

## Child Friendly School

By Nattha Keenapan



Krabi, Thailand, November 27, 2007 – Rojana\*, a Grade 9 student at a secondary school in Krabi Province, started crying one recent day when her teachers asked her why she had joined the school’s Child Rights Club, surprising her teachers, friends and visitors to the school.

A weeping Rojana explained that she wanted to learn more about child rights “to protect myself in case something bad happens, because I feel unsafe living in the same house with my step-father.”

Rojana’s father died a couple of years ago while her family was living in a neighboring province, and her life changed dramatically when her mother remarried and the family moved to nearby Krabi province.

Rojana says that through the Child Rights Club at the school she learned that every child has the right to survival, education, development and protection. Moreover, she learned they also have rights to participate and voice their opinions on issues that concern them.

“I also learned that my step father has no right to harass me,” Rojana said. “If he does, now I know where to go for help. I will definitely tell my teacher and the police.”

Child Rights Clubs are one of the activities carried out under the UNICEF-supported Child Friendly Schools (CFS) initiative, which is being implemented in about 1,100 schools across the country. The CFS initiative, also supported by UNICEF in

numerous other countries around the world, was first introduced in Thailand in 1998, and started up in schools in the tsunami-affected provinces in 2006.

A school is considered “child friendly” when it provides a safe, clean, healthy and protective environment for children. At Child Friendly Schools, child rights are respected, and all children – including children who are poor, disabled, living with HIV or from ethnic and religious minorities – are treated equally.

At these schools, teachers are trained on child rights, while teaching methods focus on a child-centered approach. Lessons for children include essential life skills aimed at keeping them safe and building the skills they will need to fulfill their potential and contribute fully to society. In addition, Child Friendly Schools bring together students and members of the community to develop and act on ways to improve their school’s environment.

“These are the concepts that we are promoting,” said Katrin Imhof, Chief of Education at the UNICEF Thailand Country Office. “Of course, it’s a long-term process, but we have seen improvements in many schools,”

Teachers are the key to making schools “child-friendly”. They are trained on children’s participation in school development and on how to effectively pass on this knowledge and awareness to parents, community members and the students themselves.

“At first, I didn’t understand the term ‘child rights’” said Urairak Jitchuchuen, a teacher at Ban Khlong Yuan School in Krabi Province. “Later I realized that it is very important that we need to take child rights into consideration in whatever we do in school,”

Once teachers, parents and community members are trained on child rights, they meet to assess themselves, the school and community on what they lack and what needs to be improved. Most schools organize activities for students, including Child Rights Clubs, which students run by themselves.

“Children get to say what kind of teachers, school, parents, friends or even community they want to have. And we use their opinions to plan our activities in school,” Urairak said.

In addition, teachers are required to prepare individual files on each student, which include information on the student’s socio-economic background as well as the student’s strengths and weaknesses in school. This is considered one of the most important elements of the Child Friendly School, since by having such information teachers become closer to each student and understand much more about their individual needs or problems.

“We have noticed positive changes in students, teachers and the community” said Nuttikan Tangkam, another teacher at Ban Khlong Yuan School. “Now parents get more involved with the school, and children speak up about what they want. It means that both children and adults have a better understanding about their right and their duties.”

Chadaporn Tongratkhaew, president of the Child Rights Club at another school in Krabi Province, said the club now has 131 members from Grades 4-9. The students meet once a week to share their thoughts and problems, as well as to discuss things that need improvement at their school and how they can help.

“We get to participate more in class and initiate activities at school,” Chadaporn said. “For example, we have selected a counselor who students can talk to and share their problems with. We also ran a campaign in school to educate other students about HIV/AIDS and pornography since we think these are things they should know about, especially since we live in a tourist town like this,”

Chadaporn and other students said their teachers became more sensitive and understanding about their concerns after their school joined the Child Friendly School programme last year.

As at many other schools in the tsunami-affected areas, the most common concern of students is related to the school’s water and sanitation facilities.

“Many schools in the tsunami-affected provinces are facing water and sanitation problems,” said Imhof, UNICEF’s Chief of the Education. “In the dry season, many schools are short of water and students have to bring water from home. In addition, most primary schools do not have water filters, and the drinking water is therefore not safe. In some cases, children only have unfiltered rain water to drink.”

Imhof said many schools lack the minimum number of toilets required to serve the student population. In addition, many schools do not have enough separate toilet facilities for boys and girls, while existing toilets are often dirty, dark and usually far from classrooms, which can be dangerous, especially for young children and girls. To address this problem, UNICEF is spending more than 43 million baht to support new and upgraded water and sanitation facilities at 121 schools across the tsunami-affected provinces.

But while new water and sanitation facilities can be built in a relatively short period of time, educating teachers and parents about child rights is something that will take much more time to do, Imhof said. One of the most challenging tasks in turning all schools into ‘child-friendly’ schools is changing adults’ attitudes and understanding about child rights, she said.

“Although we see lots of positive changes, there are many teachers who still oppose the idea of promoting child rights,” said Sukdee Tangsongsawadi, an Education Supervisor with the Krabi Education Service Area Office. “They are afraid that all this talk about child rights will result in children saying they have the right to do things that violate Thai cultural norms. This clearly shows that many teachers still don’t properly understand the concept of child rights,”

Sukdee said the capacity and knowledge of teachers needs to be regularly upgraded so that they can cope with new challenges and make the Child Friendly School initiative truly sustainable.

Rojana, who probably would never have expressed her fears about her step-father at a non-Child Friendly School, felt much better after talking about the problems with her step-father. She now knows more about the role of parents and how they should treat their children. And more importantly, she is much more confident about her rights and how to protect herself.

\*not real name

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## **CHILD FRIENDLY SCHOOL AND QUALITY EDUCATION**

Child Friendly Schools strive for quality in the following five areas:

**Quality learners:** healthy, well-nourished, ready to learn, and supported by their family and community

**Quality content:** curricula and materials for literacy, numeracy, knowledge, attitudes and life skills

**Quality teaching-learning processes:** child-centered; (life) skills-based approaches, technology

**Quality learning environments:** policies and practices, facilities (classrooms, water, sanitation), services (safety, physical and psycho-social health)

**Quality outcomes:** knowledge, attitudes and skills; suitable assessment at classroom and national levels

Source: UNICEF