

# For the sake of children, the War Memorial needs to put bigger emphasis on peace

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Tens of thousands of school students visit the Australian War Memorial every year - [more than 95,000 in 2022-23](#) alone. For students in years 4-12, a visit to the Memorial is mandatory for the school to receive [federal funding](#) for a visit to Canberra.

The Memorial therefore plays a role in shaping what young Australians understand about our wars and their costs.

What it portrays, and how it does so, are important. Portraying war with a sense of great sadness and grief conveys very different attitudes and values from presenting war as exciting and a normal part of international affairs. Children have a particular stake in how the Memorial portrays war for another reason.

One of the realities of modern warfare is that the vast majority of its victims are civilians, with children [disproportionately affected](#).

Children pay [a horrendous price](#) - through death, maiming, lifelong psychological trauma, bereavement, displacement, deprivation, loss of education and much else - in conflicts started by adults.

It is disturbing therefore that the War Memorial has drifted so far from the core beliefs of its founders.

Charles Bean, Australia's official war correspondent in World War I, first [conceived the idea of a memorial](#) as he reported on the horrors of that war, which he called "some ghastly giant mincing machine".

His guiding principles for the Memorial rested on the belief that "those who have fought wars are generally strongest in their desire to prevent wars". In opening the Memorial on November 11, 1941, governor-general Lord Gowrie spoke of the hope that it would be "a reminder to future generations of the barbarity, of the utter futility of modern war".

Such a hope appears to have been abandoned. In recent times Memorial directors have promoted troubling notions that elevate military service and values beyond all others.

In 2020, current director Matt Anderson told a Senate inquiry that the Memorial develops in young learners "[a deeper understanding](#) of the connection between civic responsibility and military service".

His predecessor, Dr Brendan Nelson, promoted [a central role for the Memorial](#) in how young Australians develop values, saying that for young Australians searching for "belonging, meaning, purpose and values", their journey leads to the War Memorial.

But what beliefs and values does it promote? Justice, compassion and peaceful resolutions of conflict?

Or that war itself is a necessary and noble institution?

As another Remembrance Day passes, and wars continue to rage, a new report released this week by the Medical Association for Prevention of War argues that the Memorial should honour its founders by focusing the minds of young Australians on the need for peace rather than preparing for endless wars.

[Time to talk peace: the Australian War Memorial and children](#) outlines the Memorial's failure to guide children and youth through war's complexities, costs and lessons for the future.

The Memorial's outreach to children has included significant elements of play and fun activities. Before its closure due to COVID, the Discovery Zone children's area was set up for pretend games in a World War 1 trench, a Cold War submarine, a Vietnam-era helicopter and replicas of other "wartime" situations.

This was very far from education about what these theatres of war were really like. A war memorial is a place for reflection and learning, but not for fun.

As the controversial redevelopment proceeds, the Memorial is planning to work with an advertising firm to drive an "emotive connection" with the younger generation, with clear potential to further amplify feelings of excitement around warfare.

The education of children about warfare should be driven by education experts, not advertising agencies.

While the Memorial has recognised the importance of peace through its exhibition *The Courage for Peace*, which describes the valuable work of Australian peacekeepers, there is far more to peace than peacekeeping. Civil society has contributed greatly to educating citizens about peace-building, peacemaking, and reducing the harms of wars.

Valuable material is available to kick off discussions about the pursuit of peace. It should be used. *Time to Talk Peace* lists a number of principles to guide the Memorial as it redevelops children's galleries, including the following:

Children and youth should not be encouraged to believe that war is inevitable, exciting or even fun.

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, combatants and civilians, and other costs, including the devastating costs to the environment.

Children should be exposed to information about all of Australia's wars, including the [Frontier Wars](#). First Nations' children should feel proud of their ancestors' resistance to the invasion of their land.

Exhibits should be culturally appropriate and sensitive to the fact that almost half of all Australians have a parent born overseas, including from countries where Australian soldiers have fought. Many Australians from culturally diverse backgrounds have experienced war firsthand.

Funding from weapons corporations, whose existence depends on wars and threats of wars, threatens the integrity of the Memorial's mission, and should cease. Children should be exposed to non-violent ways that nations can settle conflicts, using historical examples.

The Australian War Memorial is uniquely placed to instil in our 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.

In the foreword for the report, acclaimed children's author Jackie French wrote "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."

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