PLANTING SEEDS OF PEACE IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Written by Sara Hagel and Heather Rowlands







Photo credit: Peacemakers

About Peacemakers

Peacemakers is a charity based in Birmingham, UK, dedicated to sharing skills and strategies to grow peace in schools and communities. We have nearly 40 years' experience, working in hundreds of schools of all types, equipping pupils and the adults who work with them with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to build peace.

The majority of our work is with children in the primary phase (4 to 11 years old) and adults working in these schools, although we work with all age groups in all types of school. Peacemakers' trainers work directly with children and young people, delivering courses on aspects of peace education and training young people to be mediators. Other work is delivered to school staff, and focuses on introducing a peace curriculum into schools and developing a relational, restorative peaceful school environment. We work in schools across the West Midlands in the UK and last year we worked with 480 staff and 1,305 young people in 47 schools.

Our popular primary level peace education curriculum, *Learning for Peace,* supports teachers and other peace educators to roll out a program of peace education working with peace within, through peace between and among us, to peace in the world.

Why Peace Education Matters

The concept of peace in primary schools is not one often grappled with. Time is spent talking about conflict and 'falling out' and what can be done after something has gone wrong. But what about building peace?

Children's understanding of peace is complex and nuanced. When we ask children what peace is, their responses range from 'no wars', 'no one falling out', and 'showing respect' to 'chilling', 'playing with my dog', and 'reading my book'. Their varied responses support our belief that peace can exist at all levels – personal and interpersonal, as well as structural which in turn reinforces our understanding of peace as interconnected, our peace weaves with that of others - we need to create it together.

Peace is much more than the absence of violence –it is something added, something we must actively build and nurture. Lasting peace needs the removal not only of direct violence but also the removal of indirect structural and cultural violence. We need to consciously make and build peace and justice in addition to peacekeeping. Peace lives where people have strong relationships, treat each other respectfully and equitably, and have a voice, the skills and tools to resolve and transform conflicts. We need peace to feel safe, to thrive as individuals and to come together well in communities.

That's why peace education matters.

"The change has been massive - children have worked on their speaking and listening skills, teamwork skills, alongside the peer mediator skills."

"Their listening, thinking, remembering and working together skills have been practiced and have improved significantly."

~ School Staff

Peace Education

Peace education is developing and practicing the tools, skills and confidence to build peace within ourselves, peace among those we live and work with, and peace in the wider world. Peace education helps people understand their reactions and interactions. It helps to build better relationships in the groups and communities which we are part of and to create the building blocks of peace in our wider world.

In schools, when there is learning for peace, children and young people understand and communicate their emotions and needs. They get along, work and play together better in class and the playground, and they navigate the complex issues they face as they grow up and become more engaged in the world around them. Learning for peace equips pupils and staff to positively address a range of issues and challenges they may experience or witness: injustice, division, conflict and change. Through our work, classroom staff and school leaders have told us that when there is learning for peace, children and young people are more likely to be able to get along, play together and communicate effectively.

> "[The students] are generally more confident and problem-solving things themselves, taking initiative, and being assertive."
>
> ~ Class Teacher

Just like we teach the building blocks of English and mathematics, children of primary school age can learn the fundamental skills they need to build peace – and schools and teachers can get support to help nurture these skills. Peace education encourages staff to reflect on their practice and their interactions with children to create peaceful communities.

> "I enjoyed that we were taught how to do things in fun ways, like role plays, games and stories"
>
> ~ Year 5 child

Peace Pedagogy

Through our work in hundreds of primary schools, we know that it's not just what is taught that is important, it's equally important how it is taught.

Good peace education can be counterproductive if it is taught in a draconian way. We need to explore participative and democratic ways of learning and know as adults we are always modeling to others with our own behaviour and interactions. In their book *Positive Peace in Schools*, Cremin and Bevington explore this further. For them the how of peace education "needs to be grounded in praxis and in education that is accessible, engaging and democratic." (Cremin and Bevington, 2017, p. 45).

Circles have been used by communities across cultures for centuries as a way of generating discussion and dialogue. However, they aren't always a regular part of many schools' pedagogy. Taking the opportunity to teach in circles allows

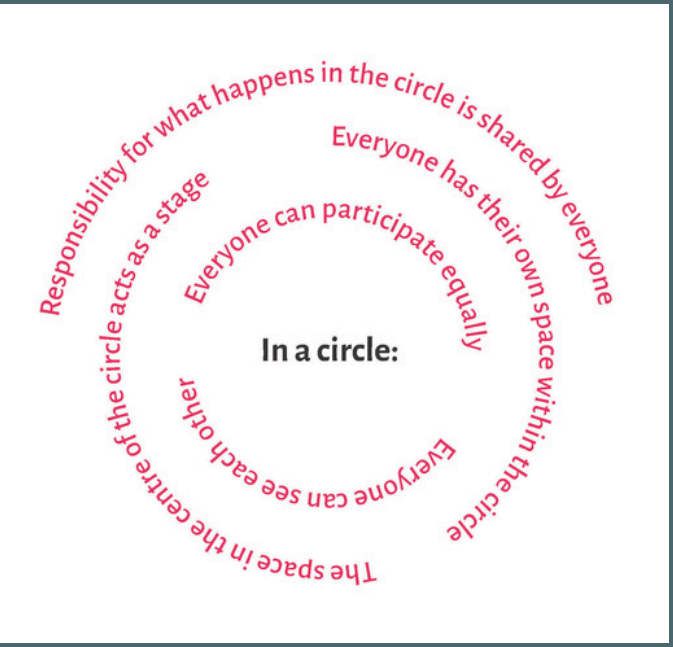
everyone to be seen and heard. Our practice of passing a talking piece around the circle allows us to hear all voices, including those who may otherwise feel excluded. Circles encourage empathy and understanding through listening to all voices and gaining different perspectives. They can also balance power by sharing responsibility for the circle with all its participants. Within a circle you can use the space creatively for games, group work, paired discussion and drama.

Equity and Diversity: Inclusion

There can be no peace without inclusion of all. If we recognize that we all come with unique backgrounds and needs, and to meet these needs we must adapt and accommodate, then we will be learning for peace through peace and creating an atmosphere where all can thrive.

Recognizing the diversity in classrooms enhances discussions about peace, conflict resolution and social justice. By exposing children to a variety of perspectives, we help them to develop empathy and critical thinking skills. Encouraging open dialogue about diversity allows children to challenge stereotypes and biases, promoting self-awareness and a sense of responsibility for inclusion. Each group is unique, and inclusion will look and feel different in different settings.

We must be mindful of marginalized voices within



In a circle...
Photo credit: Peacemakers

a circle, as well as challenge unchecked stereotypes, exclusive behaviors and unmet needs. Core foundations of building cooperation, emotional literacy, empathy and respect need to be in place to enable these challenges to be most effective.

Planting Seeds of Peace

In our experience of working with schools over the last few decades we have seen that where there is peace education, children have more confidence and empathy, develop their listening skills, find their voice and build emotional literacy, wellbeing and self-esteem.

"[The children] contribute to the safety of everyone." ~ School leader

"There has been an increase in the children's skill development." ~ Class teacher

"The course developed children's ability to deal with conflict particularly the ability to empathise with both disputants and understanding the blame can escalate a conflict." ~ Class teacher

Children understand how to get along better with each other and, when they don't, have confidence to deal with conflicts well. When peace is embedded in a school, children's ability to work together and cooperate grows and stronger relationships and respect for diversity are forged across the school community. Pupils can explore global issues and feel they can make a difference. Below are two case studies of the results of Peacemakers courses.

"[The children are] better able to identify emotions/empathy and, where issues may arise, [they have] increased awareness of each other's views/difficulties."

~Year 4 teacher

Case Study 1 | Finding ways to get along

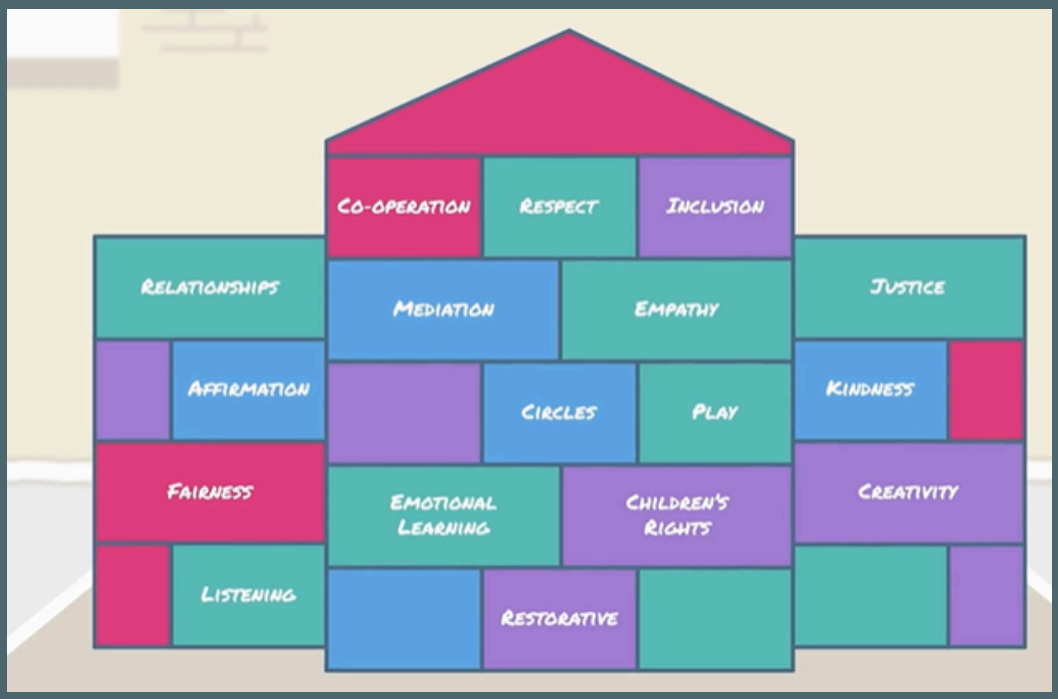
Before taking part in a Peacemakers course, Aisha and Mohammed just didn't seem to be able to get along in class, and their teacher often had to ensure they didn't work together. However, after learning how to talk about conflict and what happens when things go wrong in the course, they were able to develop new understanding and skills that allowed them to get through their differences.

After taking the course, Aisha came to her teacher one lunchtime, very upset. She said, 'Mohammed took the hoop off me, we used blaming language and now we've got to the top of the conflict escalator.' Her teacher asked if Aisha needed her to step in, or if they could use what they learnt in Peacemakers to talk it out themselves. By this time Mohammed had come in too. They decided to try and sort it out themselves. They talked in the classroom whilst their teacher worked at her desk and successfully resolved their disagreement. Later, the teacher asked Aisha and Mohammed to work together on a task – they did so all afternoon without any more issues.

Case Study 2 | From cynic to convert

New teacher, Steve, was cynical when asked to take part in a Peacemakers circle course. He had come from a business background; he and his students loved his high-energy lessons and his outcomes were good. Soon, though, he began to see how the children were engaging in the Peacemakers sessions. Children who were previously quiet were speaking up and taking a more active part. He saw competitive children sharing resources and asking for the opinion of others.

Over the weeks, Steve took a more active part in the circle games and, as a result, got to know more of the children in his class. He started to notice the learning from the circle was being applied in academic subjects and his pupils' group working skills were noticeably developed. By the end, Steve said himself that he moved from cynic to convert to the Peacemakers' circle process.



Build a peaceful school brick by brick | Photo credit: Peacemakers

Practical Peacebuilding in Schools

When a school builds peace it:

- Puts more of the peace-making in the hands of the children.
- Builds relationships to make connections with others.
- Builds an emotional understanding on how to get along with ourselves and each other.
- Learns to repair harm when things go wrong.

It also gives children opportunities to learn about the world we live in and the part we all play in building peaceful communities.

In our experience there are many ways schools can follow their journey to becoming a peaceful school – they can follow a restorative approach, or hold regular circles working through a peace curriculum, or train and support children to become peer mediators. Small actions make a big difference, and peaceful school communities are built brick by brick. You can start anywhere!

Recent teacher feedback (2024) shows that Peacemakers' work had the following impacts on children:

- Greater confidence or maturity.
- Improved listening skills and communication.
- Increased social opportunities to build links with peers.
- Gained a reciprocal language to support problem-solving.
- Increased responsibility to solve their own problems and empowerment to do so.
- Greater empowerment to support others to solve their problems.
- Increased understanding of the impact of body language and eye contact upon others.

You can learn more about our approach and work in the new edition of 'Learning for Peace: a toolkit for peace education in primary schools', available from Peacemakers' website. Let's spread the word about peace education and the difference it can make.