

Explaining the United Nations to kids

Almost 7 billion people live on the planet, in 194 countries, speaking thousands of different languages. You and your brother may speak the same language, live in the same house and have the same parents, and yet you don't always get along. So maybe it's not surprising that the world, too, is full of conflict.

That's where the United Nations comes in. On Oct. 24 the United Nations turns 65. In 1945, after World War II ended, 51 countries founded the U.N. with the goal of developing healthy relationships among nations, helping one another, and ultimately maintaining peace.

Representatives from 192 countries are now part of the General Assembly and meet every September through December, and at occasionally at other times throughout the year, in New York. A general debate kicks off the September meeting during which a representative from any country can "take the floor," or speak in front of everyone about anything. This year, representatives from 186 countries spoke, ranging from five to 33 minutes. (Wow, talk about a long meeting!)

Smaller groups from the General Assembly meet also, and this year, a group met to discuss how sports can help bring about peace. One member called on leaders to make sure people could participate in sports. Another spoke about the need for role models in sports.

The General Assembly is the biggest part of the United Nations, but the Security Council is the most powerful. Five of the countries, including the United States, are permanent members, and 10 others are picked from different regions of the world every other year. The Security Council can vote to take military action or to punish countries for inappropriate actions (these punishments are called sanctions). If just one of the five permanent members vetoes (or votes against) a Security Council resolution, it won't

take effect.

All this sounds like just a lot of talk, but the United Nations does more than that. For example, maybe you have heard of UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund. When monsoon rains caused devastating floods in Pakistan this summer, about 1.4 million kids were affected. UNICEF worked to get kids food, water and medical supplies. UNICEF is just one of many U.N. organizations that work around the world, helping people with such issues as reducing poverty, fighting disease and combating natural disasters.

The U.N. obviously has a big job to do, in a world full of so many people in so many places with so many problems.

It's something to think about the next time you and your brother have a hard time agreeing on what to watch on TV.

-- Moira E. McLaughlin