

Children offer views on Elian's plight

Little Elian Gonzalez is back in the news again, with renewed efforts to return him to Cuba and his father and reinvigorated resistance to that plan. Since the 6-year-old boy was rescued on Thanksgiving Day off the coast of Florida, his fate has been a focus of international attention and dispute. Fishermen found Elian clinging to an inner tube after his mother and 10 others died when their boat capsized en route to the United States.

Elian's father and Fidel Castro want him returned. So do some people in this country, including Atty. Gen. Janet Reno and the Immigration and Naturalization Service. But Elian's American relatives — and some members of Congress — would like him to stay here and are fighting for his citizenship and political asylum through the U.S. courts.

We've heard a lot of people's opinions on the matter, but not much from the perspective of children. Are many of them aware of Elian's plight? Do they care? Children, after all, are often caught in the middle of disputes, with adults making decisions in which they have little say.

I asked a sampling of area

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youngsters for their views. Most had heard about Elian. While some didn't have strong feelings about the situation either way, several did, including Jesus Gonzalez, 11, of Pomona.

"I think he should go back to Cuba," he said. Jesus is a student in Robert Lamascus' class at Sumner Elementary School in Claremont. He learned about Elian's situation from the newspaper and had been involved in lively classroom discussions of current events.

"His dad has the right to get the little boy because he's his dad, and his aunts and uncles are just his aunts and

uncles," Jesus said. "His dad is the one who brought him into the world; he should have the right to get him back to Cuba. Also, the people who are deciding to let him go, they should listen to the little boy — his opinion."

But Jesus said a boy in his class who was from Cuba felt that Elian should stay in Florida because "it was his mom's dream to come to America." Most of his classmates took that position, he said.

Unlike Jesus, most of the fifth- and sixth-graders at Pepper Tree Elementary School in Upland had not discussed Elian's destiny in class, but many had clear opinions about the issue anyway.

"I think they should let him go back to his father," said Chad Vandersluis, 10, "because he's a little kid and he probably wants to see his dad."

Steve LaForce, 11, agreed. So did Tyler Haines, 11, who tried to imagine himself in Elian's shoes.

"I would go to my dad," he said.

Ivy Povia, 12, thought more about family responsibility, saying that Elian should live with his dad because "he's

probably the person responsible for him — not his relatives, even though they are part of the family."

At Foothill Knolls Elementary School in Upland, Steven Gonzalez, 10, had discussed the issue extensively as part of current events in Raquel Carlson's fifth-grade class. Steven thought Elian should stay in the United States and said most of his classmates thought so, too.

Upland resident Rebecca Garrett, 10, is home schooled. She saw the story on television and in a newspaper. She had discussed Elian with her family, and she thought he should return to Cuba if he wants to.

"They should ask him," she said.

Alexa Singleton, 11, a sixth-grader at Lyle S. Briggs School in Chino, agreed that Elian should have some say in the decision. After hearing the story on the news, she asked her mom to fill in the details.

"It's his life after all," she said. "Instead of them fighting over him, deciding where he's going to stay, have him decide."

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