

REMARKS BY DOUGLAS ORANE
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Greetings

Who can tell me the theme for Child Month 2010? You are right. This year's theme is, "All I want is a chance to grow up". That might seem a bit strange to you as not only are you all expecting to grow up, you probably already know what you want be when you grow up. How about you, what do you want to be? And you? Excellent. When I was your age I wanted to be a pilot. By the time I left high school I decided to be an engineer and so I went to study engineering at Glasgow University. Later, I decided that business was my true passion so I went on to do graduate studies in business administration. I know that you are all working very hard at school so that you, too, will be able to achieve your dreams.

Let us get back to our choice of the theme for National Child Month 2010, "All I want is a chance to grow up." We chose this theme because, tragically, not all children have the opportunity to grow up and achieve their dreams. This fact was brought home to me even more forcefully, recently, when I attended the funeral of the child of a close colleague. He was a bright, talented young man who showed great promise of being a citizen of whom we would be very proud. He didn't get the opportunity to fulfill his dreams. He did not get the chance to become an adult because he was killed by another young man.

This situation is much too familiar, children killing children. Just two years ago two 16-year-olds, one from Bellefield High and the other from Brown's Town High were stabbed to death by other teenagers. More recently, there was the violent clash between youngsters in what became known as the Gully/Gaza war in support of DJ rivals Mavado and Vybz Kartel.

The stories in the media describe many incidents of violence against children, of all ages, which are truly horrifying. Just last year, UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), an international agency which works on behalf of children across the world, commissioned a study on Jamaica's children. Some of the information was very heartrending. Between 2006 and 2008, 230 children under 17 years old were murdered. Every day, between 2007 and 2008, 17 children and adolescents were treated in emergency rooms for violence-related injuries. Children as young as five years old were treated for gunshot wounds and other injuries in the emergency rooms of the island's hospitals.

However, I don't want to spend time listing the horror stories which even the youngest among us already know but, rather, I want to examine how we can change this situation. What can we do to give more of our children the "chance to grow up"?

The truth is that we have the laws, the policy framework and the institutions in place to take care of our children. In November 1989, Jamaica signed *The Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which is an international agreement on how we must treat our children, how we must protect them, nurture them, keep them safe and ensure that they grow up to be confident, responsible and productive citizens. The Government of Jamaica has put several measures in place to help to achieve this including passing the Child Care and Development Act which outlines the standards of care and treatment of our children.

In addition, the Government created the Early Childhood Commission to ensure that all early childhood institutions – nurseries, basic schools, kindergartens and day care centres – are operated in keeping with international standards of safety and care and with the ability to ensure the appropriate development of all Jamaica's children. The Child Development Agency was established to ensure that the proper programmes and policies are in place for the protection and development of all Jamaican children. Another recent initiative was the appointment of a Children's Advocate. And, there are still our traditional institutions of church, school, youth groups, sporting organisations and community groups.

If systems are in place, then why are we failing as a country to protect our children from violence, accidents and illnesses that prevent them from having the chance to grow up? What we have lost from the Jamaica of my youth and which no system or institution can effectively take the place of is the caring attitude which saw **all** adults taking responsibility for **all** children in their domain. The community had the right to reprimand any child and, in turn, children were expected to obey adults. Today, children are openly defiant of adults, including teachers, who dare to correct or scold them. As a child, I had to respect all my elders, not only the members of my family. Parents and guardians worked in tandem with the church and the school to protect and train the children of the community. When a child succeeded the entire community felt a sense of pride in having had a role in his or her development and when a child failed the community felt a sense of having failed that child.

Over the years we have come to a stage where each family operates as a unit on its own and even close family members, such as cousins and aunts and uncles, are unwilling to give advice or assistance for fear of being seen as interfering. The result is that sometimes families are overwhelmed and unable to cope and, thus, situations of abuse develop. I find it difficult to believe that in many of the cases reported in the press of children being killed as a result of domestic abuse, that neighbours and family members would not have had some hint that something was wrong in the household.

We need to become more vigilant on behalf of our children and do our utmost to protect them even from dangers in their own homes. Communities, both urban and rural, need to take an interest in the children in their neighbourhoods who are at risk. Not only is it our moral duty, it is our legal obligation to report any abuse observed to the relevant authorities. Children, even you can play a role in protecting each other. If you know that a friend or relative is being abused you need to tell an adult that you trust. I know that tattletales, or informers, are disliked by some, but some things should not be kept a secret because

otherwise you become a silent accomplice. If you know that your schoolmates are angry at each other and are planning to harm each other, don't keep it to yourselves, tell the guidance counselor at your school, or one of the teachers so that they can try to prevent it. Some of you can become peer counselors so that you can help your friends and schoolmates to solve the problems before things get out of control.

We are all a part of the Jamaican family and we must look out for each other. In the same way that we feel pride in the achievements of our athletes and other outstanding Jamaicans, we need to feel a deep sense of loss when our children die needlessly. A wise person once said that we are so focused on giving our children the things we did not have, we have forgotten to give them the things we did have. Let us go back to being communities that care. Look out for our children on the roads. Drivers, be aware of the children on the road; stop and allow them to cross safely and do not overcrowd buses and taxis. Adult pedestrians, take time to guide the young children across the roads and instruct them how to use the roadways correctly.

Adults in the schools and churches pay attention to the children, get to know them and see how you can help to protect them. Parents, remember that you need teachers to assist in the development of your children. Re-establish the partnership between yourselves and the school for the good of our children. Let us look at becoming mentors for other children besides our own. When a child dies, or suffers any type of abuse, instead of always seeking to lay blame let us consider what we could have done to improve the conditions, generally, for Jamaican children.

The schools, churches, government agencies, non-governmental organisations and the private sector need to work together in coming up with solutions to improve the situations in inner-city and garrison communities where the lives of children are being snuffed out at alarming rates. None of our children are safe, until all our children are safe!

I commend and support the work of the National Child Month Committee and pray that God will guide and bless them as they prepare to implement their programme for 2010.