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RUNNING HEADER: VIOLENCE IN CHILDHOOD

Recognizing the diverse and complex nature of violence in childhood

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**Abstract**

Research on the prevention and intervention against violence in children is urgently needed. In contrast to a narrow approach, typically focused on physical violence against children, the authors offer a novel and urgently needed framework that captures the episodic, structural and cultural nature of both violence and peace. Ranging from intersectional risks to global climate change, we comment on the utility of this approach, as well as possible extensions. We echo the call for recognizing children's agency, shown in our own research on children's peacebuilding in settings of protracted political conflict, and link the points raised to other global policy frameworks, such as United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth Peace and Security.

**Keywords:** children, violence, peacebuilding

### **Recognizing the diverse and complex nature of violence in childhood**

In the following commentary, we highlight the immense value of Wessells and Kostelny's *Understanding and ending Violence against Children - A holistic approach*. Their work on violence against children is urgently needed. In an extensive and far-sighted United Nations report on the impact of armed conflict on children, Machel states: "We must do anything and everything to protect children, to give them priority and a better future" (para. 10). Wessells and Kostelny's thorough literature review, as well as their high-quality policy and research recommendations, meet Machel's demand.

Complementing their analysis of violence against children from a multidimensional perspective, we adopt the term violence in childhood (VIC), in line with the 2017 Ending Violence against Children Report. This conceptualization expands our focus and encourages an even more exhaustive approach by researchers and policy makers. The shift toward to VIC enables wider ranging investigations and interventions. More specifically, VIC includes a) how children are impacted by witnessing violence, b) more explicitly allows investigations of self-directed forms of violence occurring during childhood, such as self-harm and suicide, and c) opens the door for greater agency among children. Picking up on this latter point, our own research focuses on children's prosocial responses to VIC, particularly in settings of intergroup conflict. This broader conceptualization includes the interactional effects between different forms of violence, noted in the paper, and emphasizes the overall right to freedom from fear, including what children can do to combat VIC.

A key strength of Wessells and Kostelny's paper is the critical, universally applicable and multidimensional focus. VIC occurs in homes, schools, communities, societies and cultures, in-person and online. To investigate these forms of poly-victimizations, a social-ecological perspective is rooted in peace psychology (see Taylor, 2020). Using a conceptual matrix, the episodic, structural and cultural nature of both violence and peace is noted. The

paper also highlights that the majority of research and interventions target episodic VIC. In contrast to this narrow approach, the authors offer a novel and urgently needed framework.

Through an intersectional lens, Wessells and Kostelny examine how children are differently positioned in a society. Focusing on different *-isms*, they demonstrate that children belonging to a marginalized minority, girls and those with disabilities are especially vulnerable to VIC. The authors explore how social norms and stereotypes produce widespread, commonly accepted and very harmful forms of cultural VIC as a global problem. On the one hand, the universality of VIC faced by children “regardless of whether they lived in rich countries or poor, in the global North or the global South” (Know Violence in Childhood, 2017, p. iii), paints a dark picture. On the other hand, it offers the chance to collectively target VIC globally.

The global North-South divide includes the unequally burden of the climate crisis. As the biggest challenge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, climate change is a global health crisis that endangers children across the globe. More specifically, climate change impacts VIC. For example, extreme weather events, such as hurricanes, have been associated with higher levels of domestic abuse including VIC (Yun, Lurie, & Hyde, 2010). Yet, the burden is not equally shared by all children. In this paper, Wessells and Kostelny discuss this double jeopardy faced by children in the developing world (Sanson & Burke, 2020).

The climate crisis is not only an example of North-South inequality, but also one of intergenerational injustice. Caused by unsustainable economic activity by older generations, children are disproportionately affected by the consequences of this crisis. Children are, for instance, physically more vulnerable to the direct effects of extreme weather (McMichael, 2014). Due to the immense importance of these interacting factors, we encourage a stronger focus on the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 13, which urgently demands climate actions, in order to combat VIC. Relevant to the interdisciplinary audience of *Peace and*

*Conflict*, we highlight Sanson and Burke's (2020) call for *all* researches from *all* disciplines to investigate how to address the negative consequences of climate change.

Based on their holistic and multidimensional analysis, Wessells and Kostelny argue for a pathfinder (vs. one-size-fits-all) approach to combat VIC in a culturally appropriate way. We echo this call. Contrasting the unidirectional North-South flow, true co-production in which local stakeholders are critically engaged is essential to tackle the roots of VIC. This type of approach, however, calls for fair and sustainable funding that enables high-quality research and effective interventions globally.

Such an approach also points to a shift from an intervention mind-set to a prevention and resilience-building one. Consistent with peace psychology, this calls for more structural and cultural initiatives, not only those that address episodic VIC. Toward this end, global and interdisciplinary partnerships are necessary. As psychologists, we must partner with legal scholars and judicial reformers, for example, to end impunity for those harming children, even on a structural basis. We must name institutionalized and governmental forms of discrimination as VIC, due to their intentional nature. Holding perpetrators and systems to account, must also be balanced with supporting the agency of children and young people who have been affected by VIC.

### **Children as Change Agents: Insights on their Peacebuilding Potential**

Wessells and Kostelny highlight that children can become agents of social change eliminating structural forms of violence, for example. Our own research reinforces this point. Trying to understand how children affect their social world, our research investigates the constructive impact children that can have even in settings of violence (McKeown & Taylor, 2017; Taylor, O'Driscoll, Dautel, & McKeown, 2020). Recognizing the children as peacebuilders, we have investigated the antecedents of peacebuilding across five settings of protracted political conflict (Bähr et al., in press). In this cross-cultural research, we find children are willing to share with those from the rival, conflict-related outgroup. This

outgroup prosocial behavior, however, is dampened in settings with more recent and intense violence.

These empirical findings, more broadly, support the Developmental Peacebuilding Model (Taylor, 2020), which examines the *target* and *type* of children's prosocial behavior, specifically outlining how children's outgroup prosocial behaviors can promote constructive change at different levels of social ecology. For example, civic engagement targets *structural* change at the *exosystem* level, while signing a petition for national or global *cultural* change at the *macrosystem* level. As recognized by the Developmental Peacebuilding Model, outgroup prosocial behavior can serve as a tool for conflict transform. In settings of intergroup conflict, the Developmental Peacebuilding Model how constructive intergroup relations among children may consequentially reduce revenge and retaliation, which typically fuels VIC (O'Driscoll, Restrepo, & Taylor, in press). For example, our research has demonstrated that cross-group contact is an important VIC reducing tool in conflict-affected settings (McKeown & Taylor, 2017; Merrilees et al., 2018). Furthermore, empathy has been identified as crucial for outgroup prosocial behavior toward traditional conflict rivals (Taylor et al., 2020) as well as newcomers, such as refugees (Taylor & Glen, 2020). Although the Developmental Peacebuilding Model focuses on settings of conflict, it outlines how prosocial behavior can strengthen social cohesion more broadly in divided and diverse settings, with implications for reducing VIC. This academic research coalesces with global policy efforts.

### **Policy Implications**

We link their paper on VIC with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth Peace and Security (UNSCR2250), unanimously adopted in December 2015. Highlighting the agency of young people, the document gives legitimacy to their peacebuilding efforts. The five pillars of UNSCR2250 – participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, disengagement / reintegration – can frame prevention and intervention efforts on VIC. Children should be included in the decision-making processes aimed at protecting them.

Focusing on prevention and a culture of peace, more generally, can help to find proactive ways to end VIC.

As victims and change agents against VIC, children should be given a voice. Spaces in the public and private spheres where children can break the silence are urgently needed. Interrupting cycles of violence, and creating the potential for self-healing and empowering interventions for those affected by VIC, are of central importance. If we do not combat VIC, we may be planting the seed for future violence (Taylor & McKeown, 2019).

Against a background diversity and complexity of VIC, Wessells and Kostelny successfully set new gold standards for research, intervention and funding. Their paper outlines how different forms of VIC (e.g. physical, sexual, psychological) occur on various ecological systems (e.g. household, school, community, society). Inspired by their analysis, we highlight the urgent need for a) appropriate and sustainable funding, b) identifying levers to mobilize political will, and c) global, high-quality research. Building on these efforts, we may realize the goals laid out in their paper.

All children have the right to a violence-free childhood. A thorough investigating of VIC helps us to achieve more supporting and peaceful environments, in which all children can thrive. Our research on the Developmental Peacebuilding Model across multiple contexts provides empirical support for how young people can combat VIC (Taylor, 2020). Creating and expanding safe, positive and secure environments is essential to not only protect children, but also to give them the foundation to build a better world.

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