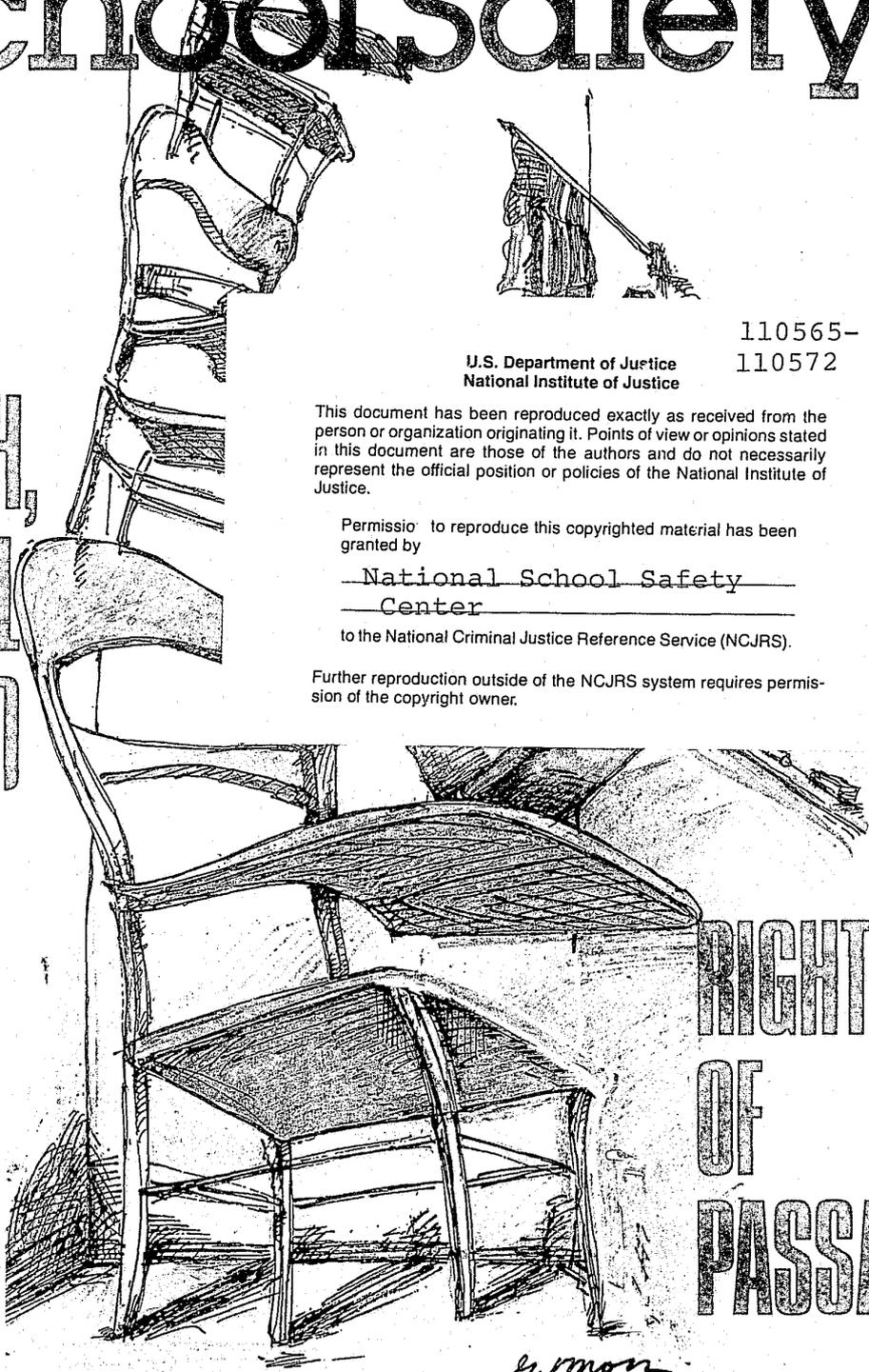


# School Safety

YOUTH,  
SCHOOL  
AND

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U.S. Department of Justice  
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## School Safety

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Ronald D. Stephens, Executive Editor  
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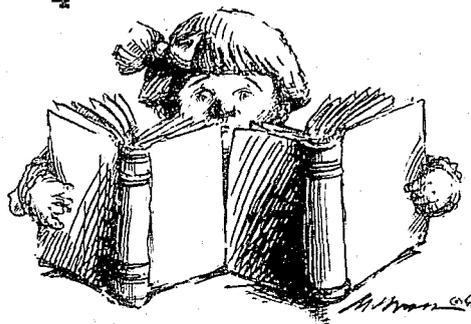
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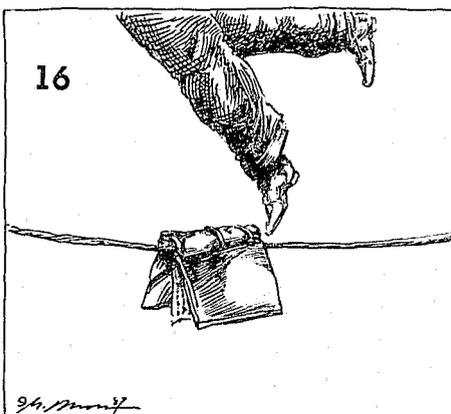
Just as passing from grade to grade, growing up requires learning and balancing a series of rights and responsibilities. Cover by Geoffrey Moss. Copyright © 1978, Washington Post Writers Group. Reprinted with permission.

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BY BOB DITTER

*There are subtle, yet vital, differences between the use of power and use of control with youth. Balancing this role creates a sense of safety and empathy.*

## Emotional safety and growing up

Many educators and child advocates are concerned about how to best help children grow and resolve emotional and developmental challenges, especially with today's high divorce rate, shrinking open spaces, increased drug abuse and other opportunities for children to go astray.

From working with children in families or in groups from special programs where the population is especially troubled and in need of more powerful means of intervening, we have been composing a kind of "bill of rights," or series of observations, about the nature of things that make a difference with children. This is a presentation of some of those observations and how they empower adults who work with children.

### **A sense of safety**

One of the more central observations we have made is that children learn when they listen, but they won't listen unless they feel heard. Furthermore, they won't let us "hear" them — know their true needs and concerns — unless they feel that it is safe for them to do so. We discovered then that many of

*Bob Ditter, M.Ed., a child and family therapist, has a private psychotherapy practice in Newton (Boston), Massachusetts, and serves as a consultant for camps, schools and agencies throughout the country.*

our observations were related to factors which created a sense of safety for children.

Unfortunately, when we encounter a child's resistance or stubbornness, we often feel frustrated and become in danger of falling into a battle of wills. In an ironic way, even though we stand as the adults in these situations, we often complain, "That child just won't listen!" as if we were the victim of the child's refusal to cooperate. During such exasperating moments, it seems easy to feel diminished and difficult to imagine what struggles must lie behind the misbehavior.

The truth is that we actually have the power to enable children to listen to us. One of the obstacles which seems to prevent us from seeing and utilizing this power more readily is that it is easy to confuse power with control, especially since children are such experts at drawing us into control battles.

Power is the capacity to mobilize a child's own motives and inner resources to get him to want to do something (i.e., creating motivation from within the child). Control is the imposition of some external force, such as the threat of reprisals, to make a child do something we want (i.e., creating motivation from outside the child).

Obviously, all children need us to supply a major portion of the control in their lives when they are very young.

What is surprising to most parents is that one of their children's most dreaded fears is the loss of self-control, although one would never guess this based on their apparent behavior! This universal fear is one of the elements that makes a child naturally wish to internalize a model of control, especially when that model is based on our own self-control and restraint. Without it, children are often disorganized, impulsive, depressed and prone to anti-social behavior.

### **Developing self-control**

It is our power, wisdom and influence that help children develop their own control (what Bettelheim [1985] refers to as "the development of morality"), which also spares us from having to control them ourselves. It makes a tremendous difference in working with children to know how to appeal to their natural desire to learn, be a winner and find relief from pain.

Have you ever known a child who wanted to be a loser? This is precisely why such "know-how" is so powerful. These are the ardent concerns of every child, and manipulating them in a deliberate way (i.e., that we, too, are on the side of the child that wants to win, find relief and try to adapt) creates in him the feeling of being understood. The challenge for us as educators, caretakers and child advocates is to develop

this "know-how" as a way of achieving an openness or understanding with children, even when they don't yet have the words to do that for themselves or when their behavior — often attempts to convey their inner conflicts in a kind of "code" — gets them into trouble.

Let me cite an example. A young boy I will call Tom had a temper that had already become a legend in his school by the time he was in the fifth grade. Displays of his fireworks had gotten him not only a reputation, but also several trips to the office and an apprehensive regard by his peers. One day, while playing in an activities group I had organized after school, he managed to show me just what this reputation was all about. It was one of his better performances. I knew that if I acted too soon his vulnerability would have prevented him from hearing my words as anything but an attack, so I waited for the smoke to clear before addressing the issue with Tom and the rest of the group.

I stumbled into the discussion without anything more elegant than, "I guess you were pretty upset back there, Tom."

"Shut up, Ditter!" was his predictable response. At this point, one of the other boys in the group decided to "help" by making fun of Tom's temper — not a great move in the survival skills department.

I had my opening, however: "But you know, I think Tom must hate it when he loses his temper," and turning to Tom, I added, "It must be terrible, Tom."

With a hesitant look, he replied, "I don't want to talk about it!"

"I don't blame you at all, Tom," I said sincerely. "I don't think you like it when that happens to you."

"I don't!" he said curtly, but his admission was the opening I needed to begin to show him that I was on his side, and together we could probably find a way to help him do from the inside what others had been trying in vain to do from the outside. When I used boy "tough talk" to say it took "guts" for him to admit what he had, it

enhanced our alliance even more. We shared this with his teachers, who came to appreciate with him how desperately he wanted to find relief from a temper that, up to now, had always ruled him.

As we have seen, the development of self-control, the feeling of being understood by adults and the acknowledgment of their innate desire to become "bigger" (kid talk for "more masterful and self-restraining") are all crucial factors in a child's evolving sense of self. They form a part of what might be called the "rights" of passage — those conditions that not only allow, but also induce children to want to participate in an alliance with mentoring adults in the work of their own growing up.

The one condition that is common in all of our interventions, which are based on establishing a working partnership with children, is their sense of safety. We know that when children feel safe, they are able to lose themselves in play, virtually abandoning their worries and inhibitions to enter into a kind of "flow experience." Likewise, when the environment signals "safety," children feel more at ease about telling us their feelings, concerns and motives for their actions. In fact, the need for safety is an ever-present, implicit request that children want us to "hear" intuitively, regardless of how provocative their overt behavior might become.

#### **A secure environment**

The importance of a sense of safety becomes clear when we look at the consequences of its absence from a child's environment. The more unsafe children feel, the more they fear being humiliated, diminished or set up to be abandoned, and the more they disguise their pain, troubles and worries. In fact, the more a child perceives his environment (and especially the adults in it) as threatening, unstable, unpredictable or unsafe in other ways, the more extreme his behavior will become as he attempts to protect himself from possible loss or injury. Manifestations of such a defensive posture in a child range from acute

withdrawal to serious risk-taking (as a way of "proving" to himself that he isn't afraid) to acting out against society (almost, as Berman [1964] points out, as a way of "broadcasting" his sense of alarm and inner disruption).

As we have seen, self-control and containment are crucial to the sense of safety a child feels about himself, and these elements need to be embodied in the physical setting in which children work and play. Every child has a right to an environment that can "hold" him — physically and emotionally.

When children feel the safety of containment, they treat their environment with greater respect. The reason lavatories in so many public junior and senior high schools around the country are such targets for vandalism and violence is because these areas often lack a sense of safety. The presence of firm, yet caring adults creates an environment where negative impulses can be contained and where offenders and victims alike can be reassured.

We have found that the more "damaged" a child's sense of himself or his ability to control his feelings, the more critical his physical and emotional surroundings become. A youngster who has suffered major losses, deprivation or other trauma, or who has weak impulse control, will react with increased provocation to a room with broken doors, peeling paint, cracked windows and the like. It is almost as if his own state of disrepair and that of the room were indistinguishable to him.

If the anxiety of such children escalates too far, the sense of safety for that child and his peers (not to mention his caretakers) can become severely impaired. Such children require a more secure environment, not as a punishment, but as a humane response to their need for greater internal control through containment. When their cries for safety, which are often encoded in risk-taking or acting-up behavior, go unmet (or are met only by a punishment that does not heed the true request), these children develop a con-

tempt for and a lack of trust of adults, eroding their sense of safety even further.

When children have gone for many years not getting the kind of containment they need, their behaviors become rigidly ingrained and they are seriously suspicious and contemptuous of adults. If a child cannot maintain himself in his present environment, it is not the job of one person, but of the system, to find him an environment suitable to his needs. Not only does his sense of integrity depend on such a move, but also that of the community as well.

### Expressing anger

In no arena do the issues of self-control, safety and containment come into greater play than in a child's expression of anger, especially toward adults. Tremendous confusion exists about this matter, and many adults equate a child's display of anger toward them with being disrespectful. Such adults decree that angry feelings, especially ones targeted at them, are unacceptable, forcing children either to suppress these feelings entirely or defy adults and risk losing security and self-control.

As Eda LeShan (1972) points out, neither of these choices is healthy. When children receive the message that anger is not acceptable, they often believe they must be inherently "bad" to have such feelings in the first place. Some children take things a step further, actually repressing their anger out of the concern that "bad things might happen" if such feelings come out — most notably in the emotional (or even physical) destruction or loss of someone the child depends on.

This same fear is most likely at work, though probably well buried, in those adults who lead children to believe, out of their own unresolved conflict, that expressing anger toward adults is disrespectful. As Dr. Sidney Berman (1964) points out, as long as we adults are unbalanced in our own approach to anger, we are in danger of

overtly suppressing anger in children while unconsciously encouraging them to act out ours.

Two brief examples illustrate the problem of denying anger. Nine-year-old Jenny always presented her parents with her "sunny side," replete with pictures of flowers and rainbows. She was "not in the slightest" jealous of her newborn sister, nor had she ever shown anger toward her parents. They liked her this way, yet they became concerned when her marks, usually the highest in her class, began to slip after her sister was born. Jenny became disinterested in friends, activities and other things she used to enjoy.

The implicit, yet unspoken, message in Jenny's family was that angry feelings were not allowed — that one should always be "nice." Jenny found it extremely difficult in her subsequent

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*We are not born with the distinction between feeling something and acting it out.*

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therapy to begin to acknowledge such feelings and relieve her depression, always presenting herself as a thoughtful, kind, unangry little girl without much revelation of her true self.

In another case, George constantly announced that he was never angry at his father or his mother, and he asserted that he never liked to be angry. Unfortunately, he teased younger children unmercifully, was defiant with his teachers, and was provocative in school and with his peers — all with the steadfast assertion that he was never angry. When his mother was suddenly killed in an automobile accident, his rage became so unbearable without appropriate outlets that he ended up with a psychotic depression.

That most of us would have a tremendous series of reactions to such a tragedy is obvious. Yet this boy was ill-equipped to deal appropriately with angry feelings, a status based in the first place on his latent fear of loss — a

fear which, in his mind, had come true with his mother's death — and he ended up debilitated for nine months in the hospital when he might otherwise have been able to grieve with his family.

### Handling anger appropriately

Poor guidelines from adults about anger probably result in one of the more serious, pervasive causes of behavioral and emotional disturbances in children and adolescents. Children need help expressing their anger for at least three reasons. First, acknowledging and appropriately expressing anger helps reduce the risk of a child having to act these feelings out in a more drastic or harmful way. Feelings do not go away if they are suppressed; they simply go underneath, only to come out later as a stomachache, fistfight or over-reaction to another, unrelated event.

Secondly, children need to learn that their anger will not consume them or destroy others if it can be channeled and expressed with restraint. We are not born with the distinction between *feeling* something and *acting* it out. Children need us as coaches so they can discover that feeling angry does not irrevocably lead to action. One youngster I saw in therapy firmly refused to admit his feelings of anger because he thought that meant he would act out the violent consequences. Action is an *elective* consequence of an impulse that occurs only when we are aware of the impulse and have had practice discerning between feelings and actions.

Thirdly, children also need practice in order to know that their anger, however justified, is not a license for blackmail, getting even or being destructive. If, as we have seen, children are concerned about their ability to maintain self-control, then it should come as no surprise that parents and other adults who are held hostage by their children's demands and threats of anger are doing these youngsters a disservice.

Many educators may interpret the previous discussion about allowing the expression of anger and avoiding the

use of control tactics as a kind of laxness about setting limits. On the contrary, children do not need us to be helpless in the face of their impulses, especially when such feelings may be overwhelming to them. Though they may complain about our firmness or test our resolve, children rely on us to provide the containment they cannot give to themselves.

There are two "tricks" to keep in mind when coaching children to handle their anger more appropriately. One is to permit anger while providing the perspective and reassurance that no dire consequences will come of it (e.g., retaliation, loss of control, dissolution of the adult's ability to contain the child's impulses, etc.) The other is to monitor our own emotional issues to be sure we are truly helping youngsters feel safe from the ravages of their own impulses, as opposed to either giving a voice to our own unexpressed feelings of anger (by subtly and unwittingly encouraging children to act out) or to assuaging our own need for control.

### **Establishing individual boundaries**

Separating our issues and feelings from those of the children we work with is extremely important in creating a sense of safety, and that is what we accomplish once we have established clear boundaries. Children need an evolving sense that their feelings are their own, distinct from that of their parents and other caretaking adults, in order to develop their own sense of self. Boundaries — the distinction of one person's wishes, impulses and so on, from that of another — is what fosters this emerging sense of integrity. In most cases of juvenile delinquency, the presence of blurred boundaries in the family has been found to be a significant factor.

This threat to their boundaries is one of the reasons children react defensively when we *tell* them their feelings rather than inquire about them. In addition to being intrusive, this practice also makes a child feel compromised, as if he doesn't have a private mental life of his

own. Even though we may be accurate in our analysis, telling a child their feelings, as opposed to empathizing with their struggle, creates annoyance and resistance rather than alliance.

As one teen-age boy once said to me, "I figured out that when my mother has a reaction to something, she automatically thinks I'm going to have the same reaction." What was even more annoying to him, although he couldn't admit it at first, was when his mother was also right. What was so disturbing to the boy was not the accuracy of his mother's projection, but that he was never allowed to feel his feelings were distinct from hers — that he had a separate self.

Two people may feel similar feelings, but each must also feel they are experiencing the effects as a distinct individual. As one teen-age girl once put it, "When I get upset, my mom gets more upset than I do. It's almost like it's happening to her and not me." If as caretaking adults we are not clear about our own issues as distinct from those of our charges, we stand to create a lot of resistance rather than to create any alliances.

Creating an alliance with children out of knowing their implicit need for a safe environment is actually an act of empathy based on wisdom. Maintaining clear boundaries, addressing the need for emotional and physical containment, allowing the appropriate expression of feelings (including anger), and providing a medium for this to occur in socially acceptable ways are all factors that create an environment with greater integrity. These factors need to be implemented on the elementary school level if we expect students to have a positive regard for authority by the time they reach secondary school.

### **Creating support**

Since we cannot teach or pass on what we ourselves do not "know" in an empirical sense, we must also be willing to work with one another when we attempt to develop these elements in our schools. Creating support in the form of

peer groups, conducting in-service training that is practical and based on empathetic strategies for school personnel, and providing speakers who can advise parents about the difficult issues of raising children are all supplements to establishing the elements that create a sense of safety for children as discussed here.

Child and family therapists from community clinics or other agencies are often willing to address timely issues with teachers or parents from a practical standpoint simply as a way of making their services known. After-school activity groups for children with behavioral disorders can help siphon disruptions from the classroom into a setting where they can be contained and resolved. Screening children who are candidates for such groups can help identify youngsters who may not be able to be contained in the school setting but who need other forms of intervention. Again, local clinics or private practitioners are often willing to work in concert with parents and school personnel to work out logistics, costs and procedures. My own experience with such programming is that it can make a tremendous difference for the child as well as for the school and the family.

Our work with children must begin at the elementary school level. Though young children are more accepting of authority than teen-agers, delinquent teen-agers were once children who came to resent authority when it was presented without emotional safety. Making a difference with children by creating a sense of safety and empathy is an opportunity to contribute to the wisdom of the culture. □

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