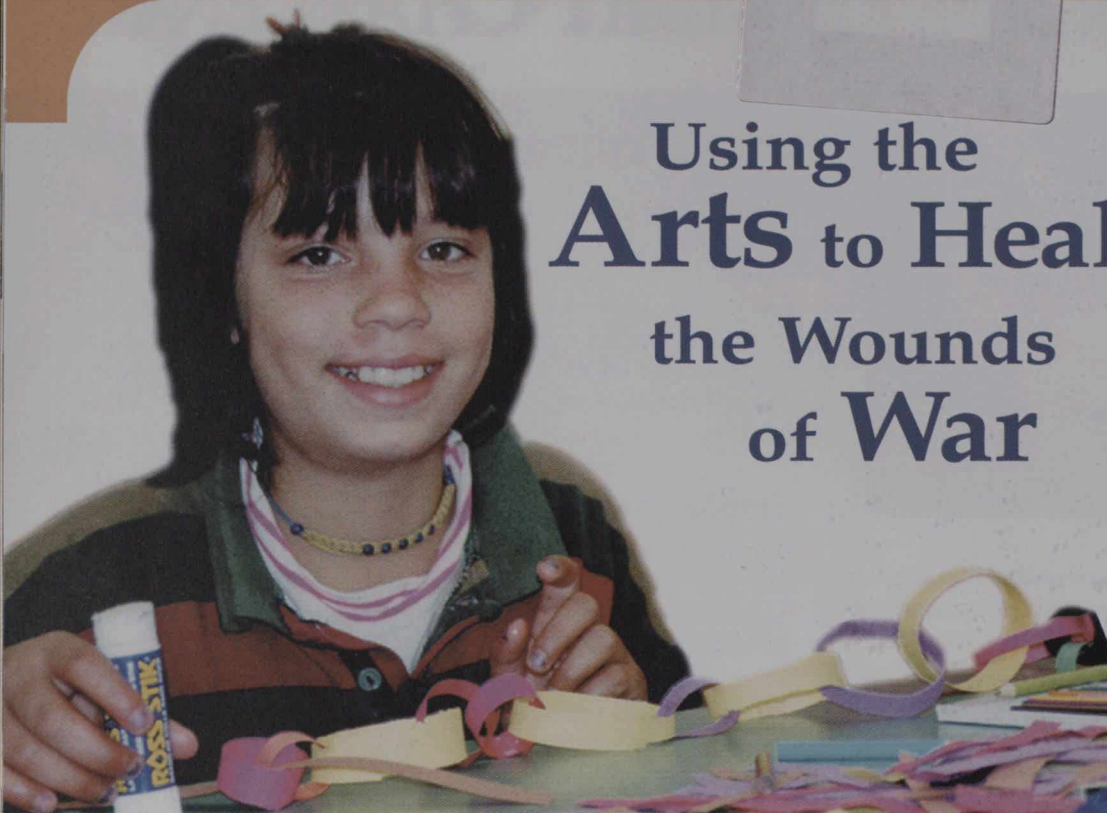


# Culture

## Using the Arts to Heal the Wounds of War



photos: International Children's Institute

Over the last decade, millions of children around the world have suffered inconceivably from experiencing war. A great many of them will remain severely traumatized for years, perhaps for life, by what they have witnessed or endured: killings, rape, torture and brutal amputations. We simply cannot imagine the terror or trauma they have lived.

To begin to recover, they need many types of help: medical attention, psychological support, a safe and stable environment, dedicated care, education and shelter. But that is not all. Often overlooked is their need to express their emotions; and the most valuable way they can do this is through the arts, through drawing and painting, writing stories, making music, through theatre and drama. To begin healing their psychological wounds, they need to laugh and to cry, and to play as children do.

Meeting this need is the aim of the Cultural Initiatives for War-Affected Children, a program set up two years ago by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade in response to a call from the United Nations. Under the program, the Department has provided an annual fund for initiatives ranging from art therapy to drama workshops,

from clown shows and street circus to music and dance workshops. It has also financed the making of film and video documentaries to help raise awareness about war-affected children. Receiving support have been initiatives in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Mozambique, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Albania, Bosnia, Peru and other countries.

One initiative is the "Planning for Peace" project by Cultural Connections of Ottawa: in Rwanda and Mozambique, it brings children and youth together in workshops that use local cultural symbols and practices to promote healing and rebuild children's connections to their society. The visual arts are the focus in the "Painting Peace" project by Change for Children of Edmonton; this assists youth groups in Nicaragua and El Salvador to paint murals expressing their reality, and it also links them with Canadian youth to exchange experiences and understanding (see *Canada World View*, No. 8, p. 10). In Soweto, South Africa, Open City Productions of Montréal is running a project called "My Sister's Place"; its aim is to plan, prepare and establish a school arts curriculum for street kids who currently have nothing.

All these projects involve the active participation of children—a key element in the healing process. Recalls Madeline-Ann Aksich of the International Children's Institute in Montréal, "In the spring of 1999, we visited several refugee camps in the Sarajevo area in Bosnia. We were struck by the fact that the number of children was very high, that they were depressed because they had nothing to do all day long. Communication between children and their parents was non-existent. Clearly, these children needed help."

The Institute developed a drama therapy program in which children wrote stories and scripts, made puppet characters and were able to act out their stories and feelings. They also performed for adults and parents, and thus began to open many doors for communication. The experience has been a great success and the Institute intends to use the model in other countries. Concludes Ms. Aksich, "Kids need to tell their story. It's a wonderful therapy for them." ●



For more information, visit the Web site of the Cultural Initiatives for War-Affected Children: [www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/culture/children/menu-e.htm](http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/culture/children/menu-e.htm)