

Defence for Children International

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Discussion Day on Violence in Families and Schools

Violence in the Personal Lives of Children and the Threat of Terrorist Attacks

It could be any American city: New York, Philadelphia, Denver, Washington DC. A sunny spring day is suddenly punctured by the blare of sirens, as police and firefighters race to a shopping mall, or a government building, or a train or a bus. Once on the scene, emergency personnel in protective suits hurry inside where people are sprawled on the floor, overcome by an unknown chemical agent. Outside, paramedics erect a mobile decontamination unit.

Jose Vegar, Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Vol. 54, March/April 1998

After the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Vegar's scenario reads like a chronicle of terror foretold. The terrible events of September 11, 2001 will influence all our lives - adults and children alike. At this point in time, when we are still reeling from the after-shock of the attacks, the consequences cannot be completely be foreseen. It is a new kind of war.

First of all, at a time when the focus is on fighting terrorism, identifying perpetrators and training bases, it will be not easy to uphold the credo that no psychological or physical pressure may be applied in interrogation of minors. Still, this is the task of human rights activists, even if the climate for upholding these values is difficult.

One thing, however, is clear - a pessimistic, doomsday mind-set will create a very sad new generation. An important task of educators is to give children hope. How to do that in a violent world where planes drop out of the sky to sow death and destruction is also a task for children's rights activists and the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

DIFFICULT TIMES FOR CHILDREN'S RIGHTS ACTIVISTS

To talk about violence in the family and in school without taking into account that we live in a violent world seems strange, if not impossible, to us at Defence for Children International (DCI). In order to do so, new areas of research will have to be developed, as has been done in previous times of global insecurity.

In 1957, when the Russians launched its Sputnik, an area of psychology - research in cognition - started to develop in the United States. It was a response to the feeling that because American children did not receive a thorough education in science and technology, Russia achieved supremacy in these areas.

In 1985 research on the threat of nuclear war and how young people perceive that threat took precedence. Eric Chivian, et al (American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, October 1985) found that for both Soviet and American children "nuclear war is seen as destroying everything, there being no clear boundary between loss of individuals and the loss of a nation".

Almost without exception, Soviet children questioned by Chivian were concerned about the nuclear threat, while American youths were not troubled at all by it. [This seems odd in light of previous paragraph which says that all children thought nuclear war would destroy everything]

Soviet children were more pessimistic (or, as Chivian remarked "realistic") than American children about the chances that they, their families, the Soviet Union or the United States could survive a nuclear war. Soviet children dismissed civil defense measures as useless because what they were taught had not convinced them that protection was possible.

In October, 1985 a conference, Nuclear Threat and the Mental Health of Children and Adults, was held at the Wilhelmina Children's Hospital in Utrecht, Netherlands. It was there that Mrs. C. Streutker-Fransen, noted that it was irresponsible to talk to children about the threat of a nuclear attack without presenting a solution, because it would only raise fear and apathy (Kinder en Jeugdpsychotherapie Vol.12, 1985) and result in their withdrawal from society. According to Prof. C. Bierman of the Medical Academy for Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy in Puchheim, Germany: "Children ask their parents questions but at the same time blame them for [the problems]. Parents are powerless. This increases the generation-gap." (Kinder en Jeugdpsychotherapie Vol. 12 ,1985).

In 1995 Aum Shinrikyo attacked the Tokyo subway with a sarin gas. Now that the nuclear arsenal of the former Soviet Union is in various countries in which the military is underpaid and organized crime a powerful force, the possibility of a terrorist group obtaining a nuclear weapon is all too real. To prepare the public, including children, for all eventualities without creating panic is important, but raises questions.

How do we pursue our tasks?

ADULTS SHOULD MAKE THE WORLD A SAFER PLACE

Even if we do not have all the answers for our children, it seems important that we adults are seen to work seriously at making the world a safer place. That not only relates to fighting terrorism, but also reducing the raising levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, controlling the rising world population, the destruction of rain forests and global warming – all of which lead to disasters: floods, hurricanes, water and food shortages, etcetera.

It is of utmost importance that children's rights organizations do not ally themselves with groups supporting violent solutions to problems, including attacks on civilians. Children's rights groups must pressure political leaders to use non-violent ways (i.e. peace negotiations) to solve the problems which may underlie the causes of terrorism. Peace-education should be an important element of the education system.

Among the underlying causes of terrorism which must be addressed are the wide gaps between rich and poor and the negative effects of globalization. Current levels of development aid have about as much effect on ameliorating these problems as a cup of tea in the ocean; rights groups should lobby for more funding.

Ed Ayres the editor of World Watch, wrote in his book God's Last Offer: Negotiating for a Sustainable Future (1999): "We need to revisit how people learn (or don't learn) from the first gasp of life to the last, because today's average, upper-middle class college grad, when you strip away what he knows about entertainment and technology, has a medieval understanding of the world. That understanding won't get us through the next century".

In the book Vital Signs, the Trends that are Shaping our Future (1995) Lester Brown and other authors of the World Watch Institute write: "After rising dramatically from the late seventies until the mid-eighties, the number of wars raging in the world appears to have plateaued".
Would that it were true!

Dr Philip Veerman
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28 September 2001