



# SAFEGUARDING ISRAEL'S CHILDREN

The National Council for the Child is Israel's foremost advocate for the rights and well-being of children. An independent non-governmental organization funded entirely through donations, it promotes change in legislation and policy, as well as monitoring the quality of services for children, gathering data on Israeli children in general and children at risk in particular, and serving as a nationwide address for reporting children's rights violations / Liza Rosenberg

One day, staffers at the National Council for the Child (NCC) received a call from a concerned elementary school teacher who had discovered the severe distress of a new girl in her class. The teacher had visited the student's home and had been shocked to discover the filthy and meager conditions in which the girl lived. Her mother - a single parent - was blind, and was raising five children alone. With no food in the kitchen and wearing ragged clothing, the children were responsible for all household chores. The mother disciplined her children by beating them with a stick.

On another occasion, they received a letter from a Russian immigrant girl living and studying at a boarding school. She complained that food was scarce, the conditions were unsanitary, and that she was the target of constant emotional abuse. Unfortunately, these two cases are far from unusual, and every day the NCC receives new calls for help from desperate Israelis who rely on them to improve the predicament of children who are disadvantaged, abused or whose rights have been infringed upon.

## Children at risk

In fact, every year the NCC receives more than 10,000 complaints by telephone or mail from across the country, covering a wide variety of problems - from children who are sexually or physically abused to those unjustifiably arrested or taken advantage of at work. Other complaints include child pornography, failure to enforce legislation, the lack of appropriate educational and rehabilitation frameworks and supervision, and unsatisfactory educational, health and welfare services.

In order to cope with this dire reality, the

NCC set up the Ombudsman for Children and Youth (OCY), which serves all sectors of the Israeli population - Jews and Arabs, religious and secular, rich and poor, native Israelis and immigrants. Established in 1990 to defend and protect Israel's children against violence, cruelty, exploitation, deprivation, neglect and other forms of maltreatment, the OCY serves as an advocate for children in all aspects of

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their lives, whether at home, within the family, at school or in the community.

"Children cannot make do with vague promises of a rosy future or fill themselves with obscure declarations of love. Children deserve, need and have the right to be treated as people. Children deserve, need and have the right to be invested in, to have us available to them, to be protected from harm. They deserve to be given the opportunity to grow and to be provided with a role model, every day, every hour, here and now," asserts Dr. Yitzhak

Kadman, Executive Director of the National Council for the Child (NCC). "We should recognize their uniqueness. We should be concerned with their health, education, welfare and wellbeing. We should treat them with respect. We should really listen to them and not do to them that which we hate."

## Support and encouragement

"Roi," an eleven year-old boy, was required to testify against his friend in court after his friend attempted to rape Roi's seven-year old sister. Disturbed by what her young son was being made to do, Roi's mother called the NCC for advice, where she was referred to the Victim Assistance Program.

Following the trial, the volunteer who assisted the family received the following letter: "Thank you for the effort you made to meet with us just before the trial. As a result of your guidance and explanations, you managed to calm us down. Thank you for standing with us (and for pushing us) at the entrance to the courtroom. Thank you for being with Roi during his most frightening moment (in front of the judges). I don't know if anyone really understands or knows just how much you really help children unless they've been there themselves. Fortunately, you were there with me. Without your support, your patience and your encouraging explanations to Roi and me, I might have made mistakes along the way and I wouldn't have known how to deal with Roi's fears."

Roi and hundreds of other child victims of crime are the "clients" of the NCC's Child Victim Assistance Program, which accompanies and provides aid to the child victim in order to reduce the stress involved in taking part in criminal legal proceedings. Trained



**Far left:** A picture drawn by a little girl during a period of unrest in Israel

**Left:** A paper doll made by a boy during a Children's Rights Mobile Unit activity. Near a picture of the devil he wrote: "This is my Dad and he is evil"

volunteers are appointed to provide crucial and meaningful support to these children and their families.

### Advocate for all children

NCC is unique in that it combines on the one hand activities for individual children at risk and finding solutions to concrete problems, and on the other hand the advancement of fundamental issues and policies in order to improve the welfare and rights of all children in Israel. It has left its mark on the legislative books, having initiated and promoted no fewer than 70 laws and legal amendments, from mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse to protection of children on the Internet.

Understanding the importance of speaking out on behalf of these youngest, most vulnerable members of society, representatives attend

every Knesset committee meeting on subjects regarding children, and are an integral part of the entire legislation process. It is the only group in Israel that carries out such significant measures on behalf of all children in Israel.

Through its Education Center, the NCC aims to provide the knowledge and skills necessary to promote and protect children's rights by encouraging education and dialogue and by initiating educational programs and activities such as "The Children's Rights Mobile Unit." Reaching 20,000 elementary school children a year across the country, the Mobile Unit plays an instrumental role in raising children's awareness about their rights and responsibilities.

Many of the issues addressed by the Education Center are the direct results of the NCC's constant and deep-rooted involvement with children through the Ombudsman pro-

gram. As a result of the organization's flexible approach, it constantly adjusts its activities according to the needs of Israel's children. For example, as a result of the large number of telephone calls the Ombudsman received from parents worried about the information their children are exposed to and are giving out, a program that deals specifically with Internet safety is now an integral part of the Children's Rights Mobile Unit program.

### Independent and objective

The NCC neither seeks nor receives government funding. This independence enables the organization to act in defense of the child's best interests with no outside interference, guaranteeing that the organization's activities are not driven by hidden agendas or other external forces, allowing them to retain objectivity and the freedom to act.

Explains Elizabeth Levy, the NCC's Director of Resource Development, "as a result of this policy, our efforts depend solely on the generosity of foundations, businesses and individuals around the world. We call on those concerned with the wellbeing of Israel's children to support our efforts." According to Levy, "the organization focuses on the monumental objective of ensuring that all children receive everything they require to develop and reach their full potential. The NCC's comprehensive goals are put into action through the innovative projects it operates."

Concludes Kadman, "Children are people, here and now, unconditionally, not once, not tomorrow. For children, the present is the foundation on which the future needs to be built. For many of the children in Israel, the present doesn't promise anything."

However, thanks to a devoted, passionate and creative staff, the NCC continues to face these challenges and lead the struggle to safeguard Israel's children, promote their rights and create long-term change in both policy and practice. ■



For more information about the National Council for the Child and for donations, please go to [www.children.org.il](http://www.children.org.il), or contact [ncc@children.org.il](mailto:ncc@children.org.il); Tel.: +972-2-6780606.