



## Evaluation of the Health Workers' Proficiency in Advocating for Child Rights

### Sağlık Çalışanlarının Çocuk Hakları Savunuculuğundaki Yeterliliklerinin Değerlendirilmesi

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#### ABSTRACT

**Aims:** Child rights are defined as the protection of children rights all over the world such as education, health, living, housing, protection against sexual or psychological abuse. It is necessary to increase awareness of children rights among healthcare professionals and to put them into practice. In this study, we aimed to evaluate the awareness of healthcare professionals employed in departments of child health and diseases regarding children's rights.

**Material and Methods:** The study comprised 319 people including physicians, health officers, nurses, and midwives working in the Department of Child Health and Diseases in training and research hospitals in Ankara, Turkey. All participants completed a questionnaire consisting of 19 questions. Results: Two hundred and twenty (69.0%) participants were aware of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, while 99 (31.0%) were not. There were 59 (18.5%) participants who could list 3 of the basic principles of the convention, but there were 236 (74%) participants who could not specify any articles. It was found that 111 (34.8%) people in the study population considered themselves sufficient in advocating for children's rights, but 208 (65.2%) did not.

**Conclusions:** This study found an insufficient level of awareness of children's rights among healthcare professionals. This suggests that there is a need to raise the level of knowledge and awareness of healthcare workers to know the principles, to fulfill the responsibilities determined in terms of rights and laws, and to be aware of the importance of this convention for children.

**Keywords:** basic rights and laws of children, right to education, healthcare professionals, right to life

#### ÖZ

**Amaç:** Çocuk hakları, tüm dünyada çocukların eğitim, sağlık, yaşam, barınma, cinsel veya psikolojik istismara karşı korunma gibi haklarının korunması olarak tanımlanmaktadır. Sağlık çalışanları arasında çocuk hakları konusunda farkındalığın artırılması ve uygulamaya geçirilmesi gerekmektedir. Bu çalışmada, çocuk sağlığı ve hastalıkları bölümlerinde çalışan sağlık çalışanlarının çocuk haklarına ilişkin farkındalıklarının değerlendirilmesi amaçlanmıştır.

**Gereç ve Yöntem:** Çalışmaya Ankara eğitim ve araştırma hastanelerinin çocuk sağlığı ve hastalıkları bölümlerinde çalışan hekim, sağlık memuru, hemşire ve ebelerden oluşan 319 kişi katılmıştır. Tüm katılımcılar 19 sorudan oluşan bir anket doldürmüştür. Sonuçlar: Katılımcıların 220'sinin (%69,0) Birleşmiş Milletler Çocuk Hakları Sözleşmesi'nden haberdar olduğu, 99'unun (%31,0) ise haberdar olmadığı tespit edilmiştir. Sözleşmenin temel ilkelerinden 3 tanesini sıralayabilen 59 (%18,5) katılımcı mevcutken, herhangi bir madde belirtemeyen 236 (%74) katılımcı saptanmıştır. Çalışma evrenindeki 111 (%34,8) kişinin çocuk hakları savunuculuğu konusunda kendini yeterli gördüğü, 208 (%65,2) kişinin ise yeterli görmediği tespit edilmiştir.

**Sonuç:** Bu çalışma, sağlık çalışanları arasında çocuk haklarına ilişkin farkındalık düzeyinin yetersiz olduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Bu durum, ilkelerin bilinmesi, haklar ve yasalar açısından belirlenen sorumlulukların yerine getirilmesi ve bu sözleşmenin çocuklar açısından öneminin farkında olunması için sağlık çalışanlarının bilgi ve farkındalık düzeyinin yükseltilmesine ihtiyaç olduğunu düşündürmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Çocukların temel hak ve hukuku, eğitim hakkı, sağlık çalışanları, yaşam hakkı

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## INTRODUCTION

The first Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted in the United Nations General Assembly on 20 November 1989 (1,2). The convention defines a child as any individual under the age of eighteen, unless the age of majority is attained earlier under national legislation, and sets out the civil, political, economic, social, health, and cultural rights of individuals in this age group (3). The convention defines the rights of all children without discrimination, regardless of their birthplace, identity, gender, religion, or social origin (2). All parties to the agreement accept that every child has a basic right to life. All participating states work to ensure the health and well-being of children. (4). The convention also stipulates that children have the right to express their opinions and that their opinions are to be taken into account when decisions are made concerning them (5, 6). It provides the necessary conditions for children to prepare for the future and gives young people freedom and respect (5, 7).

The medical community is widely recognized as playing a crucial role in protecting and advancing kids' rights. The importance of healthcare professionals' knowledge and comprehension of children's rights remains significant in terms of the practical application of these rights in their lives and their perspectives on advocacy. To effectively address the medical, physical, emotional, and developmental requirements of children, it is imperative for healthcare professionals to serve as strong advocates and actively work towards the endorsement and advancement of relevant protocols and guidelines. Therefore, the implementation of children's rights will ensure the full growth and well-being of children.

Establishing an encouraging environment for children to freely share their opinions, keeping parents informed about the child's disease progress or treatment, and ensuring easy access to healthcare facilities are achievable through a profound understanding of children's rights. Health professionals working in pediatrics can promote the protection of children from discrimination and inequality, as well as ensure that children's fundamental needs are met and their development is maximized, by fully understanding and implementing children's rights in their own practice for children. Children's hospitals should be improved as centres for children's rights, and there should be a concerted effort to enhance the level of knowledge among health professionals. In this study, we aimed to evaluate the awareness of healthcare professionals employed in departments of child health and diseases regarding children's rights.

## MATERIAL AND METHOD

The study comprised 319 participants including physicians, health officers, nurses, and midwives working in training and research Hospital in Ankara

which had pediatric service. All participants were randomly selected. We excluded individuals who were not healthcare professionals and those who were not employed in a department of child health and diseases.

The questionnaire was prepared by the researchers and included questions about the gender of the participants, their profession, the hospital in which they worked, the history of children's rights, the main articles and their use in the clinic. A survey form with questions to determine the existence of awareness of children's rights was distributed to all participants. A brief information was given before the survey and the participants were asked to answer the questions themselves. The survey questions are listed in supplementary materials.

### Statistical Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows (version 21.0) was employed for data analysis. In accordance with the objectives of the study, frequency (f) and percentage (%) calculations were performed to describe the personal information and opinions of the healthcare professionals and physicians included in the study. For categorical variables, inter-group differences were determined by chi-square test. The level of significance was considered as  $p < 0.05$ .

## RESULTS

Of the study population, 94 (29.5%) were male and 225 (70.5%) were female. It was determined that 150 (47%) were doctors, 100 (31.3%) of the healthcare workers were nurses, 38 (11.9%) were midwives, and 31 (9.7%) were health officials (**Table 1**).

**Table 1- The Distribution of Participants' Responses to the Questions.**

"Have you ever heard about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child?"	
Yes (n, %)	222 (69.0%)
"What is the date of the convention?"	
Correct answer (n, %)	35 (11.0%)
"Has Turkey signed this convention?"	
Correct answer (n, %)	146 (45.8%)
"When did Turkey incorporate this convention into domestic law?"	
Correct answer (n, %)	39 (12,2%)
"Can you list 3 of the basic principles of the convention?"	
Three principles	59 (18,5%)
None	236 (74%)
"Do you think the implementation of the convention concerns healthcare professionals?"	
Yes (n, %)	301 (94,4%)
"Do you consider yourself sufficient in advocating for children's rights?"	
Yes	111 (34.8%)
No	208 (65.2%)

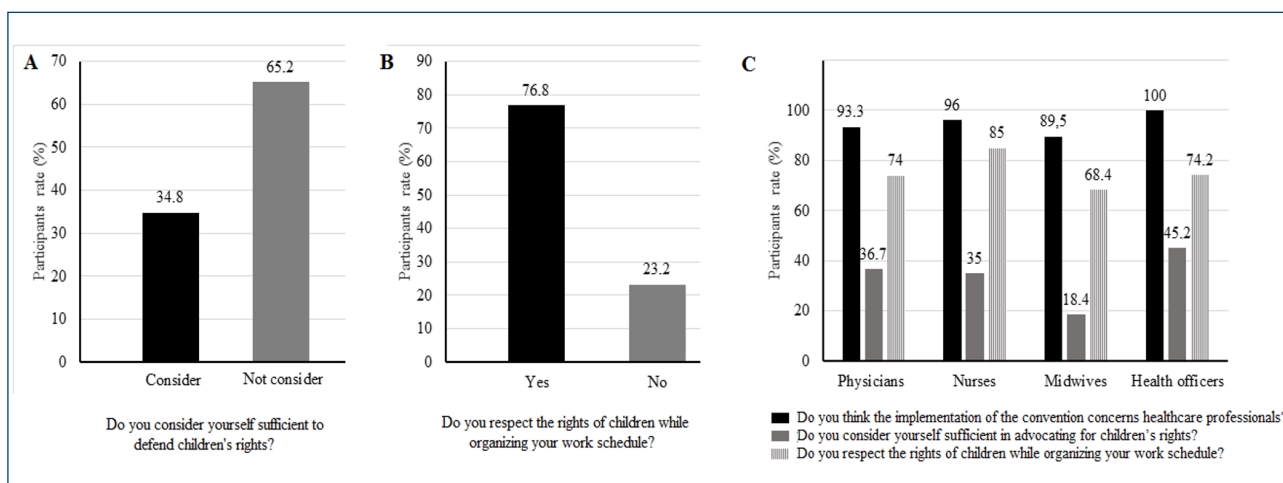


Figure 1. Participants' views on children's rights

Distribution of participants answer to the questions were shown in **Table 1**. Considering the professional groups, the rate of being aware of the convention was 72.0% among physicians, 81.0% among nurses, 34.2% among midwives, and 58% among health officers ( $p < 0.001$ ).

“Can you list 3 of the basic principles of the convention?” Among all participants, the numbers of those who could list one, two, and three articles of the convention and those who could not list any of the articles were 6 (1.9%), 18 (5.6%), 59 (18.5%), and 236 (74%), respectively. “Which do you think is the most important right/law?” In answering this question, 207 (64.9%) of the participants replied with “no rights are more important than the others”, 77 (24.1%) with “the right to survive”, 25 (7.8%) with “the right to be protected from physical and sexual abuse”, and 10 (3.1%) with “the right of non-discrimination”. Replies of all participants to the question “Do you think the implementation of the convention concerns healthcare professionals?” were “Yes, it concerns them” for 94.4% participants and “No, it does not” for 5.6%.

The participants were asked whether they consider themselves sufficient in advocating for children's rights. Accordingly, 111 of the participants (34.8%) stated that they considered themselves sufficient in advocating for children's rights, whereas 208 (65.2%) stated that they did not consider themselves sufficient (**Figure 1A**).

Replies of all participants to the question “Do you respect the rights of children while organizing your work schedule?” were “Yes, I do” for 245 (76.8%) of participants and “No, I don't” for 74 (23.2%) (**Figure 1B**). According to professional groups, 93.3%, 36.7%, and 74.0% of the physicians replied positively to the questions “Do you think the implementation of the convention concerns healthcare professionals?”, “Do you consider yourself sufficient in advocating for children's rights?” and “Do you respect the rights of children while organizing your

work schedule?”, respectively. Among nurses, these rates were 96.0%, 35.0%, and 85.0%, respectively. Among midwives, these rates were 89.5%, 18.4%, and 68.4%, respectively. Among health officers, these rates were 100%, 45.2%, and 74.2%, respectively (**Figure 1C**). “Do you think there are violations of children's rights in daily life?” 282 (88,1%) people thought, while others did not. “Do you think there are violations of children's rights in clinical or outpatient practices?” To the question, 34.8% (111) of the participants answered “Yes”, whereas 65.2% (208) answered “No”.

“According to the UNCRC, for what ages is the definition of ‘child’ valid?” Of all participants, 218 (68.3%) answered this question with “0 to 18 years old”, 26 (8.2%) with “0 to 17 years old”, 38 (11.9%) with “0 to 16 years old”, (2.8%) with “0 to 15 years old”, and 28 (8.8%) with “0 to 14 years old”. Among the physicians, 10 answered with “0 to 14 years old”, 2 with “0 to 15 years old”, 23 with “0 to 16 years old”, 11 with “0 to 17 years old”, and 104 with “0 to 18 years old”. Among the nurses, 9 answered with “0 to 14 years old”, 7 with “0 to 15 years old”, 10 with “0 to 16 years old”, 7 with “0 to 17 years old”, and 67 with “0 to 18 years old”. Among the midwives, 5 answered with “0 to 14 years old”, 1 with “0 to 16 years old”, 3 with “0 to 17 years old”, and 29 with “0 to 18 years old”. Among the health officers, 4 answered with “0 to 14 years old”, 4 with “0 to 16 years old”, 5 with “0 to 17 years old”, and 18 with “0 to 18 years old” (**Figure 2**).

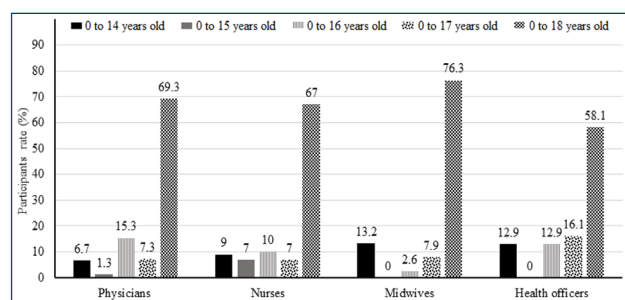


Figure 2. Definition of the Child by Occupation

“When conducting a patient examination in an outpatient clinic, do you have a separate meeting with an older child?” To this question, 52.4% (167) of the participants answered “Yes” and 47.6% (152) answered “No”. The participants were also asked whether it is necessary to obtain consent from an older child before an intervention, and 293 participants reported that consent was required from a child, whereas 26 participants reported that there was no need for a child to provide consent. The participants were further asked if they would inform an older child about his/her disease at the diagnostic and therapeutic stages of the disease. To this question, 293 answered “Yes”, whereas 25 answered “No”. According to the professional groups, this question was answered positively by 54.7% of the physicians, 47.0% of the nurses, 55.3% of the midwives, and 54.8% of the health officers ( $p = 0.642$ ). The question regarding obtaining the consent of an older child before an intervention was answered “Yes” by 165 of the physicians, 90 of the nurses, 37 of the midwives, and 31 of the health officers. The question regarding the necessity of informing an older child about his/her disease was answered “Yes” by 141 (94%) of the physicians, 93 (93.0%) of the nurses, 28 (73.7%) of the midwives, and 31 (100%) of the health officers.

The question of “Would you be interested in the active educational status of a child patient?” was answered “Yes” by 294 (92.2%) of the participants and “No” by 25 (7.8%) of the participants. According to the professional groups, this question was answered “Yes” by 136 (46.3%) of the physicians, 97 (33%) of the nurses, 34 (11.6%) of the midwives, and 27 (8.2%) of the health officers. There was no significant difference between the occupations regarding the right to education. ( $p = 0.117$ ) (Figure 3).

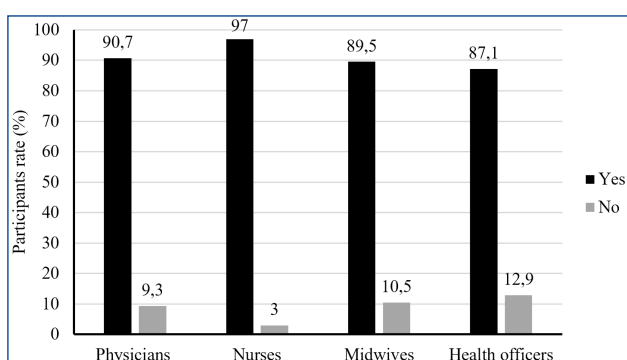


Figure 3. Opinions on the Right to Education by Occupations

## DISCUSSION

Healthcare professionals should be considered a prominent occupational category within society, as they are commonly demanded by children due to their essential role in providing medical care. It is crucial for healthcare workers to have a deep understanding and knowledge of children's rights. This study aimed

to evaluate the level of understanding of child rights among medical professionals, who are employed in pediatric wards located in Ankara. The findings of this study show that approximately one-third of healthcare professionals are not aware of the UNCRC.

The UNCRC is the most widely accepted human rights document in history (8-11). It reveals a new vision of child and childhood, considering the child as a strong and competent individual and a family and community member with rights and responsibilities suitable for the developmental stage. This convention, which recognizes children's rights in this way, focuses firmly on the child as a whole (12-14). The basic values that guide this convention can be listed as non-discrimination, care for the benefit of the child, and the right of the child to life, development, and participation. Children's rights are innate rights that all children in the world have, legally and morally (15, 16). Children's rights do not only entail the right to have needs met, such as education, health, and housing. This universal concept also includes the protection of children from physical, psychological, and sexual exploitation (17-22).

In terms of professional groups, the rate of awareness of this convention was higher among nurses than physicians. There is a need to enhance the knowledge and awareness of healthcare professionals, enabling them to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the principles outlined in the UNCRC. This will enable them to effectively fulfill their obligations as mandated by legal frameworks and ensure that they recognize the significance of this convention in safeguarding the well-being and rights of children.

Turkey has signed this convention and thus came under the obligations contained within it as a state party. However, in our study a lower number of participants knew the details of the acceptance of this convention by Turkey. This suggests that the UNCRC is not sufficiently emphasized in the education of Turkish healthcare professionals.

In our study, participants who were previously aware of the UNCRC were asked to list 3 of the basic principles of the convention. Of the 220 participants who were aware of the convention, only 83 were able to list of basic principles. This is a very low rate. It is not enough to simply be aware of the convention to advocate for children's rights and to apply the principles of the convention; it is also imperative to know the content and basic principles of the convention.

To the question of which is the most important right or law, only 24.1% of participants responded with “the right to survive”. However, Article 6 of the UNCRC stresses that “States Parties recognize that every child has the inherent right to life and shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child”. Therefore, the right to life forms the basis





of benefiting from all other rights and freedoms. In addition, we believe that the most important principle that should concern healthcare professionals is the right to life, because healthcare professionals have a vital role in maintaining the healthy life of the child.

Only 35% of the entire study population considered themselves sufficient in advocating child rights. This is a truly dire result, revealing that healthcare workers are not aware of the content of the UNCRC or the basic principles of children's rights. It is also important for healthcare professionals to specifically adhere to children's rights and laws in personal and clinical practice, in the regulation of healthcare services, and in children's access to healthcare services because children have different physical and psychological characteristics than adults. During periods of growth and development, they should be socially protected against the negative effects of the external environment.

Despite a low rate of awareness of children's rights among the study population, about 88% of respondents expressed the opinion that violations of children's rights do occur. In recent years, violations of human rights including violence, fear, and oppression in many countries of the world have reached daunting levels (23, 24). These terrible events have the greatest impact on children. According to data provided by Amnesty International, it is evident that nations categorized as undeveloped and developing exhibit a higher prevalence of children's rights violations. This may be attributed to the presence of significant detrimental factors, including but not limited to violence, labor exploitation, pornography, and various illicit activities 25-27. Children should be able to benefit from the necessary treatments and rehabilitation services. It is the responsibility of states to heal and support children who are neglected, abandoned on the streets, abused, or tortured. The responsibilities of healthcare professionals include defending children's rights, informing children and their families about their rights and ensuring their understanding, intervening in cases of violations, informing patients about their diagnosis and treatment, and protecting their privacy. Despite these important responsibilities, the rate of awareness was low among midwives and health officers.

Our population may not be fully representative. Due to the survey's expansive coverage area, demanding working conditions, and time-allocation constraints, it was impossible to recruit enough people to establish statistical significance. After a brief introduction, participants were given questionnaires, which were subsequently collected. The return rate for the questionnaires we sent out was disappointingly low. Open-ended question answer rates were low since they were not administered through in-person interviews.

## CONCLUSION

Our study revealed an insufficient level of awareness of children's rights among healthcare professionals. To raise awareness of children's rights and the principles of the UNCRC, this convention should be highlighted at every stage of the training of healthcare professionals. Children's hospital should establish a supportive atmosphere to meet the fundamental needs and rights of children and give them a voice in situations where they lack those rights. Health professionals should be in charge of carrying out the supporting of child rights.

## ETHICAL DECLARATIONS

**Ethics Committee Approval:** According to the 2013 Official Gazette Regulation Law on Clinical Trials, no medication or examination related to the volunteer or patient group was performed in the clinical trial and there was no need for an ethics committee due to the thesis design. The study was conducted with the permission of the department lecturer and hospitals.

**Informed Consent:** All patients signed the free and informed consent form.

**Referee Evaluation Process:** Externally peer-reviewed.

**Conflict of Interest Statement:** The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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**Author Contributions:** All of the authors declare that they have all participated in the design, execution, and analysis of the paper, and that they have approved the final version.

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