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# The Problem of Harmful Aggression

**H**armful aggression, disruption, and even violence are all too common in our schools and classrooms. Unfortunately, they are a part of U.S. society. In the United States in 2002, firearms were the second-leading cause of death for children between the ages of 10 and 19, behind only motor vehicle accidents. In fact, during that same year firearms killed 71 preschool children, while 56 law-enforcement officers were killed in the line of duty (Children's Defense Fund, 2005). It is extraordinary that more preschoolers were killed than on-duty police officers. As we write this book, we mourn the victims of three horrific school shootings in less than a two-week period, the most shocking of which was in an Amish school where six young girls were shot to death and six more were wounded. While we understand that this incident was not the result of student-on-student violence, we are still deeply saddened and unnerved by this tragic event. The Virginia Tech massacre was another in a long line of tragedies related to kids, guns, and killing.

Many children with disruptive behavior come from troubled homes. These students are frequently on the move,

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jumping from relative to relative with no stable home. With movement comes change, and many of our disruptive youth have experienced much change. According to Walls (2003), more than 500,000 third graders had already attended more than three schools between first and third grade. It takes four to six months for each student to recover academically from a transfer. These students are half as likely to graduate from high school as kids who do not move between schools, and their attendance rates are much lower than the national average (Walls, 2003).

The causes of unbridled harmful aggression are complex and often interwoven. Abused children often grow up to be abusive adults who perpetuate a cycle of violence directed toward those they can victimize—and each year, two to three million children are reportedly abused in this country. Other causes of aggression include the continuing erosion of the nurturing family structure, the absence of fathers in the home, increasing depersonalization within communities, drug use, turf wars caused by drugs and the profit motive, and a diminishing impact of community values. In one class I (BDM) taught last year, three of my five unmarried male students were to be fathers within the year.

For those who are not within a nurturing and healthy family, gangs become a substitute family. Others join gangs out of fear or for the excitement they envision. Society used to bemoan gang members who “rumbled” with switchblades. Now, with incredibly easy access to handguns and combat weapons, shootings and their far more destructive effects are common.

Too often, the media glorify harmful aggression as a natural way of life, barraging impressionable youth with images of death and violence. According to Herr (2005), parents spend an average of three and a half minutes a week in meaningful conversation with each of their children. These same children average more than 1,600 minutes (almost 27 hours) in front of the television set, often with violent images streaking across the screen. Even more startling is that the average child will have witnessed close to 8,000 murders on television by the

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end of elementary school (Herr, 2005). With so little guidance from parents, it is not surprising that many youth carry the aggression, hostility, and violence they see on television into the classroom with them. According to Larsen (2003), there are some factors that increase the likelihood of violence in school: When the male population increases, so does aggression. The larger the student population, the greater the prevalence of violence and aggression in schools.

RLC had an in-depth discussion with Brooks Brown. Brown was a best friend of Eric Harris, who was one of the shooters at Columbine High School, Colorado, in 2000 (the other shooter was Dylan Klebold). He talked about how he and his friends played videogames that encouraged shooting people and how they loved the killing part. "Killing was so much fun," he said. Reportedly, Harris and Klebold watched the movie *Natural Born Killers* a few hundred times. We cannot say whether the games or movie influenced Harris or Klebold. We *can* say with some certainty that the relationship between kids and the media is not always healthy.

Messages of humility are hard to come by. Commercials often promote the acquisition of quick and easy goods and status. Music videos saturate youth with images of violence, beautiful women, diamonds, expensive clothes, and pricey sneakers. Television shows have capitalized on the fantasies of teenagers as well. Extreme makeovers where men and women become "new" people are becoming increasingly popular. Of course, rarely do the networks show the person working hard to attain a "great body." Usually we get to see the surgery that cuts away the fat. Why work hard over a long period of time in the gym and go through the discomfort of changing your diet when you can just go under the knife and get the same new look? We can turn on the television at any time of the day or night and find someone winning huge money at the poker table. Unfortunately, the game of choice in study hall and the cafeteria is now "Texas Hold 'Em." Instead of kids pretending to be the next Michael Jordan, they want to be the next Chris "Jesus" Ferguson. Instant gratification is in!

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What's next? A reality show in a bar showing how many beers a person can shotgun without throwing up? How about a chain-smoking reality show? Let's see how many cigarettes you can smoke without choking.

On a global level, hatred based on religious, cultural, or sexual differences is on the rise. When tens of thousands riot and burn buildings because of an unflattering cartoon depicting the prophet Mohammed, and suicide bombing carried out against innocent civilians becomes an acceptable form of warfare approved by too many religious leaders, is it any wonder that violence is viewed as an acceptable way to solve problems? We cannot solve all of the world's problems, but schools have an imperative to teach better ways of handling aggression, in less harmful and even productive ways. Although it is easy to grow sick and tired of trying to understand the causes of unbridled harmful aggression, it is important that we understand what affects our students' behavior so that we can more effectively deal with its effects in our classrooms.

### AGGRESSION AND SOCIETY

Aggression is part of our makeup. It is human nature to occasionally be aggressive toward someone. We need to teach students that there are times and places where aggression is acceptable. We need to point aggressive youngsters in the direction of the football field, wrestling mat, or even the boxing ring or octagon. These kids need to learn how to channel the aggression to the places where it is appropriate and even useful.

I (BDM) was recently playing golf in Florida with two 25-year veterans of the Miami-Dade Police Department. They shared stories of drug busts, gang fights, and unruly drunks. After a few minutes, they asked me what I did for a living. When I told them I was a high school teacher working in a tough district outside of Rochester with emotionally challenging 16- and 17-year-old kids they both looked at me with

bewilderment. One told me I was crazy, and with a completely straight face said, "That job is way too dangerous for me. I have no idea how you do it." Thinking about that exchange later, I wondered where our society had gone. Did these two hulking police officers really think that working in a school with kids was more dangerous than the police beat in Miami? Unfortunately, it seemed they did. Both appeared to breathe a sigh of relief that they were able to return to their nice, cushy jobs of patrolling the streets and arresting thieves and murderers in southern Florida.

During our discussion, one of the officers asked why so much of the literature his young son brought home dealt with violence and aggression. It occurred to me later that much of the curriculum has aggression and violence associated with it. While Shakespeare is one of the most marvelous writers of all time, and the lessons that can be learned from his work are many, his plays are often tragic and brutally violent. In many schools, the ninth-grade curriculum includes his classic *Macbeth*, a story where greed, deception, and lies lead to murder. Shakespeare is not the only author who deals in death, of course. It is not Shakespeare or any other author that creates a problem. Rather, the problem is that violence is accepted by our culture as a natural way of life.

Despite the many positive moral lessons in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, George shoots his best friend Lennie in the back of the head. Mention S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* to a high school student and you will hear what a great book it is. Of course, the main premise is that Socias and Greasers battle for supremacy, and the climax of the book is an all-out rumble between the two gangs. Again, violence is at the core an American classic. *West Side Story*, a modern retelling of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, remains a popular musical performed by high school drama classes.

We do not mean to imply that literature, plays, or schools are the cause of aggression and violence. In fact, we believe that one of the best ways to get students to pay attention in class and not disrupt others is to teach curriculum based on

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what students relate to. That said, it is important to understand that aggression continues to be as much a reality in schools as in society, despite the fact that school remains the safest sanctuary for many children who are confronted with daily assaults to their physical and psychological well-being.

### **We can make a difference**

The problem with a lot of school interventions is that they do not get to the root of the problem. Too often, simplistic solutions such as “just say no” or “zero tolerance” become the blueprints for our “solutions.”

Author Brian Mendler recently consulted in a school outside Dallas, Texas, and has this to say about the experience: As I pulled up to the school, I could not help but notice the gorgeous athletic facilities. The football stadium sat 15,000, the baseball diamond’s pristine grass was perfectly manicured, and the track was brand new. Each facility had a set of powerful lights for evening games and events. Then I walked inside the dark, dreary school. The auditorium was old and run down. In fact, the principal had a hard time finding a microphone that worked. I told him it seemed a bit ironic that the athletic facilities were better than most colleges I had seen, but microphones for conference days were scarce. He told me that the fields were so beautiful because taxpayers will approve spending money only when it includes renovating an athletic facility. He told me that the school did its best to “sneak textbooks and other essential items” into those proposals.

Although nice athletic complexes are hardly the root of unacceptable aggression, how we prioritize is part of the problem. As much as we would like to, we cannot fix the home lives of our children, change how many television shows they watch or video games they play, or even change how our school board develops its priorities. Our goal must be to maximize the time we have with them at school to improve the quality of their lives. We must make schools and classrooms inviting, relevant places where students want to

be. We must work as hard as we can to make our schools and classrooms more appealing than the local mall or arcade, and more attractive to them than playing their favorite video game. Great teachers can take a show like *MTV Cribs* and teach an economics or math lesson directly from the conversation students are having about it. Lessons on probability can connect to their fascination with poker. Most important, while we have them, there is much we can do to teach that hurting others is wrong, that there are nonaggressive ways to get what they want, and that success in school and ultimately in life is absolutely possible.

### **What is harmful aggression?**

*Harmful aggression* is an assault on a person that can take three forms: body (physical injury), esteem (verbal harassment such as name calling toward the teacher or another student), or property (damage to things one owns). Often, harmful aggression is bred in an atmosphere of hostility where it feels and looks better to hurt than to resolve and tolerate. All educators realize that learning is seriously affected when children and teachers feel unsafe. Learning cannot flourish when students are worried about being hurt, put down, or having things they value defaced or destroyed.

### **Discover and define new possibilities**

Read the following exchange between Bill, a graduate student, and his professor after a tough day at his teaching job:

Bill: I cannot get these kids to stop talking. They just will not shut up. What do you do with kids who are constantly talking?

Professor: What are they talking about?

Bill: I have no idea, and who cares anyway. They should be listening to me.

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Professor: Okay, what are you trying to teach them?

Bill: Vocabulary. I'm a French teacher and these kids have to learn the vocabulary.

Professor: Are you sure you don't know what they were talking about?

Bill: (*getting more disgusted*) I guess they were yapping about the Yankees game last night. You know kids; all they talk about are sports, music, and video games.

Professor: What vocabulary words were you trying to teach?

Bill: Colors and numbers.

We couldn't help but wonder what would happen if Bill engaged his students about the game and said something like, "You know guys, I hear you talking about the game last night. How do you say the word 'Yankees' in French? What is the French word for the color of their uniforms? By the way, what was the score? Who can say it in French?"

We sometimes get so caught up in trying to teach the curriculum that we miss opportunities to capture the energy of our students by blending their interests with what we are expected to teach. If we are always concerned with stopping a behavior, we might miss a great opportunity to teach our content by using what students do or say as a bridge to the lesson. We will discuss this important concept in Chapter 5, *Classroom Strategies for the Teacher*.

## THIS BOOK

*Strategies for Successful Classroom Management* describes practical methods of prevention: things educators can do to minimize the likelihood that students will act in aggressive and disruptive ways at school. This volume provides many methods of action: ways of behaving and communicating with

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students when they are engaging in challenging and potentially explosive behaviors. This volume also describes skills that students can learn to make them better at identifying “anger triggers” so they can choose alternatives to violent responses. This approach, first described in the book *Discipline With Dignity* (Curwin & Mendler, 1988, 1999), continues to be very effective in helping thousands of educators establish best practices in their classrooms.

This book was written with the lofty goal and fervent hope that children can be taught to internalize nonviolent and nonaggressive ways to handle their emotions. The curriculum of the twenty-first century must include skills in how to get along with each other, which is as close to the basics as a society can ever hope to get. Without these skills and knowledge, no other learning will matter much. Effective programs can change the way children think and behave. Schools can and should lead the way to a safer and saner future.

This book is a prayer and a response to the problem of aggression and disruption. Solving this problem requires a long-term commitment: a commitment to the belief that all children have value and that every act of aggression and violence against them is a crime against our way of life, our most cherished values, and our belief in the future of all our students.