In order for children and adults to achieve peace, theories suggest that understanding is required. Few efforts have been made by previous researchers to trace the developmental process and describe the unfolding of that understanding. However, this qualitative study of 58 children aged 3 to 12 used drawings and semi-structured interviews to identify themes in children’s descriptions of peace. Those themes and understandings were then divided into levels which were interpreted in light of developmental theories. Some changes in children’s thinking appeared to be stage-like, others showed gradual development, and others appeared to be more idiosyncratic. Implications are shared for researchers, including recommendations for methods and analysis. Implications are also offered for parents and caregivers when supporting children’s developing ideas about peace.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND BACKGROUND

Research on children’s understanding of peace began in the 1960s and 1970s. • Most studies were quantitative and used checklists, questionnaires, and word association. • Authors created lists of concepts that appeared in children’s answers. • It is unclear how many of the concepts were created a priori by researchers. • Concepts were combined in categories without explanation or justification.

Early research on age of understanding peace • Cooper (1965): First understanding at age 6, coherent descriptions by 7 or 8. • Most researchers did not include younger children. • Hall (1933) included ages 4-6 and did not include specific age results. • Other researchers reported themes common in younger vs. older children. • Problems—changing methods for different ages, including limited age ranges, not tracking the developmental process

Related Research
Empathy and perspective-taking • Studies have cited Selman (1980) and said perspective-taking is central to peace concepts

Pro-social behaviors • Modern studies show that children as young as a few months of age show a preference for people showing pro-social behaviors toward others

This suggests research on children’s understanding of peace is as important as soon as they can verbalize their thoughts—around age 3.

Theoretical Framework
• Cognitive-developmental theory
• Socio-cultural theory of human development (Vygotsky, 1934 [1986]) – Cognition is a process of learning and experience – Individual development occurs within a cultural activity or context – War and peace are relevant concepts for children – Mechanism of change: process of internalization of cultural activities, transforming shared participation with others into personal knowledge – Joint problem solving accomplishes advances.

Peace Themes Reported in Early Studies
Hakvoort & Oppenheim (1993) • Missing • War-related • Religion and nature • Positive emotions • Absence of war • Social activities

Hakvoort & Hagglund (2001) Their summary of themes found in most studies: • Abuse of war • War and concepts • Religion and nature • Peace and war • Social activities

RESULTS

Research Questions
What is children’s understanding of peace, and how does it develop during the childhood years? What progression can be identified in their understanding?

METHOD

Data Collection
• Families with children aged 3 to 12 were recruited through schools and child-care programs, personal contacts, and snowball sampling.
• Phase 1: Interviews conducted after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 and in 2009 and 2010 during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. n = 20, 10 boys and 10 girls, mean age = 7.64
• Phase 2: Interviews conducted after the NATO bombings related to the Kosovo crisis in 1999. n = 38, 18 boys and 20 girls, mean age = 7.43
• Children were first asked to draw pictures of war and peace and then were interviewed by a trained graduate student or professor using a semi-structured interview.

Analysis
• In the first phase of analysis, we began individually reading through all of the children’s answers regarding peace to get a sense of the data, as recommended by Patton (2002), using some of the results of previous studies as sensitizing concepts.
• The step was to arrange the children’s answers according their ages. While reading through the children’s answers in this order, we used open coding (Patton, 2002) to look for trends and themes related to age.
• A developmental progression at six levels was identified.
• Using axial coding (Patton, 2002), the themes within each stage were reduced and refined.
• In the second phase of analysis, we used the coding categories from the first phase to code the answers of the 38 children in the second group.

This analysis added some themes and was used to confirm and refine the stages.

RESULTS

Themes Identified by Children Arranged by Chronological Order

CONCLUSIONS

• The use of drawings in conjunction with verbal interviews allowed even very young children to participate in and contribute to the investigation.
• The results help to provide a pathway and agenda to support children in their growing awareness of peace and nonviolence.
• This awareness can then be nurtured to become a sense of empowerment and the ability to help the world reach the elusive goal of living in peace.
• An important next step in this field of research is to associate children’s developmental levels of understanding peace with some of the possible factors that could influence that development.
• Peace education experience, parenting behaviors and characteristics, exposure to various political situations, child intelligence, temperament and personality factors could all be assessed.

The type of this analysis would be valuable in determining possible interventions or approaches to help children in their levels of understanding.

BIBLIOGRAPHY