

Peace Education: A Transformative Process

Peace education is based on the philosophy that peace is a virtue which allows us to act harmoniously and creatively with one another and with the wider world. The question for early childhood educators is how to teach such abstract concepts to children? We adults do this, I believe, by modeling the philosophy of peace education in every action we take. We are genuinely respectful and empathetic when interacting with students, co-workers, and parents. We create a safe environment that encourages creativity, cultural competence, caring, problem solving and critical thinking. We mentor children in developing their skills in communication, perspective taking, and peaceful conflict resolution.

During the current preoccupation with early academics, it is important to recognize that peace education not only creates harmony, it also nurtures the child intellectually, socially, emotionally and spiritually. An aspect of peace education that excites me is how it truly supports the child in reaching her or his full potential. The practices of conflict resolution, class meetings, class agreements and earth care teach life skills: self-regulation, listening and processing, creativity, perspective taking, empathy, and skillful communication. These skills enhance the giving and receiving of help and working cooperatively and fairly with others.

One can create an environment conducive to the practices of peace education in several ways. One suggestion is that the environment should represent the identity of anyone who may walk through the door by providing literature, dolls, puzzles, and toys that honor diversity. Another suggestion is to provide open-ended learning materials that encourage creativity and collaboration. Respect for differing learning styles, temperaments and interests supports the belief that a population rich in diversity can live and learn in harmony.

One of the most amazing experiences I have ever had occurred during my retirement party after 35 years of teaching. During that day, past preschool students gave oral testimonials, and a multitude contributed written ones. What surprised and please me was how so many of their comments revealed an awareness that they had experienced dynamics integral to peace education. There was mention of inclusion, honoring everyone's ideas and abilities, problem solving, being honest, loyalty, respecting the earth, and caring for one another. One young adult wrote, "All my life I've taken what you taught me about making peace, sharing and saying what's in your heart, and made it into how I live in the world."

Peace education is a transformative process. I've witnessed amazing growth in the positive self-identity of

individuals and groups. I recall children who attended my school who, under most circumstances, would be considered quite challenging. I well remember one year when a *whole class* was challenging! During the first few weeks we witnessed daily episodes of yelling, throwing, biting and hitting. It was disconcerting how these children resisted sitting next to one another during meals or group times. Since this group was so volatile and seemingly intransigent, however, we had multitudes of opportunities to go through the **peaceful conflict resolution process**. Every day we would take the time to help calm the children, respectfully listen and encourage them to listen to one another, acknowledge needs and seek solutions together, and try out their suggestions for resolution to their conflicts. We engaged in the process so often and so consistently that by the third month, most of the children were able to engage in the process without adult assistance. In fact, this group ended up being amazingly skilled in problem solving. For example, one day three boys were engaged in a seemingly impossible conflict related to the use of a favored scooter. During their problem solving, one said, "I know what we can do!" He leapt up, ran inside, and returned with a sand timer. The three quickly came to an agreement about timing their turns and spent the rest of their recess patiently watching grains of sand drop. Note the word "we."

An incident midyear convinced me that this challenging class had transformed their original chaotic group dynamic into one of a positive group identity. One of the children wanted to "make a school" by the sandbox and needed the easel as a prop. Another child working in the sand box hollered to the larger group, "We need help!" Surprisingly, several children arrived and after learning what was needed, raced back to the easel, hefted it up and struggled across the entire playground. I was delighted by this spontaneous display of kindness and teamwork.

For broader coverage of these topics please see the P.E.A.C.E website: www.peaceeducators.org

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