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in a changing world

Building Peace in Early Childhood

"If we start to build a peace in this world it should start with children, and it should be very early…."
Mahatma Gandhi

The achievement of a more just and humane world calls for a change - a conscious turning away from violence and exploitation toward a culture of peace and co-operation in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Recognizing the critical issues of young children, in 2010, the General Assembly requested a special report addressing the implementation of the CRC into early childhood programming. The recognition that young children should enjoy all rights afforded by the CRC, underpins efforts in peace building aimed at protecting and improving the lives of young children. Building the defence of peace requires educating communities and constructing new ways of thinking and behaving among these communities.

In order to most effectively impact and encourage communities to foster and maintain peace, education must begin in early childhood[1], which is the period when the brain architecture is developing most rapidly. It is a critical time of life when habits are formed, differences are recognized and emotional ties are built through social relationships and day-to-day interactions in homes and neighbourhoods. Young children who grow up in unstable environments, exposed to abuse, neglect, and other stress, are less likely to build trusting and loving relationships which can often lead to low self-esteem and long-term psycho-social and behavioural problems[2] (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine). ECD programmes can contribute, in the long-term, to peaceful societal interactions as it teaches young children critical emotional skills that will impact on their future behaviour and foster more peaceful communities.

Peace-Building

Peace Building encompasses the rebuilding of societies following a crisis and preventing future armed conflicts. Equally as important, it is also about creating conditions that are conducive to lasting peaceful relations among individuals, communities and society at large. Where violent conflicts are the norm, the lives of young children are greatly disrupted and their families find it far more difficult to provide the sensitive and predictable care that young children need in order to thrive. According to UNICEF's latest report approximately 13 million[3] children are displaced by armed conflicts and violence.

Early Childhood Development Programmes and Peace Building

Early childhood development programmes can be instrumental in building peace in several ways, at the individual, community and societal levels:

At the individual level, programmes may target children, parents or the interaction of parent/child pairs during early childhood. Parenting programmes may empower families to help their young children develop socially and emotionally and promote values and skills for future active democratic citizenship and pro-social behaviour. The early years lay the foundation for the development of social-emotional skills such as cooperation, empathy, the capacity to see other perspectives, and the ability to relate to others in a peaceful manner.

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[1] Declaration of the World Conference on Peace Education in early childhood, 24 April, 2007 Albacete-Spain
[2] From Neurons to Neighbourhood : The Science of Early Childhood Development, Chapter 9

[3] UNICEF's The State of the World's Children's Report, Special Addition 2010.
Note: To access user-friendly tools on ECD in the INEE Toolkit, please visit: www.ineesite.org/toolkit

Community-based programs have significant potential to promote peace and strengthen intra and inter community relations. ECD programs can reach across communal divides and encourage communities in conflict "to develop alternative visions of the future based around the needs of children" (Connolly and Hayden 2007). During active conflict, safe spaces should be provided for young (and older) children to play, to provide parents with critical information and support to improve child care practices, to provide integrated services, and to encourage positive and supportive parent/child interaction. If they are functioning during conflict and certainly during transition, child-care centres, kindergartens, and nursery schools can provide these safe spaces. Many early childhood curricula that emphasize social and emotional learning, conflict resolution, and citizenship skills, are widely and regularly used. ECD programmes where parents actively participate in the management of ECD centers, where parents, are involved in daily activities and/or with a strong parent education component, can have a particularly powerful impact by bringing together parents in ways that build trust across divided groups. By reaching the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups, they can also help reduce actual and perceived inequities and (potential) sources of conflict.

On the societal level, ECD in social policies works to reduce inequities. Inequity violates children's rights and becomes a serious barrier to peace. Support for children and their families during the early childhood years is imperative for peace building. ECD programmes reduce economic inequalities by promoting holistic development for all children - especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. For children growing up in poverty, quality early education improves school readiness and chances for school success, financial independence, and social stability. ECD can mitigate the factors that trigger armed conflicts or widespread violence. National policies, laws and legislation concerning the welfare, care and education of the young child should also be in line with international agreements.

Resources that enhance understanding and implementation of such programs can be found among many partners including: UNICEF, the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development and the Inter-Agency Network on Education in Emergencies (that jointly sponsored the development of an annotated bibliography of relevant research[4]), the International Network on Peace Building with Young Children, Save the Children, ChildFund International, and the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

UNICEF, the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, the Inter-Agency Network on Education in Emergencies (INEE) and their many partners call on all citizens to:

- ensure that the needs of young children receive equal emphasis during all emergency situations from preparation to stabilization in order to allow children to develop their full potential; and

- assure that programs addressing peace building recognize the critical period of early childhood in promoting the skills that enable children to become agents of change in building peace in their societies and around the world.

[4] *Early Childhood Care and Development and Emergency Situations: Annotated Bibliography*. http://www.ecdgroup.com/docs/lib_006084512.pdf