

Active school

Well-being is a fundamental right for children

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989), Article 17, requires the signatory states to protect the “social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health” of all children on their territories. The Children’s Rights Convention (CRC) reflects the general provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948, <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>, including the right to life (UDHR, Article 3; ECHR, Article 2) and to health and well-being (UDHR, Article 25; ECHR, Article 2).

Human and children’s rights stand and fall with their implementation and protection. The healthy cognitive, emotional, behavioral, physical and social development of the individual is therefore a key objective of the World Health Organization (WHO). However, our health and physical well-being does not only depend on the prevailing living conditions and the social security support systems provided by the state in which we live, but also on our living habits. Whether our habits support our health and physical well-being or harm them depends on our personal choices and responsibility. In making such choices, we exercise our human right of liberty, which means that we can only be encouraged, but not forced, to lead our lives sensibly (UDHR, Article 3).

Your school, therefore, plays a key role in helping young people understand the vital importance of their choices and how they affect their lives and identities. Your school can provide children and adolescents with the necessary knowledge, skills, social support and environmental reinforcement and empower them to adopt long-term health-enhancing patterns of behavior. In this respect, QPE acts as the foundation for a lifelong engagement in physical activity and sports. The learning experiences offered to children and young people through physical education lessons should be developmentally appropriate to help them acquire the psychomotor skills, cognitive understanding and social and emotional skills needed to engage in lifelong physical activity (Source: adapted from Association for Physical Education (afPE) Health Position Paper, 2008)

A significant factor contributing to children’s health, social development, learning capabilities and resilience to mental problems is their involvement in daily physical activity. This includes free play, active transportation and recreation, physical education at school, organized sports or planned exercise.

Play is one of the developmental rights which enables children to reach their fullest potential together with education, leisure, cultural activities, access to information and freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child defines physical activity and recreation as human rights, explicitly recognizing the right of the child to health (Article 24), rest, leisure, play and to engage in recreational activities (Article 31).

In particular, the UN General Comment number 4: ‘Adolescent health and development in the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child’ <https://www.childrensrights.ie/resources/unrcr-general-comment-adolescent-health-and-development-context-convention-rights-child> draws specific attention to the importance of adequate information on health-related topics including physical activity (Section III, 26).

Furthermore, a UN committee monitors the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It recommends the availability of:

1. Environments in which play and recreational opportunities are accessible to all children and provide the conditions for creativity.
2. Opportunities to exercise competence through self-initiated play, enhancing motivation, PA and skill development, as well as cultural life-enriching playful interactions.
3. The right to rest, which ensures that children have the necessary energy and motivation to participate in play and creative engagement.

Your country has pledged to observe these conventions. This requires you, as a principal, ***to do your best to implement this pledge in the best possible way within your sphere of responsibility.***

In order to adopt a human rights based approach to schooling, principals therefore need to know more about human rights, democracy and children’s rights, as well as their implications for educational thinking, planning, and evaluation.