



Hi. I'm Jillian van Turnhout, Chief Executive of the Children's Rights Alliance. Welcome to our Children's Rights Podcast Series. On 2 April in Dublin Castle the Children's Rights Alliance held a high level symposium on children's rights in Ireland and through this mini-series we would like to bring you a taste of the event.

In this podcast you will hear from Mary McAleese, President of Ireland. The Alliance was delighted to welcome the President to speak at our symposium. It was an opportunity for us to thank her for her ongoing and tireless advocacy on behalf of children and young people in Ireland. In her work she clearly demonstrates the conviction of her words through her actions, and is a true champion for children's rights. At the Symposium the President joined with us in signing and pledging that she valued children's rights and will work towards making Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child. President McAleese in her speech inspired us all and encouraged us all to search our souls as she helped us to answer the question at the heart of our symposium 'Children's Rights – Are We There Yet?'

President of Ireland, Mary McAleese

Go raibh maith agat a Noirin agus Dia Dhaoibh a cairde. Conas atá sibh? Go maith. Ah good you're awake! Thank god! That's a good start. The afternoon slot is always a hard one. It's good to see so many of you here, it really is. I'd like to say a very big thank you to Noirin and Jillian for allowing me to be part of this symposium. All of us who are parents have heard that little phrase haven't we, 'Are we there yet?'. Actually for most parents who have ever set out on a long car journey. Usually we were heading from Rosstrevor to Donegal. It's a heck of a long way. And if they start asking the question at Warrenpoint, it actually doesn't mean that two shortens the journey. It has the opposite mathematical effect, believe you me. I know that when the phrase is used here it is used with the same kind of childish impatience I suppose, the anxiety, the wonder, the wanting to get to this promised land. This beach with rain pouring down onto it that you know is at the end of the rainbow, or the end of the journey. But actually, the impatience in that phrase is a righteous impatience here isn't it. Asking that question. It is really designed to make us stop in our tracks and ask ourselves, looking back at the sweep of where we've come from, looking at where we're at this moment. Are we really in a place yet in terms of children's rights, the experience of children's lives, where we can say 'yes, we're in place where we are happy to be'. Or are we still really some way from the completion of that journey that I suppose was articulated best in the phrase that everybody loves from the proclamation- that phrase that talked about being a nation that would cherish it's children equally. It's a very beautiful phrase I think ,because

the word 'cherish', it's not a very legalistic kind of word. It's a nurturing word. It's a soft word but when you unpack it around the life of a child, it has so many elements. Elements that are picked up very beautifully and very brilliantly in the preamble to the UN Convention on Children's Rights, which it's hard to believe now is almost 20 years old, where it talks about children having the right to family life, to a loving environment, a happy environment. That's where we want to get to. To make Ireland a place where we can say with our hands on our heart, not putting spin on it, but being real about it. A place where we can say children do grow up happily. The best place for them to be, hopefully in the world, here in Ireland. That's our ambition. Are we there yet? Well we've a way to go I think. We have a way to go, but thankfully in this audience we have the champions who have this little impatient voice that keeps nagging at us, to make sure that we keep on that journey. That we get there as quickly as we can, and safely.

Almost 30 years ago, Dr Joe Robbins, don't know if you remember Joe. He wrote a book called 'The Lost Children' and it's a study of charity children in Ireland between the years 1700 to 1900. When the book came out I used it as a text book for a number of years whenever I talked in Trinity college, and wherever I've gone since that book has stayed with me, never too far away from me. It's terrifying, any of you who have read it, it's absolutely just terrifying. And in the push and pull of wars, and famine, and emigration, and poverty, the story of children which he was focusing on, the kind of kids he was focusing on were, for a large part of the course, were charity children. They were orphaned. They were abandoned. They were legion. They were numerous. And their story was largely overlooked. They were the forgotten corner of life. There were a very big corner of life but they were quite forgotten, obscured. And really until the end of the 18th century, he charts a treatment of children which can only be described, and he describes it as callous indifference. Callous indifference, on a level and on a scale, which we today would find, in our jurisdiction, utterly shocking. Though of course we know that it continues in other parts of the world regrettably to this moment. A century later, in the 19th century, things had begun to change and there was a growing concern for the welfare of children. It was expressed in organisations and charitable institutions and legislation designed to protect them. But it was of course overly paternalistic, and it had a focus too on things like correction and on discipline. And it was of course, not a space in which children ever voiced an opinion back. By the 20th century there had been an explosion in what you might call the sentimental view of childhood, that was now more child-centred. In which the voice of the child was still, largely unheard, but in which a new kind of idealised view of childhood started to emerge. Though we have to say that in the 20th century, and even in the 21st century, of course there are still vestiges of that whole kind of paternalistic world, just very conscious in front of this audience, that it is in relation to children of course that we still find that they are subject of course still to physical chastisement, which is the last remaining pillar of those four pillars that I used to teach about years ago. Cos we start at the 20th century with masters who, with a law that permitted masters to use reasonable chastisement by which they meant violence, and physical violence. At least certainly physical contact anyway. Physical violence against recalcitrant wives, servants, animals,

and children. They've gone from three of those categories but not the fourth. The only remaining remnant I suppose of that time, is the right to physically chastise children, at least parental chastisement nowadays. And we know from the stories of many of those who experienced the institutional care, the kind of institution that grew up in the 19th century and lasted through to a large chunk of the 20th Century. We know now what was very much a silent and untold story, except among themselves, the children themselves, just how vulnerable children were in those institutions, how very often they were cowed into silence. There was no space for their voice or their experience to be told, to be properly monitored, to be properly accounted for. And we also know today, from children who have been abused at home, just how hermetically sealed from help they can be in the home environment. How many of these things, these stories of abuse, are only told after a painful childhood, an appalling adolescence, a tortured adulthood that, eventually in that tortured adulthood, the voice was eventually empowered to speak.

So today, thankfully to some extent, we have moved on, and I think it has to be said we have moved on considerably. But today we speak of children having civil rights and having human rights. We have the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, now, as I say, 20 years old. They have a children's ombudsman, and they have a Children's Rights Alliance and now they have really very articulate champions, who like you, keep asking that question 'are we there yet?' It's an important question to keep asking. They grow up in an Ireland where the vast majority of them today thankfully have something that, in other centuries, they were denied — they have a childhood. They do have a childhood, and that is a great blessing — to know that the vast majority of our children have a childhood. A decent childhood that would conform to the best ideals set out in the Convention. But we know that that is not, of course, the case for all children. They grow up with free education. That wasn't the case for so many of our people. That's a relatively recent event in our history, not really until the end of the 1960s. Child benefit and universal vaccination that have helped, thankfully, to eradicate the many childhood illnesses that conspired to high levels of infant mortality. So there is a growing story, a growing good news story, but every generation reveals a new part of this story, sheds a different light on a different corner of this story. We've seen the stigma of a legitimacy that made an absolute misery of the lives of so many children — that's now gone. The secret confinements, the forced adoptions virtually disappeared. The physical and sexual abuse that were once taboo; they haven't disappeared, but they are now openly acknowledged thanks to champions, and I see a number of them very prominent in the audience. Now acknowledged, the language out there, the story being told in ways that cannot be denied or suppressed and perpetrators pursued relentlessly, even decades later. Now we talk of improving childcare, better crèche facilities, we talk of parenting classes, of child abuse guidelines, of protection for our children, helplines so that they can speak with their own voice, of educating our children about their rights and about their vulnerabilities, and their right to be advocates in their own cause. And they have us as champions to advocate their cause, and increasingly we are hearing their voices telling us in their own words, their experience, what it is they know. What it is they

feel. It's not quite the same world that Seamus Heaney once wrote about in that lovely poem of his 'The Railway Children'. For he says —there's a lovely line from it. Well, it's a lovely line from the point of view of this symposium, it captures so much though it's actually also quite a scary line in some ways. He says 'We were small and thought we knew nothing worth knowing'. That's a very, very, very disempowering place to be. To think you are small and that anything you know is not worth knowing, because that which is not worth knowing, you do not share, you keep to yourself. And it can burn as we know, a very very very very big flame, an awful conflagration inside a human heart. And the world in general, it would be true to say, also thought that children knew nothing worth knowing. That thing's passed over their heads somehow, didn't lodge like barbs deep in their hearts. Now we know to our cost, and to their cost, because a whole new science around behaviour, and psychology, and psychiatry and social science, they are all telling us that the old adage is true. That what is learnt in childhood is engraved in stone, and the more competent the engraver, the more the little life flourishes into adulthood. The more incompetent the engraver, the greater the struggle to avoid really very serious dysfunction, the kind of dysfunction that blights a childhood and wrecks an adolescence, and gives way to an adult that can be full of just nothing more than wasted potential.

I remember my grandmother used to use that phrase, if you've heard me say this before I apologise but my grandmother used to use that phrase a lot- 'what's learnt in childhood is engraved in stone'. She had reason to know it, she had 60 grandchildren. My family thought they had to increase, multiply and fill the earth entirely by themselves. And practically succeeded too, certainly in our parish anyway! But she used to say this, and then many years later, I used to never pay a blind bit of attention to her, like most of us don't until our kids remind us that we're now using the phrases that our granny's used. But years later when my grandfather's headstone had been put up on the graveyard, we noticed that there was a small mistake in the engraving on his gravestone — it's there yet. He died on the 21st of February, but some genius had written, instead of writing 21st, had written 21nd. And I said to the guy who had put up the headstone, 'Look can we do something about that because isn't it a strange thing because when you stand at the gravestone everything else is perfect but your eye is always drawn to the flaw'. Human-always drawn to the flaw. And he said 'Look no, you can't do that' he said 'because it's too deeply engraved in it. What we'll do is we'll take down the gravestone, take down that headstone. We'll put up a new one'. Great, you can do that with a headstone, that's okay. We didn't actually do it, we thought we'd rather leave it. But we can't do that with our kids. We can't just take down our kids and put up a new one if you get the engraving wrong. Life doesn't work that way. We get one go around with our children. We get one go around. And we engrave well, we get a good result. We engrave badly, we get a bad result. And Carson McCullers put it beautifully when she said 'The hearts of small children are delicate organs, a cruel beginning in this world can twist them into curious shapes'. And none of us want our lives, or the lives of our children, twisted into curious shapes, to make them objects that, for all their lives, whoever meets them, will always be drawn to the flaw. The flaw that was not of their making. The

flaw of the engraver; parent, the teacher, the person in the community, the abuser, the whoever it was that twisted that life into a curious shape.

Today our children are fortunate, to this extent, that they do have a veritable army now of professionals and volunteers who are wiser now about what can happen in the hermetically sealed silent space of childhood and adolescence. Who are not just as innocent, not just as stupid as we used to be. Not just as deferential when we see all those veils and masks and places and spaces, that were covered by a kind of faux deference over years, and behind which the lives of children could be twisted into curious shapes. Now we have an army of professionals and volunteers. We have rules and regulations about those professionals and volunteers. We're careful about them now. Not everybody who stands up and says 'I want to be a volunteer to look after children or help children' makes the grade, because now we're careful who we let near children. We want to be sure that these are people who can be trusted because that trust has been abused and broken in the past to terrible cost. But we have them, they look after the well-being of our children. Whether it's in the home, whether it's in crèches, whether it's in youth schools, youth clubs, after school clubs, family oriented projects, all sorts of interventions, all sorts of careful, well-constructed interventions in children's lives. That today they're well constructed, but the professionals who are involved are always asking themselves the question 'How can we do them better?' 'How can we improve?'. And this is why you come to a symposium like this, because when you do, there's always somebody here who has another piece of the jigsaw puzzle that you need to help you to perfect what it is we do, how it is we help our children to grow, to grow safely in this world of ours.

We also know we're all meeting in a time that is very different from the time of even a year ago when we mightn't have had exactly the same set of conversations but these economic times are very very fraught and the environment is changing very dramatically for children, and I've said it a few times now at recent gatherings or in conferences to do with children, that we would do well to be listening to the voices of children at the moment because what they are hearing around them, the language they are hearing in their homes, the things that are being said either to them or around them, have changed quite dramatically in a relatively short period of time. A home in which there was a roughness of money a year ago that allowed a child to say 'I want' and a parent to say 'yes you can have', that conversation has changed. Now 'I want' has to be 'well I need' and even what you need, maybe you cannot get. And parents are now talking a different language, and exhibiting the stresses and strains that come from serious financial worries or job worries, and our children are not immune. Just at lunch time I flicked on a program that I heard was going to be discussing this very issue in America, and there were young people and you could see the harrowing worry in their faces. I'm talking about late teens now, talking about the changes wrought in their homes, which a few months ago were happy and well doing and had money, and now parents are facing joblessness and this is the first time for them that they are hearing this kind of language because they grew up exclusively through relatively good times. So our young people here are not hermetically sealed; they are not immune. They will need now the reassurance,

such reassurance as we can give them. And they need also, of course, space in which to express the things that are going on in their heads and their hearts, And we need to hear from them, We need to be drawing out those voices, so there is not this awful world of suffocating silence which we pay the price for. But more importantly that they pay the price for, later on in life.

So are we there yet? Can we say, hands on hearts, that we cherish all the children of the nation equally? I think we can say we want, we have a great ambition. We have a strong ambition to cherish the children of the nation equally. That's a really strong impulse and it's an impulse thankfully that we see here in this room. And we can also say that we are getting closer than any generation before us has managed to arrive at, but that's still not a place; it's a destination. It's still not a place where you take your foot off the accelerator and switch off the engine saying 'we're here'. Far from it. Because every so often, as everybody in this room knows, we'll waken up one morning, and there on our television or our radio, our media, is a story of another child who has escaped all the best efforts. All the nets, all the networks, all the protections, all the words. Some child has escaped and has been brutalised. And that comes to the surface and it just fragments us. It pulls us apart to realise that we have to recommit in the face and in the teeth of those stories. We have to take those stories apart and understand, where in the warp and weft of this child's life was the gap that allowed this to happen? How do we plug that gap, meaning fully, for that child and every other child, and for the children that come in future generations. Every single day, we hear of experience, and we experience ourselves directly in our own communities, the consequences of childhoods that went wrong, that got squandered. Whether it shows up in street crime, in unstable family life, in drug and alcohol abuse, in messed up relationships. All those lives that got twisted into curious shapes. They have a very very big cascade effect. First for themselves, then their families, their relationships, their streets, their communities, and for all of us as a society.

And then we think too of the children who so often just get forgotten about. The kids who do put up with a lot. Kids who are carers, who are going home today from school, and before they can get down to their homework or before they can get down to anything else, they've got to mind a Mum, a Dad, a Granny, a sick sibling. The kids who are dealing with bereavement. This morning now I was at a conference organised by Console, who of course look after those who are bereaved through suicide. And again a new dynamic in Console is focusing on children bereaved by suicide, because again in the past it was simply presumed that this was a problem of adult trauma. That they somehow, by innocence or ignorance, were sealed off from the downstream, long-term consequences of the trauma of suicide.

There are the kids that live themselves with chronic illness and disability, and the right they have to tell us how they want their lives to be and what we need to do to meet them, at least some of the way. And then there are those, and I've spoke about them this morning also in the context of suicide, but I think of them particularly, the children that are in their early teens and late teens at the moment. Who are

discovering, having grown up in homes, and gone to schools, and been on the streets with their mates, who have heard nothing but relentless homophobic kind of remarks and attitudes. And now in their teens they are making a discovery —Not a decision — a discovery about themselves, that they are gay. And suddenly who can they talk to? Because they've heard their Mum or Dad say something about homosexuality. Perhaps they've heard their teacher say it. Perhaps they've heard their friends, and now they are locked into a very very silent and scary space. And then we have the children who have come to us from so many other parts of the world. And I think, in particular, it is easier for the littlest ones, the four-, five-, six- and seven-year-olds. But particularly for the older children, the teenagers who have come here, who understand racism, who understand loneliness, who have left everything familiar behind them and are now locked into a culture which they do not understand. Perhaps a language they do not understand. Their parents are trying very hard and are focused 100 percent on trying to make it economically here. And those young people showing extraordinary courage. Their voices too we need to be hearing because they could be doubly silenced, as outsiders, trying to become insiders. And there are the adolescents that are facing unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual pressures. They feel very vulnerable in terms of resisting. And no child has the range of coping skills to deal effectively or adequately with those kinds of demands placed on them. Though I know that many cope remarkably well, but many do not. And it is to those children, somehow, we've got to find a pathway to each one of those as individuals so that we can encourage them to believe that they are not on their own. We cannot go their life journey for them, wish we could. We can't do that. But in this room there are people that want to go their life's journey with them. To be the help, to be the advice, to be the guide. To be the person that many of us in this room were fortunate to have. Many of us had the good parents, the good teachers, the good guides, the person that was interested in us. The person whose gentle hand in our lives, helped us to make good decisions and good choices. So yeah, these kids, they need, they really really need your championship. They need to believe that there's someone out there who dares to care about them, strangers though they may be to you.

So we have the best educated generation yet, haven't we, to help us find the answers that will allow us to say sometime when that question is asked 'Are we there yet?' somebody is able to say 'Yeah we're pretty close'. Not there yet, but with the genius that's in this room, and the experience that's in this room, hopefully you'll be able to plot the next steps that will get us further along the journey. One of the reasons that it's so important too to get it right here, is of course precisely because, right around the world, there are still so many children who are still living in that world described by Joe Robbins. It's not the 17th Century. It's not the 18th Century. For them it is the 21st Century. It is real life, live today. And so what we get right here sets an agenda for children, not just here in Ireland, but it sets an agenda for children everywhere. Their rights, their human rights, they are inalienable. They are not something that you concede. They are not something that is drip-fed to them through a paternalistic interest. These are things that they are entitled to by virtue of being human, by virtue of their very existence.

So Yeats it was who once said that no man has ever lived that had enough of children's gratitude. And I know that what you do here today isn't done in search of the gratitude of children, or a desire for any kind of recognition for that matter. But you know it is actually important that we earn their gratitude. They may not fully comprehend how much they owe to people like you, to good engravers, until they are well into adulthood. That is the nature of childhood and adolescence; is it not. To not fully understand these things, that is exactly what makes them so often vulnerable. But to know there are people out there who are working to earn your gratitude for all the right reasons, all the right reasons, is a very important thing. And our children depend on us. They depend on us to do what's right, because we are the big people around here. We are supposed to be the big people around here who care. And so, it's up to us to do what's right, to do what's necessary. We are in control. They are not yet. And I want to thank you for making this work. Your vocation, it's very tough work. It is work I know that demands huge, huge commitment, and recommitment, particularly in the teeth of very very difficult stories and difficult cases. But I want to thank you for the way in which you do make this work — your very special vocation. And to see up on the board as I came in, that pledge 'to make Ireland the best place that we possibly can, and the best place in the world for children'. That is a very noble ambition. It's not just words. It's something that we can legitimately work towards. Something that we can legitimately hope to and aspire to create. But we can't do it without the hands of the work, and the hearts of the work. They are people like you. Thank God for them, because without you it just remains words, doesn't it. Thank you. God bless.