

# A Meditation on Peacemaking

by Elizabeth Jones

Once upon a time there weren't many human beings on Planet Earth, and the ones there were subsisted in small face-to-face groups. Because they had big brains and insatiable curiosity, they kept exploring possibilities: What's this? What does it do? And because they had opposable thumbs, they could ask, "What can I do with it?" — and then do it (just as four-year-olds do at play). They wanted to remember their discoveries, and so they invented what we now call culture: arts and artifacts, including language. Each group had its own culture, and that's what its young children learned. Each group — families, clans — cared for its members.

If they encountered strangers, they could ignore them, defend their own territory, or kill them. Killing was most exciting; when it expanded into organized warfare,

it became a whole way of life, and the framework for remembering centuries of history.

They kept inventing many things — ways to travel, ways to dance and sing, names for new discoveries. Wheels and ships made colonization possible — and if you find a whole new continent, why shouldn't you regress to the stage of autonomy and say, "Mine!" If some other folks were there first, kill 'em! Or enslave them. And this whole process snowballed, and after a while there was industrialization. And war didn't require swords any more; not long ago, it went nuclear. Human beings everywhere found themselves potential victims of their smarts, as they kept inventing worldwide communication systems in hundreds and thousands of languages.

That's where we are now. There are many, many human beings on the planet, living in diverse places and cultures and continually running into each other.

What can we do about all those strangers? Black American feminist Bernice Johnson Reagon admonishes us, "There is no hiding place. There is nowhere you can go and only be with people who are like you. It's over. Give it up. It must become necessary for all of us to feel that this is our world. And

watch that 'our' — make it as big as you can. The 'our' must include everybody you have to include in order for you to survive. I ain't gonna live unless you let me live" (Reagon, 1983).

Can we do that? Can our next generations — the young children we are caring for — replace war with peacemaking? What would they need to learn to take on that responsibility?

## What Can We Teach Children?

A culture's stories reflect its practices and its values. In many cultures it's easier, as a young child, to practice fighting than to practice peacemaking; there are far more role models. Stories of fighting have become myths and legends; in modern media, bad guys and good guys in battle continue their historic popularity. Children discover them very early, with plenty of heroes to copy.

If children in group care encounter strangers — children and families (and you?) who talk funny, wear different clothes, don't know your stories — their first reaction may be to avoid or to tease. Historically, strangers are dangerous. But now that the dangers are different and larger scale, children (and adults) need to practice making peace, not war.



Elizabeth Jones  
 2015 Exchange Master Leader  
[www.ChildCareExchange.com/leadership](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com/leadership)



Elizabeth Jones is Faculty Emerita in Human Development at Pacific Oaks College, where she has taught both adults and young children — and taken lots of calculated risks. She continues to write and think with students and colleagues about the connections among learning through play, emergent curriculum, and response to diversity, within the context of lifespan human development. The second edition of *The Play's the Thing* (Teachers College Press) with Gretchen Reynolds is her latest book.

They need to learn empathy, not ferocity. Caring must become the new ethic (Noddings, 2003).

Adults need to respond to the potential of little children's big brains and encourage their curiosity about strange others, asking genuine questions:

- You think he talks funny? Maybe he has different words for things. How do you think you could invite him to play?
- He brings weird lunches to school? Have you asked him what that food is called? Do you think he'd give you a taste? Would you give him a taste of yours?
- She's crying. Did she bump her knee? Could you help her feel better? Can you help me help her?

Empathy is how people learn to get along. It can be modeled. It can be talked about — scaffolded. Even toddlers have the capacity to act empathically with others — patting them, helping them — if they've watched others doing it.

Early childhood educators often think in terms of developmental stages: young children need to develop trust, then autonomy, then initiative, in order to prepare for the responsibilities they will assume as members of society. Infants learn trust by interacting with caring adults. Toddlers practice autonomy by challenging others: "Mine!" (NOT yours) and competing for desired outcomes. Preschoolers practice negotiation and making friends: Will you play with me? Can we get along? And making enemies: I won't be your friend. Go away. In doing so, they are moving toward assuming the responsibilities of an industrious member of society.

## What Does a Peacemaker Need to Learn?

Fighting is competitive; if I win, you lose. Skills are learned by practicing — doing it right, over and over. Much lifelong practice of skills, both physical and mental, is also competitive; but it's kept non-violent through established rules with intervention as needed.

Sports — physical action — may have a designated referee or umpire to call disputes. Skills are rated by scoring and winners are acknowledged. Excited audiences may add drama and fame.

Sedentary games with rules (card games, board games, computer games) are mathematical in design. Playing them develops mental skills.

Social skills are learned through play — creating interactions and building relationships. We need each other to collaborate on problem solving and enjoy discoveries together. Competition for objects and for roles may be resolved by compromising, turn taking, sharing, letting go, or inventing stories (often spiced with humor and drama).

Empathy is learned by reflecting, documenting, retelling, negotiating. Who are you? Who am I? Can we get along? If children encounter strangers, empathy becomes a learning priority, supported by caring adults in a number of ways.

1. Modeling conflict resolution in our own behavior with children and with adults.  
  
Scaffolding conflict resolution among children: How could you solve that problem? (Supporting logical thinking, re-telling real events.)
2. Reinforcing children's expression through all the arts — alternative modes of thought and communication. Scaffolding through imagination and

humor: Co-creating stories about bad guys and clever wise gals:

- Reading stories about conflict and peacemaking.
- Teaching children competitive games with rules — and about being good sports.
- Setting clear limits on behavior that hurts others.

To make room for all these interactions, a teacher/caregiver needs a constructivist setting — one where children have room for choosing and for playing, and where time is flexible. An open classroom, organized for play, is inclusive; it values everyone's stories, everyone's thinking. In it, all children get smarter. Thinking together takes a lot of time — problem-solving, observing, and listening. It interrupts the "curriculum" that someone has said you're supposed to cover.

But interrupting doesn't sound right. In "real school" everyone does the same thing at the same time. You listen to the teacher, you follow her directions, you practice on a worksheet, and you don't talk to your neighbor. That way you learn obedience and sitting still and being quiet — and trying to do it faster and smarter than the other kids, competing to win.

If this clear, traditional mode of teaching works for you, that's probably what you'll choose to do. But it's not a path to peacemaking. Peace is more complicated than war, and human beings haven't practiced it as much.

And so, with peacemaking as a goal, the hardest challenge may be experienced by those adults who are accustomed to act according to common sense, enjoying their power, demanding respect and unquestioning obedience from children, and following the rules

themselves. Can they / we practice curiosity and openness to new ideas as part of their work, and can they be supported in doing so?

If we're caring for young children, we need to practice patience, empathy, and asking genuine questions. These aren't skills that come naturally to many of us. But if we learn to model them, maybe the next generation will be more skillful peacemakers when they grow up.

They're likely to be more skilled in other ways, too. We want children to be motivated, curious learners and problem solvers. We want them to develop social competence, grounded in empathy for one's neighbors. And we want them to become literate — an obsession in schools — and literacy is more complicated than the phonics folks make it out to be. It's about *representing experience* for the purpose of thought and communication — in all the “hundred languages” (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1993) that begin with the early childhood mantra to children, “Use your words,” and extend in ever-widening circles into reading, writing and the arts.

### Conflict Maintenance

Two children had begun squabbling over possession of a new sand toy, a large shiny bucket. Voices were raised, fists were lifted — and an alert teacher moved toward the scene, ready to mediate problem solving. Knowing what was coming, the little girl said impatiently, “Oh no, I don't want to problem solve. I've got to fix dinner for the babies. He can have it. I'll get something else” (Jones & Cooper, 2006, p. 80).

And what would have happened if the teacher-mediator had taken over? A mediator slows everything down. She talks and listens. She translates action into words; she constructs a puzzle to be solved collaboratively. As this feisty little girl knew well, from

repeated experiences, the bucket would have been set aside and the children engaged in conversation, as the adult sat down between them. “I see you have a problem. Alicia, can you tell Marcus what you want? Marcus, can you tell Alicia what you want? Can you tell me what happened? What do you need the bucket for? Is this the only bucket? Could the two of you together figure out how both of you can use it?”

And the outcome will be sweetness and light? Nope. The problem-solving script works, sometimes — but it's time-consuming.

In a good classroom for children there's often a lot of conflict — not hurting, but disagreement and arguing. *Conflict maintenance* is a necessary part of the process, especially in a diverse group. It's only authoritarian classrooms (or those in which everyone is like everyone else) that can be conflict-free. Those aren't fruitful learning places. Historic cradles of civilization were intersections, full of encounters between interesting strangers who challenged each other to learn new languages and new world-views. Today, in a highly permeable world, we all live in the intersections (Jones & Nimmo, 1999, p. 9).

### Can It Be Done?

So, what shall we teach our children and what will the consequences be? Peace is made through, and invites, love. Peaceful peoples are inclusive and curious, rather than exclusive and defensive. If we raise our children to be curious and imaginative rather than scared, to welcome into their play children who are not like them, to practice empathy rather than hostility, what will happen? Our lives will get more complicated. Is that what we want? It isn't easy. Much more time will be spent in translation — that's hard. Let's hear it for tradition — for how our people have always done it. But maybe we can't do it the old way any more.

Proposing this change, I'm making two assumptions:

- That if we stick to killing, we may destroy humanity.
- That children raised to be curious and reflective and caring will have the potential to save us all.

In a program aiming to teach peace and democracy, there will be many opportunities for children to make individual choices and negotiate and work and play with each other. What really interests you? What do you care enough about to work hard at mastering? What delights you and motivates your full participation? In an environment full of choices, children don't just do what they're told. Instead, they are responsible for using their time well and being respectful of the needs and rights of others — for building a democratic community. For making peace, not war.

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