

# Connecting Our Values: Children's Rights, Anti-bias Education, and Peace Education

by Ana Page and Louise Derman-Sparks

We dedicate our article to the late Chris Lamn, whose inspiration, insights, and prodigious skills laid the foundation and led the building of Peace Camp, Orange County, California.

In 1959, the United Nations General Assembly set forth its Declaration of the Rights of the Child, followed in 1989 by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Diversity and equity early childhood advocates around the world treat these documents as foundational to their



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work. Article 2 of the Convention makes clear that children's rights are universal, applying "to all children, whatever their race, religion or abilities.... It doesn't matter where children live, what language they speak, what their parents do, whether they are boys or girls, what their culture is, whether they have a disability, or whether they are rich or poor. No child should be treated unfairly on any basis." And, especially pertinent for anti-bias education, Article 29 declares that "education... should encourage children to respect others' human rights and their own and other cultures. It should also help them learn to live peacefully, protect the environment, and respect other people."

This article highlights the Orange County, California Peace Camp, a summertime day camp experience for a diverse group of children ranging from ages 5–17. The educational elements of the camp program practice the values of the UN Rights of the Child by melding peace education with anti-bias education. We describe the program's educational elements, offer a sample of

activities, and close with comments from Peace Camp alumni about the impact of their experiences on their lives as young adults.

Peace Camp's vision to create a more peaceful world rests on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s belief that "true peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice." Its mission is to nurture children to believe in themselves, understand and enjoy diversity, think critically about fairness, and develop the desire, values, and skills for building a just, peaceable community. The educational elements of Peace Camp draw from the goals and strategies of both peace and anti-bias education. A range of activities meet the changing developmental and age needs of the campers.

## Grow and Strengthen Self-awareness and Identity

This first educational element includes supporting children to build their self-identify and social identity, find their voice, and be proud of who they are. If

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children feel strongly about themselves, they can then support others to develop their identity, voice, and be comfortable with diversity. Many children find healing at Peace Camp from hurtful experiences of prejudice and discrimination. Books such as *I Like Myself!* (2004) by Karen Beaumont and *These Hands* (2007) by Hope Lynn Price, open discussions with younger children. Storytelling with Persona Dolls (see Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010) then becomes a major vehicle for building children's self-awareness and pride as they learn about and celebrate each other's differences. Older children have a chance to make their own persona dolls.

### Expand Communication Skills

Promoting campers' use of peaceable and intentional language, learning to be conscious of how words can contribute (or not) to building positive relationships, and to resolving disagreements

in peaceful ways all make up this element. Older children additionally explore the history behind certain words and why they are hurtful. Communication skills also reinforce building conflict-solving and advocacy skills for challenging bias and injustice. One favorite tool — The Talking Stick — offers children an opportunity to take turns talking and listening to each other.

### Learn Collaboration Skills

This element involves practicing being mindful of other peoples' perspectives, experiences, and life situations. The focus is on learning to be aware of how others may be different from oneself, and to understand needs in the context of people's lives. Collaboration requires allowing space and giving respect to everyone's voice when deciding on team or group actions. Painting a mural is one popular collabor-

orative activity. It begins with planning and working for consensus about the mural theme. Every child's voice is heard and blended into the final consensus. Everyone then participates in making the mural in ways comfortable to them. They may do the preliminary drawing, or grab brushes and paint after the drawing is sketched. Children who choose to be an observer support the sketchers and painters by gathering the supplies they need. Each choice contributes to the whole and exhibits the different roles of a village working towards a common goal.

### Build Community

Practicing integrating one's own needs with others' needs in a community that includes multiple diverse perspectives, voices, and ages is central to this element. It also includes understanding that actions of bias and bullying break the bonds and ties of a peaceable

community and helps children learn to be self-aware of behaviors that may insult or step on other peoples' toes. Communication, collaboration, and advocacy skills also come into play. At the start of camp, the campers collaboratively discuss and create a written statement about behaviors they think make up a peaceful community. When an agreement is broken, the group gathers for a meeting to discuss it, problem solve what to do, and to review their statement. Building community threads throughout all the activities in which the campers engage.

### **Practice Peaceable Conflict-solving**

Underlying this element is the awareness that bias and bullying undermine a peaceable, just community. It includes strengthening one's own sense of self, embracing differences, and building communication, critical thinking, and collaboration skills. One activity offered in Steve Seskin and Allen Shamblin's (2002) book and song, "Don't Laugh at Me," helps children open up about bullying experiences they've witnessed or experienced. Children primarily learn to undertake peaceable conflict-solving in the context of real-life issues that arise among them during a day at camp. An example is staff teaching them how to use *I-Messages* to de-escalate a conflict.

### **Learn Ways to Take Care of the Environment**

Peace Camp teaches that people, animals, and the environment are interconnected. The children also learn how violence harms all parts of the living environment. The program encourages campers to be aware of and take care of animals and the environment as a part of building peaceable, just communities. An example of children applying what they were learning occurred when a group of five- to eight-year-old Peace

Campers on a field trip to a park witnessed children from another camp breaking branches off trees. The Peace Campers spoke to the perpetrators, trying to explain they were harming the tree, but that the tree could not voice to them that it was hurting. Finding that they needed help talking with the other children, the Peace Campers asked the park ranger for assistance and support.

### **Develop and Practice Advocacy Skills**

This element focuses on developing the desire and confidence, as well as the skills, for speaking out and *acting* for fairness for both oneself and others. Children gain practice in advocacy as incidents occur at camp that invite them to speak up. In addition, learning about the history of social justice activism in our country offers campers examples of real people who worked for just, peaceable communities. This knowledge strengthens children's identity and their respect for diversity, and offers older campers insights into the issues of current life related to prejudice, discrimination, war, and peace. It also serves as inspiration and hope for creating a more just country and world. The Peacemaker Walk is one way children learn about social justice activists. Youth Leaders dress up as diverse activists from past and present, such as Mattie Stepanek, Cesar Chavez, and Marian Wright Edelman. They sit at stations around the camp, while the children go on a journey through time as they visit with each activist, hear their stories, and ask questions about their struggles and victories.

### **Develop Leadership Capacity**

Building the next generation of advocates is a key part of Peace Camp. This element is carried out in the Youth Leadership Training Program. Many

campers return for several years, which makes this element possible. Youth Leaders (10–17) facilitate activities and discussions with younger children, and are expected to lead by example. Youth leaders regularly meet with Peace Camp staff throughout the year to talk about living the camp's mission in all aspects of their lives. Some of the youth leader's alumni — Ana among them — take over coordination of Peace Camp, and the responsibilities of passing on its vision and philosophy and training new Youth Leaders. This year, the Camp will celebrate the third generation of youth leadership.

Youth Leaders also create a yearly advocacy project, which involves reaching out to other organizations. They have worked towards planting trees in deforested countries, making recycle bins for parks and community centers, and cleaning beaches. Their most recent project brought 20 children from a homeless shelter to participate in a summer of Peace Camp. This required reaching out to community partners to help with tuition, lunch, and transportation.

### **Alumni of Peace Camp Speak**

The following excerpts are from interviews Ana conducted with Peace Camp–Orange County alumni in 2016. Their statements illustrate how much the mission of the program took hold in the campers. People spoke about using the skills or tools they learned at Peace Camp in their workplace, classroom, or with family. Here is a small sample:

"The greatest thing that I've learned about being a part of Peace Camp is how important community is. I don't think I've experienced very many communities in my lifetime that are as rich as Peace Camp's was."



"The beauty of it is that we had such a diverse group... like we would have a lot of discussions and someone would say something and then someone would bring up another side of it that I wouldn't think of because they have different experiences than I do, and that was really powerful. You know, 'Aha, like wow,' that just kind of helps you understand there's a lot of other ways to view things and try to be open to that."

"I most treasure what we learned about working with different groups and being able to cooperate.... I use these in my field of environmental management.... You have a lot of different viewpoints, personalities, and stakeholders with different agendas, so it's important to think about and respect differences. For instance, take fishing with certain Native American tribes. It's very easy to say, 'No you can't do that, like that's just not allowed,' but you really need to understand the cultural significance [of fishing in specific places] to that group, and get other people to think about that. It's like

bridging two fields — getting people to pay attention to the differences among people and to take care of the environment."

"Peace Camp helped me practice speaking up for people or causes that I believe in.... I don't think a lot of the people that I interact with have had that experience of being empowered to say something when they think something's wrong and knowing what you can do even if it's something small.... And also, speaking your views to people who have more power than you."

"The song 'What Can One Little Person Do?' has always resonated with me. Oftentimes when people say, 'But you're only one person,' I'm like, 'The problem is that if no one does it, then there's not going to be people to follow.' It's hard being the only person, but I feel like I carry on in my life the idea that one person doing something does make a difference. And I teach this to my kids all the time."

We'll close with a wish expressed by one of the Peace Camp alumni, which aptly voices our own feelings: "Wouldn't it be wonderful if all children did have the chance to achieve the values, skills, and courage to work to make our world a peaceable, just community for all?"

## References

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