

Review Article

The International Century of the Child: Is it a Dream?

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Abstract

There is evidence that multiple negative influences and conditions worldwide not only hinder children from achieving their optimal potential, but also often cause them to be involved in malevolent behaviors. Present evidence suggests that children exposed to guidance via authoritative parenting, modeling of helping behaviors, reading stories with a moral and age-appropriate human relations programs stand the best chance to enter the ranks of responsible citizenry as adults. Moreover, the skills of non-violent conflict resolution are likely to be developed, resulting in the avoidance of armed conflict. It is proposed that the Oversight Committee for the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) of the United Nations should continue to review progress made by countries in advancing the welfare of children. Partnerships with governments and NGOs in furthering the welfare of children is critical. The input of the United States of America would be more helpful, should ratification of the CRC be finally approved by its Senate.

INTRODUCTION

The General Assembly of the United Nations passed a proclamation designating 1979 as the "International Year of the Child, under the auspices of UNESCO [1]." The proclamation was intended to draw attention to and hopefully address problems that impacted children around the world. As a consequence of this effort to provide support to children in need, a new document was drafted. This document "The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)" [2,3], was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989. Subsequently, the CRC was ratified by every UN member state, except the United States of America. Concern for interference in sovereignty and control of parenting decisions apparently prevented USA legislators from voting on the CRC. Unfortunately, only representatives of member states that ratify the CRC can be members of the oversight committee. That committee's role is to evaluate progress made by members in addressing the needs of children and to make recommendations as to how the rights of children may be better served by individual states. The fact that many impediments to the psychosocial and physical development of children persist throughout the world is a testament to the work still waiting to be accomplished. A listing of some of these critical problems is in order to document areas where much more effort is clearly required.

Child Labor

Child labor [4], is the exploitation of children through any form of work that deprives them of their childhood, interferes with

their ability to attend regular school or is mentally, physically, socially and morally harmful. As of 2023, in the world's poorest countries one in five children are engaged in child labor. Poverty and lack of schools are considered the primary causes of child labor. UNICEF notes "boys and girls are equally involved in child labor", but in different roles, girls being substantially more likely to perform unpaid household labor. The total number of child laborers remains high with UNICEF and the International Labor Organization (ILO) acknowledging an estimated 168 million children aged 5-17 worldwide were involved in child labor in 2013.

Child Labor and Slavery in the Chocolate Industry

One form of child labor is commonly seen in the chocolate industry [5-7]. Chocolate is a product of the cacao bean which grows mainly in Western Africa, Asia and Latin America. The cocoa produced goes to the various companies that produce the multitude of end products. In previous times, organizations and journalists have exposed widespread use of child labor and cases of actual child slavery in some cocoa farms. Chocolate companies are aware of the child labor and the instances of human trafficking and slavery in the harvesting and initial processing of the cacao pods. Most cacao farmers are said to earn about one dollar per day, so they are well below the poverty line. Child labor is used to keep the price of cacao and the end product at the cheapest possible price. The chocolate producers do manage to make considerable profits as they sell their end products.

Many cases of child labor in the harvesting of cacao have been classified by the ILO as “the worst forms of child labor practices likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.” A large number of children work on the cacao farms. The traffickers often tell children and their families that the job pays well. Moreover, the families are unaware of the dangerous work environment, the poor accommodations provided and the lack of provision for education. Traffickers are known to abduct children from countries that neighbor the cacao producers. Most of the trafficked children are 12 to 16 years of age, although some are younger 40% of children are girls.

The child cocoa workers work long hours, up to about 14 hours per day. They climb cacao trees to cut the bean pods with machetes. This requirement violates international labor laws and a UN convention eliminating the worst forms of child labor. Subsequent to harvesting the bean pods, the children need to pack them in sacks and carry the heavy loads long distances through the forest. Some children are beaten, if perceived to be too slow in their work. Following arrival to a base, the pods are cut open to harvest the cacao beans, a very dangerous job that may also involve exposure to insecticides.

It is through exploitation of cacao farms that corporations producing chocolate products garner huge profits. Some of these corporations have tried to develop inspections of the farms to improve conditions. Lack of inspectors and enforcement of reasonable standards have made these corporate efforts largely ineffective. Efforts to “certify” products as occurring without the use of slave labor have often been misleading, as oppressive work conditions persist. Moreover, most of the “certified” farmers still live in poverty, so they often do not have the resources to improve the work environment. Therefore, abuse of children in the cacao farms seems to go on unabated.

Clearly, there is a simple solution to the problem of abusive child labor on the cacao farms. Adequate resources need to be provided to support comprehensive inspections. Clear standards for children who work on the cacao farms must be developed. Adequate housing, good nutrition, safe work environments and education must be provided. Governments can provide the resources and person power to do the job. Such an effort could be promoted and monitored by the CRC Oversight Committee (OCCRC). It should be aggressively pursued.

Corporal Punishment and Psychological Abuse of Children

Corporal punishment and the psychological abuse (i.e. shaming, coercion) of children are commonly used by parents and teachers to “discipline” children [8-10]. Both modalities of establishing control take many forms. The apparent purpose of corporal punishment is to have the resultant pain associated with this modality deter similar behavior in the future, due to its unpleasant consequences. The problem with both these forms of behavior modification is that they commonly produce repressed fear and anger [11-13], that serve as a source of negative mental

energy that may be expressed in antisocial and violent actions in later years.

Additionally, when the child is working daily to avoid physical and mental insults, there is no opportunity to experience trusting, supportive human relationships. As a result, a stifling of emotional empathy occurs. Such an occurrence facilitates participation in violent actions that a society may establish for its own selfish purposes, due to a disregard for the pain inflicted on others.

Traditionally, corporal punishment and psychological abuse have been common modalities used with authoritarian parenting and societies [12,13]. An antidote to such a destructive parenting style is that of authoritative parenting where trusting supportive relationships between child and caretakers are established [13,14]. With authoritative parenting, discipline for misbehavior is carried out in a non-violent manner. The trust that develops allows for learning that frequently leads to optimal psychosocial development. Such learning includes early reading skills, modeling of caring and helping behaviors, reading stories with a moral and human relations programs for children. In places where authoritative parenting is not the practice, parenting teams can be organized to teach required skills. For an early start, parenting education in prenatal classes has been found to be effective [15-17].

The Teaching of Hatred to Children

The term hatred may be defined as intense ill will, great dislike or aversion, enmity and malevolence [18]. The teaching of hatred to children represents a special form of psychological abuse that is unfortunately propagated by many families, institutions and countries around the world [19]. With such teaching, children are variably taught to hate particular national, ethnic, religious and racial groups and other minorities. The urgency to eliminate the teaching of hatred to children stems from the well-known link between learned hatred and resultant violent speech and actions [19-21].

Kieran O'Hagan has defined psychological abuse as “the sustained inappropriate behaviour which damages, or substantially reduces, the creative and developmental potential of crucially important faculties and mental processes of a child; these include intelligence, memory, recognition, perception, attention, language and moral development [22].

Commonly, hatred is instilled into children by family members or societal institutions by false narratives. There are false narratives that distort history, promote false beliefs, and propagate negative feelings toward particular groups. Such storylines may incorrectly depict one group as a victim of another, misrepresent the beliefs of other groups as heretical or undermine the humanity of those to be victimized due to a desire for dominance [23].

Repeated exposure to these narratives often results in their

internalization, occasionally achieved through accompanying coercion and intimidation.

The result is a false belief that may later manifest itself in violent actions against an individual or group so targeted. Thus, hatred results in a trait of character, namely a vice, that unleashes mere self interest, so that one ignores or even fails to see the interests of others, much less protect and promote their interests [12,19].

If peaceful societies are our goal, then non-violent conflict resolution and other virtuous traits need to be promulgated. Traits such as tolerance and appreciation of individual differences and reverence for the value of human life are desirable. This is so because virtues blunt mere self-interest, so that one can see and actively promote the interests of others [19].

As a vice and counter to the values that most civilized people consider virtuous, the teaching of hatred to children is immoral.

Consequently, such children suffer an (imposed) arrest in moral development that fulfills the definition of psychological abuse [19].

Clearly, much work needs to be done to counter the teaching of hatred to children. The sequence of exposure to authoritative parenting, modeling of caring and helping behaviors, early literacy, reading stories with a moral and human relations programs for children should go a long way to prevent children from developing unfounded hateful attitudes [13]. Other modalities such as using the law to outlaw the teaching of hate, identifying and opposing the teaching of hate, thwarting the dissemination of hate and violence in the media and projects at home and in the community could be very helpful [19]. A serious effort to eliminate this destructive practice of teaching children to hate is clearly warranted to prevent the personal and societal problems that are known to occur because of it.

Child Soldiers

Thousands of children are serving as soldiers and in other capacities in armed conflicts around the world [24,25]. The service involves either government military groups or armed opposition groups. Children may fight on front lines, participate in suicide missions and act as spies or messengers. Moreover, although not necessarily combatants, girls may be forced into sexual slavery by militaries.

Many children are abducted or recruited by force. Others join out of desperation, thinking that armed groups offer them their best chance of survival. Child soldiers who survive armed conflict often develop psychiatric disorders such as depression and PTSD. Poor literacy in these children is often seen and contributes to a high incidence of poverty and unemployment in adulthood. Alcohol abuse, an increased suicide rate and violent behaviors are also frequently seen after children are enlisted and trained to fight whether they experience combat or not.

Beginning in the 1960s, a number of treaties have been

drafted to reduce the use of child soldiers. Although helpful, these treaties have not eliminated the use of child soldiers [24]. Even economically powerful states still train adolescents for military service. Moreover, in a number of countries, the use of children in armed conflict, terror groups, and insurgencies continues.

Clearly, thousands of children are still either compromised or killed by their recruitment to participate in armies and militias. The treaties themselves are not the answer, if mechanisms of enforcement are not in place.

Global Poverty, Hunger, Malnutrition and Starvation

The World Health Organization defines poverty as when individual or household income is below what is needed for sustenance [26]. It is well known that poverty is associated with many undesirable conditions. These conditions include a lack of food and little access to medical care or education [27,28]. Poor literacy, unemployment, inadequate housing and poor sanitation are common. The resultant desperate circumstances often create susceptibility to unfortunate choices while those impacted are struggling to survive. Children caught up in families with poverty have a high morbidity and mortality from infectious diseases and starvation. The scenes of such starving, malnourished children depicted on television for decades have resulted in successful fundraising by a number of NGOs that provide food relief. Some governments have also donated foodstuffs. Unfortunately, the great need worldwide has not been adequately addressed.

It is estimated that more than three billion people in the world live in poverty [26]. In addition to the mortality associated from infectious diseases and starvation, there is the loss of human potential from the lack of education and malnutrition. Data indicates that acute malnutrition is responsible for almost one third of all deaths in children less than 5 years of age and causes intellectual or cognitive impairment among those who survive. A recent study substantiated this conclusion. It was found that malnutrition at age 3 years is associated with poor cognition at age 11 years independent of psychosocial adversity [29]. It is then apparent that promoting and facilitating early childhood nutrition could enhance long-term cognitive development and school performance.

Global Warming Leading to Food Insecurity

Global warming has recently been associated with the problem of food insecurity in certain parts of the world. Climate shocks like droughts and floods kill crops and livestock, degrade soils, damage infrastructure and drive up food prices [30]. When that happens, conflict, displacement and mass migration often follow. People will not stand idly by when they cannot feed their families. If the average global temperature rises by 2 degrees centigrade from pre-industrial levels, an additional 189 million people are expected to be pushed into hunger [31]. Higher rises in temperature could result in more staggering numbers of people with food insecurity. An attempt to address global warming is ongoing. Lack of concerted efforts to cut back on the use of fossil fuels is a problem under discussion.

Going Forward with a Plan for the International Century of the Child

John Locke famously introduced the concept that the newborn infant, except for some innate reflexes, represents a “tabula rasa” (blank slate) [32]. Locke’s theory refers to the concept that the human mind at birth is entirely blank. It follows then that it is one’s experiences and learning that results in knowledge, beliefs, morality and other emotional and cognitive faculties. To a large extent, Locke’s theory is still valid. Consequently, one can now define a path that leads to optimal physical and psychosocial development of children [13]. The challenge is to create circumstances for all children to follow such a path that leads to benevolence, helping behaviors, constructive creativity and non-violent conflict resolution [33,13]. Considering the present state of world affairs, allowing a century to achieve this goal would seem reasonable. Hopefully, the efforts toward this goal will not be interrupted by thermonuclear, climate or other human-made disasters.

To proceed with a plan to benefit children worldwide, an organizational structure needs to be established. Fortunately, such a structure presently exists in the form of the Oversight Committee of the CRC (OCCRC). A stumbling block to the optimal functioning of the OCCRC is the lack of involvement of the USA, due to the CRC not being ratified by the United States Senate. As previously mentioned, an interference of sovereignty and an interference in freedom to parent has been stated as reasons why the CRC has not been brought forward for a vote. Both those reasons should not be stumbling blocks to US ratification. First, the USA “on paper” and through established agencies and laws protects the rights of children at a significant level [34]. USA representatives made important contributions to the drafting of the CRC. Where deficiencies in the human rights of children have been noted in the USA, laws and policies have been enacted to improve protections. There is still work to be done to protect the rights of children in the USA, but this is an ongoing process [35]. Next, there is little basis to imply that the CRC would interfere with the parents’ right to parent. Reasonable concerns for aberrant parenting have been scrutinized for years in the USA. There are presently Child Protection Teams throughout the USA that respond to reported instances where children may be suffering from maltreatment. Indeed a pediatrician may lose his/her license if suspected abuse is not reported for further evaluation. Lastly, there is evidence that children are maltreated in many countries that have signed the CRC [36]. Only by objectively evaluating these situations and providing solutions to childhood maltreatment can progress be made. Participation and the assumption of a leadership role in solving existing problems would be a laudable function for USA representatives. Non-participation is clearly not an avenue for alleviating the physical and mental maltreatment of children and promoting their optimal human potential worldwide.

Major areas that adversely impact the growth and development of children including child labor, corporal punishment and psychological abuse, the teaching of hatred to

children and requiring children to join various militaries have been referenced. Global poverty, hunger and malnutrition and global warming also have been shown to impact both the physical and psychosocial development of children. Organization to address these issues and funding to effect change will be critical. As mentioned, the OCCRC is the logical group to coordinate progress in child welfare and development worldwide. However, an expansion of the OCCRC will be necessary with subcommittees developed to find solutions to individual problem areas and coordination should be sought with existing efforts.

The teaching of hatred to children illustrates how challenging the effort will be to change societies where this practice has become established. Recently, UNESCO published an approach to identifying and stopping the teaching of hatred [37]. This was apparently a response to multiple areas around the world where this practice has occurred.

The situation in the Middle East demonstrates the difficulties involved in changing a circumstance where hatred is promoted against an ethnic group. For example, in 1968, a UNESCO Commission examined 127 textbooks used to teach Arab children in refugee camps financed by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). The report noted that “a majority of the 127 textbooks reviewed by the Commission employed the deplorable language of anti-Semitism, distorted history, incited to violence and were educationally destructive because student exercises were often inspired by a preoccupation with indoctrination against Jews rather than by educational aims. The Syrian Minister of Education rejected the findings of the Commission in a letter to the director general of UNESCO. The Syrian Minister wrote, “The hatred which we indoctrinate into the minds of our children from their birth is sacred [38].” In addition, UNRWA schools have continued their indoctrination and incitement against Jews, until the present time. This has occurred, even though this kind of teaching is contrary to the values of the nations that have funded UNRWA (mainly the democracies of the world of which the USA contributes the most annually).

Many graduates of UNRWA schools are now parents, so they can literally start the indoctrination at home in the early years of their children. Of course, the propaganda is pervasive in Palestinian society in the West Bank and Gaza. In 2005, Dr. Raanan Gissin, Foreign Press and Public Affairs Adviser to the Prime Minister of Israel, responded to a publication that concluded that the teaching of hatred to children was a form of psychological abuse [19]. Dr. Gissin wrote on behalf of the Prime Minister, “The Palestinian communications and education systems - electronic media, newspapers, textbooks etc, - have been mobilized to instill hatred and enmity among Palestinian children, youth and adults, and to preach for “the liberation of Palestine with blood and tears”, and the destruction of the Jewish state. These harbingers of hatred and unrest are constantly adding fuel to the flames and inciting the Palestinian masses to violence and martyrdom, through the murder of innocent people [personal communication].” Unfortunately, some Islamic clergy do promote Jihad and glorify the suicide killer (the shahid)

[39]. “Successful” suicide bombers are often celebrated by their families and football fields commonly named after them.

So, the various ongoing forms of propaganda that are internalized by a proportion of Palestinians from the early years of life result in a desire for “graduates” of the system to participate in a “culture of death.” Clearly, this is the antithesis of an avenue that would lead to a peaceful society whose citizens respect individual differences, the sanctity of human life, non-violent conflict resolution and other virtues that are valued by the majority of nations.

However, it is important to point out that nations and their citizens can change. The authoritarian cultures of Japan and Germany where aggression was prominent before WWII and hatreds taught through false narratives have adopted democratic values and seek peace and not war.

To promote nations and their people who pursue generally accepted virtues and avoid vices, a long term plan is required. For children, as previously mentioned, such a plan starts with authoritative parenting, modeling of caring and helping behaviors, reading books with a moral and that teach a lesson and human relations programs for children. Governments and NGOs would need to provide the resources and personnel to establish this kind of support for the growth and development of children. Understanding how such a program could lead to a more peaceful world and an enhanced quality of life for millions of people should provide the impetus for developing and providing the needed programs [40].

It is apparent that establishing all the programs needed to optimize the physical and psychosocial development of children, enhance their quality of life and hopefully contribute to a much more peaceful world represents a Herculean effort. On paper, such an effort is possible. If enough nations come together, will it and work on it, it will not be a dream [41].

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