

**PHOTOCOPY  
PRESERVATION**

**ChildLine Conference  
London, England  
May 13, 1999**

## ChildLine Conference

Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton

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Thank you very much, Cherie. And thank all of you for this very important conference and for inviting me to take part in it. I'm delighted to be joined here with so many judges, barristers and solicitors, and child care professionals, leaders, parents, and citizens who are working to make sure that children's voices are heard and listened to—not only because of a conference like this, but every day of every year.

I want to thank Cherie for the leadership that she has given to this effort, but more than that, for the leadership that she has provided on behalf of important issues affecting children, families, women, and other matters of justice over the years. We have spent a lot of time talking together about our concerns about children and how we can do a better job of caring for them.

I also am pleased that there are experts from a number of other countries who are sharing their perspectives and experiences. And of course, none of this would be possible were it not for the sponsors of this conference: *The Express* and ChildLine. And I especially want to thank and acknowledge the extraordinary leadership and sheer determination of Esther Rantzen, who had the vision and the energy to create ChildLine about 12 years ago. And in addition, I want to thank Valerie Howarth and all of the staff and volunteers who answer a million calls from children every year. And they make sure that what they hear continues to reverberate after they put down the receiver of the telephone.

When they listen to the concerns that children bring to ChildLine—whether the children are speaking in a whisper, scared to death that they might be overheard, or in a shout because they're so indignant, upset, or angry; or whether they cannot get the words out through their tears and sobs—the staff and the volunteers are doing the work that all of us should be doing, and that all of us must support. I think that one of our great challenges—certainly speaking from my perspective in my own country, but also as I travel around the world—one of our big challenges is that we are not listening enough to our children. The pace of modern life, the difficulties that many families face—everything from the way we construct our living situations, our commuting times, the amount of television that is consumed, and now of course the Internet and the computer—all have taken away so much time from children.

There was a recent study that was done in the United States in which parents and children were asked what they wanted most from each other. Parents said that what they wanted was for their children to listen to them. And what children said they wanted was the time and attention for parents to listen to them and spend time with them. So this is a very timely conference. The work that the ChildLine has done is a constant reminder to all of us, in our individual lives as well as our professional and public lives, about our responsibilities to children.

I ran across a quote that I like a lot. And it is from a former dean of St. Paul's Cathedral who said that the proper time to influence the character of a child is about one hundred years before he is born. Well, that is a rather daunting prospect because most of us don't think a year ahead, let alone a hundred years. But it is a sober reminder that much of what happens to children, at any time in any society, is affected by the decisions that have been made by the adults who come before. How much progress we can count on behalf of children depends on whether or not we are willing to shoulder our responsibilities.

This conference is a wonderful bit of nostalgia for me because I started my law career doing a great deal of advocacy and legal work on behalf of children. Starting in law school when I represented children and adults who were in some way standing in for children, all the way through both my public and private law practice, I have seen firsthand many of the problems that we have just heard the panelists reporting about. I have represented abused children. I have represented children in divorce and custody battles. I have represented children in criminal and delinquency proceedings. And I have seen, more than I wish that I had, the difficulties, the distresses that children face.

And I think, as we look at the solutions and recommendations that have come from the various committees that have reported back, and as this conference—with all of your support—thinks of ways to improve the treatment of children so that their voices are heard and what they say is taken seriously and acted upon, it might be well to put this in the broader context of human rights. Because much of what we are discussing today is a question of the human rights that all of us, including children, possess. When the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it established a new standard for how we treat each other. And the Declaration clearly states, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." That was an extraordinary and revolutionary statement. And it said, "all human beings." It did not say "men," or "women," or "people of certain property ownership rights," or "races," or "regions," or "religions." It did not even say "all adults." It did not exclude children. In fact, it says specifically "all children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection."

Human rights are not given to us by a parent or a government. They do not miraculously appear when we turn 18 or 21. And no piece of paper can either bestow or remove them from us. And no culture holds a monopoly on them. And no country can abdicate its responsibility for them.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child—which we were reminded the United States has yet to ratify, despite the President having sent it to the Senate, it is sitting there, languishing. But the Convention does declare that every child is born with the right to be protected from abuse and abduction, violence and work that threatens his or her development. It says that every child has the right to worship freely and express opinions and aspirations, and that every child has the right to health, to education, to life.

Now, of course, it is up to adults to make those rights real in the lives of children. And, of course, we have to be careful about how they are implemented. We do have to both recognize and protect the family. We do have to recognize that children at different stages of development are able to be given different responsibilities. So we do have to be thoughtful in how we implement such a declaration of rights. But we have certainly come a long way, in a relatively short period of time, in how we view children and how we view whether or not they are entitled to rights. For centuries, they were nothing but the property of their families, primarily their fathers. They were instruments of work, both inside and outside the home. Parents were given the right to abandon, ignore, or sell their children, which still unfortunately happens even today.

We can go back and think about the work of a great English writer like Dickens, and summon up the image of the way children were treated not so very long ago. I can go back and look at the work of the great Progressive Reformers in my own country, women like Jane Adams or Eleanor Roosevelt. And I can read the accounts of what they saw and found when they went into the tenements and saw what was happening to children, or visited the sweatshops where small children were working 12 to 16 hours a day, six to seven days a week.

Well we have certainly made progress from those days, in my country and yours. Your Children's Acts of 1908, 1948, and 1989 show how the attitude toward children has changed over time—that we no longer could view children merely as little adults, but instead we had to see that in order for them to become successful adults, they needed the love, the attention, the discipline, and care that they should get from their families, and they also needed education, health care, and the support from the larger community that either supplemented an effective, functional family, or substituted for it.

When we listen to the cries for help that ChildLine gets every day, we can see how often we as adults fail at their very fundamental obligation to respect our children. I have worked with abused and neglected children for more than 25 years. I have looked into the eyes of many poor and abandoned children. And I am always amazed when there are some in our world who continue to dismiss or diminish the suffering of children, who believe that somehow children are so resilient they will always bounce back, who do not accept what I believe is a fundamental responsibility for all of us to care for children.

In 1973, I wrote an article about children's rights under the law, specifically their rights in family situations that pose serious threats to their health and safety. In the last few years, I've seen a continuing questioning of that, what I consider to be a rather unremarkable position. I have been questioned and criticized for advocating things that I certainly have not, but for whom others have claimed I have—that by saying that children have rights under the law, we are trying to break up families, take parents into court over issues like hairstyle, or bedtimes, or household chores. Criticism from those who refuse to see what you see and what ChildLine hears, that there is an extraordinary amount of very real, profound suffering in the lives of too many children.

So we have to strengthen and maintain families wherever possible and help parents succeed at the toughest job there is to do. But we also must take a stand on behalf of children. When tragedy, abuse, or neglect strike, we have to act to prevent children from being continually abused or neglected. That is not interfering with the rights of parents. It is protecting the God-given rights of children.

In many African villages, neighbors often greet one another by saying, "How are the children?" Well, the answer today is that the children are doing better in so many ways around the world. They're more likely to live to see their fifth birthday, and even their seventy-fifth, than just 10 years ago. In health and nutrition and education, in water supply, in sanitation, three out of five countries are on track to reach the child survival goals set by the 1990 World Summit on Children. Over the last two decades, immunization rates rose from 5 percent to 80 percent, saving more than 3 million lives a year.

Around the world, I have personally seen governments and non-governmental organizations coming together to expand the circle of human dignity to children. Whether it is waiving school fees so that girls can attend school, or, as you are here in the UK, working to make it easier for children who are witnesses to give their testimony. A few years ago, in our country, we enacted the Adoption and Safe Families Act, which says that our first priority in child welfare must be the health and well-being of children. There are many other examples I can point to of legislation, of changes in practice, of economic and political, social, and cultural development.

But we still must ask, "How are the children?" And the honest answer is, "Which children? Where do they live? Who are their parents? How affluent are they? What kind of societies are they a part of? Are they valued, despite the fact of being girls, or from some minority group, or outcast tribe?"

A few weeks ago, I was just idly pulling off images and pictures from newspapers and broadcasts to see how the lives of children are being reported in the daily news. And as one might guess, the bad news makes the headlines. And you can see the distress of children so clearly. "The Kosovo Conflict Has Devastating Impact on Children," says one headline. "Man on a Mission to Save Children in Romania's Sewers," says another. "Malaria, Leading Killer of Children Increasing," says a third. So we know there is much for us to be worried about and respond to. And each of those headlines, and all of the reports that you have received from this conference, is a challenge, and we will have to determine how we respond.

Will we permit the kind of abuses, neglect, and discrimination against children continue? What possible meaning can human rights, or any declaration or convention, have on a girl child who is shut out of school? What possible meaning can it have for a child suffering from a disease that is not going to be treated because there is no health care available or it cannot be afforded by the child's family? What possible meaning can any litany of human rights have for children who start to work at the age of 4 or 5?

I have visited many of the places where these are not just topics for discussion but are the reality of everyday life. I have visited with mothers who worry about their daughters' education but have nowhere to turn because of cultural and religious custom that stops their education after primary school. I have visited with children and families who have been forced or sold into very harsh labor conditions. Child labor is not, by any means, a problem of the past when one quarter of the children in the developing world—120 million—work full time. I have also seen the new and terrible face of child labor where girls are sold as part of the international trade in human beings from South Asia to the Middle East to Central America. It is estimated that there are hundreds of thousands of children literally enslaved as domestic servants. I have also visited children who, after they have been given away—given into prostitution—and acquire HIV or AIDS, they come home to die. I've stooped by the chair of a 12-year-old girl, wasting away from AIDS, who was sent home when she was no longer of service.

So there are so many problems that afflict the children of our world. And we have to do a better job of responding to their needs and listening to their voices. Governments can do more than they are doing. The first and foremost obligation of any government is the security of its people. We often think of that as an issue for threats beyond our borders. But I would argue that the security within a country is equally important. Children deserve to be protected—whether they are street children who are routinely rounded up and murdered in some countries; whether they are left to fend for themselves and therefore are preyed upon in the streets and, yes, in the sewers of other countries; whether they are children who cannot go safely outside to play or be safe in their own homes. Our first and foremost obligation is to make once again the world a safe and secure place. We also have to be conscious of the numbers of children who have become victims and tools of war.

The Declaration of Human Rights was a deliberate response to evil, and I use that word intentionally. Back when it was written, shortly after the end the Second World War and after we were coming to the awareness of the horrific nature of the treatment of people from the Holocaust to the prison camps and throughout the world, we could never have envisioned the way that children are today being constantly brutalized by war. We could not have imagined that children were being conscripted into service on behalf of military action. We certainly would not have wanted to imagine that we would see again in this century children and their families being expelled from their homes.

Last week I met the first group of Kosovar refugees to arrive in the United States. There were grandmothers in shawls, and students who spoke perfect English, and many children—some in diapers, others sitting on their mothers' laps, some just passed out from exhaustion from their ordeal. As I looked into the eyes of those children, I thought about what they had seen and the atrocities that they had witnessed and endured. None of us will soon forget the haunting images of children crowded onto trains, robbed of their homes, their families, their childhoods.

I know that there are many horrible stories coming out of the Balkans, and I hope that we do not become immune to them. Sometimes the statistics mask the personal suffering that lies behind the faces on the television or in the newspaper. I will be going to Macedonia tomorrow

to bring not only a word of support and solidarity to the refugees, but also to the people, the families, the men, the women, the children of Macedonia, who have been overwhelmed by this crisis. We want them also to know that we care about their futures as well. So we need to listen to the voices of these refugee children. We need to hear the voices of those who have been abducted and systematically raped. We need to be sure that we never forget the quarter of a million child soldiers.

I recall meeting a very brave woman, Sister Rachele in Uganda, who headed a boarding school where 139 female students had been the subject of a raid by rebels who had crossed the Sudanese border. They invaded the school, tied the girls up, beat them, and took them away in the dead of night. This woman, like so many others who are absolutely committed that we never forget the children, has traveled the world speaking out on their behalf. There is no way that any of us should rest easily while any child is subjected to such horror.

And what about what happens closer to home? When violence strikes our schools and communities, as it did in Dunblain and now in Littleton and other places, we are reminded once again that everything else—everything that we do—pales in comparison to keeping our children safe. There may be no easy answers. There may be no single solution. We're well aware of that. But we have a responsibility to listen to young people, to change attitudes, to offer a helping hand. In the aftermath of what happened at Littleton, I've spent quite a bit of time listening and talking to children in my country. As I hear their voices—especially the “sub-text,” what they don't even fully have words for—I know that they're asking that we pay attention to them, that we cut through our adult bureaucracies and institutions, and that we put away our prerogatives and professional concerns to come together on their behalf.

I'm reminded of the words of T.S. Eliot when he said, “Last year's words belong to another language and next year's words belong to another voice.” We have changed so much as societies in the last 50 years that I think that we are only now understanding fully how much we have to change how we think about many things, certainly, but foremost among those, our children. We don't have the luxury that previous generations seem to have had of living and working close by, of spending a lot of time with children who helped in the fields or in the store, or who were part of the extended family. We are having to think very hard indeed about how to deal with these changing life patterns—everything from increasing divorce, to greater awareness of abuse, to the overcrowded conditions of schools and neighborhoods that often exasperate the natural tensions that children have among them, to increased bullying, to much easier access in our country to weapons.

If we take seriously the challenge to listen to children, then we have to change how we think and act. There isn't any one way that we can be successful in doing that. I listened carefully to the recommendations that came forth. But perhaps the most important commitment is that we resolve ourselves to do whatever we can to pay closer attention to children's needs—to place children's needs on as high a level of concern as any other, in our personal lives, in our government and public lives, and indeed in our professional lives as well. If we do that, then we will begin to restructure institutions, to move toward better practices, to listen more carefully to

those who are the front lines of children's work, to shelve some of our own stereotypes and preconceptions about what children need, to work where we must to change laws and regulations, and to make it possible for children to feel once again that they are in a safe place.

I began my work on behalf of children when I was in law school and I became aware that there were many issues that no one was addressing that had to do with the values we brought to the law—whether they were based in our understanding of child development, whether they were a better appreciation of the societal factors that influence families that were not being taken into account. And I was lucky enough to combine my law studies with work at the Yale Child Studies Center. And I was fortunate there to work with some very good people, primarily psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and judges. We were all concerned about what the law needed to do to be more responsive to the problems that we were seeing. It seems like a long time ago, but in my life it was not that long ago that child abuse was not considered a serious problem.

I began working on the wards of the Yale New Haven Hospital and talking with the personnel there—the doctors, the nurses, and the staff—about how we were going to deal with child abuse, which was no longer swept under the rug but was viewed as the serious problem that it was. I began doing work on behalf of foster children, children who had been taken away from their families for abuse and neglect, but who were often left in a limbo that was psychologically very damaging. And I began paying more attention to how we structured institutions that had major impacts on children's lives, such as schools. That work has stayed with me over the years, and I have tried to stay true to the children whose voices I have heard, and whose cries I can never forget. But I have to confess that as we stand here at the end of the century, I don't think that we have done as much as we could. I don't believe that we take seriously enough the concerns of children. And we do not do enough to help families do a better job of caring for their own children. In our business life we don't pay much attention to the double burdens that parents have to bear both at home and at work. We don't make it very easy for people to make a living and care for children. And we have gotten so big in all of our institutions that we often render children's voices mute.

I recently visited a school in New York City as a "Principal for a Day." And what I took away from that were the impressions of the bright, eager children who come from homes where 30 different languages are spoken. But I also took away the very strong impression that we had taken a school built for 1,500, and took 2,000 12-, 13- and 14-year-olds in and were adding on so that we could have 500 more. That does not demonstrate the commitment to the well-being of children that I think we should have.

One of the main architects of the Universal Declaration was one of my favorite predecessors—Eleanor Roosevelt—a remarkable woman whom we still honor because of the way she pricked our conscious and made us think about issues that we'd prefer not to. It was often said of her that she saw her goal in life to "comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable." And there's a particular story that I like about her. This was long after she was out of the White House and even out of the United Nations, but she never gave up her advocacy

on behalf of people in need. One day she had a speech to give. She was very sick—so sick that her throat was literally bleeding. Everyone begged her to cancel, including her doctors, but she refused to do so. She drove herself some hours to the place that she was scheduled to be. And when she got out of the car with her traveling companion, a young girl stepped forward with a beaming face and a bouquet of flowers to hand to Mrs. Roosevelt. She was reported to have said, “You see, I had to come. She was expecting me.”

I think that there are many children who call the ChildLine who are expecting us, who are expecting someone to answer their cry for help, who are expecting some adult to intervene in some way that adults should be intervening to make life safer and more secure for them. If we think about all of those children, those thousands and thousands of children who have no one else to talk to except for a stranger on the end of a telephone call, I think that we can be both emboldened and encouraged to do more on behalf of children. And then if we put into context those children; and think of all of our children here in the U.K. and in the United States, we know that we have to do more to give them the kind of life and future that they deserve.

And then finally, we cannot forget all of the children around the world who have no access to a telephone or a ChildLine, whose cries are too often ignored and who need also to believe that someone is going to come to help them. If we give our focus to this work, perhaps in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the good news that we do have reason to celebrate about the changes in children’s lives the world over in the last 50 years can become even better news from our courtrooms and our police stations, to our killing fields and our refugee camps. Let’s do better for all of our children now.

Thank you very much!