

“Solutions?” lecture part workshops SADR

My name is Marieke Hopman and I am from Holland. I am a researcher and teacher at the university of Maastricht. Three years ago I came to the camps to study the rights of the Sahrawi children. We started this study by speaking with children. What we learned was that it is very nice to be a Sahrawi child. The children here are very much loved by their families, and they have a lot of freedom. They can play outside all the time. What children did say was that they thought there is a lot of fighting between children, and this is a problem. Because children said this, focused our study on violence against children. In addition to fighting between children, we studied beating by teachers and by parents. I will tell you some things that we learned during this study, and share some possible solutions that could make things even better for Sahrawi children.

According to international children’s rights, under international law, children have a right to be protected against violence. I think most people here agree that children should be protected from violence. But you can ask: what is violence? According to international law, everything that you do when you want to hurt someone else, even if you want to hurt them only a little bit, is violence. So when to children are fighting and hitting each other, it is violence. If they are throwing stones at each other, it is violence. If a teacher hits a child with a stick on the fingers, it is violence. If you lightly hit your child as a punishment, it is violence. According to children’s rights, children have the right to be protected against all these types of violence. Adults have to protect them, and they have to protect each other.

Now I will tell you something about the results of our study.

First, on the topic of fighting between children. What we found, was that Sahrawi children fight with each other a lot, and probably everyone here knows that. Boys fight more than girls, but girls also fight. For example, about one third of all Sahrawi children say that other children have thrown rocks at them ‘a few times’ or ‘lots of times’. This includes both boys and girls. What was very interesting, was that when we asked whether fighting between children is a problem, the opinions were very different between children and adults. Adults mostly thought that it is not a problem. It is just something that children do, it is part of their play. However, children almost without exception said that it is a problem. In fact, for children, it’s the most serious problem that children have in the camps. Only a few children enjoy fighting. [reference to stickers]

We found three reasons why there is so much fighting between children:

1. Because children are bored. There are not enough child friendly places, where they can play and be stimulated for example by toys.
2. Because certain forms of violence are considered normal by Sahrawi people. From research we know that children are very good at telling the difference between when fighting is a game, it is play, and when it is serious fighting. Sahrawi children say that much of the fighting between children here is serious fighting. But adults say that it is normal. When they think it’s normal, they don’t do anything about it. So this type of violence is considered “normal”. Children also indicated that they see adults fighting seriously with each other sometimes. Children copy behavior from adults and when they see adults fight, they will also fight.
3. There is not much protection. Children often don’t tell their parents when there are fights, because if they do tell, there is a good chance that parents either don’t care, or they punish the child for getting into a fight (for example by beating them). So instead of being protected against violence, children are actually punished.

What can be done to change this:

1. First you could create more child friendly spaces. With very simple materials you could create a playground, for example with tires. You could start a library for toys, where children can come and borrow toys like they can borrow books in the library. You can also ask your government to create more child friendly spaces, like sports areas and playgrounds. You can also ask NGOs like UNICEF or Terre des hommes.
2. Second, you have to realise that fighting between children is a problem for children. So you have to take it seriously, and find ways to protect children. When they are fighting, they need to stop. Adults also should try not to fight, and give a good example to children.
3. Third, there should be clear rules that fighting is not allowed. One option could be to create rules together with children. For example, discuss how adults will and should react when they are fighting. Should they be punished? And if so, how? Or rewarded if they don't fight for a long time? Children may have some good ideas.

Second, we studied physical punishment of children. As you will know, this occurs also quite often in the camps. Children are beaten by parents, and by teachers. This is also not allowed according to children's rights.

There are a lot of different ways to treat children who are behaving badly.

First, many studies have shown that to change children's behavior, in general it is much more powerful to positively reward good behavior than to punish bad behavior. So it is better, and more effective, to give them compliments when they behave well, so that they will behave well more often. You can for example also give rewards for good behavior, like a high five, or a compliment, or everyone claps for the child, or a sticker. Sometimes you could have a reward system when you want a child to learn something. For example a child who is always late, you could make a paper with ten squares. Every time he comes on time, you put a cross in one of the squares. When he or she has 10 crosses, they receive a little present. Like some pencils, or stickers – it can be something small. In general, it is important to talk to the child about the things they do well and give them a lot of compliments.

If you do have to punish, there are alternative punishment to physical punishment. For example:

1. Time out: a child has to sit down and be quiet for a few minutes and think about their bad behavior, before they can join again.
2. Visible warnings: like the sheet with squares, you can do this with bad behavior too. If you behave badly you get a cross, if you behave badly three times need to take a time-out. If you behave badly three more times, you have to speak to the manager or you call the parents.

All these advices can be used by parents and by teachers who want to correct children's behavior. Luckily, we have some very experienced Sahrawi teachers here who can tell you more about their experience with using alternative approaches to correct children's behavior.