



## Education for a Culture of Peace with NVC

### *3 examples of applying Nonviolent Communication (NVC)*

Here are some examples of applying NVC – Nonviolent Communication consciousness in practice (all names have been changed):

#### **First example.**

Anna, 5 years old, comes storming into her mother Karen, who is standing in the kindergarten cloakroom and packing Anna's lunchbox into her backpack. Anna clings to her mother's leg. The educator Hanne has followed Anna from the playground.

"Come on! You might as well come with me. That won't do."

Anna doesn't want to come. She hides her head in her mother's trouser leg.

"Well, Anna just punched William in the stomach out on the playground," explains Hanne to her mother. "And she won't apologize."

"Just go out and apologize, Anna," sighs Mom tiredly: "You know you have to do that, right?"

"NO I don't want to!" shouts Anna and crawls further behind her mother's trouser leg.

"Come on," says Mom angrily: "It can't be that hard!"

"With the help of both mother and educator, the protesting girl is maneuvered out onto the playground. When they come back in - apparently after Anna has delivered her "sorry" to William - the girl sits down again at her mother's leg and starts to cry.

"No - now you don't have to cry," says Mom. And the educator comforts, no longer angry:

"No, now there's nothing to be sad about anymore. Now you're good friends again."

Many of us can probably recognize something similar from our own dealings with children. The adults in the example do what they do *with the best intentions*. As we always do. The adults in the example are *in no way* able to connect with Anna. And Anna hits often. Every day. There are several girls in the kindergarten of Anna's age who don't want to play with her because she hits and is wild. It's not hard to imagine that educators as well as parents feel powerless towards Anna's behavior.

To connect with Anna, it can be helpful to focus on what her needs might be. At the same time, violence must of course be stopped *immediately*. William needs protection and comforting. Once we have taken care of William's needs and then turn towards Anna, we can choose to see her punch in William's stomach as a smoke signal. The goal is therefore *not just* to get rid of the smoke - to get Anna to stop hitting - but to take care of what apparently burns for the girl. Here is the process of connecting with Anna's needs which may include a need for understanding, empathy, being seen and heard, experiencing appreciation, guidance and support for changing relationships with others.

The chance that Anna will change her behavior and stop hitting increases when she is met with understanding and empathy. When we shift our focus from her wrong action to how she feels since she hits. When we see *her* instead of *her action*.

It is clear that the more we correct Anna, the more unfulfilled her need for understanding and empathy will be.

As soon as the adult focuses on which common human needs underlie Anna's actions, she will experience being taken seriously and accommodated. We don't even need to guess her exact and precise needs. Just directing attention towards her needs will often be experienced as a relief. Then it is possible to reach what is burning and help Anna express it in a way that does not hurt others.

How does William react when he sees the adults listening with interest, understanding and empathy to Anna?

Will he experience it as unfair that she is met with interest, understanding and empathy? Experience shows that William reacts with relief. For several reasons.

Firstly, he may see a chance for Anna to stop hitting when she is seen, heard and understood.

Secondly, empathy creates an atmosphere that is more secure. No scolding but trust that William will also be listened to with interest, understanding and empathy when he has disagreements with other children.

## Second example.

An adult woman who was bullied by her brother when they were children tells:

"One might think I would feel relieved and safe when my parents resolved our conflicts by putting my brother in his place with anger. That was not the case. I felt no joy or relief at being 'right' when he was made 'wrong' and felt bad. As long as one child is made the cause of how the other feels there will be guilt. My brother was blamed for me being scared and my father getting angry - and I felt guilty about my brother getting scolded and feeling sad.

Imagine if my father - instead of scolding - had tried to empathize with my brother by guessing what unfulfilled needs underlay the boy's actions. He wouldn't have had to hit the mark; just expressing understanding and interest in an empathetic way would have done something completely different for all of us.

And imagine if he had then been able to support my brother in fulfilling those needs in a more constructive way. It would have met my own need for understanding and help and freedom to be me because I could then let go of the guilt over my brother's frustrations. I would have more trust that the harassment would stop if my brother was met with empathy and help. It would have been a huge relief."

If we judge a child guilty and ask them to apologize, we are role models for what underlies bullying. Children who bully repeat the system they see adults practice, namely that it is OK to withhold benefits or directly punish those who do something we don't like. Or give rewards in the form of friendship and inclusion to those who do something we do like. Both dissolve when we succeed in creating an atmosphere of understanding and empathy towards all parties in a conflict. It provides fertile ground for trust, appreciation of diversity and inclusion.

## So let's replay the first example with Anna with a focus on needs:

Anna, 5 years old, comes storming in to her mother Karen who is standing in the kindergarten cloakroom and packing Anna's lunchbox into her backpack. Anna clings to her mother's leg. The pedagogue Hanne has followed Anna from the playground.

"Hi Karen. Anna and William are right in the middle of a conflict that I would like to help them resolve before you leave.

Hanne sits down and looks at Anna with openness and interest. "Hi Anna, I would like to understand what happened so I can help you. Will you tell me about it?"

Anna doesn't want to. She hides her head in her mother's trouser leg.

"Hmm, so are you sad and would rather be with your mom right now?" says Hanne as she senses that Anna needs security and that need can be met by being with her mom right now.

"Yes, William is stupid," sniffles Anna.

"So William did something you didn't like?" asks Hanne as she shows empathy in her tone without judging William wrong. She focuses on Anna's need for security and influence on how they play together.

"Yes, he pushes," says Anna looking sideways at Hanne.

"I would like us to find a way to play that is nice for both you and William," says Hanne as she senses Anna's need for trust that her well-being counts while also accommodating the same care for William. "Are you willing to come with me and go out and talk with him?"

Maybe Anna is ready for it now. Or maybe she needs more empathy before she can relax and trust that her needs matter in the talk with William.

Mom goes with them out.

"Hi William, are you willing to come over here and talk about what just happened?" calls Hanne. If William expects reprimand he probably doesn't want to come over. If on the other hand he expects to be listened to with interest understanding and empathy then he probably trusts coming over for a chat."

"I saw Anna hit you in the stomach, William, and I would like to understand what happened so I can help both of you feel good again. Will you tell me about it?" asks Hanne while keeping her attention on the needs for security, support and guidance for both children.

"Anna ruins the game," says William with a pout.

"Hmm, so Anna did something you didn't like?" asks Hanne while keeping her focus on both children's needs mattering. She adds: "Anna says she didn't like something you did. And I would like both of you to be able to play well here." Hanne keeps her attention on the need for understanding and empathy for both children.

Maybe the conflict is already resolved here and the children show it by getting up and signaling that they are ready to move on in life. Or maybe more guidance is needed. The most important thing is to create an atmosphere of trust that both children's needs matter and that no one is wrong.

Experience shows that children often respond with greater trust respect and cooperation when they are continuously met with interest understanding and empathy. Once may not be enough but once can plant a seed that will sprout and grow when empathy is repeated.

### Third example.

The following example can help clarify the NVC process both in interaction with the child in the story and in conversation with the parents:

Susan is a pedagogue in a kindergarten. In her group she has Peter a new 4-year-old boy. Peter pushes or lashes out at the other children when he walks by and kicks if they sit too close. He shouts in the other children's face and his little body radiates great anger. The other children distance themselves and quickly develop negative expectations of him. The adults intervene by stopping Peter

and then talking with him and the other children about what happened. Even though they often choose to listen to Peter before the others he clearly doesn't want these conversations and becomes very upset.

Susan has worked with NVC for several years and takes time to observe Peter's needs. Through this observation she seeks to get closer to what needs Peter has and what the kindergarten can do on a daily basis to better meet them. She takes initiative to change small things in the surroundings so it becomes easier for him to settle into the group but it doesn't really work. She perceives the situation as serious and wants to contribute to turning the development in a more positive direction.

So after 14 days she decides to have a conversation with his parents.

At the beginning of the conversation it is clear that his parents feel insecure. Susan meets their insecurity with understanding and guesses at which needs lie behind their feelings here and now in relation to Peter. Susan does not have an agenda or list of things she wants said. Her only goal with the conversation is to connect with the parents about their son's well-being.

Gradually, the parents relax and become curious to hear Susan's concrete examples of what is difficult for their son. They are open to what Inger says because she has won their trust.

They experience that the conversation is based on a desire to contribute to the boy's well-being and not from criticism and blame towards either the parents or their son. Now an open talk develops about what needs the boy might have and what can be done to meet them.

The parents tell that Peter has a little brother and that his little brother probably gets a lot of attention because he says and does so many funny things - he makes them laugh. While they talk they realize that they probably have the attitude towards Peter that he should be able to take care of himself and that he should know better than to do something that makes his little brother cry.

"I get so terribly irritated," says Peter's mother and Peter's father nods.

They realize that Peter is under tremendous pressure because his need for closeness understanding and warmth has not been met for some time. Peter's father himself suggests that Peter probably misses one-on-one contact with him and decides to spend half an hour every day playing with Peter and being together with Peter on his terms without his little brother.

Already the day after the conversation Peter comes in smiling. His body is relaxed his eyes are shining. After a week he has enough energy to be with other children in a pleasant way and can alternate between giving and taking, listening and speaking.

Susan ends her story like this: "It has been absolutely wonderful ever since."

It is relevant to consider how Peter would have developed if at this early stage in his life he had not been seen and met in his needs. How would he have expressed himself when he started school? Would he have become a 'bully'?