

National Children's Day now official in Jamaica

It's official! For the first time ever in Jamaica, we now have an official National Children's Day.

By a proclamation of the governor general, he did "hereby, proclaim the third Friday in the month of May annually as National Children's Day ... " This year, National Children's Day is May 18. Why do we even have a National Children's Day? Well, according to the proclamation, "the National Child Month Committee observes that Jamaica is among the few countries worldwide which has not designated a day in honour of their children." The National Child Month Committee was correct. While Universal Children's Day - recommended by the United Nations - is observed on November 20, that has not been enough for many countries. In fact, more than 77 countries around the world have designated their own special day for children, each at various dates during the year. Finally, in our 50th year of Independence, Jamaica is designating an official day for children! But do we need to give our children a special day because other countries have done so? No. Unfortunately, in Jamaica, our children need a special day because for the most part, on the average day, our children are not treated in a special way, or even as their rights require - they are not educated, protected, or nurtured as they have been either promised in law, or rightly expect the society to do. The least we could do is set aside a special day to do so, and the National Child Month Committee is to be commended for all their efforts to make this proclamation a reality. Did you notice that our National Children's Day is on a Friday? Interestingly, the proclamation states that "National Children's Day seeks to honour, remember, esteem and appreciate our children by showing them love, and helping them to feel special in the same manner we would honour parents on Mother's Day and Father's Day."

Why a Friday? So if Mother's Day and Father's Day are on Sundays, why is Children's Day on a Friday? There's a very good reason for that. The Chairman of the National Child Month Committee, Dr Pauline Mullings explains that Friday was specifically chosen so that schools can celebrate children since there are children who do not have loving, caring and supportive environments whether in the community or in the home. How sad is it that Jamaica has to choose a school day for National Children's Day because we cannot be assured that all families and communities will celebrate our children? It is a very real concern. In her speech at the launch of Child Month, Chairman Mullings noted: "Did you know that many of our children feel that they have nothing to celebrate or they are not worthy of being celebrated? Yes, some of these children are challenged physically or mentally, have been raped, abused, used, crushed, abandoned, criticised, scandalised and hurt. Many have emotional scars that we cannot yet see. They still attend school, still study, still perform, as they utilise their God-given skills and talents; still smiling, but who knows their pains, their hurt, their bruises, their bitterness and their anger? Who can hear the little voices that say, 'There is nothing special about me?' 'Who will celebrate me?' 'Who will think I am worthy enough?'" Dr Mullings' comments are consistent with data brought to our attention by the chairman of the Early Childhood Commission, Professor Maureen Samms-Vaughan, that shows us just how much violence and abuse children see or are victims of in their communities and homes. The evidence is clear - Jamaica must treat its children better and as least as they are entitled to. In the proclamation, the governor general "encourage(s) all parents, caregivers, principals, teachers and citizens of Jamaica to participate in this activity which we believe will truly enrich the lives of our children and by extension, our nation." For this, the inaugural, Children's Day, the National Child Month Committee is asking for four simple things: 1) For everyone "to honour, esteem, show appreciation and love our children through recognition, treats, tokens, hugs and kisses, words of encouragement etc. helping them to feel special in the same way we honour parents on Mother's and Fathers' Day."; 2) Motorists to keep the headlights on during the day; 3) The media to have child-focused programming; 4) People should wear "sunshine yellow - reflecting the joy of celebration of our children and the prospect for growth for a better future". Surely, we must be able to do these simple acts to show support for our children. And frankly, we should do more. The proclamation states: "The National Child Month Committee urges the nation to focus on the importance of our children and the role they play in the future development of our country." Completely agree. Prepare them for future We must prepare our children to play that pivotal role in development. We must start at the age when they learn about our national symbols and to respect them, when they learn the basics of literacy and numeracy, when they learn manners and develop self-esteem - that's early childhood. If we invest in the early-childhood development of our children, we give them the tools to learn and grow, and we give them skills for life. As we build a society that demonstrates appropriate care and respect for children, we will develop children better capable of coping in a society that is yet to provide for them in every way that they are entitled to. Crayons Count, the campaign for early-childhood education is delighted to collaborate with the National Child Month Committee on a special after-school event for our children in the early-childhood age group, a signature Crayons Count event, where learning is fun, and children are treated with the utmost respect and held in esteem. We do that on National Children's Day. We do that any day and every day. What will you do to mark this special National Children's Day?