

Peace and Play

By Dorothy G. Singer

Three days before President Bush initiated the war on Iraq, **Playing for Keeps**, a nonprofit organization, held a three-day conference at Yale University devoted to children's play, imagination and their role in cognitive and social development. Attendees were toy manufacturers, toy retailers, toy designers, media industry representatives, educators, researchers, and parents. Panelists and main speakers presented various points of view regarding toys, play and creativity. It seemed fitting to hold this conference despite the fact that the threat of war loomed.

On the eve of the first day of the conference, we decided that we needed to set aside some time during the proceedings to talk about what we can do to help our children if war occurred, and even if it did not, it seemed important to know how to deal with the messages children were receiving via the media and from their friends. Six volunteers led different groups of attendees in discussions about the impending war. We used materials adapted from the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence. Many of the participants needed to talk about their *own* anxieties, let alone how to deal with their children either in their families, in the schools where they taught, or in the social service organizations where they worked with children.

When children are anxious, distressed or when they have experienced trauma, one of the best ways they can heal is through play and art. We discussed the many signs children display when they are worried about terrorism or war: excessive clinging; seeming more quiet or withdrawn; easily startled, jumpy or uneasy; difficulty in concentrating; regression to earlier stages such as bedwetting, thumb sucking; trouble falling asleep; having nightmares; and apprehension when separated from a parent even for a short period. Children who cannot verbally express their fears and concerns often can do so through their play in a therapy situation, or informally, when offered the opportunity to draw or to play with even the simplest props. Many children after September 11 drew pictures that signified hope and a brighter future. Many, however, drew pictures over and over expressing their fears about bombs, fire, and destruction. For them, this was a way of manifesting their feelings. After many such drawings, and discussions, these children gradually began to draw more optimistic pictures of the world.

The United Nations passed a **Bill of Children's Rights** in 1979. One of these rights is "the right to full opportunity for play and recreation." We must give our children the right to play, a feeling of trust, a sense of safety, and we must be honest with them. Can we protect them from harm all the time? This is not always possible, but we can let them know that we are trying our best to keep them safe and secure and that we love them. We need to carry on our affairs as normally as possible. This helps children to be less anxious and affords them a more positive view of the future.

On our last day of the conference, we held a tribute in memory of Fred Rogers. He was scheduled to be a keynote speaker at the conference. We did what Fred Rogers always did when he spoke before a large group. We offered the audience a moment of silence. In that moment many of us prayed for peace. Fred would have liked that.

Dr. Singer is affiliated with Yale University.