

Marching for Equality: The Children of Birmingham

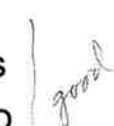
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Imagine being a 12 year old child in Birmingham, Alabama, on May 2nd, 1963, marching downtown. The streets of Birmingham roared with chaos, with rivers of ice clashing against the children and shadows with snapping jaws lunging at children who were marching. No matter who wanted to push them down, the children never stopped marching. Through this essay, I will evaluate the controversial ethics of Martin Luther King Jr.'s decision to use child protesters in Birmingham, analyze how the resulting violence gained unparalleled attention compared to previous efforts, and conclude by outlining my favorite accounts of children in the march, and by arguing whether Birmingham was the movement's definitive turning point.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s decision to involve children in the Birmingham campaign, while a hefty gamble, was a necessary risk for the movement's success. When the city ordered an injunction on April 10, 1963 to cease the protests, *adults* couldn't keep protesting. Therefore, James Bevel had the idea of the Children's March (May 2–10, 1963). In response, Commissioner Bull Connor ordered police and fire departments to use physical force against the students. The resulting newscasts, which depicted the brutality of police dogs and fire hoses against children, spread globally, sparking international indignation. As King assured parents, the children were "Don't hold them back if they want to go to jail. For they are doing a job for not

only themselves, but for all of America and for all mankind." Although it's unfair that the children had to risk their lives just to be treated the way every human should be treated, it's hard to say whether the children's involvement in the protests was the right or wrong decision.

The Children's March on May 2-10 1963, brought more attention to the inequitable segregation happening in Birmingham nationally and internationally than any other attempt to challenge racial injustice in the city because it involved thousands of people risking their safety for a cause, specifically children. Adults had been protesting for years, but most people ignored their efforts. Protests were seen as a "normal" political disagreement. The people of the south were accustomed to reports of adult-led protests, so the government downplayed their efforts and showed them as disruptive and controversial, rather than ethically imperative. Also, adults had to suspend protests due to the lack of bail money, and adults feared that they would lose their jobs. Children seemed like a better idea because the children were very passionate, and wouldn't have to worry about problems like losing their jobs. Unlike the previous protests, children marched, faced arrests, and endured violence from police and crowds. People saw the children as innocent and vulnerable, so when they were attacked, it outraged the nation and the world. All of this proves that even the youngest voices won't be silenced, forcing the nation to confront the injustice of segregation.



Audrey Faye Hendricks is one of the most talked about children who participated in the march because she is the youngest known child to protest. At just 9 years old, Hendricks put on a nice dress and tucked a board game underneath her arm, and got arrested for parading without a permit. With having family in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Hendricks felt compelled to do something. In an interview, Hendricks stated, "It was no way for me not to really be

involved...My parents were involved from the point that I could remember...My church was involved...You were there and just a part of it." (National Women's History Museum). Her composure was shocking as she knew that she would get arrested for protesting, so she took a board game with her to jail, and went to school the day after getting released. Her quiet determination played a part in changing the nation's opinion against the violent tactics of the city government. Although, not every child's sacrifice was as quiet as a trip to jail. Aretta Streeter didn't just march, she helped organize the Children's Crusade at just 15 years old. Just in 11th grade, she was taught about what was happening to the Black people of Birmingham like her, and it persuaded her to join the movement. She recruited many of her classmates, and she planned how students would leave school and gather at the 16th Street Baptist Church. While Audrey showed her bravery through calm courage, Aretta showed it through her bold leadership. If it weren't for children like Audrey and Aretta, the movement would've never gained enough momentum to break Birmingham's system of segregation.

I agree that Birmingham was a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement because of the many civil rights leaders, such as MLK Jr. and Thurgood Marshall, who chose Birmingham strategically because they knew the commissioner, Bull Connor, would react aggressively. After seeing the horrifying images from the protests, John F. Kennedy ordered his chief civil rights assistant to negotiate an agreement. Before, Kennedy hesitated to do anything about the movement because he didn't know if it was a big enough problem, but after seeing the news broadcasts in Birmingham, he had to address the crisis in Birmingham. The most important part was the Children's Crusade, the watershed moment of the Civil Rights Movement that drew more national and international attention than previous attempts.

The Children's March of 1963 proved that courage is not measured by age. The bravery of Audrey Hendricks, Aretha Streeter, and thousands of other young protesters showed the world that even children could demand justice and spark change. By facing danger, arrest, and violence, they forced the nation to confront the cruelty of segregation and helped shift the momentum of the civil rights movement. Their actions remind us that progress requires risk, sacrifice, and the willingness to stand up against injustice. The children of Birmingham left behind a legacy of courage and hope that continues to inspire generations today.

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