

Disarmament education: a building block for our children's future

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In 2001, the United Nations Secretary-General convened a Group of Governmental Experts to examine the topic of disarmament and non-proliferation education and training. The group concluded that “[d]isarmament and non-proliferation education and training is a lifelong and multifaceted process... . It is a building block, a base of theoretical and practical knowledge that allows individuals to choose for themselves values that reject violence, resolve conflicts peacefully and sustain a culture of peace.”¹

The report of the group specifically mentions the need for disarmament and non-proliferation education to target children. During the group's deliberations, the Chairman, distinguished disarmament diplomat Ambassador Miguel Marín Bosch of Mexico, challenged us to think about how to capture the attention of children and youth—not just university students and adults. His premise was that if we want to build a more peaceful and secure world through disarmament and non-proliferation, we need children to know that these issues exist and that they too have a stake in them. He likened it to the explosion of environmental awareness that has taken place among young people over the past few decades. What we need is a comparable shift in awareness about peace and security by children and for children in order to prepare the next generation to be able to think critically about these issues.

It is daunting, however, to think about how to introduce the issue of disarmament and security to young children. By its nature, this topic has frightening elements, and the urge to shield our children from unpleasant realities is understandably strong. It is possible, however, to offer children tools for *how* to think about disarmament and security, not *what* to think. In so doing we are encouraging critical thinking skills, compassion and the ability to consider the perceptions of others in an age-appropriate manner.

Having children of my own has encouraged me to consider this at two practical, interwoven levels: first, how can I promote a more secure world for my children; and second, how can I give my children the tools they need to be able to think about issues of disarmament, security and peace?

The safety and security of one's child is of primary importance to every parent. You start thinking about protecting your child from pregnancy: you consider whether you need to change your diet, cut down on coffee, or perhaps finally stop smoking. You rearrange cabinets to put cleaning products out of the baby's reach, buy gates for the stairs at home and covers for the electrical outlets. And it isn't only physical safety. I assume that I am not the only parent who has spent more than a few moments imagining how I will try (and more often than not fail) to protect my child from disappointment, injustice and frustration.

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You think about your child's security and welfare in extremely broad terms—do those red spots mean he needs to see a doctor? Did I dress her warmly enough this morning? Health, education, safe streets and schools, the right opportunities and conditions for physical, emotional and mental development—we strive to protect our children to the best of our abilities—to keep them safe.

When many of us think about security in terms of our family, we think about their physical safety, nutrition, a stable environment, clean water and air, their health, that they wear a helmet when they ride their bike, that they don't get into a stranger's car or that they look both ways before crossing the street.

However, when we think about security in the larger world, we think about military power, and the threats posed by terrorism, violence and war. For those of us fortunate to live in countries at peace, it is easy to overlook the connection between these two levels—human and global—of security. Yet we cannot aspire to a more peaceful and secure world if people don't have security in their daily lives.

So how can we as adults, parents, community members and individuals contribute to building a more peaceful and secure world for our children? And how can we offer our young children the initial tools that will prepare them to think about security and disarmament issues as they grow older?

Perhaps we need to go back to the basics. These are the straightforward rules of any playground or school yard:

- Treat others as you would like to be treated
- Share
- Keep your promises
- Don't bully or shove
- Don't cheat
- Might doesn't make right

A few minutes spent in a local park will quickly confirm that parents and caregivers are teaching, reminding, and re-reminding their children about these concepts—sometimes in increasingly insistent tones! These concepts are the first building blocks for disarmament education. Yet as our children grow, it is easy to stop talking about these simple, but ever important, ideas. The good news is that we are already teaching these ideas to our children—but some work is required on our follow through.

While we are convinced that these are simple enough rules and concepts for young children to understand and obey, as adults we don't always hold our leaders to these same straightforward rules, particularly when it comes to matters of security. It's as if we lower our expectations, with the justification that "the world is complicated", "politics is a dirty business" or "those people don't share our values". Bullies are not unknown on the international scene, and we are often confronted with countries that wield their might—financial, political or military—to address their real or perceived grievances. Don't get me wrong. The world is complex. We do have differences. Not everyone will play by the rules. But that doesn't mean that we should lower our expectations. Our children are watching us, and they learn from our example.

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So, what can we do to make the world a more peaceful place for our children?

- First, make a personal commitment to offering the children of the world the security and safety they deserve—and then choose a way to act on that commitment.
- Second, teach our children respect for themselves and for others.

- Third, the next time you hear a child say “It’s not fair”, encourage him to seek out just solutions to the problem, and encourage compassion to be aware of the concerns of others.
- Fourth—and perhaps most important—tell them not to lower their expectations as they become older. By holding steady to some of the basic building block lessons of childhood they can help make the world a safer place for their own children—and for us, their parents.

Disarmament and non-proliferation education is a crucial tool that will build a culture of peace and, in the words of the preamble to the United Nations Charter, save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. While it is a long-term investment and one that requires continuous attention, it is one that we simply cannot afford to neglect.

Note

1. *Report of the Secretary-General: United Nations Study on Disarmament and Non-proliferation Education*, UN document A/57/124, 30 August 2002, paragraph 20.

