

For Safety's Sake

by Deborah Meier

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When I used to occasionally take a taxi to school in Central or East Harlem, the driver would always wonder at my willingness to work in such dangerous places. It was unclear whether he meant the neighborhood or the school. So when friends would comment on the same point, I probed. I soon realized that their picture of life inside New York City's public schools was a composite shot of violence, involving scenes from TV, movies, and other images conjured in their heads. They envisioned knife-wielding, chair-throwing youngsters spewing profanity while their teachers cowered helplessly nearby. They simply didn't believe me; they thought maybe I was covering up scandal when I would tell them that in all my years in the city's public schools, I had never encountered a student I was physically afraid would hurt me nor ever seen a violent, life-threatening incident. Instead, I saw teachers or school guards manhandle kids, and I saw kids frightened of bullies, avoiding the bathrooms, and more. But most of the time, life inside the school was boring, boring, boring, and not violent. Even in the so-called worst high schools I entered, I saw mostly genial kids who opened doors for me.

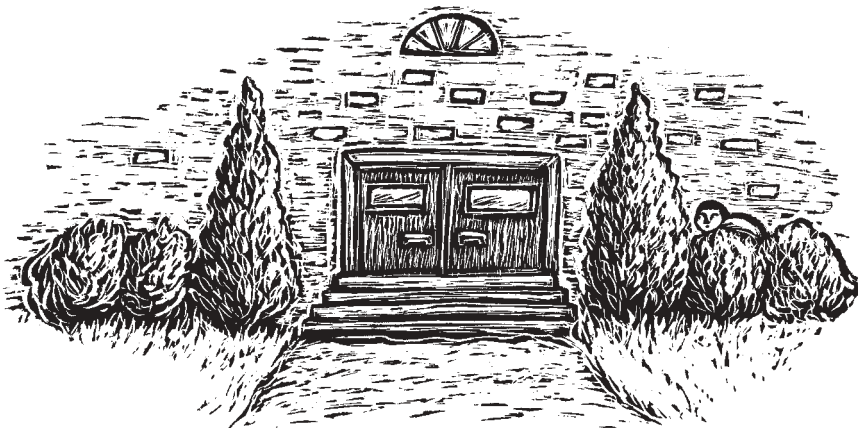
But boredom and violence are not disconnected, and kids who aren't engaged in what they must spend more than twelve years doing, day after day, are at risk. When I was a child and my mother took me, for cultural reasons, to the opera, I used to stare at the huge chandelier and wish it would fall down. That, I thought, would create a little excitement. I wonder how often today's students have similar antisocial dreams. It may be that only when we create truly more interesting schools will they be safer places. In short, too much of our discussion of safety misses the real target.

Once I scolded some kids for hanging around school after hours and told them it was "not safe" for them to be in our school at 5 p.m. I was taken aback by their incredulous query: "Do you think we'd be safer hanging out on the streets?" Going to and from school was where the

danger lurked: in their unsafe buildings, on occasion with angry, violent adults. School was obviously one of the safest places around. Maybe the kids knew that and did more than we acknowledged to keep it so.

Yet there are real safety concerns within our schools too. In the late '60s and '70s, during an uneasy period in New York City school history, my own children told me that they felt physically hassled—even occasionally stuck with needles—as they went up and down the stairs in their junior high. I was stunned and outraged—both that they had held this back from me for so long, and that it was happening. A change of principals—not such an easy thing to do—and it was gone. What wasn't gone was the daily minor violence to children's egos. Nor, as I learned as a school board member, do some see regular minor violence as always negative. In a school in Harlem I visited regularly, the sight of teachers and aides wielding rubber band-covered rulers was a commonplace. Doing something about that was harder than I expected. I was told it was a cultural difference I misunderstood, but on deeper examination the cultural difference was largely a matter of despair. To impact such a "cultural difference," a different frame of reference is necessary—a point of reference that includes hope, possibilities, and mutual respect. We need to surface the assumptions behind those particular claims about culture—and many others that go with it.

But are schools safe even in more favored neighborhoods? Not in the deeper sense of safe. Not only are children verbally and physically abused in many public schools in minor ways—in ways that are not life threatening—but in almost all schools they are abused in subtle ways. This type of violence can be even more harmful because it is so difficult to identify—and harder yet to stop, and even sometimes overlooked or dismissed as mere kids' stuff.



When reading the distinguished kindergarten educator and author Vivian Paley's *You Can't Say You Can't Play* to my granddaughter a dozen or more years ago, I was startled to realize how much the child identified with the victims of the story—and perhaps too often saw herself as the “outsider.” “Could you send that to my teacher?” asked my beloved five-year-old. We have long claimed that socialization is one reason home schooling is a mistake: where are kids to learn about how to treat their fellow beings if they are schooled at home? Today I sometimes think, “How else can they be schooled to kindness *except* through home schooling?”

Children learn early in our schools the power that some kids have over other kids—a power that suggests a kind of implicit violence, a violation of young children's deepest emotional ties and longings. They are quietly tormented in ways that adults in charge appear to either willfully ignore or silently approve. The adults may think that if the children had the right stuff it wouldn't happen to them, or at least they'd know how to turn the tables on their tormenters. It's precisely during the times we claim schools teach socialization that such violations are most rampant: at recess, in the lunchroom, on the stairwells, in the bathroom, and even right there in those nice little groups we set up for kids to learn to work together. Who sits next to whom, and who says “yuck” when asked to hold certain children's hands, or to work beside them? Who saves seats for whom? Who laughs at whom when that warm-and-fuzzy sharing time is at hand? The leaders of the peer pack have increasing power over the value system and ranking of the young, a ranking that this same grandchild informs me pretty much sticks to kids from the age of five until they graduate. And this all has happened in a benign, all-white, small public system in upstate New York. It happens also in small, caring schools like my own in Roxbury, Massachusetts, where it took us months to find out that one young boy was being physically and mentally abused in the most shameful way—and where the kids, now in their early teens, insisted they thought we knew all about it.

Yes, a small school is needed: a school where the faculty feel powerful and “in charge” and where parents and kids are likely to share information. It's the first step, but not the last. A curriculum that provides lots of opportunities to talk about cruelty, to step into the shoes of the victim and the victimizer, and to bring into the open our fears and realities—that too is needed. An unhurried pace, so that we can watch and observe, not rush about to cover more and more curriculum demands, is a must. Time—the protected leisure for teachers, not just for kids, to speak about what is on their minds—is hard to come by. Time for teachers to share a passing fear, or a parent to call and raise a concern with specifics to follow up on together, is also essential. We must acknowl-

edge our sometimes apparent helplessness to respond effectively to child-on-child cruelties, and then recognize what this helplessness does—no matter how justified—to the kids in question. *Inaction sends a powerful message.* But sometimes the cruelest thing is a well-intended intervention that leads to unintended consequences when we turn our attention elsewhere. Both the bully and the bullied are dangerous to our social peace and our future democracy. A school that can come to a halt when an act of cruelty is exposed, rather than move on to the next item on the agenda, is essential, although hard to imagine in the world we live in and the schools we inhabit today.

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We need room and space and above all time for frank conversation between school adults and home adults about the fears children have in both places. A wise mentor of mine once told me she used to tell parents: “I’ll not believe everything kids tell me about what happens at home if you will do the same about what happens at school.” That’s half the answer. The other half is that much of what we both hear is true, and it needs a way to be placed on the table and explored together for our children’s sake.

Naturally kids have good reason to feel unsafe in a world in which children’s games are as likely as not to be about hurting others and about being powerful enough to get away with it. None of that is new, but it does not allow us to put off dealing with it everywhere, and above all in the two places children spend most of their time: their homes and their schools (before and after school included). Adults are silent, as often as not, because they do not know what to do, and our self-assuaging rhetoric that kids need to solve these questions on their own is at least in part a cover-up for our helplessness. Still, of course, there’s just enough truth to it to shame kids into silence, and to shame their families as well. It’s a circle that must be broken.

Safety is also essential for the intellectual skills we are trying to impart, but it’s important to remember that first and foremost it is essential out of sheer humanity. We should not need to point to test scores, graduation rates, or future success in life in demanding safety for kids—physical and emotional. Doing wrong to others needs to be viewed as a simple breaking of a covenant that we must all live with—our golden rule.

But it’s of course a fact of life that we need to be tough enough to take the slings and arrows of fortune, and tender enough not to inflict such arrows needlessly on others. We need not take everything personally, but we also need to acknowledge what is personal. We need to learn

to speak up and speak out when we are injured or when we see others injured, but we also need to know how to protect ourselves so that we can get on with the business at hand.

It's up to us to make sure that we aren't perpetrators ourselves by the way we respond to "stupid" questions and "stupid" answers. For example, when a child queries what we mean by getting into a single line, and we respond with a patronizing smile (intending to share the remark later with friends as an example of cute ignorance), we need to think instead how smart he is to ask it. When a child is puzzled about whether a leaf, a piece of bark, a rock, or a blade of grass is a living or nonliving thing, we have to wonder why we never asked that ourselves. When a child says, "She doesn't like me," we need to resist reassuring her that it's not true and getting the classmate to confirm it; then we must ask ourselves what has led to this idea. Probably there is truth to the cry for help, and our refusal to admit it may simply lead the child to hide her hurt more deeply. Do we do too much reassuring—"It doesn't hurt," "It'll be okay"—and not enough exploring, joining with the child's queries, fears, thoughts? Who likes and doesn't like us is not frivolous. Friendships count a lot in life, and in school. The friendless child may be coping well, and pushing "friendships" on her may be the worst idea possible. But dismissing the idea is the second worst.

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These nuances are bound often to escape us; we will say many wrong things, as will our students. Our curiosity and intelligence must include these other aspects of life—what we learn about through the curriculum of the school. Literature and history, even math and science, are tools for exploring human interrelationships as well. What did it feel like to be a slave in Egypt? How did parents explain captivity to their offspring in the slave South? At what age should we answer one way or another? These are issues that are important to consider, and they once again require collaboration with our families and community.

What sources to consult for answers is also critical, but hiding our heads from what children ought to be thinking about is even more so. When students study history or science, they should ask: Does the lab rat have feelings? Are scientists always happy when colleagues make discoveries before them? Even in math, our sense that there is something peculiarly "stupid" about our inability to understand what our neighbor considers common sense is of consequence, and not only for learning mathematics. The impact of publicly exposed "stupidity" may be far greater than we realize, with repercussions in how citizens later feel about expert knowledge.

How we set up these dynamics in school goes a long way toward helping kids know how they might try to set things up outside school. Children who have never experienced a safe public community are far less likely to fight for one and are more likely to see it as a hopeless cause. Children who do not see that their hurts can be taken seriously are not likely to care about the hurts of others. Youngsters who think the world makes no sense, and that they cannot act upon it, cannot help us create a better world even for their own loved ones, much less the larger community. A school community in which adult teachers are there for each other, where decisions are not made ruthlessly, where flexibility to meet human needs is always possible and teachers are actually engaged in teaching kids about possibilities, is a safer school. It helps kids explore what “ought to be” in the larger world—even in the workplaces they enter. It produces, perhaps, citizens who assume their voices (and votes) count. So expecting safety—and a mutual concern for it—needs to be seen by kids as the norm, what they too must expect and demand of the world they will inherit.

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