

2013 Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Scholarships
Essay on Non-Violence
By Taryn Kilgore

Overcoming violence as a means of conflict resolution is a life-long journey and struggle for all humans. We are faced with a particular conundrum: we have a primal nature, yet we also have the capacity for logic and morality. No other species on earth has evolved to have a basic, universally-accepted moral code. Murder, theft, lying – all are unacceptable trespasses upon human dignity. The question at stake here is: how do we overcome our most primal instincts and urges and instead act on the higher powers of thought and compromise? Unfortunately, there is no clear answer, even after thousands of years of human existence, but there are many ways we can work to make ourselves better.

I believe we still have issues with violence because, even in our society that claims to be very advanced, we still do not work to eliminate violent tendencies in children at an early age. I work every day after school at Extended Student Services, an after-school daycare center for elementary-age children. All too often I have seen arguments over the score of a basketball game or insults thrown around resulting in hands-on violence. As staff, we intervene in violent conflicts because we want to teach the children non-violent conflict resolution as well as keep them safe.

The first step in teaching children is to stop making excuses for their behavior. The boys fighting over the score of game are not “just being boys,” -- they are acting on their primal instincts because they have not been properly taught to act on their ability to comprehend peace. The girls fighting over whose turn it is to play Mom are not “just being bossy” or “trying to be a leader,” they’re trying to violently control other’s actions. That sounds familiar: violently trying to control other’s actions. Isn’t that what happens both in street fights *and* in the political world? Street bullies and politicians were children once too.

One of the ways I remember learning about bullying in elementary school is through a workshop my third grade teacher conducted. After some particularly nasty incidents, my teacher

got a big piece of construction paper and called it her “self-esteem.” The students had to come to her and say mean things or that they were going to physically hurt her, and then tear off a piece of construction paper. All the students felt awful doing it – we loved our teacher and we didn’t want to hurt her. It was easier to hurt each other. Afterwards, she collected all the pieces and taped them back together. She showed us the mangled reconstruction and said, “No matter how many times you say that you’re sorry, or how much time passes, my self-esteem will never be like new. You will leave scars on me emotionally and physically. If you bully someone, this is what you are doing.” No one could meet her eyes.

Another way to teach non-violent conflict resolution is to teach our children that “the easy way,” or the violent way, is never the right way. When I try to solve a conflict with my gossipy little girls at work, it takes a long time to sit them down and talk it out so they all feel better. It would be quicker and easier if I just said, “You have a problem with each other? Fight it out. The winner gets the friends, the loser gets abandoned.” But I don’t want to do that. Violence doesn’t solve anything – someone always gets hurt, and you can never take back a punch or nasty words.

In the same way, even though it is right to teach our children to apologize when they have wronged someone, they should be taught that “I’m sorry,” is not a fix-all phrase, particularly when said without feeling or shame. Helping our children to understand just how they made the victim feel will enable them to better apologize sincerely. When staff members say “use your words,” we mean “tell the other person how you feel,” not insult each other. What we like to call “I-Statements” are perfect for these situations. By telling the bully how the victim felt when bullied, the bully is better able to comprehend the effects of his or her actions. Instead of “You’re mean!” being tossed around, “I feel really excluded when you do that” is said helping children to better understand each other’s feelings, and not use their fists.

A better future begins with children who know how to resolve conflicts without violence. Through each new generation, the ability to find peaceful resolutions will improve. In the end, peace is worth the “fight,” or “non-fight,” and the world can be a better place.