

Violence:

'The exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury or damage to persons or property; action or conduct characterised by this.'

Force:

'...Strength, impetus, violence, or intensity. Power or might; esp military power.... A body of armed men, an army..... A body of police....'

Injury:

'Wrongful action or treatment; violation or infringement of another's rights; suffering or mischief wilfully or unjustly inflicted.... Intentionally hurtful or offensive speech or word...'

Shorter Oxford Dictionary

the strange case of acceptable violence

from a loving slap to collateral damage

Where do we start? Just after the terrible slaughter of the Second World war, the French writer Albert Camus posed what he called the great political question of our time. 'Do you or do you not, directly or indirectly, want to be killed or assaulted? Do you, or do you not, directly or indirectly, want to kill or assault?'

Try it. You'll find that the answer has all kinds of implications. Camus said that it's necessary to understand what fear means: 'Fear implies and rejects the same fact: a world where murder is legitimate, and where human life is considered trifling.' As for his questions, he says, 'All who say No to both these questions are automatically committed to a series of consequences which must modify their way of posing problems.' And, he said, you have to know your position on this before you can deal with any other issues.

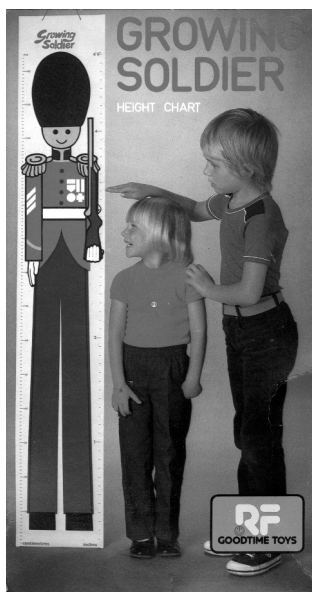
Most people agree that they don't want a violent society. Beyond that comforting consensus, however, views begin to diverge almost at once, often radically. Violence means different things to different people. If we want the new century to be less violent than the last, we have to ensure that the next generation is less attached to using violence to achieve change. This is the challenge facing those of us responsible for bringing up children or teaching them. To help children develop an understanding of what violence and non-violence mean, we need to have a firmer grip on these slippery abstractions ourselves.

double-think

Consider the following statements: 'The perpetrators of this brutal act of violence must be severely punished. Society must be protected from people like this.' and 'We give thanks to our brave airmen who risked their lives so that we may live in freedom.' In one case the perpetrators are brutes, because of the violence of their act. In the other, they're heroes; the violence of their acts (bombing and killing) is invisible, not even mentioned; if it were, we'd find living with the contradiction too difficult.

In every sphere of life acts of violence are variously condemned or commended. As we argue about how justified it was and what punishment, if any, is appropriate, the act itself, and the pain or damage it created, often disappears from the discussion. Other factors transform it: economics, cultural values, personal views. A boy is jailed for killing a toddler; a prime minister is praised for his military decisions, though children have been killed as a result of them. The equal awfulness of any child's murder is obscured by our double-thinking assessments of motive and state of mind.

A recent magazine published by the Refugee Council aimed to show that refugees, displaced victims of war, aren't a burden to their host countries. On the contrary, many turn out to be valued citizens and in some cases outstanding achievers. Included in the latter category was Madeleine Albright, the Czech-born US Secretary of State. Was she included ironically? When (as US Ambassador to the United Nations) she was asked by a television interviewer what she thought of the deaths of half a million children as a result of UN sanctions against Iraq, this was her reply: 'I think this is a very hard choice, but we think the price is worth it'. It's unlikely that the magazine accepted infant deaths as an unremarkable feature of power politics. It's more likely



'One day you'll be tall enough to fire a gun.'

Too many people grow up thinking that soldiers mean safety.

But there's no real safety anywhere as long as there are weapons and armies to use them. We need to teach children to measure up, not to military forces, but to the example set by people tackling conflict with nonviolent techniques and peacemaking teamwork.

that in admiring her career achievements they simply forgot the appalling opinion she once expressed. People have an extraordinary, and alarming, ability to condone acts of violence carried out in the name of politics, and to absolve of guilt the public figures who ordered them to be done.

'not acceptable at all'

A Barnardo's pamphlet on smacking clearly understands how slippery the definition of violence is. To a question about 'ordinary little smacks', the pamphlet replies, 'Of course it would be absurd to argue that a smack is the same as whipping, but it's equally absurd to argue that they are unrelated. They are different points on the same continuum'. It goes on: 'Discussion about how much physical violence towards children is acceptable distracts attention from the fact that physical violence towards children is not acceptable at all.'

The pamphlet quotes an official report on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. 'If it is not permissible to beat an adult, why should it be permissible to do so to a child? One of the contributions of the Convention is to call attention to the contradiction in our attitudes and culture.'

In 1999 each taxpayer in Britain paid over £830 towards the cost of preparation for and execution of war

Barnardo's concern with violence is properly restricted to its own sphere. Comments on grosser forms of violence – nuclear weapons for example – could be thought inappropriate in an article on the physical punishment of children. Nevertheless, with its reference to the UN Convention, Barnardo's

focuses attention on that 'contradiction in our attitudes' regarding violence as a whole.

The logic is reassuring, too. Physical punishment is unacceptable so a scale for its application is valueless. There is another continuum, the one with a fist-fight at one end and war at the other, which deserves similar moral and political disapproval.

a matter of state

A more ambitious publication is the excellent report by the Commission on Children and Violence. Among other things it recommends that 'a commitment to non-violence – *which does not have to be pacifist or non-competitive* [our italics] – should be adopted by individuals, communities and governments at all levels'.

Those 'contradictions in our attitudes' are present here too. Promotion of a commitment to non-violence at 'all levels' is, of course, warmly welcomed. But that qualification, 'which does not have to be pacifist or non-competitive' – doesn't that tie the commitment's feet together before it starts to walk?

The Report doesn't say what it means by 'non-violence', but does helpfully describe violence as 'behaviour by people against people liable to cause physical or psychological harm' – a definition hard to fault. So why the exclusion clause? There are a number of possibilities. Maybe committee members felt uncomfortable recommending non-violence to a government with a working army. Maybe they thought violence was occasionally acceptable.

Here we see 'violence' getting the political treatment. What is war if not 'behaviour by people against people liable to cause physical or psychological harm'? What is war

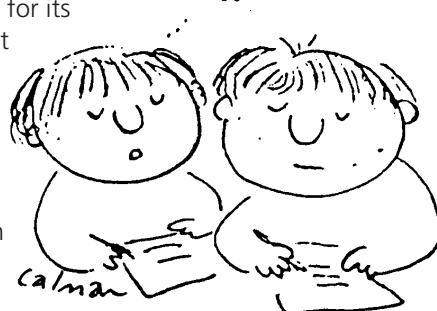
CONFLICT SURPRISE A RECIPE FOR WAR

ingredients 5kg of greed, 2kg of anger, 1 large selfish (very ripe), 5kg of mistrust, 7kg of over-ripe violence, 3 large misunderstandings.

method Using fist, mix in the greed and envy, let it simmer for an hour. Kick the raw anger in. Squeeze the selfish and add it to thicken the mixture. Sprinkle in the mistrust and stir thoroughly. Using tank, fire in the violence. Beat in the misunderstanding, take a world leader and empty its mind of peaceful thoughts. Using half the mixture, refill the mind, carefully put world leader back in its place. Using sword, spread the other half of the mixture across one of the world's countries. Remember to stand back after you have done this: you may become a victim of your own creation. Watch for the after-effects, you will enjoy the pain and suffering. You will find it impossible to clean the kitchen when you have finished: all the ingredients will contaminate the rest of the kitchen.

Quick tip: For fuller flavour act first, think later. *11 year old girl.*

My DAD hates VIOLENCE
but he says WAR
is different...



A common point of view

The cartoon above is a good starting point for your own thinking as well as an image to stimulate discussion in the classroom.

► Copy and enlarge the cartoon for classroom use.

► Discuss the differences between 'violence' and 'war', focusing on their different causes.

► Invite the children to write a short head-to-head dialogue for the cartoon characters, one defending Dad's opinion and the other questioning it. Act them out, encouraging discussion of the arguments employed. Basic facts about war: www.gn.apc.org/peacepledge/info.