

Youth reporting on children's rights in the
Netherlands

On the implementation of the UN Convention on the
Right of the Child in The Netherlands

November 2002

YOUTH REPORT: CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN THE NETHERLANDS

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Introduction

This is a report through which young Dutch people are able to express their opinions regarding the rights of children in the Netherlands.

What are the rights of the child?

Children's rights are human rights. Children are human beings and, consequently, all human rights apply equally for children. Moreover, children have even more rights. Because they have special needs: for education and protection against ill treatment, for example. A special convention has been drawn up on the rights of the child by the United Nations, an organisation with representatives from all the countries of the world. The convention contains agreements about how countries should treat their children and details the rights of the children.

What are rights?

Children's rights are the various rules that say what a child is allowed to do and what he or she is not allowed to do. The convention also details the care that should be provided by the parents and what the government should do to ensure that children are able to grow and develop in a correct manner. All countries that have signed the convention have, for example, accepted the obligation to ensure that children have a space in which to play and that children can attend school free of charge. Children have a right to food and drink, and a roof over their head. Children are allowed to express their own opinions. If they are ill, they should be allowed to visit a doctor. And so on, and so on.

The convention also contains obligations. If you have rights, you also have obligations. You have the right to your own opinion, and others should respect this right. You have the obligation to respect the opinion of others. The convention also details the obligations of the government and parents and all the other adults surrounding and relating to children.

Reports

The Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that, every five years, each country is to submit a report to the Committee on the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) of the United Nations. This report is to contain details of the situation concerning children's rights in that country. Organisations that work with or for children can also submit a report to the Committee. This applies equally for children and young people themselves. Indeed, they are what it is all about.

The Committee of experts will discuss the reports with the government. Subsequently, the Committee will make recommendations to the government, regarding ways to improve the situation of children in their country.

Report by young people

The intention of this report is to inform the Committee of experts about the opinions of young people in the Netherlands regarding their rights, and what this group knows about their rights. The report is also intended for the young people in the Netherlands. It was compiled by the Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights, with representatives from, among others, Unicef, the legal advice centres for children and young people and Defence for Children International. The Dutch government has contributed to this, both financially and in terms of ideas, as have UNICEF Netherlands, *Kinderpostzegels* [children's welfare stamps] and the Jantje Beton National Youth Fund.

How was the report made?

We would have liked to have heard the opinions of all the young people in the Netherlands, but this is unfeasible. We did, however, try to talk to the widest range of young people. On 20 November 2001, the daily newspaper *Trouw* published a questionnaire entitled '*Met praten kom*

je tot je recht' ['Talking leads to your rights']. The questionnaire was completed and returned by a total of 6,600 young people. This gave us a good insight in to the opinions of young people with regard to children's rights in the Netherlands. The results of the questionnaire are included in this report.

We prepared propositions for a number of schools, detailing child abuse, rights and obligations and the right to vote. We received reactions to this from 186 school pupils, via the Internet. We also held discussions with a number of classes at a primary school. Children who participated in the National Youth Debate in 2001 also completed and submitted the questionnaire.

We expressly wished to talk to children and young people for whom the correct protection of their rights is particularly important. Children who are not so easily heard, such as disabled children, children whose parents are relatively poor, children living in children's homes and refugee children. We were able to contact eight children through assistance provided by the organisation *ATD Vierde wereld* [ATD fourth world], one of whose activities is the organisation of holidays for poor families. In some cases, the parents were present when we interviewed the children. The majority knew very little about children's rights and, as a result, a lot of the discussions centred on the question of what children's rights really means. A school in Utrecht made the necessary arrangements to interview 11 young people. This school gives education in catering studies for children with mild mental disabilities. This group also had a need for more information relating to children's rights in the Netherlands. This school also arranged for us to interview 2 girls with very high IQs. We also interviewed a group of 6 young people with physical disabilities. These young people are members of the Youth Inspection Team for disabled children in Utrecht. This organisation originates from the *Stichting Alexander* [Alexander Foundation]. During 2001, this team made a review of the policy relating to youth and the disabled in Utrecht.

To gather the opinions of young people living, for whatever reason, in children's homes, we published the questionnaire in the magazine 'House', a publication intended for residents of children's homes and youth care institutions. 178 young people completed and submitted the questionnaire. Subsequently, discussions were held with 11 young people who were attending the *Jeugdwelzijnsberaad* [Youth Welfare Conference]. This conference is held several times each year, at the invitation of the *stichting JP 2000+* [Youth Platform Foundation 2000+]. All the participants are members of the youth committees at their institutes.

Young refugees were approached via *Amabel*, a meeting place for single minor asylum seekers (AMAs) in Amsterdam, and also via HVO-Querido, the place of work of the mentors of these young people. It was not a simple matter to interview these young people. They were held back by their fear of talking to strangers about their experiences, and by their lack of understanding. The ice was broken through the use of a video presentation, showing interviews between young people and, as a result, it was possible to interview a few of the young people. Additionally, a number of young people were interviewed at their homes, while their mentors were present. During 2002, 59 single minor refugees and young refugees were interviewed in Amsterdam, through the organisation Samah. The results of these interviews are included in this report. A researcher for Defence for Children International arranged for us to interview a girl who is living in the Netherlands as an illegal immigrant. We were able to record her story as a result of her trust in the researcher.

All these interviews have been processed in this report. The majority of the young people have also given their ideas about how things could be improved further for children in the Netherlands. These suggestions will be presented to the Dutch government.

During the compilation of this report, maximum use was made of information from existing reports and research documents.

Children and young people

The Convention on the Rights of the Child refers to everyone below the age of 18 years. In many cases, people under the age of 12 are referred to as children, while those aged over 12 years are young people. The terms 'children' and 'young people' are intended to express the same meaning in this report.

Obviously, this report cannot reflect the opinion of every child in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, considering the manner in which we have gathered the opinions of young people, we think that we have been able to correctly present the opinions of young people. We hope that this report will be useful, both for the UN Committee and for the Dutch government, so that the Netherlands will be an even better place for children to live.

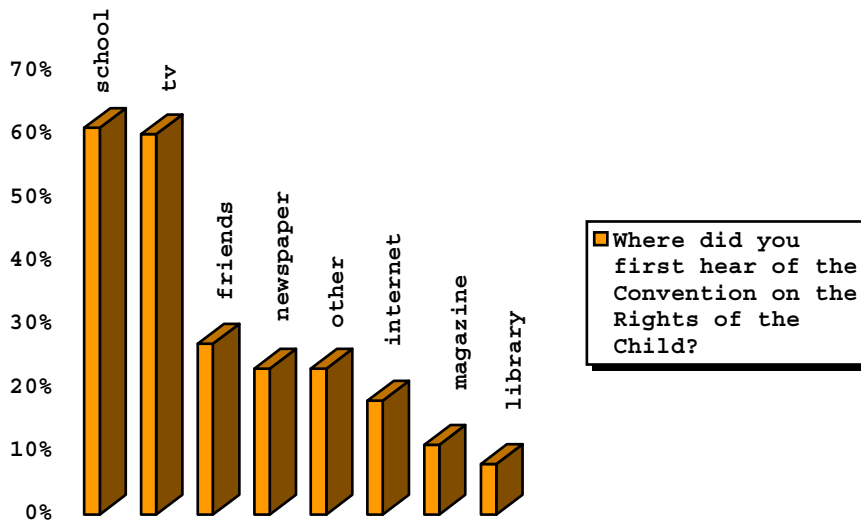
Join the discussion about your rights!

'Join the discussion about your rights!' was the title of a survey carried out in 2001 and 2002 in the Netherlands among young people aged 12-18. The questionnaire was sent to schools and youth care institutions, and also appeared in the national daily newspaper *Trouw*.

A total of 6600 young people completed and returned the questionnaire. In secondary schools and primary schools, children's rights and the questionnaire were discussed in more depth during lessons. As a consequence, a number of schoolchildren gave their responses to statements about the right to vote, rights and duties, and the ill-treatment of children. The results of the survey are presented below.

Know your rights

All the young people who took part in the survey knew that children have rights, and 62% knew of the existence of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. How did they know of this convention?

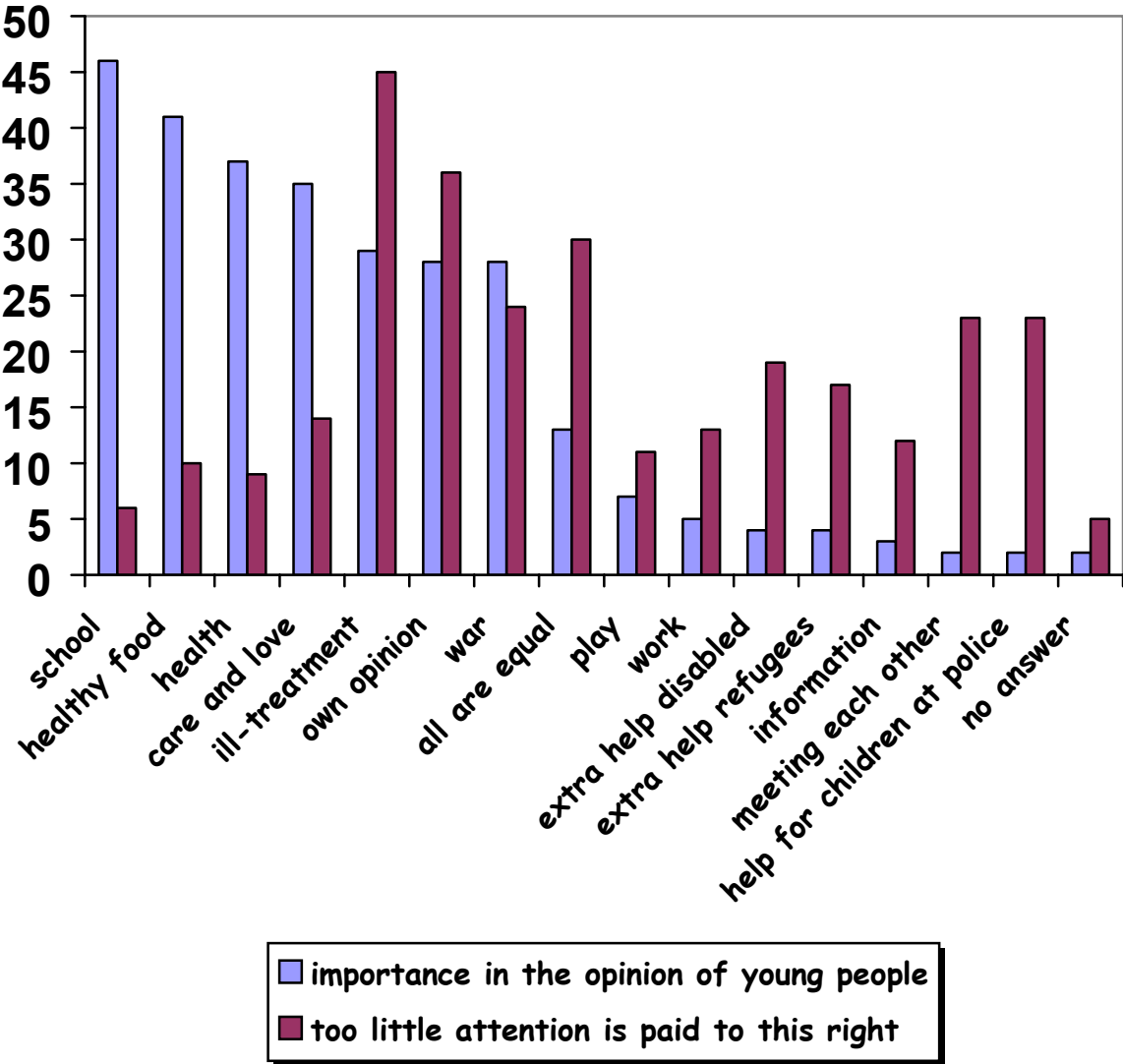


Young people are not equally aware of all children's rights. In the table on the right, you can see the percentages of young people who were familiar with the various children's rights.

Children's rights	% knew of this right:
school	99%
care and love	96%
no ill-treatment	95%
health	93%
healthy food	90%
one's own opinion	90%
help for the disabled	87%
all children are equal	86%
help for refugee children	85%
play	84%
not being a victim of war	84%

information	79%
no child labour	78%
help for children at police stations	69%
meeting with each other	68%

The survey asked which rights the young people considered to be the most important. The most important rights were considered to be the right to attend school (46%) and the right to good health and to healthy food (41%). This is shown in the graph below.



Another question asked was which children's rights should receive more attention in the Netherlands. The young people were each allowed to choose a maximum of three rights. The graph above shows the most significant figures.

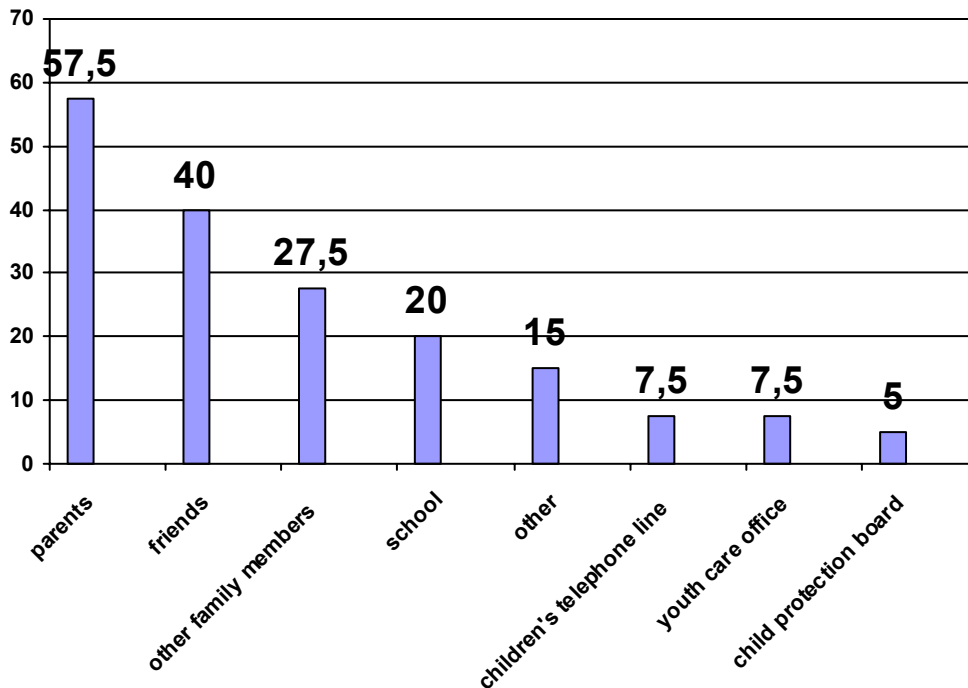
The following facts stand out:

Young people in the Netherlands think that more should be done to put an end to the ill-treatment of children, and that more attention should be paid to a child's right to express his/her own opinion.

	Child's right	Has had to stand up for this right
	own opinion	40%
	all children are equal	30%
	no ill-treatment	20%
	meeting each other	15%
	information	15%
40% of the young people have had to stand up for one or more of these rights on at least one occasion. This group has had to stand up for the following rights:	play	12.5%
	care and love	12.5%
	help for disabled	10%
	sufficient food	7.5%
	school	5%
	health	2.5%
	help for children at police	2.5%
	help for refugee children	2.5%
	no child labour	2.5%
	no victim of war	0%

Help, I have a problem!

80% of the young people who completed the questionnaire ask for help when they have a problem. Who do they ask? Mostly their parents (57.5%) and their friends (40%). Under the category 'other', the following were mentioned: neighbour, grandmother, social worker, the courts. Children's Legal Advice Centres and the Youth Information Point (JIP) were not mentioned. 20% of the young people questioned do not ask for help.



37.5% of the young people questioned indicated that the help they received was really useful, 42.5% said it had been 'partly' useful, and 20% said that it had not been any use at all.

To the question 'If you had a problem, with whom would you talk about it?', the young people gave the following answers (they could give more than one):

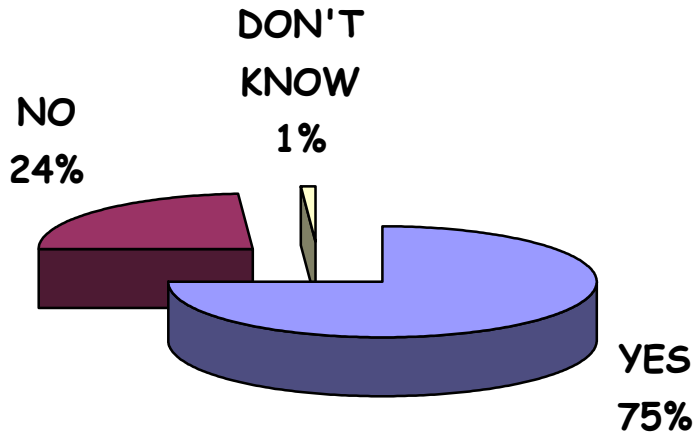
my parents / carer(s)	73%
my friends	60%
someone at school	27%
my brother / sister / family	26%
the children's telephone helpline	13%
somebody else	8%
nobody	5%
the Youth Care Office	3%
the Child Protection Board	2%
the JIP	1%
no answer	1%
the Children's Legal Advice Centre	0%

Under the category 'somebody else', the following were mentioned: my guardian (2%), my best friend (2%), my cousin and my neighbour.

To the question 'Do you think you should always have someone to turn to with your questions?', 34% answered 'sometimes yes, sometimes no', 62% thought they should always have someone to turn to, while 4% felt that this was not necessary.

Going to court

In the Netherlands, adults can go to court if they want to stand up for their rights. Should children and young people also have this right?



Taking part in discussions and decision-making

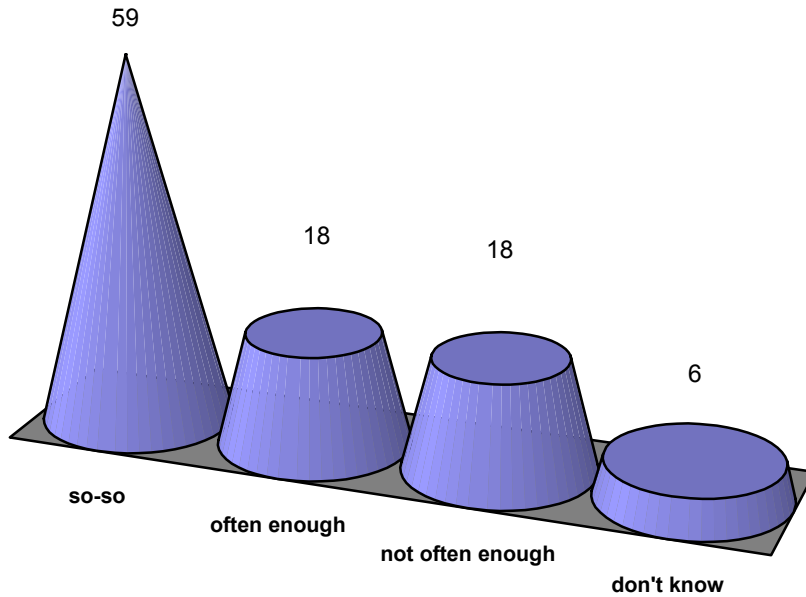
On which subjects are you allowed to have a say at home? Respondents were allowed to give more than one answer. Young people are allowed to discuss / help decide on the following:

- ⇒ Clothes / appearance 89%
- ⇒ Choice of school 87%
- ⇒ Television programmes 85%
- ⇒ Friends 79%
- ⇒ Food 78%
- ⇒ Holidays 75%
- ⇒ Bedtime 66%
- ⇒ Pocket money 55%
- ⇒ Religion 47%

To the question whether they had the feeling that adults take them seriously, most gave the answer 'sometimes' (65%), 26% had the feeling that they are taken seriously, 8% did not have this feeling, and 1% did not answer the question.

Having a say at school

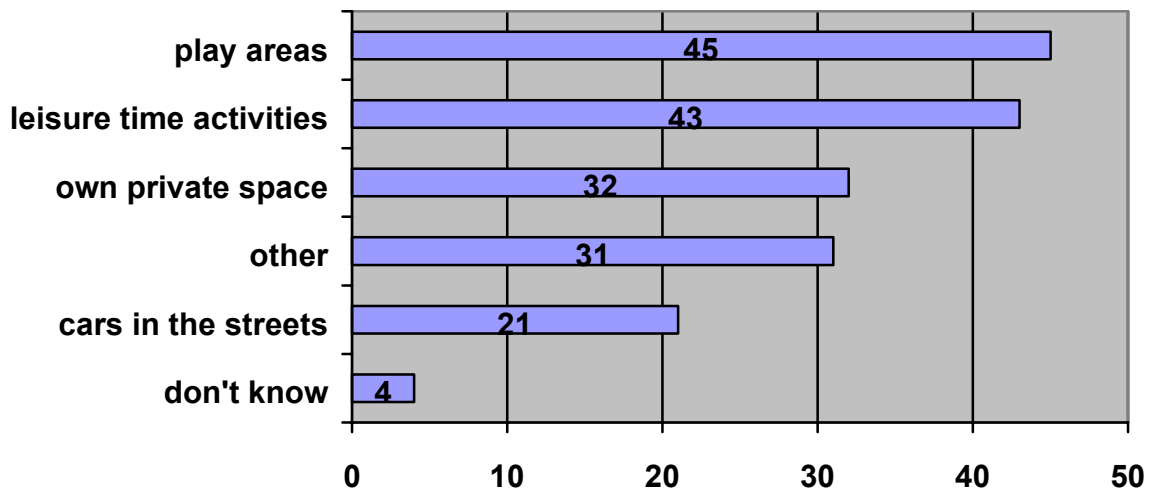
Are you allowed a say at school when decisions are being made? Is your opinion asked, and is it listened to?



'If you really want to let young people take part in the discussion, you need to set up a political party for children. Put 17- and 18-year-olds in the Lower House. Then there would be a point. Then they could have a say.' (comment filled in on the questionnaire by a 14-year-old girl)

Having a say in the neighbourhood

Regarding having a say in decision-making in the neighbourhood, 26% had the feeling that they are allowed to take part in the discussions, 51% said the situation was 'not too bad', 22% had the feeling they were not involved in the neighbourhood, and 3% gave no answer. In what would they like to have a say?



Special groups in the Netherlands

What is the situation regarding the rights of disabled children, refugee children, children with problems at home, children in a youth care institution, children in jail, children whose parents have a low income or who are receiving state benefits, and children with long-term illnesses?

Group	good	normal	Bad	Don't know	total
Disabled children	60%	30%	9%	1%	100%
Refugee children	26%	43%	31%		100%
Children with problems at home	37%	50%	13%		100%
Children in a youth care institution	24%	59%	17%		100%
Children in jail	30%	42%	26%	2%	100%
With parents on a low income or receiving benefits	27%	39%	32%	2%	100%
Children with long-term illnesses	46%	31%	21%	2%	100%

The majority of the young people said that the situation for children in the Netherlands with a disability or a long-term illness is good. The situation for the other groups of children (refugees, those with problems at home, those in a youth care institution, those in jail, and those whose parents have a low income or who are receiving benefits) is generally seen as being 'normal'.

Conclusion

In total, 6600 boys and girls aged between 10 and 17 took part in the survey 'Join the discussion about your rights!' All who took part knew that children have rights, and 62% knew of the existence of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The young people considered the right to education (46%) and that to enough food and healthy food (41%) to be the most important children's rights. They also thought that more attention should be given to the right of all children not to be ill-treated (45%), to the right to express one's opinion (36%) and to the right to be treated equally (30%).

40% have had to stand up for one of their rights at some point. This mainly concerned the right to express one's opinion (40%) and that to be the equal of all other children (30%). 20% of those who have had to stand up for a right had to do this in cases of ill-treatment. Those who had asked for help in that situation mainly turned to their parents (57.5%) or their friends (40%). 37.5% of these young people found the help they were given useful.

In general, 73% of the young people who have a problem turn to their parents or carers for help; friends were the second-placed source of help (60%). 62% of the young people considered that they should always have somebody to whom they can turn for help.

At home, most young people in the Netherlands are allowed to discuss and help decide on issues of clothing and appearance (89%) and the choice of school (87%). Religion scored the lowest in this respect, with only 47% having a say.

Only 18% of the young people had the feeling that they were able to exert enough influence as regards school affairs. As regards their neighbourhood, 26% had this feeling. Most (65%) 'sometimes' have the feeling that adults take them seriously.

What did young people think four years ago?

In 1999, a survey was carried out among young people asking them for their thoughts on the rights of the child in the Netherlands. What are the differences between the answers given then and those given now?

- Four years ago, 98% of the children knew that they had rights. In 2002, 100% knew this.
- Four years ago, 58% of the children knew of the existence of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In 2002, 62% knew.
- What really stands out is the difference in how the young people had heard of the Convention: four years ago, 33% said that they knew about it through school; in 2002, this figure was 61%. This could mean that more schools are giving attention to this topic, and are incorporating it into lessons.
- Little has changed in the answers given to the question of which rights are children's rights. The percentages of four years ago and of now are very close together.

- It is striking that four years ago young people considered the right to enough food and to healthy food to be the most important right, whereas in 2002 education was the most important. Four years ago, education was ranked seventh. Other than these, there were no significant changes.
- This year, 45% of the young people thought that more attention should be given to children who are being ill-treated. Four years ago, this figure was 14%. The right not to be ill-treated, the right to express one's opinion and the right to equality were ranked the highest in this respect, both in 2002 and four years ago.
- Now, as well as four years ago, children have sometimes had to stand up for their rights, in particular the right not to be ill-treated, the right to express one's own opinion and the right to equality.
- Just as was the case four years ago, young people turn most frequently to their parents for advice. The percentages correspond with those of four years ago.
- The answers to the question concerning the subjects on which children would like to be consulted are comparable for both years. Young people consider it important to be able to have a say in what they are allowed to watch on television, the school they attend and the clothes they wear. The percentages of four years ago and of now are, generally speaking, comparable.
- The answers regarding having a say at school were also similar to those of four years ago: most of the young people indicated that the situation was 'so-so' (59%).
- On the issue of whether they are taken seriously by adults, the percentages were close to those of four years ago.

Young refugees

Article 22 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Child refugees have the right to special protection, equally so when the child requests refugee status without being accompanied by his or her parents. In such cases, the government concerned is required to endeavour to trace the child's parents.

In the Netherlands, there are 15,000 children and young people under the age of 18 who have fled to the Netherlands for asylum, without parents or other guardians. The majority of those who arrived in 2002 came from Angola, Afghanistan and Sierra Leone. There are various reasons why they were unable to remain in their country, for example due to a war. Living in the Netherlands is difficult. They arrive in a strange country, with a strange language, and need to find their way in a strange community.

The interview

To enable the inclusion of the experiences of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors (AMAs) and young refugees, discussions were held with 10 of them, in a meeting centre in Amsterdam and at their homes. Additionally, the Samah organisation interviewed 59 unaccompanied asylum seeking minors in Amsterdam. The discussions covered subjects such as school, home, health-care, information, leisure time, the future and society. Discussions were also held with a girl from Turkey, who is an illegal immigrant in the Netherlands.

School

School is very important for the majority of young refugees. School ensures that they are occupied during the day and that they learn a trade, for future use. However, a large proportion of young people fail to attend school. This may be because they have insufficient funds, for example to pay the bus fare to school, or because they have been unable to sleep at night, and are therefore unable to concentrate in the classes during the day. Young people in a refugee centre, or living in small residential units, are frequently unable to do their homework due to the noisy environments.

"I don't go to school very often. I don't feel like it, I am unable to concentrate in the classroom, the lessons are not so good." (girl, 17)

"I think school is very important. I am learning to be an electrician, and I intend to continue with that in the future." (boy)

Many of the young refugees do not know where to turn when they have problems with a teacher. In general, there is a refugee coordinator present at the schools attended by the refugees, but some of the young people are unaware of this.

"I had an argument with my teacher, I'm no longer allowed to attend the classes. As a result I got a bad report." (girl, 17)

Housing

Some of the young people live alone; others live in a refugee centre (AZC). The young people living in a refugee centre are dissatisfied with their housing. There is too much noise, and insufficient cleaning is done.

"I have to share a room with three other boys. Leisure, privacy and sleep are impossible."

(boy, 16)

There are occasions when young people are required to move to another location. They are not consulted beforehand, and the move is immediate, the same day.

There is not always schooling available at the new location.

"I attended school while I was in the reception centre. Later I was transferred to a camp site, and I stopped attending school." (boy, 19)

There are also young people who live in a *Kleine Woon Eenheid (KWE)* [Small Residential Unit]. A small residential unit is a house usually accommodating four young people. A young refugee, living in a small residential unit, is coached by a mentor, with the basic principle that the mentor calls in several times each week, to check how things are going. In practice, many of the mentors have insufficient time for regular visits.

"I don't know what to ask my mentor." (girl, 16)

There is no supervision during the night. This means that the young people are on their own at night. This can be dangerous, particularly for girls who live alone in a house.

Some of the young people indicate that it is often difficult to live together with other young people, whom they don't really know, and that there are arguments or they feel irritable.

"I'm dissatisfied with my house. Nothing is good. I just don't feel at home." (boy, 17)

"One of the boys in my house is very dirty, I find that very unpleasant." (boy, 16)

"Everything is OK at home. My mentor visits about 4 times each week, nearly every day. We chat about a lot of things at school. I do have frequent problems with the neighbours. If the music is too loud, the neighbour and his wife come to complain. That is very annoying; the walls are not soundproof, at all." (boy, 17)

Refugee procedures

Every unaccompanied asylum seeking minor or young refugee has problems with the procedures, starting from the moment that he or she arrives in the Netherlands. The problem is that there is no information relating to asylum status and the asylum procedures. The young people do not always know who they should approach if they have questions about this. It is difficult to get in touch with the lawyer. Additionally, sometimes the lawyer is not fully informed about the asylum procedures.

"I have been in the Netherlands for almost a year. I still have not spoken to my lawyer. I do not know what the current situation is regarding my status." (girl, 16)

"I don't know where to turn when I have questions relating to my status. I have been here for almost two years, and I have never asked about it. I suppose I could ask my mentor about it." (boy, 17)

Because the procedure takes so long, and the young people are kept in doubt about their stay in the Netherlands, a lot of the young people develop psychological problems. Frequently, they are unaware of where to seek assistance.

"I keep thinking about whether I will be allowed to stay. This gives me a lot of headaches and I can't get it off my mind. I don't know who I can talk to about these problems."
(boy, 18)

"If I go to a doctor with a problem, he simply gives me paracetamol. The doctor does not listen to what I'm saying." (boy, 17)

Leisure time

No limitations are placed on the way that the young people spend their leisure time. Many of the young people would prefer to do fun things, but there are few opportunities. They either have no money, or they do not know how to get information about sport and other such things.

"I really enjoy dancing. Yesterday I went to a street-dancing class for the first time." (boy)

"I don't know what I can do and I don't have the money to do anything, so I sleep a lot."
(girl, 16)

"I go for a game of basketball, or I go skating. I can always borrow a pair of skates from a friend." (boy)

Dutch society

The Netherlands is very different from the countries where unaccompanied asylum seeking minors and young refugees come from. They have arrived in a society which, in their view, is bureaucratic and often quite strange. The young refugees indicate that the Dutch sometimes look at them in a strange manner. If they are in Amsterdam, it doesn't seem to be important that their skin has another colour, but the people in a village sometimes look at them in amazement.

"In a small village it is as if they have never seen a black person before!" (boy)

The big city is more individualistic. It is difficult for some of the young people to associate with other people. Many of the unaccompanied asylum seeking minors and young refugees say that they would like to come into contact with young Dutch people, but they do not know how to do this.

"I don't know how and where I can meet young Dutch people." (boy, 19)

"Sometimes the people are unkind. When I go into a shop there are people who follow me, to see whether I am going to steal something. I find this unpleasant." (boy)

Some of the young people say that they are unable to associate with young Dutch people, because they are not allowed to enter some of the discos. The unaccompanied asylum seeking minors and young refugees are not aware of their rights and obligations in the Netherlands. No one informs them about these things.

"I don't know what I can do and what I'm allowed to do in the Netherlands." (girl, 16)

Nevertheless, some of the young people think that they have the same possibilities as everyone else in the Netherlands.

"I think that I can have the same kind of future as everyone else. Someone once said to me: if you really want something, you can do it." (boy)

A number of the young people say that they would like to return to their own country, as soon as possible, so that they can see their family and friends again. Here in the Netherlands, they have nothing.

Suggestions for the government

- Refugees should be told about their residence status more quickly.
- Young refugees should be given information about the asylum procedures and Dutch society.
- Young refugees should be provided with more information regarding their future possibilities.

Some children and young people are illegal immigrants in the Netherlands. They do not have the right to remain in the Netherlands and they will not be granted a residence permit. The Dutch government requires that they leave the country as soon as possible. This is not always possible, and many remain in the Netherlands, in hiding and without rights to social welfare and care.

They do have access to education and the most elementary medical care.

Brim (not her real name) is 16 years old and lives in a three room flat, together with eight people.

Housing conditions

"We live in a house owned by a Dutchman. It is an old house. We have to wash ourselves in the kitchen, as there are no other washing facilities. Cooking is terrible. When you go up or down the stairs you get the feeling that it will collapse any minute. We do have a toilet. There are eight people there, and we have three rooms. I don't really have any space for myself. You are unable to live a normal life, there is almost no daylight, and there are mice and cockroaches. I am really scared of cockroaches. In truth, the house is simply very dangerous. The Dutch owner intends to sell the house or raise the rent. And we are simply unable to pay that. We haven't got a new house yet."

"I don't have any sense of experiencing life. I was 12 when I came and I am now 16, and I haven't noticed a thing. It seems like two days. Sometimes I think that I am 30 or 40 years old, because everyone that I see is that old. I don't have any friends of my own age. I don't discuss my problems with anyone, not even my sister or my mother. I simply don't talk to anyone. My mother and my sister have enough problems of their own.

The government could look for a house for us. Or give us money. If I don't have a house, I will have to live on the streets. I really don't know what to do. We cannot find a new house."

Health

"I can go to the doctor. But the doctors don't do anything at all. They know that we are illegal immigrants and they don't do a thorough examination. They simply look at you and make a quick examination, give you something simple - always the same sort of thing. I have a sore spot on my head, so I went to see the doctor, saying: "It is swollen and hurts a lot, and my hair keeps falling out." The doctor's reaction was: "Sorry, I cannot understand what is happening to your hair. You need to go to the hospital, to see a specialist, but I don't think that you can do that, as it costs a lot of money." An appointment costs 300 guilders. But if they simply give you a doctor's note you can go straight to the hospital. But the doctor just says that I am unable to

handle that. Her first question is always to ask whether I have employment, and how many of my family are employed.

If anything happens, I am not allowed to go straight to the hospital. Their immediate reaction is "first let us look at your papers" and, if I don't have the necessary documents, they want to see the note from the doctor. The doctor will not give you such a note just like that. I have been living here for three years and on one occasion I was given a note for the specialist, because of my head. But when I arrived at the hospital, I was first asked to pay 300 guilders. I just don't go to the hospital. It is a bit better now, although I am still losing my hair. It still hurts, and it swells up now and then.

My father and my brother do some work occasionally, to earn some money. And I also have to work, sometimes. If I need to go to the dentist then this can be arranged. However, you first need to make arrangements with someone who is able to speak Dutch."

Information

"When I want to enquire about my refugee status, I don't know where to find the answers. We cannot simply make an appointment with our lawyer. You have to wait and keep waiting. It's been a year now. I have a lot of questions about what is going to happen. No one gives me clear answers.

People from here also frequently say that they don't know anything about it, and that we simply have to wait. But if they really listened to what we had to say, they should be able to do something. I wish that they would say: "we will check it out for you," but no one says that. I have been waiting for three years. And, every month, I hope the same: maybe we will be allowed to stay next month, and I can go to school."

Leisure time

"I really enjoy sport. I used to go jogging with my brother quite a lot. I also enjoy karate and martial arts. I cannot go running here in The Hague. I go to karate, because Petra is the coach. I will not go when other people give the lesson, I find that difficult. I have nothing at all here, and I do not wish to do anything else, nor to meet new friends - just to leave them all behind if I have to leave the Netherlands.

If you have nothing at all here, being an illegal immigrant, then you simply avoid getting to like something or someone. I do go to see Petra, because I know her so well."

Rights

"The most important aspect for me is the right to information. They don't give me any information. You live a life of uncertainty. I find it important to know that something is definite. I want to be certain about one aspect of my life, but there is nothing that I am certain about regarding my life. I really want to know whether I can stay here, that I can attend school. Health is of course always important, but I don't really think about it. I put my health to one side. I only think about what is going to happen in the future."

Do adults take you seriously?

"NO! Never! If you say anything to our people, their reaction is 'you are still too small, you need to grow a bit first.' No one takes me seriously. However, to be honest, I have grown up much faster than other people, due to everything that I have been through. I try to remain a child; I don't want to grow up. That would be a pity."

Society

"The Netherlands is very similar to Turkey. A lot of people are from other countries. There are almost more illegal occupants than legal ones. If you tell the Dutch about that, it scares them."

You have lived in Germany. Is there a difference between the Netherlands and Germany from your point of view?

"A great difference. In the Netherlands, the sea is very beautiful. I never saw the sea in Germany. In Germany, I lived in a village, and I liked that much more. Illegal immigrants are treated badly in both countries. That is cruel; you should be clearer. Tell us clearly whether we can stay or not. Everything takes a lot of time. You only live once. It is a shame. I really cannot believe that I have been living here for 4 years. I cannot attend school, I will have to leave all the people behind again. I can't enjoy life if I don't have the necessary papers. We came here because it was extremely dangerous for my father and my sister. We cannot go back, because there is a grave danger that they will be killed. They belong to the PKK. I never want to see that country, I hate that country!"

Suggestions for the government

- Give the illegal immigrants in the Netherlands more clear information: what is the current situation.
- All schools should know that all children resident in the Netherlands and under 18 years of age - thus including illegal immigrants - have the right to education.
- Doctors should give better treatment to illegal residents in the Netherlands.

Poverty-stricken children

Article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Children have the right to an appropriate standard of living. Parents have a duty to endeavour to ensure this, within their possibilities, and the state should support these endeavours.

Some children and young people in the Netherlands live in a family with insufficient income. There are quite a lot of families who have to suffice with a minimum income. In 1999 (the date of the last survey) 10.1% of all children and young people under 18 lived in a minimum-income family.

Very often, these children and young people live in families that have faced poverty for many years or for several generations. As a result, the children face problems at school, at home, in the neighbourhood, with the social services, etc.

In 1998 and 1999, a survey was carried out among children in homes with little money.

Interviews were held with 54 children and their parents. The children were all in the age group of 6 to 16 years. The researchers wanted to know what the children knew about life in a family on the poverty line. The report 'Children and Poverty' describes how some of the interviewed families suffered from social and material shortfalls. 70% of the parents were unable to buy sufficient clothing. More than half of those interviewed stated that their financial situation did not allow the children to be members of a club. 80% were unable to go on holiday, more than half were unable to celebrate the children's birthday, and about a quarter could not afford to prepare a warm meal every day.

The children interviewed appear to accept the family's financial situation as fact, although they are very aware of the differences between their own home life and the way other families live.

The interview

For the purpose of this survey, interviews were held with eight children in the age group 8 to 17 years. These children are members of families that have been living on the bread line for quite a long time. The interviews were based on questions, theoretical approaches and a quiz. The interviews concentrated on subjects that are very close to the hearts of the children: teasing, discrimination, school and choice of school, the situation at home, and sport.

General

The children are well aware that they are members of families in which the parent(s) find it difficult to make ends meet. However, none of the children said that the lack of money had an overbearing influence on their lives. There are other problems facing them, problems that they wished to talk about: limited opportunities for education, insufficient guidance at school, bad neighbourhood, and problems with social workers. The majority of the children we interviewed were attending special schools, or a school where they were given additional personal tuition.

There were various different answers to the question about their awareness that their parent(s) are short of money:

"You can't simply go and buy something whenever you want to." (boy, 15)

"I cannot just go and buy new clothes, like a new pair of trousers. For example, I ask for them and my mother has no money. Then I ask again a month later and I can have them."
(girl, 12)

"Sometimes we can't do or have certain things, and I find that annoying. For example, a Furby. Nothing else." (girl, 11)

"Children often come to school wearing torn clothes, or wearing the same trousers three days in succession. We discuss this sort of thing during our discussion sessions in the mornings. We also discuss food, and how much we eat." (boy, 15)

"My mother does everything that she can to provide me with good clothes. I am free to do as I wish. Is it so obvious that I am poor?" (girl, 14)

For children who go to school, the lack of money is especially clearly and painfully experienced during the holiday period.

"I would very much like to go on holiday. Somewhere where the sun shines all day, the Canary Islands for instance. Or to Denmark, that's a nice place to be. But I just don't have any money." (boy, 15)

Nearly all of the children are involved with sport. There are funds to which the parents can apply if they have insufficient money to allow their child to enjoy sport. Some parents are not fully aware of this. The situation also differs between municipal councils regarding how much money is available for parents who want their children to enjoy sport.

"Children should have more rights to take part in a sport that they like. Some branches of sport are far too expensive, or too far away to go to, and then there is no money to travel such distances." (girl, 15)

Which groups of children are having a rough time in the Netherlands, deserving additional attention from the government?

The children name a number of groups of children in the community that should be given more attention. They all mention disabled children or children who are seriously ill. None of them say that more attention should be given to the children who are members of poor families.

"A special day should be organised for disabled children, so that they could go somewhere, so that they get the feeling of being a normal human being. Usually those people have disadvantages, they should be given more attention." (girl, 13)

Other groups of children that were named were children who are teased, refugee children and groups of foreign children.

"Some foreigners live in our street and people throw stones at them, and such. It's not the fault of those people that they had to leave their own country, is it?" (girl, 12)

"A girl in my class comes from the same country as Osama bin Laden. She is teased about this. They say: 'shouldn't you go and help Osama bin Laden?' I feel sorry for her. They tease her about her clothes, about her hair." (girl, 15)

Which groups of children do have a good life in the Netherlands?

This question is immediately reverted to their own situation. They do think that they have a good life. Their parents take care of them. Of course, there are some things that could be improved but, in general, they have a good life.

"We have, and I have, a good life." (boy, 15 years)

"Actually, I am allowed to do everything that I want to do. Everything is fine for me. There could be more money at home, if we have that, then everything is really fine." (girl, 12)

The neighbourhood

A number of the children are living in an area designated for demolition. The neighbourhood is to be demolished within the next few years. Facilities where the children could play have already been demolished and, for the time being, no new investments are to be made. This is a hot subject for the children, particularly because they are now forced to stay at home.

"It's not so nice in my neighbourhood. There is nothing for children in my sister's age group (8 years). There was once one of those basketball things, but now it has been removed. I stay indoors an awful lot. It's so boring in our neighbourhood. There are a lot of parties, however. I sense that the neighbourhood is becoming more and more dangerous."
(boy, 15)

"I hang around with a group of children, on a bench or in the shelter at the station. Sometimes we are not welcome there, then we go elsewhere." (girl, 12)

Being teased, because you are different

Being the victim of teasing, at school and in the neighbourhood; these children have all been victimised, or are currently enduring this. Sometimes because their clothes are different, sometimes because they go to different schools from the rest of the children in the neighbourhood. It is a vulnerable group of children and they are an easy target.

"You are looked at, checking whether you are wearing brand clothing, attractive clothing. If you have a tear in your coat, you are immediately asked: 'don't you have a decent coat?'" (girl, 17)

A mother, attending the interview, says that people sometimes react very strangely when she says that she is receiving welfare assistance. People give her the cold shoulder. She says that she is very unhappy when people point at her while her children are nearby. But her daughter says: "Do you know what: I don't care!"

They stand up for children who are teased, such as children with another skin colour, sometimes facing the risk that they will then become the victim. What should be changed? The school should be far more active; the teachers should be more attentive and speak to the children about their behaviour. Open discussions about teasing and looking different could be helpful. The role of the parents is also important.

"I'm not so worried about the teasing part. I had a new pair of trousers, nice ones that cost a lot of money. I had worked hard to be able to buy them. I wore the trousers when I went to a disco party. Then they said: those are nice trousers. The next day I wore my old pair of trousers again." (girl, 15)

Participation

Are you able to have your say at home, at school and in the neighbourhood? A number of the interviewed children attend *ZMLK* / *ZMOK* schools [schools for children with severe learning difficulties or schools for children with behavioural problems]. These are for children who learn very slowly or who have problems concentrating. In general these are not the sort of children who are active members of participation projects.

The majority of children indicate that, at home, they are able to have a say on most subjects.

"We don't go on holiday, so why should we talk about it. But we do talk about day-trips."
(boy, 15)

Their opinions are also sought in the neighbourhood.

"I took part in discussions in the neighbourhood once. I said that I was unhappy because our houses were to be demolished. We have friends in the central stairwell, and it is a shame to destroy the buildings." (boy, 15).

"There were plans to build a new centre in the neighbourhood, and we were asked for our opinions. They asked about the colour scheme: which colours, which designs. They listened to us; the result is very cheerful." (girl, 14)

However, the children have doubts about their being taken seriously.

"We are not taken seriously by society. Not by the teachers, not by people on the street. Imagine: you are in a bus, sitting next to a man who places his hand on your leg. You ask him to stop - three times - but he carries on. So you stand up, but he carries on. And you go to the driver to tell him about it, but he doesn't really believe you." (girl, 17)

Suggestions for the government

- Listen to us - let us participate in the discussions relating to government policy. Take us seriously.
- More play-areas in the neighbourhood, don't just demolish everything, with the result that the children have nowhere to go.
- More money for the care of disabled children.

Children with a disability

Article 23 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

A mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance, and facilitate the child's active participation in the community.

The interview

For the purpose of this report, discussions were held with a number of groups of children, initially with fourteen children in the age group of 11 to 19, all with slight mental disabilities and all attending special schools.

Additionally, discussions were held with six physically disabled young people who, although older than 18, were able to discuss the difficulties that they have needed to overcome, to find their niche in society. Those young people are members of a Youth Inspection Team. A youth inspection team is a group of young people who, working together, prepare and carry out research studies related to local youth policies. During 2001, this team studied the policy relating to young people and the disabled in Utrecht.

Discussions were also held with two young people with very high IQ, and who consequently have a lot of problems at school.

It is logical that the main subject of discussions was the place where the young people still spend most of their time: school.

"I think that it is important that all children are equals. Disabled people count too; you have to extend your viewpoint. You used to just stare at those people - but they are normal people, too. In fact, they deserve extra attention."

(student of special secondary education for children with learning difficulties)

School

A number of the children interviewed attend *ZMLK / ZMOK* schools [schools for children with learning difficulties or schools for children with behavioural problems]. Both the parents and the young people have the feeling that society does not take this group of young people seriously, and that there are limited opportunities for their full development. Firstly, according to the young people, in the Netherlands there are only a few schools where young people with serious learning problems can follow a trade-apprenticeship type of education. Young people living too far from such schools do not have such opportunities. Secondly, the young people who follow lessons at the lowest levels do not get a certificate when they finish. This means that they are unable to show future employers any documents as proof, even though employers always ask for this.

"I would like to take care of animals, but you need to have a certificate for that, and you cannot pass such examinations at my school. I can't follow an apprenticeship or a work placement because this would require me to go to another town, and the school is not willing to pay for that (it costs extra). Now I have to accept a work placement in a shop, and I don't really like that."
(girl, 17)

"I want to be a cook, later. But I am not very good at school. At my level, you are only allowed to train to be a cook's assistant. I hope that I can continue going to school after I finish at this one. I know that I can do it, it just takes more time in my case."
(boy, 17)

Additional to the group of children who have problems with schooling, there is a group of children with a very high IQ. These do not fit into the standard education systems. Some of the

children with a very high IQ are able to continue at the normal primary schools and secondary schools, but more and more children are leaving school. In the Netherlands, there are two schools that are especially suitable for children with a very high IQ.

"Indeed, I spent about ten years at a normal school. And I had an awful lot of problems, so I simply stopped going to school. Nevertheless, I am legally required to have an education so I have to go to school. Now they are making arrangements, but I need a certificate for so many things. I want to be a doctor and I would prefer to follow only those subjects that I need for that. But that is not allowed, everything has to be in accordance with the regulations." (girl, 14)

"I find it very difficult to stay in class. The government should have a more flexible attitude regarding compulsory education for children who do not fit into the system." (girl, 13)

"It is particularly difficult to work together with the whole group, doing exactly the same as the rest. I'm different. Sometimes I'm faster, sometimes slower and I am simply different from the average student. This makes it very difficult." (girl, 14)

Physically disabled young people can attend normal schools or special schools. In general, they prefer to go to normal schools, because there you are more obliged to integrate in society more quickly. You also get to know other young people - people who do not have disabilities. However, sometimes the quality of education at a special school is higher, because they have smaller classes and they are more specialised.

"The transition from special education to regular education is very abrupt. There are no transitional methods. Suddenly you have to arrange everything for yourself, such as having to adjust." (girl, 19)

"More support should be available at normal schools. If you have always attended a special school, you are insufficiently prepared for the move into general society." (girl, 18)

From the report compiled by the Youth Inspection Team for Disabled Young People in Utrecht (published in Amsterdam, October 2001) it is evident that young people get the feeling that they are held back in the special schools, being protected far too much. Other disadvantages related to the special education are, according to the Youth Inspection Team:

- The level is lower and the speed is slower.
- If you stay in the special education system for too long, you never get away from it. There is no stimulation to move towards regular education.
- Hierarchical structure.
- You do not learn to be self-sufficient.
- You are not rated at your true value; your qualities are assessed as being lower; there is no stimulation of stronger qualities.
- Little is done to promote the acceptance of your disability.

However, there are young people who prefer to follow the special education schemes:

"Initially I attended a normal primary school. But I had more and more trouble with my legs, and it became increasingly difficult to get over the doorstep. Furthermore, the lessons went so fast, writing became more difficult. You do not get enough attention at a normal school, you are just

one single disabled person amidst the many without any disabilities."
(girl, 20)

"I started by going to the secondary vocational school. But my eyesight got worse and worse. The head teacher suspected that I was using drugs. Eventually I reached the stage that I was totally unable to go to school, due to my disability." (boy, 23)

Information

The physically disabled young people say that it is very difficult for them to obtain information. A lot of relevant information is not available in Braille.

"More leaflets should be written in Braille." (girl, 21)

Access to information stands is difficult for people in a wheelchair. This group is also unaware of the existence of certain institutions.

"There should be more information available about special allowances and benefits for the disabled. It should be easy to find out how to apply for a grant or a benefit." (girl, 21)

Young people who attend special schools frequently have to check which education schemes are open to them. Not all young people are able to do this.

Society

In general, the young people think that society has insufficient consideration for the disabled. One example is that disabled young people have to rely on adaptations or people who offer assistance in order to gain access to public areas, public buildings and shops.

"Often, you are unable to enter a shop in your wheelchair, because there is a high doorstep. They don't even take the trouble to provide a plank!" (girl, 18)

"When I'm in my wheelchair, I am unable to get over the doorstep. Then I stand up, drag my wheelchair over the step and carry on; you should see the look of amazement on people's faces." (girl, 18)

Teasing is quite common.

"I had to go to school in a special minibus. I was very unhappy about this, because all the children in the neighbourhood could see that I went to a different school, that I was different." (boy, 15)

"When people stare at me, I stare back at them: 'did you have a good look'? Then I raise my middle finger." (girl, 21)

"Sometimes they think that you have a mental disorder. They only talk to my mentor." (physically disabled girl, 21)

A publicity campaign relating to disabled people, and organised by the government, could make the general public more aware of the position of the disabled in society.

"We are normal people. There should be an awareness campaign, to ensure that society gains more respect for the disabled." (girl, 18)

If the government intends to make new policies for disabled young people then disabled young people should be involved in that process.

"When a political debate is held between the young people and the council, the invitations are sent to students of the more advanced schooling institutes, but not to young people at special schools. So, the young people at those schools don't really count. How does the council know what these young people need?" (girl, 17)

Suggestions for the government

- There should be more variation in the education at schools for children with learning difficulties. The school pupils would then have more to choose from, and would be able to follow the subjects that they enjoy.
- There should be more schools available for young people with learning difficulties. These young people should also be able to get a valuable vocational diploma.
- There should be more schools available for the education of young people with very high IQ.
- A campaign should be held to increase respect for disabled people among the general public.
- There should be a better access to information for disabled young people.

Children and child welfare

Article 20 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or who, for their own best interests, cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance, by being placed with foster parents, in a kafalah according to Islamic law, through adoption or by being placed in a children's home.

Article 25 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

For the purposes of their care, protection or treatment, children may be removed from their home; the necessity for this will be periodically assessed.

The child welfare system was created for the needs of young people who have problems at school, at home or on the streets. A large-scale survey was carried out among young people in 2001. The purpose was to see how well the child welfare system is working in the Netherlands. The opinions of young people are relevant when preparing new laws relating to child welfare. This legislation stipulates that there should be a central Youth Care Office in each of the provinces in the Netherlands, where young people are able to come for assistance when they face problems. The Youth Care Office then decides which institute is capable of providing support for the young person concerned. The large-scale survey of Child Welfare was set up by the *Stichting de Ombudsman* [the Ombudsman Foundation], the *Landelijk Overleg Kindertelefoons* [the National Platform for Children's Telephone Help lines] and the *Landelijk Vereniging van Kinder en Jongerenrechtswinkels* [the National Society of Legal Advice Centers for children and young people]. In 2001, the questionnaire was published in two national newspapers (*Algemeen Dagblad* and *Trouw*), and also on the Internet. It was distributed in secondary schools, child welfare institutes and at the institutes of those who initiated the project. A total of 2141 replies were received, from 854 boys and 1283 girls. The conclusions were:

- Assistance closer to home: If things go wrong for a young person he will tend to seek assistance more readily through people in his or her immediate surroundings, through their parents, friends, family, etc. Young people who have had previous experience with the Youth Care Office will have a tendency to return there more quickly when seeking further help.
- Other than the 'assistance close to home,' many of the young people do not know where they can go for assistance. There seems to be a taboo surrounding the child welfare system.
- A place to go and chat: young people have a need for a safe haven, where they can go to talk about their problems. Young people are only willing to tell their story on the condition that they do not have to fear drastic measures being taken by an external social worker.
- Family environments and living independently: young people prefer to live in a family environment and, if at all possible, independently. Many of the young people who have had previous experience with the Youth Care Office have also lived in a children's home, which they say is in no way the ideal solution; they emphasise the importance of foster homes.

- Unfamiliarity with the Youth Care Office:
60% of the young people who completed the questionnaire replied that they were not aware of the existence of the Youth Care Office.
- In the opinion of young people, a Youth Care Office should meet the following criteria: it should be easily accessible; you should be able to telephone for advice; young people should feel at ease there; the young person would like to be able to choose who they consult.
- Young people want to participate in considerations and decisions regarding a solution for their problems: 90% of the young people want to participate in the considerations and decisions relating to the treatment or solution that is appropriate for them.
- Young people want to be informed about how the social worker intends to approach the problem: young people wish to be informed about the chosen path of assistance that is under consideration by the social worker. Young people want to be taken seriously, and want to be able to use the information themselves.
- Young people want to know what authority and tasks a social worker has regarding the decisions being made concerning their situation:
young people do not have a clear idea of the authority held by the experts involved in the process of providing assistance. When a young person contacts a social worker, the official should clearly describe his authority.
- Young people consider it important to be involved, but note that the authorities frequently fail to listen to what they have to say: a large group considers that little attention is paid to what they are saying. This percentage is higher within the group of young people who have already had contact with the Child Welfare system.

These conclusions have led to a number of recommendations, formulated by the working group 'Youth on Child Welfare'. These recommendations are important for the improvement of child welfare, and they are as follows:

1. the immediate environment is the most important area for a young person to be able to fall back on
2. young people have a need for more and better information relating to child welfare
3. young people want a safe location where they can talk
4. whenever possible, the problems should be solved at home
5. young people should be involved in evaluations of the care intended for them
6. the child welfare system should be easily accessible for young people
7. child welfare should not be judged on quantity alone, quality should also be considered.

Some of the young people who have had connections with youth social workers are no longer able to live at home. They live in a youth care institution or a children's home, for short-term or long-term periods.

The interview

The magazine 'House', a periodical published for young people living in youth care institutions, published a questionnaire at the end of 2001. The questionnaire asked the young people about the regulations, group leaders, bustle and stress in the group, pocket money and the social workers. 178 young people participated in the survey. After the questionnaire, interviews were held with eleven young people, in the age group of 14 to 17, living in various homes in the Netherlands. All these young people were members of the youth council in their homes. Such councils, comprising only young people living in the respective home, meet at regular intervals to discuss the state of affairs with the management of the home. During these discussions, the young people can identify points that they consider to be in order and changes that they would

like to see made in the home. The youth councils from the homes also meet several times each year in a national youth welfare council.

Regulations

62% of the group of young people questioned were of the opinion that they are allowed to participate in the decision-making process related to important decisions regarding the home. 38% disagree and think that, in fact, people do not listen to them. They say that they are allowed to discuss the subjects, but that nothing is really done with their opinions.

They consider the regulations in their home to be very strict. For their age, they have to go to bed too early, they are not allowed to go home as frequently as they would wish and, sometimes, there are rules relating to the most 'idiotic' things, for example that they are not allowed to use a Walkman / Discman when in the group.

"We have to go to bed too early, we have to go upstairs at twenty to ten!" (girl, 16)

"We are not allowed to have any pets in our own room." (girl, 13)

"It is bad that you have to ask if you may go to the toilet." (girl, 17)

The rules and regulations are not easy to change. First, the whole matter needs to be discussed in the team meeting, and this takes a very long time. However, in general, the young people who were interviewed all agreed about the importance of rules. The most important rule, in their opinion, is respect for each other. If you fail to show respect, then you are sent to your room. Another important rule is the one relating to prayer time. This is a one-hour period during which everyone who wishes to pray is allowed sufficient time and peace for this. Of course, sometimes they disagree with the regulations, but the majority of the young people understand the necessity for regulations.

"Whichever way you look at it, they are responsible for us. If we come home too late, they get worried and could start to think that we might have had an accident." (boy, 14)

They dislike the fact that there are repeated cases of negative decisions on occasions that they fail to comply with the rules. Another source of annoyance is the high level of control that is maintained over the group. The young people know what they have to do if they disagree with the rules and regulations. They can submit a complaint, sending it to the youth council of the home. This will then be taken up with the management of the home. Few of the young people actually submit a complaint. Nevertheless, they have a great deal of faith in the youth council. The majority of the young people think that they are taken seriously and that people listen to them. The problem is that the management of the home is frequently unable to make any changes to the rules.

"The group leaders always listen to us, take everyone seriously, but they are unable to do anything about the rules." (girl, 16)

The majority of the young people agree that the management of the home enforce the rules and regulations in a consistent manner. No one person is more severely punished than another.

Group leaders

The group leaders are an important factor in the lives of the young people. The young people have discussions with the group leaders, covering many subjects, and the leaders are frequently considered to be substitute parents. They ask the leaders for advice relating to jobs, living accommodation, social benefits, rights and obligations within the institution. But they also

come to the group leaders with their personal stories and problems. A group leader has to be an all-rounder. From the interviews with the young people, it was evident that each person had a different opinion on the group leaders. One claimed that the advice given by the group leaders was helpful, another said that the group leaders only give advice according to the book and, therefore, are unable to give any personal assistance.

"The group leaders never listen to the opinions of the young people." (boy, 14)

"The group leaders take me seriously, they look at each person to find out what we are capable of." (girl, 17)

"I get angry because the leaders do so little when someone is stoned or drunk." (girl, 16)

The group leaders have insufficient time. Sometimes they don't even have time to listen to the young people. The leaders are busy writing reports and doing administration. More than half of the young people agree that the group leaders are changed far too frequently. In general this happens three times a day and this does not include the total changing of personnel. According to the young people, the leaders should have less administrative work to do. That work should be done by others, so that the leaders have more time to give the young people advice and assistance.

"When at last you have got used to one of them, you are confronted by another one! Also, if you have one, you see them very infrequently - this prevents the building up of a relationship with them." (boy, 14)

On the other hand:

"I think that it is a good thing that the group leaders change so frequently because, in that way, you don't need to build a lasting relationship with them and it is not so difficult to say goodbye when they get a new job so soon." (girl, 17)

According to the young people, the leaders live according to the rules. They think that less emphasis could be placed on this.

"Everything first has to be discussed in the team meeting. I find it irritating that you have to make agreements about everything, even when you simply want to go outside for a while." (girl, 17)

The majority of the young people (26% of those who completed the questionnaire) ask the leaders for assistance when they are having personal problems. On the other hand, the young people say that they find it difficult to tell the leaders about some things, because everything is immediately discussed by the entire team.

To summarise, the young people consider the most important task of the group leaders to be giving advice to the young people. The group leaders are frequently short of time. The group leaders are very consistent with regard to every little rule, but the young people would prefer it if they themselves were given more attention. The frequent changing of leaders is a problem. This makes it difficult to build a relationship of trust with the young people.

Providing assistance

Young people in the youth care system are confronted by a large number of different social workers. One of the problems in this area is that there are regular changes of personnel, resulting in the confrontation with yet another new face.

Consequently, it is not easy to arrange to change their case coordinator when they are dissatisfied with the assistance that they are being given. Otherwise, the young people are satisfied. People listen to what they say, and they are involved in their therapy programme. The case coordinator takes them seriously. The young people are dissatisfied with the time that they have to wait, which is too long. Their advice is: take on additional staff, so that more young people can get assistance at the same time.

Some of the young people also have a guardian. The guardian provides guidance for the young person and is responsible for him or her. Important decisions are taken by the guardian. There is a wide variation in the number of times that the guardian visits the young person concerned. One guardian may visit the young person quite frequently, e.g. every week. Another may come only once a year. Some of the young people have never met their guardian. A large number of the young people, approx. 42%, see their guardian very rarely or, in some cases, not at all. The reasons for this are, however, unclear. It is also doubtful whether the young people would like this to change.

From the survey, it is evident that roughly half of the young people who were approached are aware that they are permitted to see their own personal files. The other half is unaware of this, or thinks that this is not permitted. The young people indicate that the situation should be clarified with regard to this.

Bustle and stress in the group

The young people living in a home are split into separate accommodation groups. In general, the young people say that it is quite hectic in the group, especially when the group is made up completely of boys. In the groups with children of all different ages, it is frequently the younger children who get the most attention, or the children who demand more attention and express this in a boisterous manner. This can be very irritating at times.

"Boisterous children often get the most attention, although the quieter children are frequently the ones who have a greater need for help." (boy, 14)

On this topic, the young people are, in general, very positive about the leaders. They are consistent and they do not punish the same people all the time. They are careful to observe which of the young people is causing the problem. The groups are quite large and, in many cases, this results in a lot of stress, arguments and gossip. The majority of the young people think that the leaders are sufficiently active in ensuring that everyone gets the same treatment.

Other results of the survey

The young people are not really satisfied with the food. 69% say that they consider the food to be moderate to bad.

The young people are dissatisfied with their pocket money. A frequent complaint is that it is insufficient for their age. Some of the young people are obliged to relinquish a part of their wages.

The young people are not really satisfied with regard to sport and recreation, although the reasons for this dissatisfaction are quite dispersed. While one considers that there are insufficient sports facilities, due to a lack of funds for example, another considers that there is too much emphasis on sport.

Of the young people approached through the questionnaire, approximately 65% are not permitted to decide which school they are to attend.

Many of the young people (approx. 32%) have no idea where they can obtain information about social benefits.

Suggestions for the government

In general, the young people that were interviewed and living in a home are satisfied with their situation. The institution listens to what they have to say, as do the social workers. For some aspects, they are clear in expressing what should be improved:

- There should be a stable leadership for the group, not one that keeps changing all the time. The young people want to be able to build a relationship of trust with the leaders.
- The leaders should have less administrative work, so that more time is available for the young people.
- More people should be employed in social work, so that the young people do not have to wait so long.
- There should be more clarity and explanations regarding the procedures that are applicable for youth care. What are the rights and obligations of young people, and what authority does a social worker have? This is important, because young people can then make their own judgement about whether things are happening in the correct manner.
- There should be more money available for recreation.
- There should be more contact with the guardians. Frequently, it is the young people who have to maintain the contact, and the end result is that there is only limited contact.

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