

Chapter One

The Impact of Conflict on Young Children, Their Families, and Communities

The purpose of this first chapter is to provide the broader context for the stories that follow. It sets out what the research tells us about the impacts of armed conflict on young children and the key issues that this raises for early childhood practitioners working in areas affected by conflict. In the first part of the chapter we will briefly examine what some of the effects of armed conflict are on communities and families; then, in the second part of the chapter, examining how these impact directly on young children's health and well-being. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key issues raised by all of this for early years professionals that will, in turn, provide the core themes that run through the chapters to follow.

The impact of war and armed conflicts on communities and families

As already mentioned, the nature of wars and armed conflicts has changed. These days they are much less likely to be characterised by contests between countries and much more likely to involve armed conflicts between two or more warring factions within particular countries. In some places the army may be in conflict with civilians while in others there may be two or more groups of armed civilians fighting one another (UNICEF, 1996). These types of civil war are therefore often played out in communities, with villages, towns, and cities not only providing the backdrop to armed conflict but also often the actual focus of the conflict. As Harvey

El Impacto de los Conflictos en los Niños Pequeños y sus Familias y Comunidades

El propósito de este primer capítulo es proporcionar el contexto más amplio para las historias que siguen a continuación. Presenta lo que los hallazgos de investigaciones nos dicen sobre el impacto del conflicto armado en los niños y niñas pequeños, y señalan asuntos claves que de allí surgen para los

profesionales que trabajan con la temprana infancia en áreas afectadas por el conflicto. En la primera parte del capítulo examinaremos brevemente cuales son algunos de los efectos del conflicto armado en las comunidades y las familias, antes entrar en la segunda parte del capítulo donde examinemos como el conflicto afecta directamente la salud y bienestar de los pequeños. El capítulo concluye con un resumen de los asuntos claves para los profesionales que trabajan con la temprana infancia, los cuales también proporcionan el hilo conductor para los capítulos siguientes.

(2003: 5) has observed, for example: “violence against the civilian population by both government and non-state forces is now the rule rather than the exception, with civilians often being deliberately targeted in military campaigns.”

The effects of all this varies dramatically from one conflict situation to the next, as the chapters to follow will demonstrate. At its most extreme form there is the brutal practice of “ethnic cleansing” whereby whole communities are wiped out either through mass slaughter or through being forced to leave their homes and land. It is estimated that at the end of 2003 armed conflicts had turned around 11.5 million people into refugees and asylum seekers worldwide with a further 25 million people having become “internally displaced” (Maxted, 2003). The plight for refugees can be severe — often having to walk for days without food or water and being vulnerable to further attack (Fulci, 1998). When they do arrive in a new and relatively safe place, they often face further suffering. In South Africa, for example, Thomson (2001) has reported how families who may have arrived together can then be separated because of the lack of suitable accommodation for those without work. In addition, they can also become “the objects of hatred and wrath” from the local population (Thomson, 2001: 183).

Those living in refugee camps remain at risk of harm and have few supports or safety nets in place to rely upon. Lack of access to basic amenities can lead to poor health and malnutrition and can feed crime and violence within and around camps. In fact, and as Stohl (2002) has reported, the camps themselves may become militarised, “exposing children to specific threats and intimidation, including rape, injury, forced prostitution, slavery, as well as forced recruitment into armed service.”

For those communities not displaced, their plight can sometimes be little better. There can be the constant fear of attack and the anxiety and trauma that this can bring. In some cases combatants will attempt to undermine communities by purposely attacking and

damaging local hospitals, schools, sanitation systems, and food and water supplies (Miosso, 1996). In the Kongor area of Sudan, for example, it is reported that a massacre of people and cattle led to the reduction of livestock from an estimated 1.5 million to just 50,000 (Machel, 1996). Public health can therefore become one of the most deadly consequences of conflict, compounded often by the short supply of medicines, the lack of health professionals forced to flee the areas concerned for their own safety, and the difficulties faced by those attempting to monitor public health (Stohl, 2002). As Djeddah (1996) explains:

“The risk of communicable diseases . . . is greatly increased in wartime due to displacement, malnutrition, and the breakdown of safe water supplies and sanitation systems. Deaths proliferate from diarrhoea and dehydration as well as from lethal outbreaks of dysentery and cholera. Acute respiratory infections, measles, typhoid, and malaria also exact a very heavy toll.”

Overall, and as Marshall (2005b: 45) has claimed in relation to wars in Africa: “far more people die as a result of disruptions in essential production, exchanges, and health services and at the hands of armed marauders than die ‘honorably’ on the battlefields. Small wars tend to create enormous humanitarian disasters.”

More generally, the relationship between poverty and conflict is deeply interrelated (Cairns, 1996). As described above, armed conflict can uproot and decimate local communities and force people into conditions where they struggle simply to survive. However, poverty and the hopelessness and desperation that this brings can also be the impetus for conflict. Research evidence from Lebanon, for example, found that it was the poorest families who were most likely to experience violence and report its negative impact upon their lives (Armenian, 1989; Bryce, et al., 1989). A very similar picture was also found in Northern Ireland where a strong correlation existed between the level of socio-economic deprivation experienced by local communities and

the number of sectarian murders committed in those communities (Connolly & Healy, 2004).

Overall this leads to what Marshall (2005b: 56) has termed the “conflict-poverty trap”:

“Our evidence suggests that political instability in African countries is strongly, negatively correlated with general issues of human security; provision of education, health, and basic social services; investments in commercial infrastructure; and expansion of modern communications and information technologies. This is the essence of a conflict-poverty trap.”

Of course, whatever the level and intensity of the actual violence that is experienced, one of the deep psychological scars that remains is the hatred and fear that is often passed on from one generation to the next. For those who have witnessed the killing of family or friends or who are, themselves, carrying the physical scars of conflict, it is extremely difficult to move on from this. Even in societies where armed conflict has largely come to an end, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina or Northern Ireland, some communities are still forced to live with a level of insecurity and fear and the continuing threat of indiscriminate attacks from members of the neighbouring community. Moreover, research has suggested that it is not always necessary to have directly experienced or witnessed violence to be affected by it. The media can be an important source of information locally (Cairns, 1996) and has the potential to fuel resentment and fear further.

There are many ways in which these effects of conflict on communities can then impact directly on families. Obviously the most brutal impact is through separation and loss. Family members may be killed as a direct result of the conflict. For some of these their deaths may have resulted from being actively involved as a combatant in the conflict, including those acting as “child soldiers” (UNICEF, 1996; Stohl, 2002; Maxted, 2003; Francis, 2006). It has been recently estimated, for example, that over half of all

conflicts around the world currently make use of child soldiers under the age of five (Save the Children, 2006: 5). However, for others they may simply have been targeted as a member of a particular community or literally just “caught in the crossfire.” In addition, families can experience loss through particular family members having to leave their homes and flee for their own safety (Maxted, 2003). Families can also be dramatically separated as whole communities are forced into exile. There are, for example, harrowing stories of desperate parents feeling they have no option other than to abandon their children so that they can run faster to evade oncoming opposing armed combatants (Ntakiyimana, 2005).

Families who may have fled their homes out of fear but have stayed together, often face significant financial hardship. In Uganda for example, large sections of the rural population were forced to move to urban centers for their own safety. Many of these ended up in IDP (internally displaced people) camps. This, in turn, had a significant impact on their ability to make a living, as they could often be separated from their farms and/or have to walk long distances each day to get to them. Moreover, much of the land surrounding these camps soon became subjected to intensive use and degradation (World Vision, 2004).

For those families who remain together, either in their original homes or after displacement, there is evidence of the acute stress and anxiety that living in the shadow of conflict can cause. In some cases this can lead to parents exerting excessive concern and control over their children’s every movements out of fear for their safety (Kenny, 2001); and in other cases it can lead to harsher and more authoritarian parenting styles more generally (Bryce, et al., 1989) as well as severe depression and domestic violence (Thomson, 2001; Maxted, 2003).

Moreover, for those parents who themselves may be deeply affected and possibly traumatised, it can be very difficult for them to offer any meaningful help and support to their children. In fact it is possible for

them to exacerbate the problems faced by their children by passing on their own fears and anxieties through, for example, being over-protective or holding anxious discussions with others from which the children are excluded (Cairns, 1996).

Having said all of this, families and the wider community can also represent essential avenues of support at times of conflict. While conflict situations can undermine and put families under severe stress, there are also times when some families can grow stronger in the face of adversity (Cairns, 1996). Research has shown that strong families can act as a “buffer to the long-term effects of trauma” and thus encourage and facilitate recuperation (Cairns, 1996: 63). Interestingly, even in situations where an individual may have lost all immediate family through conflict, the fact that they had experienced close and supportive family relationships previously has been shown to help them deal psychologically with their loss over the longer term (Ressler, et al., 1988). Moreover, the wider community has also been found to provide an important source of support for those dealing with the trauma and aftermath of war and conflict. A number of research studies have, for example, reported lower levels of trauma and other adverse psychological effects among young people who have remained within their original culture as compared to those who have been forced to live in a new country where the culture is very different from their own (Sack, et al., 1986). The implications of all of this in terms of the need to work with and support families and local communities, as well as addressing the immediate needs of children, will be considered later and will provide a theme running throughout the chapters to follow.

The impact of war and armed conflicts on young children

So what are the effects of all of this on young children themselves? How does growing up in a

society affected by war and armed conflict impact directly on the health and well-being of young children? To answer this question it is useful to look briefly at three differing types of effect: the impact on young children’s physical safety; the effects of post-traumatic stress on young children; and the broader effects of conflict on children’s social and cognitive development.

The impact on young children’s physical safety

Some of the key figures relating to the number of children dying as a direct result of armed conflicts around the world have already been mentioned. During some of the most intense conflicts, the figures are truly shocking. During the five-year period between 1982-1986, for example, 333,000 child deaths were recorded in Angola and 490,000 in Mozambique (Bellamy, 1986). However, and as also stressed earlier, brutal as it is, this is only part of the picture. If such conflicts do not kill children directly, there is a likelihood that they will be killed by the indirect effects of conflict. Young children are especially vulnerable to malnutrition and the types of communicable diseases outlined earlier (Guha-Sapir & Gijbert, 2004; Moss, et al., 2006; Zwi, et al., 2006). While malnutrition affects all children, it is those children under the age of three who face the greatest risk of mortality, particularly through “wasting” (i.e., gradual weight loss and general physical deterioration) (Machel, 1996). Also, and as MacCormack (1999) has pointed out, “in poor countries, where children are already vulnerable to malnutrition and disease, armed conflict can increase death rates by up to 24 times.”

In addition, rape and the sexual assault of girls and women have become an insidious part of many armed conflicts (UNICEF, 1996; United Nations, 2002; World Vision, 2004). It can often be used as a deliberate policy and “tool of ethnic cleansing and terror” (Harvey, 2003: 46; see also Ayalon, 1998). It has been reported that in some raids in Rwanda, for example, nearly every adolescent girl who survived the initial attacks was then raped by the militia (UNICEF, 1996).

Young children are also affected by this in two ways. First, while adolescent girls are more likely to be the targets of such assaults, it is not unknown for younger girls to also be targeted. Moreover, young children who were conceived through rape can find themselves ostracised by their own community, as well as having a higher risk of having contracted sexually transmitted diseases, especially HIV / AIDS (Ayalon, 1998).

The effects of post-traumatic stress on young children

Beyond these direct forms of physical harm inflicted on young children through war and armed conflict, perhaps the next most significant impact is the psychological scars caused by post-traumatic stress (Pearn, 2003). A survey conducted by UNICEF in 1996 in Rwanda found that nearly 80 percent of children had lost an immediate family member and as many as a third of these had actually been witness to the killings (MacCormack, 1999). Similarly, it has been estimated that around 90 percent of children who were aged two when the war in Bosnia started “saw a family member or friend die during the siege of Sarajevo and in the surrounding villages” (Armstrong, 2002). The impact of witnessing such violent loss on young children’s psychological well-being is simply unfathomable (Ayalon, 1998). However, even those children who are not direct witnesses to violent acts can still experience considerable trauma as a result of the sudden loss of and/or concerns for a close family member (Cairns, 1996). Such suffering is compounded for many older children, as the loss of a significant adult in the family can result in them becoming the main caregivers and/or main opportunity for the family to generate income (Stohl, 2002).

Children’s responses to such traumatic events have been found to vary significantly. Some children have been found to be extremely resilient, while others have displayed a wide variety of symptoms including: changes in personality and temperament; nightmares and sleep disturbances; bedwetting; excessive attachment to significant others; fainting;

aggressive behaviour; lack of concentration; withdrawal and depression; hyper-vigilance; loss of memory; speech loss and other psychosomatic disorders (Pynoos & Eth, 1985; Thomas, 1990; MacCormack, 1999). What seems to be important in many cases in relation to a child’s responses to traumatic events is not so much the event itself but their interpretation of it (Cairns, 1996). One of the implications of this for providing even young children the space to explore and make sense of the events that surround them will be considered shortly.

The effects on young children’s social and cognitive development

Finally, it is not surprising to find that the more general social and cognitive development of young children is also likely to be affected by living in war zones and areas affected by armed conflict. A child’s emotional development, particularly their sense of identity and self-esteem can be affected profoundly by the loss of a parent or other close family member and thus the loss of attachment that results (Ayalon, 1998). Some children will develop a deep sense of anxiety and insecurity, while others will find it very difficult to trust those around them and may harbour deep feelings of vulnerability (Macksoud, 1994). In addition, some young children will develop low self-esteem and self-worth and other negative psychological traits. In some cases these may be associated with a child’s loss of language, identity, or culture as a result of being displaced and/or separated from their immediate family (Pearn, 2003; Bargo, 2005; Moss, et al., 2006).

It is also possible that young children’s social and moral development can be affected by growing up in a society affected by conflict (Shulman, 2006). As Macksoud (1994) suggests:

“During wartime, children [may] experience a sense of ‘betrayal’ when they watch such authority figures as parents, teachers, or local heroes — those role models they have learned to trust and respect — repeatedly breaching the expected moral standards of

behaviour. This deep sense of betrayal may affect the moral development of these children. Basic assumptions about what is right and wrong are thoroughly shaken.”

Moreover, these role models and the divided communities and societies that young children live in and experience may also impact upon their attitudes towards themselves and others. Research from Northern Ireland, for example, has shown that even children as young as three are beginning to develop preferences for the political symbols and events associated with their own community. Within just a few years, and by the age of six, the research estimated that a third of children in Northern Ireland were aware of the ethnic divide that exists and which “side” they belonged to, and around one in six were making overtly prejudiced statements about “the other side” (Connolly, et al., 2002).

Moreover, violence can easily become a routine and normalised part of children’s lives (Shulman, 2006). This can be seen, for example, in relation to a number of studies that have reported how children tend to recreate the violence and conflict that surrounds them in their play. Observational studies conducted in South Africa have found that “police raid games” were prevalent in children’s games (Liddell, et al., 1993) while in Northern Ireland it has been reported that children as young as four and five “were spending considerable time erecting barricades in their playgroups and pretending to throw petrol bombs” (Cairns, 1996: 84). However, rather than seeing such activities as important ways in which young children are attempting to explore and make sense of the conflict that surrounds them, anecdotal evidence suggests that a tendency exists for adults to stop such games for fear of how they may look or where they may lead. This, in turn, tends to be part of a general silence that children experience in relation to the events surrounding them whereby little opportunity is provided for them to explore what they have seen and to express their feelings about it (Smyth, 1998; Murray, 2001). As Murray (2001) has argued, not having the opportunity to make sense of

what is happening around them can simply increase children’s sense of powerlessness and vulnerability.

Finally, the evidence would suggest that children’s cognitive development can also be restricted as a result of living in societies affected by conflict. Delays in the development of numeracy and literacy skills as well as critical thinking have been reported (Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003) as has the tendency for children living in such environments to place less value on education and schooling (McCauley, 2001). Part of the reason for this is likely to be the fact that schooling can be severely disrupted during periods of violence and conflict (Djeddah, 1996) and especially early childhood education programs (Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2005). It is reported, for example, that only 6 percent of child refugees are enrolled in secondary school (Blair, 2004: 11). Moreover, it has been recently estimated that around 43 million children worldwide are being kept out of school because of conflict (Save the Children, 2006: 1). Clearly, the insecurity created by living in a society affected by conflict is likely to undermine the ability of young children to play, learn, and explore as confidently and securely as they would in other environments.

Key challenges for early years providers working in conflict-affected societies

So what are the key challenges for early years providers in societies affected by war and armed conflict? It may seem from the above outline that the impact of conflict on communities and families is so great that there is little room or hope for early years services. However, the chapters to follow will show that not only is there significant potential to make a difference in the lives of children and families affected by conflict, but a great deal of exciting and innovative work is already taking place. As will be seen, the stories to be recounted are provided by members of the International Working Group on

Peace Building with Young Children working in very different contexts and situations around the world. Inevitably, therefore, the particular issues and challenges they face will vary enormously. However, from the discussion provided in this chapter, it is possible to identify a number of core issues that transcend specific situations and thus represent key challenges for early years professionals wherever they are working. There are six of these that were identified by the International Working Group at its first meeting in 2004 as a means of focusing their efforts. Each of these is posed as a question below. The purpose of the chapters to follow is to show, through the real and personal stories of early years educators, just how we can begin answering these:

- What support can we give to caregivers in helping them deal with the effects of violence in their children's lives?
- How can we best listen to the voices of young children and help them to explore, in a safe environment, their experiences of conflict and the beliefs, fears, and anxieties that arise from these?
- In situations where there are high and intense levels of violence, how do we go about meeting the needs of children when their families and communities are literally disintegrating?
- How can we begin to work effectively with families and communities in the many different contexts created by political violence and armed conflict?
- How can we be effective advocates for children living in conflict-affected societies?
- What role can we, as early years professionals, play in terms of helping to build the peace?

