

peace pledge union

STARTING EARLY: BREAKING THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

It is now generally agreed (backed by overwhelming evidence provided by extensive research) that the relationship with parents and other significant adults is among the most powerful influences on a child's development and outlook. But all parents know that relationships with their children are neither simple nor one-sided; and other powerful influences abound.

A recent study of 9,000 teenagers showed clearly that, by the age of twelve, children showed noticeable different levels of aggression according to their upbringing. 'The perception of parents' attitude towards fighting was the strongest predictor of aggression,' said Professor Pamela Orpinas. 'What parents tell their children about fighting tells a lot about the degree to which their children get involved in fighting.'

Pamela Orpinas maintains that 'children should be taught how to resolve conflict through peaceful means. It's not quite "turn the other cheek", but it is about communication... We are in an age where children's violence can escalate and we must make them aware that weapons are not acceptable- and that includes toy ones.'

Parents (and teachers) have the opportunity to give clear and explicit messages to their children that fighting is not acceptable and show them different, nonviolent ways to solve conflicts.

The degree to which children and parents get on with each other is an important factor. Crucial too is the extent to which parents keep and active - and supportively critical - eye on their children's activities. Other family relationships also impact on children's attitudes to violence.

There is another major challenge, outside home and school, from the commercially-driven output of violent images, toys and games. Preventing access to these is difficult. It's impractical without unacceptably constant vigilance; and it's inimical to a fair and open relationship between parent and child. For this reason, if for no other, we need to challenge two prevalent views: first, that gratuitous use of violence to promote products is an unacceptable means, and, second, that violence-condoning toys and games are acceptable playthings.

Creating a nonviolent environment in the family and the school is vitally important. But it is just as important to work for a nonviolent neighbourhood, nation, world. Failing that, we could become prisoners in our own small protective compound, fearful of the world beyond it.

Checkpoints:

- ◆ Work to develop a good relationship with your children. Research indicates that the poorer the relationship with the parent/ caregiver, the more aggressive the child.
- ◆ Take time to listen to, and share information with, your child.

- ◆ Respect your children. Give them space. Respect their privacy. Let them express their opinions.
- ◆ Watch programmes with children and discuss them afterwards. Help them to understand the difference between real life and what is on the screen, and to become alert to the contradictory messages about violence.
- ◆ Because the portrayal of weapons and violence is widespread, make sure children understand that guns really do kill and cause great unhappiness among victims' relatives and friends.
- ◆ Teach children that shouting, verbal assaults and physical force are not the way to resolve conflicts. Show them how to use nonviolent alternatives instead, such as talking, using humour or walking away if necessary (walking away to defuse an aggressive situation is a courageous act).
- ◆ Help children to understand that some of their friends may have reasons to be angry and fearful. These friends may not be in an environment in which respect is shown, or they may have role models who are used to settling disputes violently. Try to help children put themselves in other people's shoes, and, as they do so, trying their best to be patient, kind and understanding. Again, being patient and understanding, especially when other people are not, is a strong and positive action.

About Peace Pledge Union:

The Peace Pledge Union is the oldest secular pacifist organisation in Britain. Since 1934 it has been campaigning for a warless world. For more information see: www.ppu.org.uk