Promoting the Culture of Peace in Children

Milton Schwebel

Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology
Rutgers University

The preamble of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO’s) constitution states, “that since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be established” (Mayor, 1995, p. 3). Some would argue with this proposition, claiming that wars begin in the relations between people, and only then penetrate their minds. From this perspective, for example, only after the attack on Pearl Harbor did the people of the United States become fierce enemies of Japan. A change in the behavior of the Japanese government led to a change in relations between the two nations, and the rise of a culture of war in the United States. Either way, whether war begins in the minds of men and women, or in the external world, the two are reciprocally implicated, as they must be in the creation of a culture of peace.

The UNESCO preamble refers only to adults. But what about the developing minds of children? How do they become part of a culture of peace? This question is particularly crucial now that the United Nations has declared that this is the Decade of Education for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World, devoted to the task of inculcating in them the attitudes and behaviors appropriate to such a culture.

Observing cultural influences on children today, it is hard not to conclude that we have a long way to go. In the United States, for example, peer into the family room of many a home and take note of the children’s activities—the boys in particular. Many of the young ones will be marching, shooting, or dueling with weapons of one kind or another. The older ones, using computer video games, will be doing...
the equivalent in virtual reality. Some of this play may be their way of dealing with
the demons of childhood fears; previously, however, tales like those of the Grimm
brothers apparently sufficed. Today, such involvement seems excessive and prob-
ably has an impact on the consciousness of children, unfavorable to a culture of
peace. Yet, compared with the indescribable experiences of millions of children in
the brutal war zones of the last decade, and now of this one, the war conscious-
ness-breeding experiences of children in the United States are minor. By contrasts,
the job of transforming a culture of war is a daunting one.

In the long run, peace psychologists, drawing on the rich literature of child psy-
chology and their own burgeoning work, are interested in how children relate to
others at home and at school; with friends and in the company of people who are
different from them in color, ethnicity, gender, national origin, or other distin-
guishing attributes. They are interested in how children deal with conflicts that in-
evitably arise as they live with others, go to school together, and play together.
They are interested, in other words, in whether and under what circumstances chil-
dren assimilate the concepts, and acquire the attitudes and values, associated with
a culture of peace.

An important starting point for social scientists who want to promote a culture
of peace is knowledge about when and how children develop concepts of war and
peace, and invent methods of conflict resolution. By happy coincidence, the four
articles that appear in this issue were submitted to *Peace and Conflict* at roughly
the same time. The following summaries of the four show that they address ques-
tions that are relevant to educating children for a culture of peace.

In “Peacemaking Among Preschool Children,” Verbeek and de Waal break with
what they describe as the practice in behavioral science of emphasizing “negative
peace”; that is, identifying obstacles to ending conflicts but not mending
relationships. Their interest is in “positive peace”; that is, the active process of
peacemaking. With a sample of preschool children in the United States they ad-
dressed the question of what happens at the conclusion of a conflict between peers.
Is there a renewal of peaceful association? If so, under what circumstances is there
such renewal? Does the context in which conflict occurs make a difference? Do
prior relationships make a difference? Peace psychologists interested in issues of
reconciliation—of spouses, of ethnic groups, of nations—may find that, by the ex-
ample they set, the preschool children have something of importance to offer them.

In “Concepts of Peace and War as Described by Dutch and Swedish Girls and
Boys,” Hakvoort and Hagglund note that when children are asked to explain their
concept of war, they tend to choose concrete aspects, such as guns and tanks or ac-
tivities like bombing attacks. When asked about peace, however, they pinpoint the
absence of war and quarrels and, positively, the presence of friendships. In the re-
port on their own study, Hakvoort and Hagglund present conceptions of peace and
war expressed by children and adolescents. They compare the similarities and dif-
fences between the two countries. And differences do exist, even in these two so-
sieties that appear to be so similar. They also look for variations due to age and gender in the two countries and apply historical perspective to account for some of the differences between the two.

In “Impact of Political Violence on Images of War and Peace in the Drawings of Primary School Children,” McLernon and Cairns asked children of both Northern Ireland and England to draw pictures of war and peace. McLernon and Cairns note that children have plenty of opportunity to learn about war, but that peace is not defined for them, except perhaps for negative peace (i.e., the absence of war). Finding drawings an effective medium to elicit images of peace and war from primary school children, McLernon and Cairns used the results to assess the influences of cultural differences in the two societies on the concepts of the children.

In “Adolescent Concern With Social Issues: An Exploratory Comparison, Between Australian, Colombian, and Northern Irish Students,” Frydenberg, Lewis, Ardila, Cairns, and Kennedy provide a different perspective from those of the previous three articles. Faced with four social issues (Pollution, Discrimination, Fear of Global War, Community Violence), 14- to 18-year-old students in three different countries were asked to indicate their level of concern. The study sought answers to these questions: What differences, if any, exist among the three sets of students from three corners of the globe? How do each of the three cope with these concerns? Not surprisingly, differences were found, and Frydenberg et al. address the implications of the findings for aiding adolescents in their coping efforts, and in educating them for peace.

Developmental psychologists have long pondered how the mind develops so that it is so well coordinated with reality (Kuhn, 1984). How can we facilitate the development of concepts of peace? The four studies in this issue represent an interactionist view. Children’s developing understanding of the concepts of war and peace are seen as emerging through a series of interchanges between the individual and the environment. These two feed on each other, suggesting that to change individual minds we must change the world they live in; to change the world, we must change minds.

These studies are the contributions of 11 psychologists, representing four continents on our conflict-ridden globe. They are useful in their implications for peace education and for policymakers who seek to promote a culture of peace during this historical juncture, the Decade of Education for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World.

REFERENCES


It was then [late 18th century] that peace, the visualization of a social order from which war had been abolished, could be said to have been invented; an order, that is, resulting not from some millennial divine intervention that could persuade the lion to lie down with the lambs, but from the forethought of rational human beings who had taken matters into their own hands.

Sir Michael Howard, The Invention of Peace