Working with children to build peace in Palestinian communities



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A girl plays basketball at the Burj Al Luq Luq center in Bab Hutta, a poor neighbourhood in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. Part of UNICEF's Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy (PBEA) programme works specifically with adolescents.

By Charmaine Seitz, Hanan Michael and Monica Awad

A change in one child can transform a family, and the transformation of enough families can remake society – that is the premise of a UNICEF-supported programme that seeks to alter the overwhelming climate of violence in which Palestinian children live.

EAST JERUSALEM, State of Palestine, 6 February 2017 – Naheel, 40, has four girls and one boy. She and her husband Jameel, who installs aluminium for a living, used to live in Bir Nabala, a small town northwest of the city of Jerusalem.

"Our old house in Bir Nabala had several rooms and a yard for the children to play in," recalls Naheel.

After Bir Nabala was cut off from the Jerusalem city centre by the Barrier, many of its residents – including Naheel and her family – were forced to relocate further into the city of Jerusalem to maintain their right to live and work there.

“We had to move to a tiny house in the Old City of Jerusalem, which had been used as a storage area by my mother-in-law,” she says.

But the move also brought some good. Her 13-year-old daughter Nadine started participating in activities at the Burj Al Luq Luq community centre in Jerusalem’s Old City as part of UNICEF’s Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy (PBEA) programme. Funded by the Netherlands Government and in place since 2012, the PBEA programme acknowledges that the protracted occupation is a driver of conflict and violence, and seeks to tackle the prevailing social fragmentation and aggression in Palestinian communities.

“After only seven sessions at Burj Al Luq Luq, I noticed that her personality changed drastically,” says the happy mother. “She is no longer shy. She is able to express herself better and always reverts to dialogue with me and her dad and her siblings” instead of acting out, says Naheel. “I am very thankful for that.”

Nadine says that when she has a conflict with a schoolmate, she tries to use dialogue to solve it.
“If it is done with respect, you can even become best friends,” she says sagely.



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A girl carries books while walking through the Old City of Jerusalem. The peacebuilding initiative is crucial in this part of the city, where violence is still the main means to resolve conflict.

Corporal punishment

Incidents of violence in Palestinian schools are still commonplace. Disciplining children by physically striking them is generally accepted in Palestinian society, and only slowly being rejected by teachers and parents.

An evaluation carried out by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in 2010-2011 found that 34 per cent of students said they had been subjected to physical violence in the previous year, 67 per cent said they had witnessed physical violence and nearly 29 per cent admitted to using physical violence against others.

The PBEA programme has worked with more than 24,000 educators and early childhood development specialists, adolescents, mothers and caregivers and more than 1,300 schools in the State of Palestine.

“This initiative is critical for this part of Jerusalem, the Old City, because violence prevails as the main means to resolve conflict,” says Ahmad Hammo, a 23-year-old facilitator at the Burj Al Luq Luq community centre. “I myself was violent once, and I have changed completely.”

He says that parents are a critical link, serving as role models and connecting their children with community committees.



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A girl smiles at the Early Childhood Resource Centre (ECRC) in the Dar Al Aytam school in East Jerusalem. At the centre, parents are encouraged to spend more time with their children to help address behavioural problems.

Investing in children from an early age

Elsewhere in downtown East Jerusalem, facilitators of the Early Childhood Resource Centre (ECRC) encourage parents at Dar Al Aytam school to spend additional time with their children to help solve behavioural problems.

Nadia, 44, has five children, the eldest of which is 24, while the youngest is only seven. She says her little boy is always trying to defend himself from his elder brothers and sisters, and has become more and more violent as a result.

“Everybody is trying to control him and punish him when he does something wrong,” she says. “Even if I tell them not to interfere in raising him!”

Just a little more attention from his mother has gone a long way to help Nadia’s son be more confident and not turn immediately to violence to make his needs known.

“Learning about a child’s rights is the most important step before seeing change in a child’s behaviour,” says Manal Herbawi, who leads these UNICEF-supported sessions with mothers and early childhood educators.

She teaches them activities and games to alter the conduct of their young charges, and in the process helps the adults to consider their own behaviour and what they are modelling for their children.

“They can all change together,” Herbawi says.

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