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## 'Soccer for Peace' Helps Build Understanding Between Arabs and Jews

Wednesday, June 25, 2008

By **Ahmad Shuja**  
**FOX NEWS**

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**NEW YORK** — Forsan Hussein was born and raised in a tight Arab neighborhood in Israel. He spoke only Arabic and had only Arab friends. Though he lived in a Jewish state, he never met a Jew until he was 10 years old, and he couldn't speak the other boy's language, Hebrew.

But they soon discovered they had a language in common — soccer.

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"Growing up in Israel you are aware that you are different, that you are a minority," Hussein said of the tensions he felt as an Arab boy in the Jewish nation (Arabs make up 20 percent of Israel's population).

But Hussein learned to speak Hebrew and made Jewish friends when he met them on the soccer field. When kids play together on a team, pass the ball to each other, support their team and ultimately score a goal for it, they break barriers and forge lasting friendships, he said.

"Soccer creates a connection that survives," the 30-year-old Hussein said, citing the friendships he formed 20 years ago.

Today, he lives in the United States, working with Soccer for Peace, a New York-based nonprofit organization that runs soccer camps for Arab and Jewish children in Israel. He hopes the program will enable Arab and Jewish children in Israel to have the same sort of friendships that he developed 20 years ago.

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As part of the program, Hussein recently helped organize the Soccer for Peace Cup, bringing together about 300 players from 32 teams in New York City.

The event raised funds for the organization's programs, which recruit 10- and 11-year-old Arab and Jewish children who have a love of soccer in common. Some 100 kids train and play in a one-week soccer camp, called Camp Coexistence, sharing activities, building bonds and establishing friendships.

The week of camp is followed by a year-long program in which children play more soccer and share other activities — visits to mosques and synagogues, trips to Bedouin camps and class discussions on understanding and peace.

The program is repeated every year for six years. The same set of children train and play soccer in mixed Arab and Jewish teams.

On Saturdays their teams play league matches, and that brings their families — Arabs and Jews — closer.

"You see Jewish families and Arab families supporting the same team; they cheer for the same children. They come together and become friends, building trust and confidence," said Assaf Toledano, director of the Israeli Maccabim Association, a partner of Soccer for Peace.

"It's really wonderful and amazing."

Soccer for Peace believes bringing children and their families closer helps foster peace in the divided region. It hopes to show through Camp Coexistence that if Jews and Arabs can coexist inside Israel, they can coexist outside of it — side by side, in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

"Peace is not something that is legislated," explained Ori Winitzer, founder of Soccer for Peace. "It

can only be built between individuals."

Winitzer, an Israeli-American Jew, hopes Camp Coexistence will make a lasting impact on the children, ultimately changing minds and closing the gaps in their lives.

"The six years is hopefully long enough to build friendships and change attitudes that will last a lifetime," he said.

The long-term vision of Soccer for Peace is to expand its activities and unite children of communities engulfed in conflict around the world.

But for now it is focusing on the individuals and communities in Israel, goal by goal, person by person.

"Peace in the region has so far been on paper, between politicians. And it has not worked," said Hussein.

"We are trying to bring peace through the people. It will work."

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