

Chapter Ten

Key Lessons Learned

Reading this book is likely to elicit mixed emotions for many people. Even the briefest attempts at imagining what it must be like to be in a family caught up in violent conflict hurts. It is almost impossible to comprehend just what levels of pain and despair are experienced by young children when they see their parents or their brothers or sisters murdered in front of them or when their families are ripped apart. Some of the symptoms of loss and trauma experienced by children in response to such circumstances — such as repeated nightmares and bedwetting, loss of speech, obsessive attachment to adult family members, and uncontrolled anger — provide just a little insight into the devastating effects that living in a conflict-affected society have on young children.

However, the chapters included in this book are also stories of hope and encouragement. What we have attempted to do through these stories is to show that there are things that we, as early years professionals, can do that can make a real difference. Above all, we

have seen the power that the early years sector can have not only in its ability to provide direct support to children and their families but also in its potential to play an important role more broadly in helping to build peace and foster reconciliation. In this chapter we will focus on drawing out the key lessons learned from the previous chapters and how these might possibly provide a framework of action for others attempting to support children and families in conflict-affected regions.

Before doing this it is useful to draw out from the previous chapters what the key effects of conflict are on children, families, and communities living in conflict-affected societies. This, in turn, will help us to focus on what the nature of the problem is that we as early years professionals need to address. As will be seen, these effects resonate closely with those identified by previous research and outlined in Chapter One. They also give rise to the same six core questions that we posed for ourselves at the end of that chapter.

Lecciones clave aprendidas

La lectura de este libro puede producir emociones encontradas a mucha gente. Aun los menores intentos por imaginar lo que sería formar parte de una familia atrapada en el conflicto, son dolorosos. Es casi imposible comprender los niveles de dolor y

desesperación que experimentan los niños y niñas pequeños cuando ven a sus padres, hermanos o hermanas, asesinados frente a ellos, o cuando sus familias son separadas de manera violenta. Algunos de los traumas o síntomas de pérdida experimentados por los niños/as en respuesta a estas circunstancias — tales como las pesadillas constantes; la pérdida del habla, el apego obsesivo a los adultos

de su familia o la ira incontrolada — nos proporcionan un pequeño “insight” sobre los devastadores efectos que vivir en una sociedad afectada por el conflicto tienen en la temprana infancia.

Sin embargo, los capítulos incluidos en este libro también son historias de esperanza y coraje. Lo que hemos intentado hacer a través de estas historias, es mostrar que hay cosas que los profesionales que trabajan con la niñez temprana podemos hacer para crear una diferencia real. Sobre todo, hemos visto el poder que el sector de la infancia tiene, no solo para proporcionar apoyo directo a los niños, niñas y sus familias, sino también en su potencial para jugar un rol más amplio muy importante, ayudando a la construcción de la paz y la reconciliación. En este capítulo nos enfocaremos en el desarrollo de las lecciones más importantes aprendidas de los

capítulos previos. Y en como pueden estas lecciones proveer un marco de acción para otros que intentan apoyar las familias, los niños y niñas, en regiones afectadas por el conflicto armado.

Antes de hacer esto es útil extraer de los capítulos precedentes cuales son los principales efectos del conflicto sobre la niñez, las familias y las comunidades que viven en sociedades afectadas por el conflicto. Esto a su vez, nos ayudara a enfocarnos en la naturaleza del problema que tendremos que afrontar como profesionales trabajando con la temprana infancia. Como se vera, estos efectos se aproximan mucho a aquellos identificados por investigaciones previas que han sido descritos en el primer capítulo. También apoyan las mismas seis preguntas centrales que propusimos la finalizar ese primer capítulo.

The effects of conflict on children, families, and communities

One of the key points to emerge from the previous chapters is that each conflict situation is unique and the violence associated with it manifests itself in different ways. In Albania, for example, there are the “blood feuds” while in Colombia there is the high incidence of kidnapping for ransom or revenge. Similarly, Nepal has experienced high level of child abductions, often with the aim of political indoctrination, while Bosnia and Herzegovina is now emerging from an intense and violent period of ethnic cleansing. In Chad there is the acute problem of absolute poverty fueling existing tensions and conflict, while in the United States communities are being ripped apart by gun crime and drugs. Moreover, segregation and deep social divisions tend to underpin a number of conflict-affected regions. This can be seen for example, in relation to Palestine where certain communities are physically isolated and feel “under siege.” However, even in societies

emerging from conflict and attempting to build peace, such as the case with Northern Ireland, the legacy of those divisions remain.

What is perhaps most remarkable from the stories recounted from all of these regions is the fact that the fundamental issues facing those working with young children and their families are so similar. Regardless of the nature and type of conflict that exists, three central issues tend to emerge through all of the stories to one degree or another, and we will look briefly at each in turn.

The direct effects of conflict on young children

First, while the nature and scale of the violence has differed from one situation to the next, the fact remains that in all of these places children have not only been the direct casualties of conflict but have also suffered physically and emotionally from being caught up in and witnessing violent events. Not surprisingly, therefore, all of the stories recounted in previous chapters point to the many children who have been left traumatized by seeing their own

family members murdered, raped, or tortured as well as having to live under a cloud of fear. This cloud of fear can often be intensified for children exposed to television and radio news reporting that act as constant reminders of the threat out there.

Moreover, another theme running through these chapters has been the lack of opportunity that children have to explore and express their feelings. Many of the chapters, for example, have drawn attention to the lack of a safe space for children to begin to come to terms with their experiences and the attitudes they are beginning to develop from these. In addition there has often been an understandable reluctance on the part of early years educators and parents to even begin examining all of this with their children. After all, they are as much victims of the conflict as the children are and so will often find it an issue that is incredibly difficult and painful to deal with. As we have seen, what this often leads to is a situation where children tend to be left to their own devices to try to make sense of what is happening around them. For some, the gravity of the situation simply leads to post-traumatic stress as described above. For others, and as reported in several chapters, children will do their best to try to understand what is happening to them through re-enacting through their play the violent events and fighting they have witnessed. Not surprisingly, with little guidance or support, children will have little opportunity other than to develop partial and distorted world views where violence and division are normalized. This, in turn, can help to fuel conflict for the next generation.

Given these experiences, we are left with two key questions for those working with children and families in conflict-affected societies as originally posed at the end of Chapter One:

- 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?

The effects of conflict on families

The second key theme underpinning the stories recounted in previous chapters is the effect that conflict has on families. Many families are left to deal with the trauma and loss associated with family members who have been killed or have simply disappeared. Moreover, there can be significant adjustments required in families where one or more of their members have been injured as a result of being caught up in the conflict. All of this can place considerable strain and stress on families that, in turn, is often picked up and internalized by the children.

This, however, is only part of the picture. We have seen that conflict often leads to the loss of male family members, in particular, who tend either to be the targets of warring factions or who are drawn directly into the conflict themselves. As found in relation to the stories from Albania and Nepal, for example, this can often lead to families without any adult males. Not only are there no male role models for the children, but this can place additional pressure on families as they struggle to survive having much less capacity to earn a living.

In addition, we have seen recent examples from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Chad, Nepal, and Palestine of large numbers of families being displaced as a result of conflict. Even in post-conflict societies such as Northern Ireland, while the scale of such displacement is now much less, there are still occasions where families are burned out of their own homes or forced to flee for their own safety. As reported in several chapters, this in turn can often place such families in extremely vulnerable positions; often being unable to find work and so being plunged into poverty and ill-health. We have also seen reports of children of displaced families being unable to attend school or facing difficulties when attending new schools. For many families, even when

the conflict has ended, as in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Nepal, there is a strong reluctance to return to their home town or village because of the trust that has been broken. For some they are thus condemned to an immediate future where they are not only vulnerable economically and in terms of their health and general well-being, but they are also suffering from detachment from and thus loss of their fundamental sense of cultural identity and belonging.

There are also examples from all of the stories reported in the previous chapters of families completely disintegrating as a result of killings, displacement, and/or being ripped apart as individual members flee for their own safety. Such experiences have been recounted to one degree or another in all of the stories included in this book and lead us, as early years professionals, back to two further questions originally posed in Chapter One:

- 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?

The effects of conflict on wider communities

Finally, and as we have seen, it is not just families that are destroyed by conflict but also whole communities. Communities can often be found to literally disintegrate as families are forced to flee for fear of their lives. Moreover, in the throes of conflict the very basic infrastructure of communities can be destroyed as opposing factions purposely target hospitals, roads, sanitation, and water supplies. In Bosnia and Hervegovina, Nepal, and Palestine, for example, we have seen stories of schools and nurseries either being targeted for attack or taken over by military forces.

Such forms of conflict do not just lead to significant numbers of people being displaced but can also lead to the creation of new, and deeply divided communities where the legacy of such divisions — as in Bosnia and Hervegovina and Northern Ireland — can continue for generations. Moreover, conflict not only leads to divisions between communities but can also create divisions within communities. As seen from the stories recounted from Colombia and the United States, whole communities can begin to disintegrate from within as a result of violence and crime.

Being an integral part of the community, the early years sector cannot avoid these wider effects of the conflict on their communities. Alongside providing direct support to children and families we therefore need to look beyond this and ask ourselves two final questions, again as posed originally at the end of Chapter One:

- 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?

Key lessons learned

This, then, is the nature of the problem faced by early years professionals working in conflict-affected societies. As encapsulated by the six core questions, it is a problem that is multi-layered and therefore requires a multi-layered response. Not only do we need to continue to work directly with children and families, we also need to engage effectively with the wider community and also, beyond this, to develop a more strategic and advocacy-based role.

Fortunately, there is a wealth of experience contained in the preceding chapters that we can learn from. In particular, there are seven key lessons that can be drawn out that may be useful to other early years professionals working in conflict-affected societies. Each will now be explained in turn but, in summary, they are:

1. There is a need to develop quality, child-centered environments for young children.
2. There is a need to create safe spaces for children to express and explore their feelings, including those related to their experiences of the conflict.
3. There is a need to provide training and ongoing support to those working with young children and families.
4. There is a need to provide direct support to parents.
5. There is a need to adopt a community development approach that aims to empower local communities and build capacity so that they can develop and maintain early years services for themselves.
6. The early years sector has considerable potential to contribute to peace building and reconciliation more broadly.
7. The early years sector has an important role to play nationally and internationally in advocating for children and bringing pressure to bear for peace.

It is important to stress that these lessons should not be treated as a complete and comprehensive list of “what to do.” There is still so much more that we need to learn and share internationally as will be described in the next chapter. However, these lessons learned do provide a clear outline of some of the approaches we feel have been important and have worked for us. Moreover, we have confidence in these precisely because they resonate closely with our experiences drawn from working in many different conflict-affected societies and regions.

For the sake of clarity, we have organized the lessons learned under three headings: those related to working directly with children and families; those related to working with the wider community; and finally, those related to working more strategically

towards bringing about longer-term change. However, while reported in this way, it is important to stress that they are all inter-related. It is the active combination of all of these lessons learned that we feel begins to create an agenda for the early years sector in conflict-affected societies.

Working directly with children and families

In terms of working directly with children and families, four key lessons have emerged from the previous chapters.

1. There is a need to develop quality, child-centered environments for young children.

A concern shared by all of those whose stories have been shared in previous chapters is the need to create a quality early education and care environment for young children that is child-centered and culturally and developmentally appropriate. Young children, therefore, need to be given the opportunity to explore their surroundings, develop social and emotional competence, and express themselves in a wide range of differing ways. Moreover, we as adults need to be able to listen and understand children through the many different ways they choose to express their feelings and perspectives. This is the foundation stone that then creates an environment that makes it possible for children to explore and work through the violence and events they see happening around them (see Lesson 2).

In many respects, transforming an early years setting into one that is child-centered does not require significant resources but can often be achieved by making use of existing resources and materials that are around. In Albania, for example, where many of the settings are based in rural areas, they found it possible to make use of the wealth of natural resources that surrounded them including leaves, conkers, fir cones, and twigs to make collages, models, and pictures.

Moreover, and as illustrated by the story from Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is important not just to uncritically accept and apply “quality standards” from elsewhere but to explore and adapt them to the specific contexts within which a particular setting is located. This in turn requires a wider community development model where early years professionals, parents, and the wider community are involved in developing and delivering early years services (see Lesson 5). In fact this, itself, is dependent upon those involved having the capacity to contribute meaningfully to this process (see Lessons 3 and 4) and whereby strong and effective networks are created among all those involved as a result (see Lesson 5).

2. *There is a need to create safe spaces for children to express and explore their feelings, including those related to their experiences of the conflict.*

It is only through creating child-centered environments for children that we can begin to support children in terms of providing them with the space to make sense of their experiences and to express and explore their feelings. Clearly, this requires the creation of “safe spaces” where children feel physically and emotionally safe and thus have the confidence to be able to begin expressing themselves. As we have seen, simply creating this safe space can be extremely difficult, especially in areas where conflict is ongoing. However, as the stories from Palestine and Northern Ireland have shown, this is possible. Moreover, even where children’s spaces are being routinely targeted and used by warring factions, the example from Nepal and the success of the Children as Zones of Peace campaign shows that through collective action and advocacy it is possible to challenge this (see Lesson 7).

Within these safe spaces it is important to provide children with the opportunity to discuss and explore their experiences of the conflict if they wish to and to express their feelings about this. At one level this can be done with the use of existing resources available in a child-centered environment (Lesson 1) as well as

the creation of other inexpensive materials, such as puppets as discussed in the story from Palestine. However, and at another level, this does rely upon the adults in those settings having the skills to be able to support and encourage the children effectively, which as already noted is not always easy when they may have been affected by the conflict themselves. As such this does require significant investment in terms of the training and ongoing support of those working with young children (see Lesson 3).

3. *There is a need to provide training and ongoing support to those working with young children and families.*

Given some of the situations described in previous chapters, it is not surprising to find that in some situations the struggle is simply to create a safe and dedicated space for children. However, for that space to be effective it needs to be child-centered, as already argued; and this, in turn, requires adults who have the knowledge and skills to create and maintain this effectively. This, however, does not just require training in relation to such core matters as child development, children’s rights, and child-centered care and education. When dealing with the effects of conflict among children and families, it also requires a whole set of additional skills. In situations where everyone is affected by conflict to one degree or another, an essential part of this includes providing early years professionals with the skills necessary to be able to identify and reflect upon their own experiences, attitudes, and prejudices. As illustrated by the stories from Northern Ireland and also Bosnia and Herzegovina, training is needed that encourages self-exploration and open, honest, and respectful dialogue among those involved.

Beyond this there is also the need to provide training for those working directly with children and families in terms of how they can most effectively deal with issues raised around the conflict. As the work reported in the story from Northern Ireland has shown, this involves not only dealing with the fears and anxieties that parents may have but also how to respond to the

negative attitudes and prejudices that young children themselves might raise, and thus to promote understanding of and respect for diversity.

4. There is a need to provide direct support to parents.

From the last example it can be seen that for any approach to be effective there is a need to work in partnership with parents. As we have seen, this has been a strong theme running through all of the chapters. It certainly involves increasing the awareness of parents about key issues relating to early child care and development, including issues relating to health care as reported in the story from Palestine and around issues of fear and personal safety as covered in the story from the United States. Crucially, it also involves reaching out to and involving fathers as well as mothers as shown in relation to Albania.

Beyond this there is a need to provide parents with the training to be able to provide their children with the help and support they need in relation to the conflict. In Colombia, for example, this has included providing training to parents on how they can use drama and art as ways of helping their children work through the stress and trauma they may be experiencing. In addition, there is a need to ensure that there is continuity between the approach taken in the early years setting and what goes on at home. As shown in Northern Ireland, this can involve the creation of simple resources that children make and/or play with in the setting but then take home to encourage further exploration with their parents.

Working with the wider community

As already indicated through the discussion above, creating child-centered environments and working effectively with children and families require a

broader community development approach. It is only through involving the communities themselves and providing them with the capacity to create and maintain early years settings that any initiatives will be effective and sustainable. This recognition, in turn, leads onto the next two lessons learned from the experiences recounted in the previous chapters.

5. There is a need to adopt a community development approach that aims to empower local communities and build capacity so that they can develop and maintain early years services for themselves.

There is certainly nothing wrong with outside agencies providing support to local communities to help meet the needs of their children and families. However, for this to be effective it needs to work from where the community is at, and aim to give them ownership of any services that are put in place, and also to develop their capacity to be able to run and sustain these in the longer-term. The problems of outside agencies coming into a region with a pre-determined response and set of services that bear little relationship to the needs of local communities and families was illustrated by the story from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

However, this need not be the case. The example of the work of the Christian Children's Fund (CCF) in Albania shows how it is possible for outside agencies to work effectively to support local communities by employing local people, conducting comprehensive needs assessments, and giving local communities ownership of the services that are developed. As stressed in relation to the story from Chad, communities will only effectively begin to heal when they have opportunities to help themselves. For this type of community development approach to be effective, there needs to be a concerted effort at bringing key organizations and agencies together to create strategic networks. This was one of the key messages to emerge from the story recounted from the United States, where

effective community coalitions had to be built to begin addressing crime and violence within communities. CINDE's Family and Community Centers, described in the story from Colombia, provide another example of the effectiveness of creating local networks to help share experiences and resources, as does the national network of organizations that the Resource Center described in the story from Nepal has established.

Within this, there is a need to be strategic and thus set clear objectives in relation to the networks that are to be established. This is a point made strongly by Ali Shaar from his experience in Palestine. It is also a point illustrated by the establishment of the *Media Initiative for Children* — Northern Ireland where very clear and achievable goals were essential to the success of the program. Indeed, this last example also illustrates the positive role that outside agencies can play — in this case the US-based Peace Initiatives Institute — in encouraging and facilitating that type of networking. However, within all of this there is a need to ensure that local organizations have the resources as well as the capacity to enable them to network and participate as equals within a partnership.

Finally, another important strand found in relation to this type of community development approach is the need to develop effective and visionary leaders from within the early years sector. This can be seen, for example, in relation to the innovative educational programs described in the story from Colombia where CINDE has developed strong partnerships with a number of local universities to provide high quality postgraduate training — up to and including Ph.Ds — to help equip the existing and next generation of leaders.

6. *The early years sector has considerable potential to contribute to peace building and reconciliation more broadly.*

There is no doubt that the early years sector has so much potential to be a power for good in regions affected by conflict. As already stressed, through the provision of high quality child care and education, it is possible to set the foundations upon which future generations can emerge who are confident, secure, and socially aware and who also respect cultural differences and are inclusive in their outlook. However, this is only part of the picture. Through adopting the type of community development approach outlined above, the early years sector also has the potential to make an important contribution to building the peace more generally within and between existing communities. More specifically, there is something about early childhood that can transcend existing political divides and encourage those involved in conflict to re-focus their attention and priorities and to think instead of their own children and their future.

One example of the power of the early years was provided by the story from Albania. While in many ways Albania is a traditional and patriarchal society, the work of the early years sector there has not just encouraged men to be more involved in the care of their children; but, crucially, it has also provided the stepping stone from which it has been possible to begin engaging some of the men in conflict resolution work. Given the deeply-entrenched nature of the conflict in Albania, organized as it is around blood feuds, it is difficult to see how this may have been achieved other than through building upon the men's genuine concerns for their children and grandchildren and their futures.

Similarly, the story from Chad has shown how efforts to develop effective early childhood centers provided the basis from which broader issues, in this case gender inequalities, could begin to be dealt with and overcome. Moreover, in societies that remain deeply-divided, it has been shown how a focus on the early years has helped to provide shared spaces where caregivers from both sides of the divide are able to come together to share experiences and perspectives and to provide mutual support. As recounted in the story from Northern Ireland, this was possible even

during the height of the conflict here. Nowadays, in Northern Ireland and other societies emerging from conflict, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, the early years sector is playing an important role in drawing divided communities together and building peace.

Perhaps the key point underpinning all of this, however, is the need to begin from where communities are at and to identify and address the real needs that children and families in those communities have. It is only through this that genuine trust and effective relationships can be built that will, in turn, allow other peace-building goals to be set and addressed. It is therefore important not to begin by attempting to impose different values and beliefs on communities. As the experience from Albania showed, significant change in the behaviour of men towards child care and towards violence is now beginning to be achieved precisely because the initial focus was on building up trust and confidence through providing quality early childhood environments, rather than beginning with an explicit and political stance regarding gender equality.

Working towards longer-term change

Ultimately, there is a need to be realistic. Each of the conflicts described in the foregoing chapters has its own economic and political roots and, ultimately, will only ever be effectively resolved through economic and political means. The early years sector cannot, therefore, bring an end to conflict and build peace in and of itself. However, and as with every other sector within a society affected by conflict, it has a role to play. For the early years sector, we have set out what some of this role might be above as drawn out from the preceding chapters.

Much of the role set out so far has been concerned with working directly with local communities to meet the needs of children and families. There is, however, a wider role that the early years sector can play

nationally and internationally in terms of advocating for children and thus bringing political pressure to bear in regions affected by conflict, and this brings us to our last key lesson.

7. The early years sector has an important role to play nationally and internationally in advocating for children and bringing pressure to bear for peace.

As mentioned earlier, it is one thing to recommend the creation of safe areas for children and yet entirely another thing to actually create these, especially in societies riven by conflict. What the example from Nepal of the Children as a Zone of Peace campaign has shown is the power that a wider advocacy campaign can have in bringing about change. As already mentioned, one of the features of the conflict in Nepal was the targeting and use of schools by opposing forces as well as the significant numbers of children being abducted for the purposes of political indoctrination. Through the effective use of the news media and a coordinated awareness campaign, a coalition of organizations was able to get all sides to commit themselves to a 10-point plan to avoid children being exposed to or drawn into the conflict.

Part of the success of this campaign has undoubtedly been the fact that the concern for the safety and well-being of children was shared by all parties involved. It is in this sense that the power of early childhood can be seen in its ability to transcend political divides. However, the success of the campaign was also related to the ability of the news media to provide “hard evidence” of the effects of the conflict on children. This, in turn, points towards the important role that research can play in advocacy work by providing evidence of the plight of children and the effects that conflict is having on their lives and those of their families. Moreover, research can also play a key role in evaluating the effectiveness of particular initiatives, as illustrated by the story from Northern Ireland, as well as being used as a resource

for others to draw upon as described by the story from Nepal.

Of course early years professionals can also conduct their own research into the needs of the children and families they work with, as well as into the effectiveness of the programs and services they deliver. What this brings us back to is the importance of training and capacity building and the role that universities can play, not only in undertaking research directly, but also in building research capacity among the early years sector more widely.

Conclusions

What we have tried to do in this chapter is to draw out the key lessons learned from the stories told in the previous chapters. While these stories have been difficult to read at times because of the pain and suffering they have recounted, it is also important to recognize that these are stories of hope and encouragement as well. While conflict is brutal and can create appalling situations that children and families find themselves in, there is plenty of evidence provided in this book that there is

something that the early years sector can do about this.

In this chapter we have attempted to identify and draw out the key lessons learned from across the different stories. As shown, while each conflict situation is unique, the key issues that arise for children and families is remarkably similar. This, in turn, has enabled us to draw out seven key lessons, as outlined above, that are sufficiently generic to be applicable to a wide range of conflict-affected societies. As we have seen, these lessons have included the need for training and capacity building and for approaches based upon community development models. They have also focused on the need for strategic networking, at all levels, as well as strong advocacy work at national and international levels and applied research to support this.

These key lessons, in turn, provide a natural starting point for the final chapter which describes the development, current work, and future plans of the International Working Group on Peace Building with Young Children. It is, therefore, to this that the book now turns.