

Children's Rights in Practice

eLearning course on children's rights for public sector
officials

Final draft

Welcome

Who is this training for?

This course is for anyone working in or alongside the Irish public sector. You don't need to be a legal expert. What matters is understanding how rights connect to the decisions you make every day.

Children's rights are not an "add-on"; they are at the heart of good public service and effective public administration.

Children's rights apply across all areas of public service - not just to those who work directly with children - including children's services, culture, education, environment, health, housing, justice, leisure, sport, and transport. Applying children's rights in your daily work helps ensure that public services are fair, accountable, and respectful of children's dignity.

Why take this eLearning course?

Whatever your role, your work can shape the lives of children. This course will help you explore how children's rights connect to everyday decisions, sometimes in ways that may not be immediately obvious.

By taking this course, you will gain practical insight into how a rights-based approach supports better decision-making, more inclusive services, and stronger public trust. You will also learn how small changes in the design of policies, processes, and services can make a meaningful difference for children and the wider community.

Why learning about rights matters: Insights from children and young people

In a national consultation led by children and young people (aged 10 to 24), 78% agreed that adults should learn more about children's rights.

Children and young people also reported that they are more likely to seek support from adults who are familiar with their rights, as they feel these adults are more likely to listen, understand, support, and respect them.

Read the Children and Young People's Report

What you will gain

This course is an opportunity to understand your impact on children's rights, build confidence in your capacity to do so, and contribute to public policies and services that are fair, ethical, practical, and effective.

You will gain an understanding of:

- Children's rights in theory and practice and where they come from
- How children's rights:
 - inform policy design and service delivery,
 - support participation in decision-making and inclusion,
 - guide decision-making, and

- help public bodies deliver on Ireland's national commitments to children.
- Current Irish policies, laws, and guidance that support children's rights.
- Where to find practical information and resources on children's rights in decision-making.

Pop-up: On the rights of children and young people

In keeping with Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028, a child is defined as anyone under the age of 18, while young people aged 18–24 are considered young adults.

Although this training primarily focuses on children's rights, it is important to recognise that the transition from childhood to adulthood can be a period of increased vulnerability. During this time, young people may benefit from additional support to access and realise their rights effectively.

The Government recognises that young adults may face specific challenges, particularly during key transition points such as entering further education or employment, leaving care, interacting with justice systems, or moving from child to adult health or mental health services. Ensuring continuity of support across these transitions is essential to safeguarding their rights and promoting positive outcomes.

"I believe it is important for adults to understand the rights of children because it solidifies the stance of equality. For years, the rights of children have not been taken seriously, whether it be in the world of work, education, or unfortunately the home. We need to shift from this; I believe we have, but alas, in even the greatest societies there is always room for improvement. Which is why I believe that it is of vital importance that adults understand the rights of children, ALL children. No matter the creed, race, ethnicity, nationality, health or politics. It benefits us all in the long term."

Kylie, 16

Features of the eLearning Course

- **Tailored learning modules:** These modules have been designed to support anyone whose work impacts children.
- **Good practice examples:** Access a collection of videos, presentations, and materials that showcase good practice and real-world applications of children's rights.
- **Interactive learning experience:** Engage with quizzes and activities to enhance your understanding and consolidate your learning.
- **Accessibility and inclusivity:** Our eLearning course is designed to be accessible to all users, in compliance with EU accessibility standards.
- **Printable checklists:** Available for each module.
- **Your commitments:** At the end of the course, you are invited to write your commitments on how you will promote children's rights in your daily work.

Module 1: Why do children's rights matter in public services - and where do they come from?

Module overview and learning objectives

Public administration plays a central role in how children's rights are realised in everyday life. Many public decisions affect children, even when they are not the primary focus.

This module introduces the foundations children's human rights, explains where these rights come from, and why they matter for public servants. It highlights the importance of rights-based approaches.

By the end of this module, you should be able to:

- Describe what children's rights are, where they come from, and how they apply to children
- Recognise how children's rights improve public decision-making and service delivery
- Explain why children's rights matter in public administration

Why you matter!

Ireland has played a leading role in developing the international framework of human rights. We make these rights real through our Constitution, laws, policy, and the work you do every day.

You play an important role in securing children's rights. In fact, few people are better placed to do so than public servants.

Rights matter in public administration because public bodies exercise power: the power to decide, regulate, allocate resources, design services, and enforce rules. How this power is used has real consequences for people's lives.

A children's rights-based approach helps public servants to:

- Make decisions that are fair, consistent, and transparent
- Navigate complex or competing priorities
- Reduce the risk of unintended harm
- Ensure non-discrimination in the treatment of children and their access to services
- Support each child's development, wellbeing, and learning in line with their evolving capacities
- Consider the best interests of the child as a primary factor in decision-making
- Listen to and take account of children's views in matters that affect them
- Improve accountability and public trust
- Deliver work that is lawful, ethical, and effective

What are children's rights and where do they come from?

Children rights and human rights

Children are protected not only by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), but also by the wider international human rights conventions (treaties, covenants). Most human rights conventions apply to "all persons", meaning that children benefit from the same fundamental protections as adults. These international conventions matter because today they shape everyday decisions in public services.

Ireland has ratified the following treaties, which provide Irish people, with a broad scope of rights:

[POP-OUT CARDS]

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

The right to

- life
- freedom of expression and peaceful assembly
- vote (when aged 18+)
- a fair trial
- equality and non-discrimination
- special protection for children

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

The right to

- education
- health
- adequate housing
- social security
- adequate standard of living

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The right of persons with disabilities to

- equality and inclusion
- have their best interests respected
- be heard
- inclusive education
- disability- and age-appropriate assistance to support participation

International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination

The right

- to equality and non-discrimination
- to equal access to education, healthcare, housing and social services for all children

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

The right of

- women and girls to equality

- women and girls to live free from violence
- girls to education and healthcare

Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The right

- to be free from torture and ill-treatment
- of children to protection in care and detention
- to effective protection and remedies
- of children to heightened safeguards

When Ireland ratifies a treaty, it takes on a legal obligation to respect, protect, and fulfil human rights through their laws, policies, and public services.

Pop-up: How the broader human rights and children's rights work together

Together, the human rights conventions, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, form a complementary system of protection, ensuring that children enjoy both universal human rights and safeguards that reflect their needs and vulnerabilities.

In international law, children are protected by both layers simultaneously:

- General human rights law → applies to all persons
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (specialised child rights law) → clarifies and strengthens rights and protections for minors

Example

A child denied schooling could rely on:

- the right to education under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- and the more detailed education provisions in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Both apply at the same time. The UNCRC is complementary, not exclusive.

Important!!! Children have human rights, but not all human rights provisions apply to children – example:

While human rights apply to both children and adults, some rights depend on age and do not apply to children in the same way. For example, some political rights like the right to vote are usually limited to adults under national law.

Children's specific rights and protections: The Convention on the Rights of the Child

Children's rights are specialised human rights.

They explain how general human rights must be applied to children, taking into account their:

- Age and stage of development
- Dependence on adults and institutions
- Evolving capacities

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) complements broader human rights frameworks by:

- Clarifying how rights apply in childhood
- Establishing additional protections and standards specific to children

It recognises that children require additional protection, targeted support, and meaningful opportunities to participate.

Pop-up: Convention on the Rights of the Child - Key facts

- Adopted in 1989
- Ratified by Ireland in 1992
- The most widely ratified human rights treaty (all UN Member States except the United States)

Pop-up: The four child rights principles

All children's rights should be interpreted and applied through four key principles:

- Best interests of the child (Article 3)
→ Must be a primary consideration in all decisions, policies, and actions affecting children
- Right to life, survival and development (Article 6)
→ Public bodies must support children's physical, mental, emotional, and social development
- Right to be heard (Article 12)
→ Children have the right to express their views, and these must be given due weight
- Non-discrimination (Article 2)
→ All children must be treated equally, with particular attention to those in vulnerable situations

[See deep dive in module six]

The scope of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

The UNCRC applies to all children under 18 and sets out a comprehensive framework of rights. These rights are often grouped into three categories:

Protection rights

Children have the right to be protected from:

- Violence, abuse, and neglect
- Exploitation, including child labour

For public servants, this requires a strong focus on prevention and early action, for example:

- **Early intervention:** identifying families in need of support before issues escalate
- **Preventive public health approaches:** school-based mental health supports or vaccination programmes
- **Tackling poverty and inequality:** targeted supports for disadvantaged families
- **Addressing systemic discrimination:** ensuring equal access to services for minority or marginalised children
- **Designing child-safe institutions:** safeguarding policies in schools, care settings, and public services

This reflects the UNCRC's emphasis on preventing harm, not just responding to it.

Provision rights

Children are entitled to the conditions necessary for their development, including:

- Education
- Healthcare
- Social protection
- An adequate standard of living
- Play and leisure

For public servants, this means:

- Ensuring services are accessible, inclusive, and adapted to children's needs
- Providing support to parents and caregivers
- Allocating resources to reduce gaps in outcomes between different groups of children

Example: designing education or health services that respond to different developmental stages or additional needs.

Civil and participation rights

Children have the right to:

- Privacy
- A fair trial
- Freedom from discrimination
- Access to information
- Freedom of expression, association, and assembly
- Participate in decisions affecting their lives

For public servants, this means:

- Protecting children's privacy and confidentiality
- Ensuring non-discrimination
- Creating safe and inclusive opportunities for children to take part, and supporting them to express their views in ways that work for them
- Ensuring that someone listens to those views, takes them seriously, and uses them to inform decisions

Example: consulting children when developing services or policies that affect them.

Responsibilities of public authorities

The UNCRC sets out clear obligations for governments and public bodies. In practice, this means:

- Ensuring the best interests of the child are a primary consideration in all relevant decisions
- Designing and delivering policies and services that reflect children's developmental needs
- Identifying risks early and taking action to prevent harm
- Using available resources effectively to realise children's rights
- Embedding a children's rights-based approach across all areas of work

Overall, the UNCRC requires a proactive approach: identifying issues early, preventing harm, and making sure that children's rights are considered in all decisions that affect them.

Pop-up: The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

- Monitors the implementation of the Convention by member states who have ratified it.
- Reviews State reports on progress with implementing the rights under the Convention approximately every five years. Ireland submitted its most recent UNCRC report in February 2022.

- Issues Concluding Observations with recommendations on how countries should strengthen the implementation of rights – Ireland received its [latest Concluding Observations in 2023](#).
- Publishes General Comments – recent themes include children’s right to access to justice; children’s rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change; children’s rights in the digital environment; children’s rights in the child justice system; rights during international migration; and public budgeting for the realisation of child rights.

Exercise: Match statements with the Conventions

Drag each statement describing how a right applies and match it to the best matching Convention. You do not need to know these conventions in detail, just focus on the type of right.

This exercise highlights how children’s rights apply across everyday decisions, policies and services.

Human rights conventions

Statements on the application of the conventions

Convention on the Rights of the Child

- States must protect children’s right to education, health, an adequate standard of living and participate in decision affecting them.

Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

- States must ensure safeguards for persons in detention, care, justice, migration and institutional settings.

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

- States must eliminate discrimination against women and girls in law and practice.

International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination

- States must prohibit racial discrimination in all areas of public and social life.

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

- States must recognise everyone’s right to social security.

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

- States must recognise persons with disabilities as rights-holders entitled to full participation in society.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

- States must provide access to justice, due process and equality before courts and tribunals.

Pop-up: European human rights law

In addition to the United Nations human rights treaties, Ireland is also bound by European human rights law. These help protect children's rights in everyday decisions and services.

The main frameworks are:

The European Convention on Human Rights

The European Convention on Human Rights protects key rights , including:

- Right to life
- Right to private and family life
- Freedom of expression
- Protection from inhuman or degrading treatment.

In practice:

- These rights apply to children and adults alike and must be interpreted in light of children's particular needs and circumstances where children are affected.
- These rights must be applied with children's specific needs and vulnerabilities in mind.
- Public authorities must respect these rights in:
 - Decision-making
 - Service delivery
 - Policies and laws
- Irish courts interpret and apply the ECHR when public bodies exercise their functions.
- The European Court of Human Rights examines cases brought by individuals after domestic remedies are exhausted and issues judgments that clarify States' obligations

The European Social Charter

The European Social Charter focuses on social and economic rights that are essential for children's well-being.

It includes rights related to:

- Education
- Health
- Housing
- Social protection and welfare

In other words, it supports access to the basic conditions needed for a safe and healthy childhood.

The European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights

This applies when EU law is being implemented.

It covers areas such as:

- Migration and asylum
- Equality and non-discrimination

- Data protection and digital services
- Justice and policing

For children:

- It reflects the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child by including specific children's rights
- It reinforces the need to consider the best interests of the child in decisions

Bringing it together: A practical checklist

When developing a policy, making a decision, or designing a service, ask:

- ☐ Have I considered whether children may be affected, directly or indirectly?
- ☐ Have I applied a child rights lens recognising children as rights-holders with specific rights, needs, and protections, rather than simply as dependants of adults?
- ☐ Have I considered whether Ireland's international obligations (such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child or other human rights conventions) are relevant to this decision?
- ☐ Have I thought about whether children's rights to protection, provision, and participation are all engaged - not just one of these?
- ☐ Have I considered whether children may be affected differently from adults in this situation?

Resources for Module 1:

- [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)
- [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)
- [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#)
- [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#)
- [International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#)
- [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#)
- [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#)
- [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#)
- [The European Convention on Human Rights](#)
- [The European Social Charter](#)
- [The European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights](#)
- [Example: a children's rights approach to education in Wales](#)