

Violence Prevention in Our Schools: Promoting a Sense of Belonging

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The issue of school safety and school violence has received attention for a number of years. Certainly the tragedy at Columbine High School dramatically heightened interest in what steps could be taken to lessen the likelihood of such violence occurring in the future. Understandably, school shootings attract national and international attention, but we must not be blinded to the reality that less sensational expressions of anger and intimidation occur on a daily basis in our schools, expressed in such forms as teasing and bullying.

The reasons that children inflict physical and emotional pain on their peers are complex and vary from one child to the next. The picture is also complex when we consider how best to deal with angry, violent youth. When a shooting occurs, when a child is taunted or beaten by other students, it is easy to focus our attention on safety measures such as the installation of metal detectors or cameras in the corridors or to hold assemblies in which the concept of respect towards others is extolled and consequences for acts of intimidation are outlined. I wish to make it clear that I strongly support appropriate safety measures and I believe that each school and each community are in the best position to decide what actions are appropriate and, of course, legal. I also believe that values such as respect towards oneself and others should be openly discussed in a school community and that guidelines must be clearly defined for transgressions.

However, as most of us are aware, there are limits to these measures. Metal detectors, cameras, and similar devices provide some protection and that should not be minimized, but they fail to address what I consider to be a vital component of school safety and violence prevention, namely, the relationship that we develop and nourish with each student. When students do not feel connected with school staff, then discussions we have with them, even about themes of respect and kindness, do not have the desired impact. I recall an angry adolescent I interviewed several years. He described a classroom dialogue that centered on bullying and treating others with respect. He said, "If only some of the teachers knew how they came across to us. Some are sarcastic, don't say hello to you,

and always assume you did something wrong. It's hard to take them seriously when they talk about respect and kindness.”

He added that he had a couple of teachers who “practiced what they preached. You know they care about you. When they talk about us treating each other with respect, it's easier to hear what they have to say.”

A number of clinicians and researchers have emphasized the importance of a sense of belonging as an essential human need. If students do not feel connected to adults and peers in the school community, they will desperately seek out anyone to satisfy this need for belongingness. Unfortunately, an all-too-familiar scenario is that these lonely youth gravitate towards other students who feel alienated. Cliques or gangs or in-groups and out-groups are the likely result. Struggles to avoid pain and isolation find expression in groups such as the “Trenchcoat Mafia,” which achieved notoriety at Columbine High School.

I am not suggesting that bullying or violence at schools is just a “school problem” or can be traced solely to the existing school climate. Obviously, the roots of anger and violence stretch beyond the boundaries of school to include the homes and community in which children and adolescents reside. Comprehensive programs are necessary to deal with the problem of violence, programs that address issues of poverty, accessibility of guns to our youth, drugs, more effective parenting practices, and the availability of activities that keep children off the streets. However, schools are an integral part of the community and thus are in a position to assume an essential role in addressing the problem of alienation and violence.

As we reflect upon the magnitude of this problem, it could prompt a pessimistic outlook. For instance, caring and compassionate teachers have asked me, “What can we do? Most of this child's problems stem from factors outside the school. We can try to build kids up during the school day but it seems like a drop in the bucket.”

In response to such comments I express my hope that all parts of a child's environment will contribute to that child's emotional well-being, sense of hope, and resilience; however, this is not the reality for many youngsters. Thus, I emphasize that rather than feeling overwhelmed and

pessimistic when faced with at-risk children, we must strive to define and appreciate what it is that we can accomplish in the school milieu to nurture caring, cooperation, and learning, and to lessen feelings of anxiety and anger. As many of my readers know, I believe that we must focus our energies in those areas over which we have some control. One such area is the personal relationship we develop with students.

I have frequently described research findings that indicate that one of the most powerful factors in determining whether youngsters become more hopeful and less angry is the presence of at least one adult in their lives who believes in them. The late psychologist Dr. Julius Segal referred to this adult as a “charismatic adult” and defined the person as an adult from whom a child “gathers strength.” Segal said that in research conducted around the world, in a surprising number of cases the charismatic adult turns out to be a teacher.

The importance of youngsters feeling that there is at least one adult in the school environment who knows and believes in them must never be underestimated. Such an adult serves as a protective factor, providing support that lessens the probability of students feeling anonymous, of joining groups with other alienated youngsters, and of resorting to outbursts of anger and violence. In addition, students are more willing to learn about and put into practice concepts such as respect and dignity when taught by an adult who they know truly cares about them.

This belief in the powerful influence of one adult is supported by an excellent report released by the U.S. Department of Education titled, “Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools” (the full report may be found at the following address:

www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/172854.pdf). While the report emphasizes the need for effective family-school relationships, it also highlights the significance of a caring adult in the school. It notes:

“Research shows that a positive relationship with an adult who is available to provide support when needed is one of the most critical factors in preventing student violence. Students often look to adults in the school community for guidance, support, and direction. Some children need help overcoming feelings of isolation and support in developing connection to others. Effective schools make sure that opportunities exist for adults to spend quality, personal time with children. Effective schools also foster

positive student interpersonal relations—they encourage students to help each other and to feel comfortable assisting others in getting help when needed.”

Renowned educator Dr. Theodore Sizer expressed a similar view in a thought-provoking article titled “Reduce Violence in Schools by Knowing and Respecting Students” that appeared in the March, 1994 issue of *The Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter*. While Sizer focused on high school students, I believe the principles he described apply to students of all ages.

Sizer observed, “The typical high school kid isn’t known well to anybody. He or she moves from class to class. . . . People know his or her name but not much else. And when this anonymity involves desperate kids, it has an effect on the rest of us. The lesson I have learned from watching and listening in schools all around the country is that small schools are an antidote to anonymity. Those schools that have reorganized themselves—within their existing budgets—so that no teacher has more than a total of 80 kids witness a dramatic drop in the incidence of violence and other forms of counterproductive behavior. And in most situations this kind of reorganization is financially possible—the barriers to it are political and traditional.”

After providing an example of a large high school that reorganized itself into smaller units with a subsequent dramatic decrease in student violence and an increase in attendance, Sizer wrote, “The central needs are to have people who care and to have each student be known. It’s as simple as that. Someone who cares. Being known signals a kind of respect: You’re 14, you may be a ragamuffin or worse, but you still deserve respect. . . . Schools have to be places where the kids are unequivocally known.”

Some may question if the hectic schedule of educators represents an insurmountable barrier to their serving as charismatic adults. I think developing close relationships with students can be accomplished without requiring teachers to find more time in an already busy schedule. Sizer described how reorganizing the structure of a school provided the scaffolding for closer relationships between staff and students. Also, when I interviewed students of all ages and asked them what they thought a teacher or school administrator could do to help them feel

welcome, two of the most frequent answers were: “To greet me by name” and “To smile at me.”

Often small gestures have far-reaching results. I have received feedback from educators attesting to this fact. A principal and assistant principal instituted the practice of greeting all students as they entered the building each morning and saying good-bye as they left in the afternoon. Their teachers reinforced this activity by doing the same as they entered each classroom. Discipline problems decreased, cooperation and motivation increased, and an atmosphere for learning was reinforced. As another illustration, a high school teacher regularly called students at home “just to find out how they were doing.” He reported that spending just a few minutes on the phone most evenings actually allowed him more time with his family since he was less preoccupied with student problems. His students became increasingly responsible about completing their work, engaging in classroom discussions, and treating each other with greater respect. It is not surprising that this teacher won an award for his teaching activities.

I advocate that schools regularly review the names of all students and ensure that there is at least one adult who finds time to speak with and get to know the student. It is most important that the student feel a sense of caring and connection to this adult. A staff member’s time in this activity will be offset by the creation of a more positive, healthy school climate.

Obviously, other interventions are necessary in addition to developing a caring relationship if we are to replace bullying and violence in schools with compassion and respect. For example, we must provide opportunities for students to shine, to feel a sense of ownership and responsibility, to believe that their voices are being heard, to involve them in developing guidelines and consequences for acceptable behavior, and to appreciate and reinforce what I call their “islands of competence.” I hope to describe some of these interventions in greater detail in future articles. However, we must remember that if interventions are to be effective they must be supported by a foundation rooted in trust and caring, a foundation that has been fortified by a charismatic adult.

I have learned that in the absence of a positive relationship, students often experience discipline and rules as arbitrary impositions to be broken.

They experience our attempts to teach them about respect and dignity as hollow preachings that lack genuineness and conviction. As others have said and I wish to reinforce, “Students don’t care what we know until they first know we care.” It is within this caring, authentic relationship that our interventions will prove most successful and our schools will become most supportive and safe.

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