

As the campaign continued that month, SCLC leader James Bevel started to enact plans for a "Children's Crusade" that he and other leaders believed might help turn the tide in Birmingham. Thousands of children were trained in the tactics of non-violence. On May 2nd, they left the 16th Street Baptist Church in groups, heading throughout the city to protest segregation peacefully. One of their goals was to talk to the mayor of Birmingham about segregation in their city. They were not met with a peaceful response. On the first day of the protest, hundreds of children were arrested. By the second day, Commissioner of Public Safety Bull O'Connor ordered police to spray the children with powerful water hoses, hit them with batons, and threaten them with police dogs.

Despite this harsh treatment, children continued to volunteer to participate in the demonstrations over the next few days. Footage and photographs of the violent crackdown in Birmingham circulated throughout the nation and the world, causing an outcry. Businesses in downtown Birmingham were feeling the pressure. On May 5th, protestors marched to the city jail where many of the young people were still being held. They sang protest songs and continued their tactics of non-violent demonstration. Finally, local officials had agreed to meet with civil rights leaders and hash out a plan to end the protests. On May 10th, an agreement had been reached. City leaders agreed to desegregate business and to free all who had been jailed during the demonstrations. Weeks later, the Birmingham board of education announced that all students who had been involved in the Children's Crusade would be expelled. This decision was ultimately overturned by the court of appeals.

The Children's Crusade marked a significant victory in Birmingham. The city was in the world spotlight, and local officials knew that they could no longer ignore the Civil Rights Movement. Yet the struggle for equality in Birmingham continued. Later that year, in September 1963, four little girls were killed by bombs planted by white supremacists at the 16th St. Baptist Church, and over 20 more were injured. The horrific bombings sent shock waves through the nation. Despite this violent reaction to the movement for equality and justice, everyday people in Birmingham continued their efforts. And thousands of children, some of them as young as 7 or 8 years old, had kept the momentum of the struggle going in its most pivotal hour.