

Children and Teenagers in the Workforce

Between School and Work, It's Hard to Keep Up the Pace!

Fact Situation

Mohammed has a dilemma. He has been going non-stop for the past few months and is exhausted.

You are a social worker with an organization for youth. Mohammed is asking for your advice.

Since the age of 12, Mohammed has been working a few hours a week in his family's restaurant. He has done every job: waiter, kitchen helper and cashier!

For the last few months, the restaurant has not been doing well. It has been losing customers, especially since a snack bar opened up nearby.

Mohammed's parents are working twice as hard as usual to make up the financial losses. They let the chef go and are doing the cooking themselves, which means they are both working more than 70 hours a week. To help them out, Mohammed sometimes works until 11 p.m. several nights a week.

Mohammed has still not missed school, but he has no time for anything but work and going to class. The long hours at the restaurant are starting to affect his studies.

He also has no time to practice his cello.

Mohammed knows that he will need really high marks to get into a music program at CEGEP. On top of that, he needs to do well in an upcoming audition.

On the other hand, Mohammed doesn't want to quit his job, even if his parents only pay minimum wage. The job pays for his music lessons. His parents have other priorities right now than paying for his lessons.

His restaurant job has also let Mohammed save money for school and a cello. A good cello, even used, costs at least \$2,500.

Mohammed knows that his parents are counting on him during this difficult time. They could never find an employee as efficient as he is who is willing to put in as many hours. On top of that, no one knows the restaurant as well as their own son!

Mohammed feels cornered and is asking for your advice.

Question

Mohammed wants to know if he should quit his job. If he does, his parents would have to do everything in the restaurant themselves. What advice do you have for Mohammed?

Support your answer using laws on the subject that apply in Quebec and the principles in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* ("the Convention").



Points to Consider

Consider these points when answering the question:

- How much should a child work to help out his or her family?
- Is it more acceptable if a child works for the family?
- Should a parent be able to prevent a teenager from working or force a teenager to work?
- How can work be a good thing for teenagers?
- Do you think the law should be stricter and prohibit children under 16 from working?
- Do you think the *Act respecting labour standards* gives enough protection to children?
- Do you think Mohammed has good reasons for working so hard?

Happy writing!

Legal Information to Help You Answer the Question

1. In Quebec, at what age can children start working?

Contrary to popular belief, young people can legally start working well before the age of 16! There is no minimum age in Quebec.

However, there are rules on issues other than age. Under a law called the *Act respecting labour standards*, employers of children and teenagers cannot do these things:

- make them work without the written permission of their parents, unless they are 14 or older
- make them do work that exceeds their abilities or could negatively affect their health, development or education
- make them work during school hours if they are still obliged to attend school, or between 11 p.m. and 6 a.m. (except for newspaper delivery and artistic jobs)

Also, on nights teenagers have school the next day, employers must schedule their hours so they can be home by 11 p.m. However, this rule does not apply in these cases:

- counsellors for summer camps and recreational groups
- in the arts
- employees who live with their employers, such as housekeepers

Finally, the *Act respecting labour standards* does not apply to babysitters or young people doing occasional work, such as mowing lawns.

So where does Mohammed stand? Based on the information given, do his working conditions respect Quebec law?

Not exactly. Since he is working in his family's restaurant, he doesn't need written permission from his parents. He doesn't miss school, but his work does interfere with his studies: he spends so much time at his job that he doesn't have time to do home work. Also, he often works at the restaurant until 11 p.m., so he can't get home by the time set by law.

2. In other places, are the laws about children in the workforce the same?

No. Child labour laws vary by country, even if more than 190 countries signed the Convention. Some countries allow children to work under certain conditions, while others totally prohibit children from working.

The International Labour Office reports that about 200 million children between the ages of five and 17

do some kind of work, and that for half of them, this work was dangerous.

Dangerous work is work that harms a child's physical, mental or moral welfare. This includes work that requires too many hours or is excessively difficult, as well as prostitution and slavery.

Young workers are found mainly in agriculture, retail businesses on a small scale (beverages, fruit, souvenirs, etc.), crafts, and services (garbage collection, shoe shining, etc.).

Mohammed's situation—working long hours in his parents' restaurant—is not completely different from that of other children around the world.

Also, studies have shown that it is not always a bad thing for children to work. Working part-time can have a positive impact on the future productivity and sense of responsibility of Canadian teenagers. Not only can work be beneficial and satisfying, it can also help develop technical and social skills not learned in school.

The Convention says...

Countries that agreed to the Convention must set a minimum age below which children cannot work, and must set the conditions under which children can work. This is to protect people under 18 from work that endangers their health or negatively affects their education and development.

Read Article 32 of the Convention.

3. Can Mohammed simply drop out of school to work?

In Quebec

No. In Quebec, children between the ages of six and 16 must go to school.

It wasn't always this way. School did not become compulsory until 1943. Before then, parents still thought it was important to send their children to school, but sometimes attendance was irregular. In 1943, school became compulsory for children between the ages of seven and 14. As mentioned above, the ages have since changed.

In earlier times, many children helped out on family farms and missed school for long periods. In rural areas, children often stopped school at the end of March and returned in November. Boys often did chores around the farm, such as shearing sheep, ploughing, sowing, harvesting vegetables and stacking wood. In larger families, girls were often asked to help raise younger brothers and sisters, and to keep the house clean. Today, this is still the reality in many societies around the world, even if it is no longer the case in Quebec.

Some educational experts have recently suggested making children attend school until the age of 18 to bring down the number of school drop-outs.

The Convention says...

Countries that agreed to the Convention recognize the right to free compulsory primary education. The Convention also says that countries must help children reach their full potential, encourage them to go to school and try to prevent them from dropping out.

Read Article 28 of the Convention.



Elsewhere in the World

The age at which children can leave school varies around the world. In most western countries, it is between 14 and 16. In Canada, on the other hand, the provinces of New Brunswick, Ontario and Manitoba, students must go to school until they have a high school diploma or they turn 18.

Some countries have found a way to reconcile work and a child's right to an education. For example, Mexico has a program that encourages parents to send their children to school. Five million families receive between \$11 and \$69 per child every two months for keeping their children in school. Since the average monthly income of these families is about \$100, this money makes a difference and helps compensate for the income lost when a family sends a child to school instead of to work.

4. Mohammed's schedule has him exhausted. Is there a law that gives children and teenagers the right to relax and have fun?

Many government programs help children and teenagers lead a balanced life, even if it is hard to find the right to relax directly mentioned in our laws. For example, schools and municipalities offer activities such as sports, drama, dance and student council.

This balance is a real concern, so much so that the countries that signed the Convention made leisure time a fundamental right for children and teenagers.

A 2005 study done by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) measured the time spent by teenagers each week at school, doing homework, working and doing household chores. Canadian teenagers were at the top of the list of nine countries for time spent on these activities: about 7.1 hours per day in 2005. This is comparable to the schedule of Canadian adults, who spend 50 hours per week on the same activities.

The same study found that two-thirds of Canadian teenagers (64 %) slept fewer hours so they could fit everything they wanted to do into their days!

Mohammed is not the only one who is short on time!



The Convention says...

Children and teenagers often have to juggle school, work and chores at home. The Convention says that they should have enough free time to play, see friends, do sports and relax.

Read Article 31 of the Convention

Other Resources

[Commission des normes, de l'équité, de la santé et de la sécurité du travail](#)

[Unicef](#)

[International Labour Office](#)

[International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour](#)