



Society for Research in Child Development

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Growing Up Amid War Affects Children's Moral Development

Colombian children living in war zones exhibited an understanding that stealing or hurting others is wrong. But when asked to consider revenge as a motive, many said it is acceptable to steal or hurt others for revenge. These vulnerabilities were more pronounced among teenagers.

Those are the findings of a new study conducted by researchers at the University of Utah. One of the first studies to consider how growing up in a war zone affects children's moral development, the research appears in the July/August 2008 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

Children in about 50 countries worldwide are growing up in the midst of armed conflict and its aftermath. In Colombia, where almost 2 million children have been forcibly displaced from their homes over the past 15 years, the researchers sought to determine how living amid violence, lawlessness, and deprivation affects the way children think about right and wrong.

The researchers looked at 96 war-affected children and adolescents in Colombia to determine whether they developed moral concepts related to justice and welfare, and if so, how they brought those moral concepts to bear on situations related to survival and revenge—situations that are relevant to life in the midst of political conflict and that might represent compelling reasons to breach moral principles.

According to the study, all participants said it is wrong to steal or hurt others because of considerations of justice and welfare, and most said it is wrong to steal or hurt others even when such actions can help ensure one's survival. When the question of revenge arose, however, the youths' judgments were mixed, with a sizeable number endorsing stealing and hurting for that reason. A majority of the participants also said they expected that people would steal and hurt others in most situations; this view was strongest among teens.

“Overall, these findings unveil a reservoir of moral knowledge among war-affected children: Even the impoverished environments of war and displacement present youths with opportunities for reflecting on the intrinsic features of actions that harm others,” according to Roberto Posada, a doctoral student at the University of Utah, and Cecilia Wainryb, professor of psychology at the University of Utah, the study's authors. “But these findings also point to potential vulnerabilities in these children's moral lives. It is possible that contexts underscoring concerns with survival might compromise children's ability to view themselves and others as moral agents, while contexts underscoring revenge might give rise to cycles of violence.”

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 79, Issue 4, *Moral Development in a Violent Society*:

Colombian Children's Judgments in the Context of Survival and Revenge by Posada, R, and Wainryb, C (University of Utah). Copyright 2008 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.