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## It sometimes takes a war for parents to relate to their children as competent partners: How Anne Frank's story resonates in war zones around the world

By Shanti George and Zorica Trikic, with War Child (Netherlands)

### Introduction

War shatters normalcy, as everyday life falls apart suddenly for families and within homes. Alongside the trauma, chaos, helplessness and fear, a few positive opportunities may reveal themselves. Under 'normal' circumstances, children are very often expected to follow their parents' lead and to live their lives within parameters that parents set for them (attend school, interact with their extended family, be a part of the wider community, stay safe and respond to expectations) – until war turns this world on its head. The hierarchy between parents and children can then give way to greater connectedness and mutuality, and children's dependence can become replaced by interdependence between parent and child. This article presents three experiences that formed the core of an event titled 'Voices of Children and Young People from Conflict Zones,' that was jointly hosted by the Anne Frank House, Universal Education Foundation and War Child on the evening of 26 May 2016 as a themed networking event attached to the annual European Foundation Centre's conference. The experiences described in this article cover: Anne Frank, a Jewish teenage girl living in Nazi-occupied Netherlands during the Second World War; the insights of co-author Zorica Trikic, who was the parent of two children during the violent disintegration of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s; and Omar Munie who fled civil war in his native Somalia at the age of nine and endured several years of separation from his mother before finding a new home and entrepreneurial success in Europe.

## Anne Frank's story

Anne Frank's life changed dramatically from one day to the next, when she was thirteen years old and her Jewish family went into hiding after the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands during the Second World War. They found a secret home in the upper floors of an office building, their normal activity metamorphosed into a hidden life that was spent completely indoors for more than two years, their wide social circle was transformed into eight people sharing a hiding place. All these features have been widely commented on.

What has so far received little attention, and will be highlighted within this article, is the radical alteration that took place in Anne's relationship with her parents. Her interactions continued to resemble that of many adolescent girls within their families – ongoing friction with her mother at the same time that she adored her father, resentment that her 'goody goody' older sister Margot was held up as a model to her, limited tolerance of the preaching directed at her by the three unrelated adults in the 'Secret Annexe' (her playful name for their retreat) and a close but fluid relationship with Peter who was the teenage son of the other family in hiding.

The significant change was this. Almost until the family went into hiding, Anne's parents – like most – followed the established wisdom that children have to be protected from various hard realities of life. This may be true in certain cases, but this article argues that children should be informed about all that is relevant to their well-being in ways that are appropriate to their age and circumstances.

Anne's parents would have planned with great care their time in hiding, over a long period before it actually began, but Anne was only informed just before it happened. *'A few days ago, as we were taking a stroll around a neighbourhood square, Father began to talk about going into hiding... 'Don't you worry. We'll take care of everything. Just enjoy your carefree life while you can'* (Anne's diary, 5 July 1942). Spoken like a conventional good parent! On similarly conventional lines, Margot – being older – was told more than Anne was, that the call up from the occupying army was for Margot and not for her father. The man from the family that was to share their hiding place sent both girls out of the room in the family home, so that the adults could speak alone about the plans.

These conventions would be shattered, once both families were in the Secret Annexe, for in a situation literally of life and death the young people had to be accepted as competent partners who were crucial to maintaining secrecy, for example by not moving around during office hours lest they be heard by the employees below. The bubble of limited information and discussion – within which parents 'protect'/ imprison their children – had to burst. In the Secret Annexe, the progress of the war and the question of whether the Netherlands might be liberated (and if so when) were monitored together by the five adults and three adolescents as they listened to their radio in the evening hours when the office building was empty of employees. Anne could therefore summarise in her diary what various residents of the Secret Annexe speculated would be the course of the war, based on shared attention to the radio news (2 May 1943; 10 September 1943).

The transition to competent partner was striking, as reported by Anne. *'So there we were, Father, Mother and I, walking in pouring rain, each of us with a satchel and a shopping bag filled to the brim with the most varied assortment of items [as they headed inconspicuously from their home to their hiding place]... Only when we were walking down the street did Father and Mother reveal, little by little, what the plan was'* (9 July 1942).

On entering the Secret Annexe, relationships were transformed, and the four members of the Frank family responded to situations in terms of personality type rather than age: *'If we wanted to sleep in properly made beds that night, we had to get going and tidy up the mess. Mother and Margot were unable to move a muscle. They lay down on their bare mattresses, tired, miserable and I don't know what else. But Father and I, the two cleaners-uppers in the family, started in right away. All day long we unpacked boxes, filled cupboards, hammered nails and tidied up the mess, until we fell exhausted into our clean beds at night'* (10 July 1942).

A competent partnership, between father and daughter working shoulder to shoulder.

The family believed that the hidden retreat was temporary, that the country would be liberated, and that life as it was would be resumed sooner or later. It was therefore imperative – both to maintain their morale and to preserve the hope of an effective return to life as they had known it – that certain threads of activity continued, notably the education of the three adolescents. So formal schooling persisted within the Secret Annexe through non-formal activities, and through the competent partnership of children and parents in re-creating 'school' within their hiding place – for school could exist there only if they created it.

Anne wrote in the initial weeks: *'I'm not doing much schoolwork. I've given myself a holiday until September. Father wants to start giving me lessons then, but we have to buy all the books first'* (21 August 1942).

A month later she wrote: *'I've begun my schoolwork. I'm working hard at French, cramming five irregular verbs into my head every day... Peter has taken up his English, with great reluctance. A few schoolbooks have just arrived, and I brought a large supply of exercise-books, pencils, rubbers and labels from home'* (21 September 1942).

In this crisis situation, there was greater mutuality between parent and child in education, with Anne helping her father with Dutch lessons (German was his first language, before he had fled from the Nazis to the Netherlands) in exchange for his assistance with French and other subjects.

Anne noted a few weeks later: *'I'm terribly busy. Yesterday I began by translating a chapter from La Belle Nivernaise and writing down vocabulary words. Then I worked on an awful maths problem and translated three pages of French grammar besides. Today French grammar and history'* (14 October 1942).

A year and a half later, Anne mused *For a long time now I didn't know why I was bothering to do any schoolwork. The end of the war still seemed so far away, so unreal, like a fairy tale... I finally realised that I must do my schoolwork to keep from being ignorant, to get on in life, to become a journalist, because that's what I want* (5 April 1944).

## Being a parent in the Yugoslavia of the 1990s

For Zorica Trikić, co-author of this article, her journey through the Anne Frank House in March 2016 was framed by recollections of her own experience as the parent of two children in the Yugoslavia of the 1990s, when that country disintegrated through violent conflict. Following the visit, Zorica wrote:

'While walking through Anne's Frank house, I was overwhelmed by respect for the adults in the hiding place. They went through the different phases of a process, and in the end they focused on what was the most important – providing hope to their children and making their lives in an awful place meaningful and full of the joy of learning and creating. Anne's father knew that maybe they wouldn't survive, but instead of grieving and denying hope, he told Anne that – after the Netherlands was liberated – the Queen and the Government in exile were planning to publish the diaries and documents written by people who had suffered the occupation. Thanks to that dream of her father's, we know about Anne and we can read her diary.

As parents we always want to protect our children from pain, calamities and hurt. We very often take over challenging situations and we try to solve problems in the name of our children. We glorify children and childhood, we celebrate their competences and capacities – however we demonstrate a lack of trust in them by creating a 'safe' and not a challenging environment.

War is a state of mind and also reality, things that are happening on a daily basis but also everything that you think about it. Being a parent in wartime is a very complex situation – starting from daily survival (meeting basic needs such as safety, protecting life, providing food and water...) to the highest level needs of creating opportunities for children to play, learn and enjoy their childhood.

At the beginning of the war in Yugoslavia, I had only one child, my daughter who was then five years of age, old enough to remember the time before the war and the many family members and friends scattered around the country. She wanted to know and understand what was going on, but I tried to protect her by hiding information and not telling her the truth. I struggled to minimise the sadness and fear, including the deep and profound sense of loss of the country and of a shared identity and the lost contacts with so many dear people. We were trying to protect her by sending her to the other room to play, and we adults were looking at the television screen as though we were hypnotised. And we were, as parents, sure that our child was happy and involved in activities that make every child happy – in the room next door.

This strategy fell apart one night when she called me to her room to ask me where and how she could meet with a certain right wing politician in the Serbian Parliament. I was shocked that she knew his name and even more that she wanted to meet him. When I asked her why she wanted to talk to him, she explained to me – with a lot of patience – that she had heard him talking about ‘non-Serbs’ and that they would all have to be expelled from Serbia. So she wanted to explain to him that her aunt, my brother’s wife, was a very nice and dear person and that he should not harm her. She also wanted to advocate for the safety of all her friends and family members who were not Serbs. I was speechless and impressed – not only that she was ‘playing games’ with us by pretending that she was playing while she was actually listening to the television, but that she had a brave and a noble plan to speak out and protect the people she loved.

I’ve learned from this situation that children pay attention to everything that makes their beloved adults stressed. The less we tell them, the more they will “play” with their own ideas and fears, and they will be hurt because they are excluded. Children see such “protection” as exclusion and denial of their rights to be a part of the family. From that time onwards we started to share with her information which was appropriate to her age, not to scare her or overwhelm her, but to provide her with clarity based on truth. And she was fully part of our lives again.

I also discovered the power of a child to provide adults with comfort and empathy. When we were scared, she would come and hug us. She would hold my hand, or cry with me when I felt desperate looking at my friends going off to fight in a war that they did not want to participate in and being afraid for my male family members, not wanting them to be drafted, or doing my peace building work in the war zones or with children and youth coming from these zones. When she was ten years old, she joined me and we worked together in the refugee camps.

My daughter’s power and capacity to be a reliable partner was even more visible when the bombing of Serbia started in 1999. This was another type of fear. I knew a lot about the devastating power of the armoury, bombs, planes and explosions that I had seen bring mutilation and death to Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Croatia. I was walking through the ruins of the places I dearly loved, I was comforting children who had lost their parents and siblings, and parents who had lost their children or whose children had gone missing in the war for nine years. And I had thought that I knew how it feels!

When bombs started falling on Belgrade, I went back to my previous behaviour. Now my daughter, thirteen years old was not alone, she had a two-year-old brother. My first reaction was denial – I was telling my kids that what was going on was not bad, but now I know that both of them knew that I was lying. After that phase of denial, I tried to make them scared, and to restrict their movements – I did not let them out of my sight, and while I thought that I was protecting them, I was really making them stressed and paralysed with fear.

When this phase of “absolute control” was over, I became aware of how long it was since I had told them how much I loved them and how much I needed them in order to be able to cope with challenges. And I realised that I was focused on myself, not seeing that they were

offering help in the way they could and that I was ignoring this. And again, becoming aware of my weaknesses and talking to the father of my children, I turned to them all and we together created relationships based on mutuality. We began telling them the truth, in ways that they could understand – for the little one, the sound of sirens became truck horns and his sister was the one who took care of him. Together we made daily plans to create a balance between protection and “normal” life – reading, drawing, talking and playing together.

It was **not** about establishing normality. These devastating experiences should never be normalised, and children who undergo such experiences should learn when they grow up to speak out against violence, war, discrimination, nationalism and fascism. My family’s wartime experience was about preserving hope and meaningful learning and doing. Children who are treated as partners learn to be responsible and strong. And they know that – whatever is going on – there is always something good and important that they can do, even when they are very young. And they do not need to believe that their parents are ‘perfect,’ instead they need to understand that their parents are strong enough to provide them with love and respect in any given situation.

That is my story – children and parents can be partners only if the parents are strong and brave enough to tell children the truth, to include them and to share both fears and hopes with them. To be strong, adults need a network of support, from partners, extended family, friends and colleagues. It is too difficult to do it on your own.

The biggest lesson I learnt is that protection is not about lying to your child, denying reality and attempting control. It is about sharing and relying on each other’s strengths. Partnering with children in difficult times is the ultimate expression of love. If I did not include my children, if I did not share with them, if I did not go to them for help and comfort, I would be separated from them and would not enjoy our relationship. In war and times of crises and emergencies, there are very few things that adults can control – more or less everything is out of our power. So we should focus on what we can do.’

## War Child's role today

Anne Frank was – sadly – far from the last young person to experience disruption of everyday life and education by the winds of war. Organisations such as War Child strive to provide security and access to basic schooling for children and young people around the world, in countries that span the list between Afghanistan and Uganda.

When Zorica Trikić shared her experiences – narrated above – as a parent in a war zone, at an event organised at the Anne Frank House in May 2016, her story found a counterpoint in Omar Munie’s memories of competent partnership with his mother over four years of separation and hope.

As a boy growing up in Somalia in the 1980s, Omar loved kicking a ball around and his dream was to be a football player – until civil war erupted. His mother feared that her children would be taken away as child soldiers and planned an escape, despite the advice



of male relatives that leaving would be more dangerous than staying. At the age of nine, with an older and a younger brother, Omar was one of 300 people squeezed onto a ship meant for 100 passengers, that landed against the odds on the Kenyan coast.

Omar's mother said that she would follow her children within a week, but in the face of hazards and delays the actual separation endured for four years (as just mentioned). Despite the distance, Omar strove to realise his mother's plans and hopes for him. From the refugee camp in Kenya, he was offered asylum in Europe – the plane took him to the Netherlands and not to Germany (where he had thought he was going and he had therefore donned a German football T-shirt). Omar acknowledges the support that he received as an asylum seeker in the Netherlands. He found a new career orientation there. One evening, at the kitchen table in his new home with his mother, he followed an impulse to create a handbag out of materials that happened to be lying around, and when he showed the handbag in class the next day his female classmates applauded and said that they were prepared to pay for such handbags!

Today Omar is an extremely successful designer of handbags – who has received numerous prestigious prizes including one from Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands – and an entrepreneur with his own company Omar Munie Clothing – a global retailer of innovative handbags. And he continues to play football as a hobby.

Omar says that on his frequent visits to his mother, he does not talk of his achievements as a designer, but just savours the feeling of being her son and the taste of the meal that she has prepared for him.

Soon after Omar reached this point in his story, Zorica spontaneously moved across from her seat to hug him, and their two stories – his from Somalia, hers from the former Yugoslavia, he as a young boy fleeing civil war under his mother's guidance and she as a parent struggling to do her best for her children as war raged around her – became just two examples of how it sometimes takes a war for adults to accept that children are competent partners.

## Authors

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War Child (Netherlands), as does War Child elsewhere in the world, invests in a peaceful future for children and young people affected by armed conflict, and specialises in improving the protection and care of children, their families and communities. For more information, see [www.warchildholland.org](http://www.warchildholland.org).