

# Introduction

The programs described in this book reflect a collaborative effort on the part of UNICEF, CARE, McMaster University and the Croatian Ministry of Education to help children in war and post-war situations. Our school-based, twenty-week extra curricular education for primary school children involved training in trauma healing, bias awareness, conflict resolution and peace education. Quantitative and qualitative research was done to measure the impact of this program on children, teachers and parents.

The first pilot project program was done from February 1996 to September 1996 in Osijek and Pakrac, Croatia with a subsequent year-long program carried out in Eastern Slavonia and Baranja. We were interested in providing fourth and/or fifth grade students a range of informations and skills that would help them deal not only with their war-related stress and trauma, but also give them practical tools regarding the resolution of everyday problems and what can be done to live in peace with others. We were also interested in providing mechanisms for building self-esteem, teaching non-violent listening skills, and helping both students and teachers experience new methods of interactive learning.

Integrating trauma awareness and healing concepts with those of bias awareness and prejudice reduction, conflict resolution and peace education, provides a more comprehensive approach to learning about and experiencing each one of these categories. And it is more effective than if each one of these issues was taught or experienced separately. This theoretical premise still needs further testing, but as the research from the pilot and long-term program indicates, specifically the qualitative data, there is an important cumulative effect when these subjects are linked and taught together.

Finally, and most importantly, our reasoning for doing these programs is because of our concern for *all* children in war situations, and for those persons, such as parents and teachers, who play such an important role in their lives. How is it that these persons can most creatively help children address the past and related trauma of war and at the same time creatively help them prepare for a peaceful future?

It is clear that social, political and economic factors need to be stabilized in order for violent conflicts and wars to be prevented, but it is also essential that the adults in children's lives provide a means of understanding and skills that allow them to interact and react creatively and non-violently with others. This takes an understanding of the self, others and the world around them. To participate in rebuilding their society and be the builders of their society in the next generation, children need help to deal with pain and discover ways to prevent it causing violent conflicts. Our hope is that this book provides some insights and ideas toward these goals.

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Health Reach, which is part of The Health of Children in War Zones Project at McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada, proposes to join with UNICEF in the development of a training and research pilot program involving 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in Pakrac and Osijek, Croatia. This pilot also involves children's parents, teachers, pedagogues and school psychologists. The project will help provide data and resources concerning trauma, conflict resolution, bias and peace that can be disseminated in other areas of the former Yugoslavia.

The focus of our involvement is the premise that these particular categories of training are most important to children and youth who have been exposed to the tensions and traumata of war. It is our belief that they need this understanding as well as practical tools in these areas in order to provide some hope in dealing with the everyday issues they confront during this particularly difficult time in their lives. We feel the skills of conflict resolution, as well as the comprehension of possibilities of living peacefully, are also "life skills" that go beyond specific war-related events, and can help in personality development and self-esteem enhancement in daily living under "normal" conditions. Furthermore, these assumptions need to be tested through research instruments in order to see if they are indeed any significant changes in attitudes, beliefs and behaviours as a

result of this training.

There is sensitivity to the fact that war is still a reality for the people in the Pakrac and Osijek area, and that various training programs and evaluations have already taken place there. It might be thought by some that plans to evaluate attitudes and behaviours are inappropriate in a time of crisis. Teachers, parents, and the children/youth themselves are often so stretched emotionally and physically that our efforts may seem another imposition in their attempts to “live normally” without being constantly scrutinized or tested. Teachers, headmasters and parents must therefore be informed and involved in planning and implementation of the project. Children/youth must also be made aware of the

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process and “listened to” regarding their feelings and interests concerning involvement.

The twelve month project begins with a mobilisation stage where researchers are identified, research instruments and training materials developed and further structuring of the programme takes place. At the initial phase of this period, various officials in the Croatian Ministry of Education have to be informed about the project. Their permission to carry out this programme is imperative. The parents of the children involved should also be informed of the project and consulted, and their support and potential involvement will be sought.

The next stage involves the training of teachers and pedagogues and pre-testing of teachers and students. (It is important to know the change in attitudes of teachers as well as students.) Stage three of the project includes weekly training of the students by the teachers. Throughout the year teachers receive nuttier professional guidance from the project staff and supervisors, and supplemental training if need be. Stage four will occur at the end of the school year when pre-testing will take place; and the final stage involves data analysis and documentation with recommendations for future action.

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