

Creating a Peaceful World through Parenting Nurturing Compassion from the Beginning

by Jan and Jason Hunt

"If we are to reach real peace in this world and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with children. And if they will grow up in their natural innocence, we won't have the struggle, we won't have to pass fruitless idle resolutions, but we shall go from love to love and peace to peace, until at last all the corners of the world are covered with that peace and love for which, consciously or unconsciously, the whole world is hungering." - Mahatma Gandhi

We all hunger for peace. Yet far too often this seems to be just a dream, hopelessly out of reach. Instead of the peaceful life we all want, we have strife in our families, in our communities, and between our nations. We lose hope of anything better, and begin to think that nothing will ever change. Our dream of peace remains elusive.

This is a hard dream to relinquish, because it began at birth. Every infant beams when there is peace in the home, and looks perplexed and cries when there is not. To an infant, conflict is a puzzle. As infants, we not only want everyone to get along, we expect it. We are born expecting peace. Even as adults, we are shocked and saddened by every new story of brutality. We still believe that life can and should be peaceful. But we know that each day, in far too many places, there will be conflict, fighting, killing, and even war. If we are all peace lovers in our infancy, what makes us so divisive in adulthood? What goes wrong? How can it be fixed?

We wake each morning with the hope that things will change, but every day there is another sad and shocking story. We are all bewildered, and want to understand what went wrong. It seems to be human nature to focus on the most recent events, not those further back in time. So we wonder what could have been done on the days before a tragedy that might have prevented it. What last-minute interventions could have made a difference? What could have been done differently at the scene to save lives?

There is nothing wrong with these kinds of questions - they may help to prevent future acts of violence from taking place. But to reduce the potential for violence in general, it may be more constructive to look at the earliest links, not the most recent ones. While there are many factors that can lead to violence, the best prevention is always the earliest - the one that keeps the first domino from falling.

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As psychiatrist Elliott Barker wrote, "How do we go about the task of decreasing the number of psychopaths or the amount of psychopathy in our society? To me it is the same question as 'How do we increase the number of people in our society who have well-developed capacities for trust, for empathy, and for affection?'"¹

Here are some possible ways we can accomplish this:

1. Encourage young men and women to consider carefully their [readiness to love and nurture a child](#).
2. Offer local maternity classes and support groups that focus on the parent-child connection, such as [La Leche League](#) meetings.
3. [Give parents the support they need](#), so they can have time to fall in love with their baby - everything else can wait.

4. Remind parents of the [substantial benefits of breastfeeding](#) with child-led weaning.
5. Educate everyone on the importance of [responding to a baby's cries](#) quickly and compassionately.
6. Encourage parents to [teach their babies sign language](#) so they can communicate their needs and feelings before they have words.
7. Inform parents of the numerous benefits of [family cosleeping](#).
8. Promote [babywearing](#), especially [skin-to-skin](#).
9. Recommend that parents [avoid unnecessary baby gear](#), which can interfere with the parent-child bond.
10. Help parents learn [respectful alternatives to punishment](#) to foster cooperation based on love, not fear.
11. Counsel parents to [give every child a voice](#) by listening openly and non-judgmentally to their children's communication.
12. Teach [communication skills](#) to improve relationships among all family members.
13. Support [educational alternatives](#) such as unschooling and democratic schools, which nurture the child's natural love of learning.
14. Train family and marital counselors to emphasize the critical importance of [treating children with dignity and respect](#).
15. [Intervene on behalf of children](#) whose needs and feelings are not being heard.
16. Campaign for [children's rights](#) at home, school, and everywhere else.
17. Above all, remind parents to [take their children's feelings and needs seriously](#) and respectfully, from day one.

Parenting choices such as babywearing, breastfeeding, cosleeping, and a comforting response to crying benefit the child in many ways. They help to provide a capacity for empathy and emotional resilience, and prepare the child for a lifetime of mutually respectful and trusting relationships. These practices also offer significant benefits for the parents, as their relationship with their child will then be easier and more enjoyable.

We all do what we think is best for our children. Unfortunately, we often receive misguided advice to use approaches such as spanking, time-out, denial of privileges, and cry-it-out. While this advice may be well-meant, such strategies inevitably create anger and frustration in the child, which can build up over time and lead to aggressive behavior. They can also damage the child's self-esteem and hinder their ability to connect with their parents or anyone else.

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Without a strong connection to someone they fully trust, a child who is abused, bullied, angry or frustrated (at home, school, or anywhere else) can feel they have nowhere to turn for support and understanding.² Aggression may then become their only outlet for communicating their feelings of anger, powerlessness, and desperation.

Adults know that the more kindly they treat a friend the more cooperative and helpful that friend will be, because they will be motivated by love, not by fear. It's no different for a child. Parents who relate to their children with patience and empathy model peaceful problem-solving skills that the child can use throughout their life.

The most constructive thing we can do to create a peaceful world is to focus on increasing the capacity for empathy within every child. The importance of meeting a child's needs with understanding and compassion has been recognized by psychologists and researchers for decades.³ Let's start educating everyone about the critical importance of the early years. Focusing on those years can not only help to prevent future tragedies, but can give our children the best possible start toward a joyful and fulfilling life.

¹ Excerpted from "How Do We Prevent Crime?" by Dr. Elliott Barker

² See "The Essential Role of an Enlightened Witness in Society" by Alice Miller

³ See [parenting research at naturalchild.org](http://parenting.research.naturalchild.org)

Quotation: Mohandas Gandhi, Montessori Training College, London, October 28, 1931

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