is really a dangerous attitude.

Let's try and see together the world with children's eyes! ■

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[www.childrenineurope.org.uk](http://www.childrenineurope.org.uk)*