Peace Begins at Home

Thoughts about preserving our inborn capacities and learning to live together

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The origins of our concepts and behaviours for peaceful relations with others begin at home. My mother used to say, "Charity begins at home," and I quietly rebelled against this injunction even though it addressed our fundamental commitment to family. My father's family motto was, "You are born to contribute," and happily this mandate has ruled my life. Now I wish to assert, "Peace begins at home."

The research of Yale professors Paul Bloom and his wife Karen Wynn has revealed that infants as young as four months of age are consistently able to make moral decisions. After hundreds of child assessments, about 98% of the time infants are able to distinguish between "good" (peaceful behaviours) and "bad" (aggressive behaviours). And yes, they prefer the "good" behaviours.

Thus our "basic nature" is NOT violent. This and other research on early childhood moral and ethical decision-making are profoundly revising our understanding of the origins of our basic nature and our potential capacity to live together peacefully. From infancy, most of us are "hard-wired" to prefer and to want good behaviours around us, and to conduct ourselves in peaceful ways.

Of course, we can ask where this astounding ability comes from, and perhaps we shall never know the full answer to that question although some are certainly speculating on possible answers. However, other important questions for those of us who "fight peacefully for peace" include:

- How can we preserve and indeed build upon these primordial tendencies to prefer and want peaceful interactions?
- How can we prevent children from becoming aggressive, violent and destructive?
- Why is it that through the millennia, the world's cultures have in the main (but certainly not entirely) become bellicose rather than peaceful?

The last question is, perhaps, the easiest to answer but I submit that such an historical analysis might not point us in the direction of effective ways to imbed peaceful interactions and positive values for respecting "the other" in the psyche of children throughout the world.

Abundant research (and common sense) reveals that parents play the most fundamental role in their children's development. Parents, the extended family and other regular caregivers have in their hands, minds and emotions, the capacity to maintain and foster peaceful interactions. They can model and reinforce positive interactions, attitudes and values in their children's young lives. Their conduct with and around their children is as eloquent a lesson as their words – perhaps more than their words.

From fMRI neuroscience studies we know that virtually all children reared in situations of deprivation (i.e., malnutrition, chronic ill health, moderate to severe poverty) have brains with inferior neural plasticity and neural connections. Without intensive and individualised early childhood intervention services, these children become developmentally delayed, experience learning difficulties in school, and ultimately become unproductive adults. Indeed, prisons are

filled with such persons because a large percentage of these less capable youth and adults become violent offenders and cause high costs to society.

Furthermore, children exposed to traumas, such as those that are caused by community and domestic conflicts, natural disasters, life in camps for refuges and internally displaced persons, and domestic substance abuse, maternal and paternal depression, child abuse and especially neglect, suffer from "toxic" stress (I prefer the term negative stress), and they develop delays in their social and emotional development, and especially in areas of self-regulation. As we are seeing in many nations, some of these children become walking time bombs for social conflict.

The good news is that we have learned how to reverse most of these early developmental delays when and if we are able to identify and serve these children and their families with highly effective early childhood intervention services. Such services need to be instituted and sustained in nations around the world, and most especially in low- and middle-income countries and in impoverished or depressed groups in upper-income countries.

But even if such services were to be made widely available, in all too many countries, young children are increasingly exposed to extremely negative parenting and community indoctrination. This can be vividly witnessed today in the Levant but it also occurs in guerrilla camps in Colombia, in community wars of Africa, in subjugated ethnic minority groups in Southeast Asia and South Eastern Europe, and… Yes, the list is long.

In my lifetime, I have never before experienced such a rapid increase in the indoctrination of young children to violence and inter-group hatred. Many of our efforts to foster good child development are being later destroyed by false leaders in homes, schools, and religious and community groups.

Furthermore, in all post-conflict countries, the social and emotional development of children is almost always truncated, and the levels of domestic violence are very high. In the absence of effective reconciliation movements, violence is often linked with children's incapacity to relate positively to "the other." The lack of effective reconciliation activities sows seeds of cyclical conflict, as has been the case in Colombia and other nations. In this, the experience of "immigrant countries," such as the United States, Canada and Australia is quite compelling: a new ethos of allegiance to a polity rather than a religion or culture has helped to support inter-group dialogue. These countries are far from perfect but children generally are not reared to hate "the other."

Many people are fully aware of the intense indoctrination of young children that is occurring in countries around the world, and they decry it. However, they appear to be unable to call a halt to it and replace it with an education for peace that includes the reinforcement of positive interpersonal interactions, attitudes and values.

And herein lies our quandary.

The leaders of major inter-religious dialogues are keenly aware of this problem at the adult level. However, they and others are less aware of the intense damage that is occurring on a daily basis to the youngest of children in their communities. Even more distressing is the realisation that generally such leaders appear to be unwilling (or feel they are unable) to bear the mantle of leadership with parents and communities to promote education for peace and to eschew the indoctrination of children to violence.

Many political leaders lack the "political will" to address these issues, and in some countries politicians are leading movements to indoctrinate young children to hatred and violence. Increasingly, they are using social media to mobilise and lead children; therefore, the impact of their initiatives is becoming even greater and more damaging. In part, peace is truly a problem of political will, and through my work in participatory policy planning, I can attest to the fact that

some national leaders definitely have a greater political will to address education for peace than others.

Some specialists in child development and education understand this situation to some degree; however, most of them feel powerless, and indeed, to date most of them have had little impact.

I submit that we have not well structured our efforts on behalf of education for peace. We do know a great deal about how to do this work effectively; however, a new approach is needed that builds on our accumulated research and experience in countries throughout the world.

An effective strategy of education for peace beginning with infancy should be developed, along with all of the essential activities required to support children, families and communities in ways that are culturally and linguistically appropriate. Such a programme should be designed, field tested, revised, piloted, evaluated and then implemented widely. At the same time, all of the elements required to take such work to scale should also be prepared.

Presupposing that effective national systems of education for peace were to be designed and developed:

- Would governments, foundations or other groups fund them?
- Would such initiatives be well integrated into child development and educational services of governments, faith groups, civil society organisations and the private sector?
- Would nations implement education for peace at scale and invest in it adequately over time?

If political and technical leaders in nations were to agree to implement national programmes of education for peace, were willing to invest in it, and were to allow it to be widely implemented, then we might be able to make some progress in helping children retain their innate commitment to peace and in ensuring they would grow up to create more peaceful, productive and sustainable societies.

Given the current gravity of the world situation and the increasingly lamentable impact of violence on infants and young children, a major effort is needed to institute nationwide highly cost-effective systems of education for peace.

In the meantime, wherever possible, elements of education for peace should be added to parent education and support services, including early childhood intervention services.

And quietly, very quietly, this is what a few of us are trying to do in the absence of comprehensive national commitments for ensuring that peace begins at home.