

# INTRODUCTION

One thing we all have in common is the experience of having once been a child. The period of childhood, when we reflect back, is often remembered as a fleeting time. Yet researchers and early childhood practitioners tell us that this ‘fleeting’ time is one of critical development for a child, and its importance must be understood.

Our memories and experiences of our own childhood often help to shape the way we think of childhood, and how we, in turn, may go on to parent and engage with children. Our collective ideas and experiences of children and childhood also inform how we as a community treat and engage with children more broadly.

**Childhood may be ‘fleeting’ but it is a time of critical development for a child.**

Being a child in the 21<sup>st</sup> century comes with many challenges and threats – both real and imagined – as well as enormous opportunity and choice. We live in an age of rapidly advancing technology that is not only changing the way we learn, work and connect, but is also altering our traditional view of childhood.

Much of the research and social commentary around parenting and childhood wellbeing seems to want to focus our attention on what is negative in children’s lives and what we as parents/carers and community are doing wrong. As a result, we know much more about the harmful impacts of negative parenting than we do about the positive benefits of good parenting.

There is a pressing need to encourage parents/carers, service providers, governments and communities to have robust and open discussions about the quality of childhood today; what we as individuals and communities can do to continually improve it; and how we can best support those who have not experienced a good childhood.

# CHILDHOOD: A DEFINITION

**Child:** The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a *child* as all those under the age of 18 years, unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier (*United Nations, 1989*).

**Childhood:** Has been described as the 'State of 'being' a child: the 'time of being' a child' (*Morrow, 2011*) and consists of a number of distinct developmental periods, ranging from early infancy to late adolescence (*Bromfield & De Gregorio, 2012*).

The UN Convention, the first international human rights treaty to bring together the universal set of standards concerning children, and the first to present child rights as a legally binding imperative, defines *childhood* as:

- A separate space from adulthood, and recognises that what is appropriate for an adult may not be suitable for a child; and
- Recognises that children are the holders of their own rights and are therefore not passive recipients of charity, but empowered actors in their own development.

Today, childhood is universally acknowledged as a precious and vital stage within the lifespan of a human – an important period of physical growth, and mental and emotional learning and development.

Childhood is a time in which children should live free from fear, violence and abuse, and be cared for and nurtured in a way that helps them to realise their full life's potential.

