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Helping Children Understand and Deal with Poverty: Lessons from Greece

by Diane E. Levin

The serious economic crisis in Greece has been in the news for some time. It has led to many stressors on Greek children, families, and the wider society, including rising levels of poverty, hunger, homelessness, and more. Many children, whose situation has not become dire, have still had reduced circumstances that create disruption and stress in the home and beyond. Even children whose families have been relatively unaffected may still hear about the situation — for instance, from the conversations of grown-ups, friends in school, and items in the news. All of these stressors can undermine children's healthy physical, emotional, and intellectual development (UNICEF, 2012b).

Greek children are not alone in experiencing rising levels of poverty. In the economic downturn of the last few years, rising numbers of children around the world — beyond the already large numbers that existed before the recent economic crisis — are living in conditions of deprivation and need. While rarely discussed in the news, children in the United States are actually faring even worse than children in Greece. That is, *Measuring World Poverty* reports that of the 35 economically-advanced countries, the U.S. ranks 34th with a 23.1% poverty rate, whereas Greece ranks 30th with a 16% rate (UNICEF, 2012a).

While we know a lot about the impact of poverty on young children, I have seen very little written about how young children hear and make sense of what they hear about poverty and economic hardship in their communities, wherever their families fall on the economic continuum:

- What do children hear?
- What do they know about it?
- What worries them the most?
- What ideas do they have about what can be done to make it better?

Having such knowledge can help us in our efforts to figure out appropriate ways to respond to young children's concerns and to talk to them about what they experience and hear about poverty.¹

In order to learn more about how young children make sense of the economic situation in which they, their families, and others in their community find themselves, data was collected from young children in Greece regarding what they hear and know about the 'economic crisis.'² Twenty-nine teachers of four and five year olds talked to children about what they had heard about the crisis in the news and had them draw pictures about it.

How Young Children Think Affects the Meanings They Make

The data teachers collected from the children reveal a great deal about how young Greek children are making meaning from what they are hearing, seeing, and experiencing directly about the economic crisis. It also reflects the interplay between children's experiences with the economic crisis and what we know about the nature of young children's thinking, in general (Singer & Revenson, 1996). Seeing how the underlying characteristics of children's thinking play out in their interpretations of the economic crisis provides a powerful lens for understanding and responding to their needs and concerns (Levin, 2003). Among the characteristics most dramatically illustrated in our data are:

- *Young children are egocentric.* They often interpret the world from their own point of view and experiences and do not take others' views into account. When they hear about something happening in the world, they are

- 1 Obviously, first and foremost, societies need to provide broad-based resources to meet the needs of children living in poverty.
- 2 I wish to thank Elsie Doliopoulou, Professor of Early Childhood Education at Aristotle University in Greece, who collected the data used in this article. We worked together on drawing conclusions about the children's thinking based on their responses. I also wish to thank the Wheelock College Faculty Research & Development Committee for helping to fund my travels to Greece.

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inclined to think about how they themselves, not others, will be affected: “We don’t have even one Euro to buy something.” This can lead to worries about their own safety, independent of what they have or have not directly experienced in relation to the crisis.

- *Young children tend to think about one thing at a time* and it is often the one feature in a situation that is most dramatic; and, because of their egocentrism, it is often related to themselves: “I don’t have a suit for the Carnival, because my mom said we didn’t have money to buy one.” This thinking means that children are unlikely to focus on the multiple factors connected to the economic crisis.
- *Young children often think in rigid, dichotomous categories.* They see people and things as all or nothing; for instance, all good or all bad, all right or all wrong, a friend or an enemy: “Bad guys burn and steal since they don’t have money.”
- *Young children usually focus on the most concrete and salient aspects of a situation, not the abstract meanings or internal, less visible features or motivations.* The more salient and dramatic a concrete feature is, the more likely it is that the child will focus on it: “A bad guy burned a man and a woman inside the house.”
- *Young children’s thinking tends to be static, not dynamic.* They have a hard time figuring out how to get from one condition to another. Thus, their thinking is more like a set of slides viewed one at a time than a movie where the movement among frames appears to be continuous: “The bad guys destroyed Greece.” This makes it hard for children to see logical, causal connections between two events.

These five characteristics are very prevalent in the data. When children were experiencing the crisis directly, we tended to hear about the more dramatic and concrete aspects of what happened to them, often in the form of a static idea: they said they did not have money for food or toys, but they rarely talked about why this might be so. They sometimes talked about what happened to their parents — for example, they were getting less money — but rarely did their slideshow versus movie-thinking lead to thoughts about why these things might have happened or to comments about

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people outside their own family circle.

When thinking about how they could deal with a particular problem, some children’s egocentrism led to their seeming to blame themselves or thinking it was their responsibility to make things better: “I

shouldn’t ask for new toys.” Also, they often focused on the sequence of events that made up their own concrete experience as if it were a series of slides: for example, one child said her family didn’t have money for food, so they went to her grandma’s to eat fish that her grandfather caught. She did not think about the bigger issues beyond this immediate experience or what would happen after this one meal. Another child said the bank wouldn’t give her mother money so they couldn’t have heat. Even when children did try to find causality for what was going on — “The rich people are thieves and take the money from the poor people” — we see a focus on one concrete factor with very simple causality.

The children who did not seem to be directly affected by the crisis used this same kind of thinking to make sense of what they were hearing. For instance, they tried to connect what they heard to themselves and their direct experience. One child said, “My mom has money because she goes to the bank and gets it.” Her egocentrism and focus on one thing at a time helped her feel safe and reassured that she didn’t need to worry because her mom could get money.

Other children, who seemed to be learning about the crisis primarily from the news, often thought about it as if it were a fictional TV show — fires, bad people doing evil things — without connecting it to the lives of real people. For instance, there was a common focus on one concrete aspect of the situation using static thinking that did not look at any of the bigger issues related to the crisis — ‘bad guys’ who ‘took all the money’ or who ‘burned the bank.’

Finally, on a more positive note, sometimes the children’s thinking seemed to protect them from understanding the full nature of the threat, which could have made things much scarier for them. For instance, when a child says, “Fortunately, I have a lot of money in my money box,” she seems not to be worried. She egocentrically focuses on her own money, the one concrete item that is important to her and brings her security; she does not think about the larger picture. There were also children who used this kind of thinking to come up with ideas for how they could help other youngsters affected by the crisis. For instance, one

child said, “We need to give the poor people money for food.”

Looking at the children’s comments about the economic crisis, in order to try to better understand the nature of their thinking about it, often led us to have feelings of deep sadness and concern for them. But on a positive note, knowing more about the economic crisis from young children’s points of view helped empower us to consider how we might talk to children about this situation over which they have so little control.

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Guidelines for Teachers and Parents of Young Children

The strategies listed below for working with children who are growing up in economically hard times in countries and communities around the world, grow out of what was learned from the young children in Greece, as well as others’ efforts to help (American Psychological Association, 2009; Levin, 2003; National Association of School Principals, 2008; PBS Parents, 2009; Rice & Groves, 2005).

- *Protect young children as much as possible from exposure to the economic crisis – in their own lives, in the news, or from hearing important adults in their lives talk about it.* While it is rarely possible to protect them fully, having safety and security predominate in their immediate environment helps children cope. This means that when families are affected, they should not share all that is going on with their children, only what will directly affect them, and they should try not to talk about their economic problems in front of them. Also, the less children see and hear on the news about the crisis, the less stress they are likely to experience, whether or not their family is directly involved.
- *Trusted adults have a vital role to play in helping children sort out what they see, hear, and experience, as well as feel safe.* When exposed to aspects of the economic crisis, children need to know adults are there to help and care for them and answer their questions. They also need to trust that they will not be criticized when they bring up what they hear or say what they think. How adults react plays a big role in influencing how children think, feel, and learn about the situation and how they are able to cope with it.
- *Create an environment where children feel safe so they can work on the challenges created by the economic crisis.* For children who are feeling the stresses and dangers of the economic crisis in their families, as well as for those who are anxious about what they hear about it in the news, adults can provide an environment where they feel safe: sheltered from the storm.
- *Support children’s efforts to use play, art, and writing to work out an understanding of scary things they see and hear.* It is normal for children to do this in an ongoing way to work out their thoughts and feelings. And children’s play behavior, art, and writing reveal what they know and worry about so that adults can develop tailored strategies for helping them. Open-ended (versus highly-structured) play materials – blocks, miniature people, pretend food, markers and paper – help them with this. In drawings children made about the economic crisis, they expressed what they knew and what was most dramatic to them. This information provides an excellent opportunity to begin discussions with them.
- *When young children talk about the crisis, they will make their own unique meanings of the situation that grow out of how they think and what they have already learned from prior experiences.* Adults can take their lead from what the children do and say and what they know about them as individuals and base their responses on the age, prior experiences, specific needs, and unique concerns of individual children. However, they have to keep in mind that children will not understand the situation as adults do.
 - *Start by finding out what children know.* If a child brings up some aspect of the economic crisis, adults might ask, “What have you heard about that?”
 - *When talking to children about their questions and concerns, take the children’s level of development and thinking into account.* Infants, toddlers, and preschoolers are not ready for detailed explanations about the financial crisis, but they need reassurance, extra hugs, and attention. By age five or six, they need more step-by-step explanations of any changes they might face (e.g. when a parent loses his job). Adults must tell the truth in a way that children will understand and provide

them with emotional stability: “We have some money that will help us get through until Daddy finds a new job.” If adults remain calm, so will the children.

- *Answer questions and clear up misconceptions that worry or confuse children.* Adults don’t need to provide the full story, but can tell children what they seem to want to know at their level of thinking. In addition they do not need to worry about giving children the ‘right answers’ or disagreeing with them. What is important is to listen to children’s feelings and concerns and to reassure them about their safety.
- *Discuss what adults are doing to make the situation better and what children can do to help.* Children often feel more secure when they see adults working to do concrete things to face a crisis. In addition, encouraging children to take meaningful steps themselves helps them feel more in control: “I can ask for fewer toys.” Although when this is done, adults should avoid making children think that it is their responsibility to solve the problem. They need to see that this is the role of grown-ups.
- *Work to influence the lessons children are learning from the economic crisis.* What children see, hear, and do in their environment becomes the content they use for building ideas about the world, which are then used for interpreting new experiences and building new ideas. When children are overwhelmed with scary situations and information, they will see danger as central to how the world works. This can become a powerful part of the foundation, which later ideas can be built onto. In order to help children, adults can talk to them about how people are working to protect them and to make things better. They can also help children learn how to take age-appropriate, positive actions to contribute to the well-being of their community.

■ *Be on the lookout for signs of stress.* Changes in behavior such as increased aggression or withdrawal, difficulty separating from parents or sleeping, or troubles with transitions, are signs that additional supports are needed. Protecting children as much as possible, maintaining routines, and providing reassurance and extra hugs can help them regain equilibrium.

■ *Have regular conversations with other professionals or parents.* Work together to support each other’s efforts to create a safe environment for children. This includes sharing information, developing effective response strategies together, and agreeing to protect youngsters as much as possible from exposure to the economic crisis and its effects.

Conclusion

Today’s economic hard times are affecting the minds and bodies of young children around the world. The lessons learned from children dealing with the economic crisis in Greece confirm the value of talking with children about what is going on in their own lives, as well as what they hear from adults and in the news. While our conversations cannot reduce the levels of poverty or create a more just economic world, these Greek children remind us that we need to pay attention to young children. We need to make poverty part of our agenda in our work with young children – both rich and poor.

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