Witnessing violent events in their community, in school, on television or in computer games can affect children’s confidence and emotions, particularly if they are not given an opportunity to talk about what they have seen and how it made them feel.

Developmental psychologist Dr Natasha Kirkham, of Birkbeck’s Department of Psychological Sciences, worked with colleagues at King’s College London and the Theatre Centre in Shoreditch, east London, to see whether theatre could play a role in helping children respond to violence around them.

Dr Kirkham and her colleagues, together with playwright Ed Harris, conducted a series of workshops and group interviews with Year Five pupils (aged nine to 10) at primary schools in 10 inner-city areas with high violent crime rates in London, Birmingham, Cardiff, Liverpool and Manchester. Harris then used material from these workshops to write a play, What the Thunder Said, which toured UK primary schools in March 2014. This play allowed the children, their parents and teachers to engage in a dialogue about the gap between what the children experience and what the adults see.

Dr Kirkham and fellow Birkbeck psychologist Dr Virginia Eatough analysed the words and expressions of the children in workshops and group interviews as part of the 18-month research project. Results showed a significant gap between the children’s lived experience and their abstract understanding of the rules they are taught. Although they know the rules, they observe that the rules simply do not work a lot of the time. In addition, these children’s threshold for behaving aggressively is low. Simply being ‘annoyed’ or having someone ‘get on my nerves’ can trigger an aggressive response. They commonly discuss vastly different types of aggressive behaviour as being equivalent. Murder and cussing can be spoken of in the same breath, with the same sense of importance. The implication is that these children perceive their world as dangerous and that confusion regarding appropriate behaviours and correct responses is constant.

Reflecting on the innovative approach used in this project, Dr Kirkham said: “This project opened my eyes to just how important it is for developmental scientists to get out of the lab and into the field, to shake up their methods, and to listen to individual children. “These children all had thoughtful, strong opinions about the bullying in their environments. A more open dialogue between the children and the adults in their communities is clearly necessary.

“This experience was personally and professionally cathartic for me, offering new insights into modern-day parenting, coping strategies (for children and teachers), and developmental resilience. Ultimately, it proved to me that a lot of our ideas about how to deal with bullying need to be reworked.”

What the thunder said

Theatre gives psychologists insights into children’s responses to community violence and bullying

Below: Dr Natasha Kirkham and Ed Harris conducted workshops in 10 inner-city primary schools