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Global Problems Are Too Big for Little Kids

By **STEPHEN R.C. HICKS**

The local newspaper in the Indiana town where I was teaching last year ran a contest for schoolchildren. The students were to create a one-frame cartoon on any topic; the best would be published on the "Kid's Page." A sample of the winning entries revealed a common theme.

A girl in Grade 2 drew a sad-faced planet Earth, with the caption, "I am weary. I am tired. Please quit wasting me!" A boy in Grade 6 sketched some mountain-sized hills beside a sign reading "Landfill," with one tiny person pointing out to another, "Here we have the tallest hill in Bloomington." A girl in Grade 3 depicted a number of crying animals looking at a house under construction with some smokestacks in the background; the caption read, "We want our homes back!!!" Other entries showed black South Africans being crushed under the boot of apartheid, mushroom clouds emerging from back yards, and forests being cut down by huge chain saws.

Such a common focus could be coincidence, conscious indoctrination, or the honest effort of teachers to get students involved in important issues. Some teachers do use their power to indoctrinate; most of us have had experience with them. But most teachers are motivated by the best of intentions: They want their students to become informed, independent and committed thinkers.

Even so, we have a real problem: Many children are coming home from school frightened. After some coaxing, the parent is told that the child fears the world is a cold and scary place. All the furry animals are being killed and all the nice green trees are being cut down. Even breathing the air is dangerous.

It's a truism that you can't teach calculus before arithmetic. In trying to convey their sense of urgency about the

world's problems, many teachers are committing an analogous error.

Children are not able to deal with problems of international garbage disposal when they are still grappling with issues of personal hygiene. They are not able to put in context issues of international race relations when they are struggling with how to deal with schoolyard bullies and being talked about behind their backs.

When students are overloaded, they become frustrated and frightened. When they think the problems they are being asked to consider are too much to absorb, they give up trying to understand. If the teacher persists, the student simply mouths the appropriate words to appease him or her.

My college freshmen classes are regularly populated by young adults who are convinced that no solutions are possible and so it's useless to try, or who are so desperate for answers that they latch on to the first semi-plausible solution they encounter and become close-minded. Both apathy and dogmatism are defense mechanisms against feeling that you are living in a hostile world whose problems are too big

Notable & Quotable

Former president Richard Nixon speaking to the Institute of World Economy, Moscow, March 22:

You are entitled to expect us not to interfere in your internal affairs. But we cannot be indifferent to what is happening on the territory of another nuclear superpower. You have won the admiration of the civilized world by telling the shocking truth about your recent history. Now, when we see attempts to stifle this truth again, shouldn't we pass the same moral judgment that led us to applaud Soviet reforms to start with?

for you to handle. And these are attitudes children often acquire early in their school careers.

This does not mean educators and parents should pretend that problems do not exist. But many of these issues, by definition, are complex global issues—issues that many adults have difficulties dealing with intellectually and emotionally. We need to take extra pains to teach our children about the principles involved on a scale they can grasp.

If we want our six- and seven-year-olds to be ready to deal with acid rain when their time comes, teach them now how to care for a 30-gallon aquarium and why they shouldn't throw candy wrappers into the ravine. If we want them to be in a position to handle the Saddam Husseins of the world, help them now to evolve strategies for dealing with the little tyrant who extorts their lunch money and the kid who always wants to copy their homework. These are the problems they are engaged with and ready to consider solutions for. Do not ask them now what they would do if terrorists exploded chemical weapons above their town or what we could do if the food chain were irreparably damaged by pollution, for the child can only think, "If I could die at any moment, what's the use of worrying about anything?"

Frightened or apathetic children are not going to grow into the adults who will be able to solve the world's problems. Problem-solving requires a confidence that solutions can be discovered and a healthy self-esteem about one's ability to find them. These attitudes require nurturing over a long period of time, on countless small, day-to-day issues. Too much too fast can only destroy them.

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