

# Legally Approved Ages of Children; Opinions among Undergraduates

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**Abstract** - In Sri Lanka, any person under the age of eighteen is legally considered as a child. A child can acquire full legal capacity with regard to various circumstances at different ages according to the legislations of a particular country. Sri Lankan legislation has defined various ages under different laws to ensure rights of children and five ages were considered in this study: minimum ages of culpability (8 years), employment (14) and consent for sexual intercourse (16), maximum ages of requesting maintenance (18) and kidnapping from lawful guardianship (male 14, female 16). There are controversial opinions on legally accepted ages of children. The objective of the study was to describe opinions on legally accepted ages of children among undergraduates. A Cross-sectional descriptive study was conducted using a self-administered questionnaire among 400 undergraduates of University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka, selected by simple random sampling, 50 from first year and 50 from final year representing all 04 faculties. Mean values of suggested ages were calculated. Students suggested increasing the minimal legal age of culpability from 8 years to 16 years while endorsing the existing maximum legal age for requesting maintenance from guardians (18 years). It is also proposed that changing minimal legal age of consenting for sexual intercourse from 16 to 18 years, employing from 14 to 17 and increasing legal age of male child kidnapping to 16 years while acceding the existing legal age of female child kidnapping (16 years). The lectures as source of knowledge was reported by 17% of first years and 46% of final years and this difference was significant ( $\chi^2=38.97$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Almost all undergraduates (97.5%) were in the opinion that the legally accepted ages of children should be taught in schools while 87.5% was in the opinion that those should be taught in universities too. Undergraduates' opinions to change the legal ages should be considered and it is important to include the 'legal ages of children' in schools and university curricula to increase awareness in order to prevent both victimization and offending.

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