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Speech in the Scottish Parliament

6 November 2008

Debate on the United Nations Convention on the Right of The Child

I welcome the opportunity to take part in this important debate on the concluding observations report of the UNCRC monitoring committee.

I join Barnardo's and other children's organisations in welcoming the positive developments in Scotland in the field of children's rights.

Members are right to emphasise the achievements to date.

When we consider the lives of children in war-torn parts of the world, Scotland's children might seem protected and cared for.

There are reports in today's newspapers about the effects of war on children in Afghanistan, Palestine and the Democratic Republic of Congo, which UNICEF has described as "the worst place in the world to be a child"—

a massive contrast to the situation for children growing up here in modern Scotland.

However, despite the good progress that is being made, there is still a huge amount of work to do.

I endorse the Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights' list of priorities on compliance issues, which the Government in Scotland and members of the Parliament can take forward.

The list includes: producing an action plan; increasing awareness of the UNCRC through education; promoting a positive image of and culture towards children and young people; increasing meaningful participation; and incorporating the UNCRC into Scottish law.

That seems like a lengthy and demanding shopping list, but in Scotland and the UK we are making progress, which no doubt is helped by the work of Scotland's children's rights commissioner, Kathleen Marshall.

I join others in applauding the work that she and her team do on behalf of Scotland's children.

We should be celebrating our young people. It is time, at last, to join in the rallying cry that children are unbeatable.

I ask the minister to answer the call to update Scots law in line with article 37 of the convention.

To implement the UNCRC fully, it is necessary to reduce and, indeed, prohibit the physical punishment of children.

As Karen Whitefield said, there is, thankfully, an increasing change in attitude to smacking in Scotland, with parents looking for more support and information on positive, non-violent parenting approaches.

Research now shows a marked reduction in the number of parents using physical punishment on their children.

There is a growing realisation that smacking is ineffective as a form of discipline.

As well as legislation, we need a new public health information campaign to promote non-violent parenting.

That needs to be included in the early years strategy, and I trust that the minister will address that in his summing up.

There is another important set of recommendations on the family environment. In Scotland, the new emphasis on the effect of domestic violence on the children of victims is welcome.

We are beginning to recognise and address the effect on children of their living in a violent or abusive household, but to address it fully we need to continue to challenge the whole spectrum of men's violence against women.

That work has to be kept at the very top of the agenda, because many questions are still to be answered.

To counter the violence in our society, do we need new legislation specifically on domestic abuse, which could be included in the forthcoming criminal justice bill?

It always surprises and frustrates me that only the ministers who are directly responsible—in this case, it is the ministers who are responsible for children—attend debates such as this.

This debate is partly about justice, so I hope that all the justice spokespeople, as well as the justice ministers, take note of it.

The recommendations underline the need for education about the UNCRC, to increase awareness of children's rights.

Training is particularly important to disabled children and their families, because they have more problems in accessing and securing education and are more likely to live in poverty.

When we consider the lives of some of our children with visual, hearing or learning difficulties, we know how much work has still to be done to improve the situation of all children in Scotland.

Parents and professionals need to understand children's rights to make such improvements.

Much work that has been done in the Parliament could help to improve our progress.

For example, the report by the Equal Opportunities Committee in the previous session entitled "Removing Barriers and Creating Opportunities" highlighted problems of access to education and leisure services for people with disabilities.

Many of the committee's findings hold for children with disabilities as well as for adults. In the Parliament's first session, the Equal Opportunities Committee's report on Gypsy Travellers made recommendations on what should be done to help Gypsy Traveller communities.

Those reports are excellent, but they are useful only if their recommendations are acted on.

I invite the minister to reconsider the recommendations and perhaps to feed them into an action plan to help to address the concluding observations by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Ends

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