



TIME TO TALK PEACE

The Australian War Memorial and Children

Medical Association for Prevention of War | November 2024

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Cover image: "A Gaze Beyond War" by Leonardo Falcone, age 13

Image courtesy of War Through Children's Eyes, a UK organisation working to raise awareness of war's effects on children and to give children a platform to express their understanding of conflict through art and writing.

"By remembering the past, we can raise young people who are mindful of the causes of war and ethnic conflicts. It is essential that they understand the cost of war and what must be done to build a more peaceful future for those to come."

Narmina Mammadova, Founder, War Through Children's Eyes

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The Australian War Memorial was established as a place for us to remember those who fought, who suffered, who gave their lives.

It was not created to glorify war, or to turn war into an adventure. It was established to make war less likely, to ensure that those who have not experienced war directly can gain an understanding of its horrors.

Sadly, our War Memorial is slowly but surely displaying the opposite of the core beliefs of its founders such as Charles Bean.

I challenge you to find a single veteran who would walk through the Memorial's exhibitions today and say: "Yes, this shows what war is like, and what it's like to survive it."

We need to honour our soldier heroes, but balance that with the knowledge of 'what came next' for far too many – the agony, the nightmares, the suicides, and the desperation - and with the costs paid by the primary victims, who in today's wars are civilians.

No one truly ever wins a war. There is just one side who loses less.

A child who sees images of warfare should come away inspired by the bravery and self-sacrifice, but committed to using these qualities to pursue peace.

Items of military equipment can sometimes help us to remember, but should not be presented as playthings for children or adults.

Wars are not inevitable. In the century since Charles Bean's vision of a War Memorial, many wars have been avoided, because of the wisdom, experience and courage of so many at critical moments.

A war memorial, be it made of stone, a film, or books like mine, must never cross the line so that a child thinks "War looks exciting". I write about war for children as well as adults. Each day I ask myself: "Have I crossed the line?"

My books are war memorials, too, honouring those who fought and suffered, but also avoiding partial truths about war. I hope that every child who reads my books turns the final page with the resolution: "How can war like this be stopped?"

Foreword

Jackie French AM

The answer is in the many facets of conflict resolution, which is so important to help put an end to violence, whether it be war, terrorism or a fight in a playground.

I issue this plea to the War Memorial, and to everyone who reads this. Balance the need to remember and honour with the hopes of long-dead men: that the horror of 'The Great War', World War One, described then as 'The war to end all wars', should not be repeated.

Give our children truth. Give them courage, so they can stand up against those who urge war to increase their profits. Give our children hope, because in a world with increasing social instability and increasingly fragile ecosystems, they need hope far more than an adventure playground filled with the machines and scenes of war.

Let every child leave our War Memorial strengthened by the memory of courage and endurance, and a little more ready to face life's challenges at home and school. Let them leave with memories of resilience and empathy so that throughout their life they can bring peace, instead of conflict.

Let us, as adults, be truthful custodians of our history. May we never cross the line and celebrate war, instead of offering the resolution to avert it.

Jackie French AM is an award-winning author, 2014–2015 Australian Children's Laureate, 2015 Senior Australian of the Year, and was awarded an AM for her contribution to children's literature and advocacy for youth literacy.



“When it was decided to build this Memorial, it was hoped that the story it unfolded would not only be a record of the splendid achievements of the men that fought and fell in the war, but it would be a reminder to future generations of the barbarity, of the utter futility of modern war. And that we should set to work to devise some better, some less barbarous, some less inhumane method of settling our international disputes than by international slaughter...”

Governor-General Lord Gowrie, 1941

Introduction

“If we are to reach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children.”

Mahatma Gandhi

A visit to the War Memorial is a mandatory part of visits to Canberra for students in Years 4 – 12 if the school is to receive financial assistance from the federal government for the trip. In 2022 – 2023 alone, 95,971 students visited the AWM.

Children learn about social norms, values and customs, and how to incorporate them, through their relationships with family, peers and schools.

However, their interactions in the broader community, including educational institutions such as museums, are also influential.

This is why the nature of the War Memorial’s exhibits is critical; what it chooses to portray, and how it does so, sends a powerful message to impressionable students. The exhibits help shape what young Australians understand about our wars and their costs.

Unfortunately, the War Memorial has become captive to the notion of never-ending wars. This has been reflected in its approach to the education of children, with fun and games playing a strong role – rather than serious reflection and the promotion of critical thinking about the place of warfare in today’s world.

This must change. With the redevelopment of the Memorial advancing, now is the perfect time for the War Memorial to reconsider its portrayal of wars, particularly in activities directed at children.

The set of principles in this report will be a powerful support for this work.

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MAPW is a national association of health professionals working to promote peace and prevent the harms of war and militarism. MAPW is the founder of the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, and affiliate of the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War.

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Principles to guide the development of children's education, displays and activities at the Australian War Memorial

01

Companies whose existence depends on wars and threats of wars have no place at the War Memorial.

The AWM has accepted funding from companies like BAE Systems and Lockheed Martin, multinational companies that profit from war and threats of war around the world. Commercial relationships with companies that profit from war threaten the integrity of the memorial's mission.

02

The War Memorial is not a place for fun but a place for reflection.

Any activities, projects or outreach involving the AWM must not encourage children to believe that war is either exciting or inevitable.

03

The education of children about war must be honest.

Activities should teach children to recognise the humanity and the suffering of all those involved in wars, both combatants and civilians, and other costs including to the environment.

04

The exhibits must be culturally, and age, appropriate.

Children come from diverse backgrounds – including countries Australia fought against. How such experiences relate to warfare must be considered carefully.

05

Children should be exposed to information about all of Australia's wars, including the Frontier Wars.

For too long, the Memorial has refused to commemorate the wars fought on this land by white settlers against First Nations people.

07

The curation of the Memorial's children's exhibits and programs should be guided by an advisory body of people with relevant expertise in children, including their education.

Independent expertise and robust policy should inform programming for children.

06

To inspire hope and build understanding, children should be exposed to non-violent ways of settling conflicts between nations, guided by historical examples.

The Memorial can and should have as strong a focus on promoting peace as honouring service in war.

08

The new children's space at the War Memorial should be an evolving one, with the feedback from, and the opinions of, children and child experts guiding changes.

Children's programming should be responsive, and serve children's best interests.

The education of children about war must be honest.

Activities should teach children to recognise the humanity and the suffering of all those involved in wars, both combatants and civilians, and other costs including to the environment.



Image: Edith Chapman, Age 11 Courtesy of War Through Children's Eyes

The Memorial past and present

Origins of the Australian War Memorial

The War Memorial was the vision of war correspondent Charles Bean, who was struck by the appalling suffering he witnessed on the Western Front in World War 1. He conceived the idea of a memorial in 1916 as a place to house battle relics and commemorate those who had been killed.

After many years of delays, the War Memorial was opened on Armistice Day (now Remembrance Day) in 1941 by Governor-General Lord Gowrie, who stressed in his speech the “barbarity [and] utter futility of modern war”.

Gowrie stated:

“When it was decided to build this Memorial, it was hoped that the story it unfolded would not only be a record of the splendid achievements of the men that fought and fell in the war, but it would be a reminder to future generations of the barbarity, of the utter futility of modern war. And that we should set to work to devise some better, some less barbarous, some less inhumane method of settling our international disputes than by international slaughter...”

Charles Bean’s **guiding principles** were that the Memorial should avoid “glorification of war” and “perpetuating enmity”. Those who have fought wars, he stressed, “are generally strongest in their desire to prevent wars”.

Australian War Memorial strays from its primary purpose

Many decades on, there are troubling signs that the War Memorial is straying further and further from its primary purpose of honouring our war dead, and is in fact becoming part of the problem of Australia’s almost constant engagement in warfare.

Its focus has shifted (contrary to its purposes as set out in the **AWM Act 1980**) towards honouring the very act of fighting in wars. The Memorial’s continuing acceptance of funding from weapons corporations, which depend on wars and threats of wars for their survival, adds to this problem.

In November 2020 the War Memorial Director Matt Anderson **told a Senate inquiry** into “Nationhood, national identity and democracy” that: “We develop in young learners a deeper understanding of the connection between civic responsibility and military service.”

Anderson’s predecessor, Dr Brendan Nelson, promoted a central role for the Memorial in the development of values for young Australians. On **Anzac Day 2013 he said**: “To young Australians in search of belonging, meaning, purpose and values for the world you want rather than the one you think you’re going to get, your journey leads here.”

This notion is deeply troubling. Children’s sense of purpose and values develop from early in life through their interactions within families, schools and communities. Children do not enter the AWM as a blank slate.

With the Memorial redevelopment advancing, further concern is raised by plans to **engage an advertising firm** to help develop multimedia presentations to drive an “emotive connection” with the next generation. This, with its potential to amplify feelings of excitement, significantly increases the risks that children will regard fighting in wars as the most noble way to serve Australia.

Historians have expressed concern at the nature and extent of the war narratives that are presented to children at the War Memorial and elsewhere.

As just one example, as the World War 1 commemorations began in 2014, historian **Henry Reynolds** wrote that:

“Perhaps the most concerning feature of the spreading militarisation is the deliberate targeting of children...”

“There seems to be no reticence among the promoters of war as the defining national experience. They openly canvass the importance of reaching out to children from the earliest years of primary school and seem never to consider that their crusade is closer to propaganda than to pedagogy.”

The children’s galleries that will form part of the redeveloped Memorial provide an opportunity to move from propaganda to honest story-telling, learning from the past and inspiring hope for a more peaceful future.



Image credit: SqueakyMarmot CC BY-SA 2.0.

Museums and social norms

Any modern museum that children will visit must consider the possible impact of its displays and activities on children.

Children learn about socially acceptable behaviours, norms, values and customs, as well as how to implement them in their own lives, through their interactions with others in their social environment. While families, schools and peers are key aspects of their social environment, their interactions in the broader community, including educational institutions like museums, are also influential.

Most adults try to instil the belief in children that violence is “bad”. Physical aggression (in the form of corporal punishment, spanking, etc) by parents and teachers is banned or highly criticised, and for good reason. Reviews of research of the use of physical punishment at home and in schools have found clear evidence of negative effects on children’s academic performance, mental health, cognitive ability, self-esteem and behavioural problems such as violent behaviour and aggressive conduct.

Similarly, extensive research on the impact of exposure to violence and aggression in our media indicates that it is related to observable increases in aggression and violence, especially among younger children.

How then does this relate to memorials and museums that commemorate events – wars – that are violent in the extreme? Such institutions necessarily sanitise the subject of their displays, and yet visitors – including the young – are aware that violent events are being honourably remembered.

How do children make sense of conflicting messages – that violence can be honourable when used against an “enemy”, generally someone unlike us, but also shameful when used against people in our own society?

There are no easy answers to this, but at the very least, how war is presented matters very much. If it is portrayed as a source of great sadness and grief, this conveys very different attitudes and values from its presentation as exciting, heroic and necessary. Implicit messages of war being a matter of “good versus evil”, or “us versus them”, discourage thinking about the complexities of wars and their causes.

If weaponry itself is portrayed – either implicitly or explicitly – with a sense of excitement or adventure, this carries a message that weapons are intrinsically “good” and perhaps something for children to aspire to use when they are older.

Children who visit the Memorial, especially those who come in school groups, will be in a learning frame of mind, and so are likely to be especially receptive to the overt and covert messages in the material they encounter. A sense of inquiry and reflection should be encouraged.

Almost all of the research on the impact of museum visits on children has focused on their learning of facts and concepts, rather than their attitudes and values. However, it is clear that museums have the potential to have broader impacts. For example, in 2012 one study examined how an exhibit in an Indianapolis children’s museum called a “Kindness Tree”, which told the story of prejudice and intolerance through the life stories of Anne Frank, Ruby Bridges and Ryan White, built children’s capacity to confront intolerance through their words and actions.

For children visiting the Australian War Memorial, will they leave with a belief in the importance of cooperation and negotiation in all aspects of life, including between nations? Will they have a greater awareness of some of the alternatives to war in dealing with conflict? The answers to these questions will be important in helping young people grapple with the problem of violence – in both its sanctioned and prohibited forms – in today’s world.



To inspire hope and build understanding, children should be exposed to non-violent ways of settling conflicts between nations, guided by historical examples.

This report was written as many millions of people around the world suffer the horrific costs of war, children being disproportionately represented among them.

This century has been marked by extreme violence, and there are threats of worse to come.

Young Australians deserve something better than the existing narrative of endless wars.

The Australian War Memorial is uniquely placed to provide it, by instilling in our children and youth not only a respect for our war dead, but also hope for a more peaceful future and knowledge of the tools needed to achieve it.

To guide the War Memorial in this vital work, we have devised a set of principles.

Principle 1: No place for weapons companies

Under the directorship of its former director Dr Brendan Nelson, the War Memorial increased its efforts to secure funding from multinational weapons manufacturers.

In the three years to 2023, the Memorial took **\$830,000 in sponsorships and donations** from weapons makers including BAE Systems, Lockheed Martin, Thales and Northrop Grumman.

For this, according to a Memorial statement to Senator Jordon Steele-John in Senate Estimates on 4 March 2020, the weapons companies can receive a range of benefits including corporate branding, program and activity naming rights, venue hire waivers for functions, invitations and attendance allocations to major ceremonies, and print, advertising and media recognition. All of these are good for corporate business.

The “never again” hopes of First World War soldiers, and Lord Gowrie’s plea for the War Memorial to be a reminder that we need a “less barbarous” method of “settling our international disputes than by international slaughter” is totally at odds with a war memorial that accepts funding from weapons manufacturers that profit from the killing of military personnel.

Commercial relationships with companies that profit from war threaten the integrity of the Memorial’s mission.

A principled approach

Principle 2: The memorial is no place to play

The Memorial has presented war to children as an exciting adventure. For example, before its closure due to COVID, the Discovery Zone children’s area contained World War 1 trenches, a Cold War submarine and Vietnam-era helicopter, all set up for play, and bearing zero resemblance to the real thing. It was a travesty of “education”.

Little more than a decade ago, the Memorial’s online KidsHQ activity included a dam-busting feature under the heading “Great Stories”. The activity:

- Failed to mention the horrendous casualty figures experienced by the other side
- Described the whole thing as a “true life adventure” and
- Challenged young readers to “see if you can bust the dam”.

This was worse than a travesty of education; it was an invitation to children to play at committing war crimes.

On 12 April 2023, the War Memorial was asked by Senator David Shoebridge in Senate Estimates about its use of play activities for children. In justifying their use, Director Matt Anderson referred to article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognises “the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities”. However, there are some places where play and fun are inappropriate. A war memorial is a place for contemplation, reflection and learning; it is not a place for fun.

The UN Convention also states that:

- The child should be brought up “in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity”;

- The child, “by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care”;
- In all actions concerning children, “the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration”.

Last but not least, the education of the child shall be directed to preparation for “responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples...”.

Educational initiatives for children that normalise warfare violate these fundamental principles.

Principle 3: The need for honest story-telling, including on the suffering and inhumanity of wars

The Memorial’s current expansion is for the specific purpose of honouring all those Australians who have fought in our recent wars, not just those who died in them. These wars have been marked both by horrendous costs to civilians and repeated failures to bring about a lasting and just peace.

The need to honour Australians killed or injured in those wars is not questioned. However, without an honest telling of the costs and consequences, we come perilously close to the glorification of war which Charles Bean and countless others have warned most strongly against.

The **United Nations estimates** that some 90% of wars’ casualties are civilians; children are particularly vulnerable.

War affects children in **many ways**; armed conflict destroys the basic necessities of life, including health care, shelter, clean water and food supplies, and education. Meanwhile, the psychological trauma of warfare presents in children in many forms.

For combatants, in addition to the risks of death or permanent disability, psychological damage can be severe. Serving and ex-serving ADF members are **more likely to die from suicide** than during combat.

The **environmental impacts** of warfare are devastating. They include huge carbon emissions, pollution of land, sea and air, deforestation, habitat loss, unexploded ordnance left behind and many others.

Nuclear weapons represent humanity’s ultimate assault on ourselves and the environment.

Economically, military budgets (which in 2023 amounted to **\$2.4 trillion globally**) divert scarce funds from caring for people and the environment.

Apart from the costs and consequences of Australia’s wars, honest story-telling would address the many “why” questions, such as:

- Why have wars occurred, and who decided to send Australian troops to each war?
- Was the decision contentious? If so, why?
- Did people volunteer to go to war, and if so why did they, and what were volunteers told about what it would be like? What was it like?
- Were people conscripted and, if so, why?

Principle 4: Culturally appropriate exhibits

The need for the Memorial to take a new approach is all the more pressing given the changing nature and diversity of Australia’s population.

For the first time since 1893, the percentage of Australians who were born overseas **now exceeds 30%**. Almost half of all Australians have a parent born overseas, including from countries where Australian soldiers fought; many have experienced war and violence firsthand.

This places a serious obligation on the War Memorial to be sensitive to their experiences.

Principle 5: It is past time that the Frontier Wars were included

Perhaps the Memorial’s greatest failing in its education of children about war is its persistent refusal to commemorate the wars fought on this land by white settlers against First Nations people.

ANU **experts have written**: “The Australian War Memorial Act 1980 contains a very broad definition of the institution’s role as a national memorial to Australians who have died as a result of any war and warlike operations”.

Further, they state that extensive research on frontier violence across Australia shows there had been “a violent and sustained conflict on the frontier that should be understood as warfare”, with the use of “military-style forces and tactics to suppress Indigenous resistance.”

The **Defending Country** project for the proper recognition and commemoration of the Frontier Wars states that, “what we commemorate shows what we regard as important”.

What are First Nations children who visit the Memorial to think when the enormous sacrifices and courage of their forebears in defending their land is so marginalised in our official narratives about war?

Principle 6: Inspire hope in children

While the Australian War Memorial is not designated a “peace museum”, Lord Gowrie certainly wanted that. It is likely that the World War 1 Diggers, with their “never again” message, would at the very least have wanted the Memorial to have as strong a focus on promoting peace as honouring our dead.

The War Memorial should honour its founders appropriately and start promoting peace.

War museums can, and do, promote the role of ordinary people who work for peace.

In 2017, the Imperial War Museum in the UK was home to the exhibition “**People Power: Fighting for Peace**”, which examined the country’s peace movement over the previous 100 years. The Imperial War Museum continues to recognise voices for peace.

The Australian War Memorial has nothing similar.

The International Network of Museums for Peace illustrates the valuable educative work that is possible.

The Network promotes a culture of peace to inform the public about peace and nonviolence through the lives of individuals, the work of organisations, campaigns and historical events.

The Australian War Memorial has recognised the importance of peace through its exhibition “The Courage for Peace”, which describes the valuable and challenging work of Australian peacekeepers in conflict situations.

But this is a very narrow framework. There is far more to peace than peacekeeping. Many other actions can be taken to prevent conflict situations from arising or escalating, and to reduce the harms caused by wars.

Civil society has contributed greatly to this work, in Australia and globally.

The world’s most prestigious award for peace, the Nobel Peace Prize, was awarded in 2017 to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, which began in Australia – the only occasion on which it has been awarded to a person or organisation that originated here.

Many organisations in Australia have provided other valuable and effective advocacy for peace, including efforts to:

- Prevent Australian involvement in unjust wars
- Reform the dangerous process by which a prime minister alone can send Australians to war
- Promote greater Australian emphasis on diplomacy
- Reduce the proliferation of weapons regionally and globally
- Reduce the influence of companies that profit from war and instability in our political decision making and in our education system
- Examine whether Australia’s military alliances help or hinder prospects for peace
- Educate in non-violent conflict resolution
- Promote peace research in our tertiary institutions
- Increase Australia’s development aid and goodwill towards other nations.

All of these examples, and others, could provide valuable discussion material for young people seeking different perspectives on the pursuit of peace.

The curation of the Memorial's children's exhibits and programs should be guided by an advisory body of people with relevant expertise in children, including their education.



Image: Euan Kelly, Age 11 *Courtesy of War Through Children's Eyes*

Principle 7: The curation of the exhibits requires input from an advisory group

Despite the very large number of children visiting the Memorial each year and accessing its online programs, the Memorial appears to have no history of engaging people with the necessary expertise, or of developing principles or policies, to guide the development of its children's programs.

While some such input is apparently planned, the manner in which this will be done, the expertise that will be sought, and how experts will be chosen has not been disclosed, despite advisory groups for other sections of the community already being in place.

The Memorial states that its children's activities are developed in line with the Australian Curriculum.

However, key skills are notably absent from the Memorial's activities, including contestability, critical thinking, and intercultural understanding.

The "Aims of History" in the curriculum include the development of broad skills such as the capacity and willingness to be informed and active citizens, and contestability.

The "General capabilities" in the curriculum include ethical understanding and intercultural understanding.

The "Cross-curriculum priorities" are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures, Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia, and Sustainability.

All of these are highly relevant to Australia's involvement in wars.

To encourage critical thinking, students should be exposed to all views and experiences in relation to our participation in wars, including from those who have opposed any or all of the wars.

Principle 8: A living, evolving children's space

Children are not little adults. Their interpretations of exhibitions will often differ markedly from what we expect.

Material exhibited at the Memorial can be misinterpreted, and can be very disturbing, for children and adults alike.

At the end of a visit to the AWM, children must be encouraged to express their feelings and responses, with multiple avenues being made available in a dedicated space.

Feedback from them and from child experts should guide the evolution of the children's space.

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