Child labour is better than living in poverty. Discuss.

This topic examines the issues of child labour and poverty. Is child labour justified in circumstances of extreme poverty? If a child’s wage is helping their family buy food or access shelter, health care and education, is their working a good thing? What if that work is a risk to their long-term physical or social development? What are the consequences of a child labour? Can child labour help families and communities themselves out of poverty?

Preparing your position

In preparing for your debate or discussion, consider the following questions:

1. What is the difference between child work and child labour?
2. In what circumstances can working be beneficial to children?
3. Can child labour help children and their families escape poverty? Can you find some examples?
4. Can child labour keep a child and their family in poverty? How?
5. What are the long-term effects that child labour can have on a child and its family? Consider the social, economic, mental and physical effects.

Child work vs. child labour

Child labour
Child labour is work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity; work that exceeds a minimum number of hours; work that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and work that interferes with their schooling.

In some cases this work happens in the home community environment, when factors such as poverty, gender discrimination or cultural norms keep children labouring. However, there are also numerous trafficking cases where children are forced to work in various industries.

Child work
Not all children who work are engaged in child labour. There can be benefits for children who work, provided their schooling is not compromised and their mental and physical development is not affected.

If children are above the minimum age to work, are employed for a limited number of hours in safe conditions, are paid fairly and the work does not impact on their mental, physical or social development, working may be beneficial to both themselves and their families.
Under the right conditions, some work can be a positive experience for children. Part-time work or assisting in a family business for example, can help a child’s personal development, by teaching them life skills and developing their levels of responsibility and maturity.

**Some impacts of child labour**

**Education**
If children work long hours instead of going to school, it can have a considerable impact on their development and their ability to access an education. In some communities, it may be the norm for children to work. In small holder farming communities, for example, children work on their family’s farming plots out of necessity, yet this is often at the expense of their education.

An education is important for all children’s development and to empower them with the skills needed to support themselves in the future.

**Health and well being**
Child labour can have significant effects on the health and well being of children. Millions of children often have to work long hours in hazardous conditions. If children are injured at work they will often receive inadequate medical treatment, if any at all. They can also suffer long-term health problems due to malnutrition, exposure to chemicals, abuse and exhaustion.

In agriculture, children may be exposed to toxic pesticides or fertilisers. They work with dangerous blades and tools and carry heavy loads. In mining, children may use poisonous chemicals, face the risks of mine collapse and sometimes work with explosives. In construction, children may carry heavy loads, work at tall heights and risk injury from dangerous machinery. In manufacturing, children may use toxic solvents, perform repetitive tasks in painful positions and risk injury from sharp tools. In domestic work, children risk abuse, work long hours and often live in isolation from their families and friends.

Children who are engaged in child labour can suffer serious psychological harm, which can result in behavioural problems. This can seriously impact on a child’s social development and their ability to successfully complete their schooling.

**Unstable and unsustainable economy**
It is not sustainable for countries or industries to rely on child labour. A healthy, educated work force is essential to long-term productivity. It is important that adults are paid a fair wage, so that they do not need to send their children to work at the expense of their education and personal development.
Common arguments in favour child labour

An argument commonly made is if children weren’t working they would be living in even greater poverty. If families are living in poverty they may rely heavily on their child’s income to provide food, shelter for them. It is suggested that they would have a reduced chance of survival if they did not work to support their families.

It has also been argued that simply stopping child labour causes more harm than good in some instances. With the assumption that child labourers keep any income generated by their toil, it can be argued that if removed from that situation, child labourers may be forced into even more harmful environment. Or their increased poverty will leave them even more vulnerable to exploitation.

It has been suggested that rather than stopping child labour, we should make workplaces safer for children and improve their conditions of work.

Further reading and resources include:

**News**

BBC News: International Labour Organisation (ILO) Child labour prevents development
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/3451117.stm

CBS News: Newt Gingrich: Poor kids don’t work “unless it’s illegal”

The Express Tribune: Connection between child labour and minimum wage

The New York Times: Newt’s war on poor children

http://www.unicef.org/media/media_34504.html
Reports, Papers and Web Resources

Children in Crisis: Should children work?
http://wvasiapacific.org/childrenincrisis/should-children-work.html

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FOA): Sustainable Agriculture Rural Development and Child Labour

University of Minnesota: Should Child Labour Be Eliminated? A HRD Perspective
http://www.tc.umn.edu/~budh0004/childlaborarticle.pdf

ILO: Child labour

United Nations resources for speakers on global issues: Child labour

World Day Against Child Labour

World Health Organization (WHO): Occupational Health: Hazardous Child Labour
http://www.who.int/occupational_health/topics/childlabour/en/

Videos


Al Jazeera Child labour thrives (Pakistan): www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_trJlszXxc

Child labour rises on poverty in Jordan: www.youtube.com/watch?v=gruWBV1Xqpg

Children exploited in Cambodian building boom: www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0vOyyfgm7s

BBC Tropic of Cancer: Where Children Must Work: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJiOSuG9gZ4
World Vision’s Opinion

World Vision Australia believes every child is entitled to a childhood. This means an opportunity to play, socialise and attend school. World Vision Australia recognises that in the right circumstances, working can help children develop skills, maturity and responsibility, preparing them for the future including employment, parenthood and participation in adult society. This occurs when children of an appropriate age for the task, receive appropriate pay and work in safe environments, balancing work with school and play.

Exploitative child labour however, does not have a positive effect on children’s lives. Any work that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children, interferes with their schooling or exceeds a minimum number of hours should not be tolerated.

Many children that are vulnerable to harmful or exploitative child labour suffer extreme poverty. In many instances it is the norm for them to help support their family. When this work puts that child at risk of harm, the immediate and long-term consequences of this can have a negative impact on that child and also their family and community.

To eradicate this harmful practice a complex and integrated response is required that discourages dangerous practices. This must include educating and informing communities about potentially harmful practices (to a child’s mental, physical and social well-being), providing alternative income sources for families and increasing access to education opportunities for children.

In other cases children can be forcibly exploited for their labour, putting them at even greater risk of harm. Tackling the issues that cause harmful practices to continue is imperative. Extreme poverty; lack of alternative opportunities; lack of awareness of risk and rights, or cultural discrimination all allow exploitation of children to go unnoticed and unpunished. By addressing these issues and the demand for forced and child labour, we can significantly reduce a child’s vulnerability to these practices.

It is the responsibility of the global community to ensure all children are protected from harm, both now and in the future. This means addressing immediate poverty-related issues while also ensuring longer-term development and prosperity.

Governments and individuals internationally also have a significant role to play in eradicating this practice. For example, by encouraging an increase in effective overseas aid to tackle child poverty; implementing policies aimed at increasing adult wages and removing barriers to education and by demanding that the companies they buy from selling products made by forced or child labour.

Companies and employers that enable or benefit from the use of child labour must change their policies to uphold the rights of children and actively discourage exploitative practices. Only through a multi-
faceted approach involving action at all levels of government, corporations, employers, consumers and communities can we hope to eradicate child labour.

**Take Action**

1. **Donate to World Vision programs to protect children at risk of exploitation and abuse.**

   Child Rescue is World Vision’s programme to help protect vulnerable children, and provide support and rehabilitation for children who have been the victims of exploitation and abuse.


2. **Watch and share this video about child labour in Bangladesh**

   This BBC clip discusses some of the complexities of children who have to labour in hazardous conditions because of extreme poverty.

   [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJiOSuG9gZ4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJiOSuG9gZ4)

Note: This document has been prepared as an aid/prompt to debate preparation and not all opinions in this document are the views of World Vision Australia. Reference to different organisations are not an endorsement.