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## Suppression of the aggressive impulse: Conceptual difficulties in anti-violence programs

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### Abstract

School anti-violence programs are united in their radical condemnation of aggression, generally equated with violence. The programs advocate its elimination by priming children's emotional and cognitive controls. What goes unrecognized is the embeddedness of aggression in human beings, as well its positive psychological and moral functions. In attempting to eradicate aggression, schools increase the risk of student disaffection while stifling the goods associated with it: status, power, dominance, agency, mastery, pride, social-affiliation, social-approval, loyalty, self-respect, and self-confidence. It is argued that the distribution to students of power and authority, plausible substitutes for aggression, would enable them to express aggression in a legitimated manner and simultaneously encourage their attachment to school. A vibrant anti-violence program that attracts children will find a way for caring, amiability, sympathy, and kindness to live in tandem with competition, power, assertiveness, and anger tamed by institutional constraints.

### Comments

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**Suppression of the aggressive impulse: Conceptual difficulties in anti-  
violence programs**

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**Running head: Suppression of the aggressive impulse**



## **Abstract**

School anti-violence programs are united in their radical condemnation of aggression, generally equated with violence. The programs advocate its elimination by priming children's emotional and cognitive controls. What goes unrecognized is the embeddedness of aggression in human beings, as well its positive psychological and moral functions. In attempting to eradicate aggression, schools increase the risk of student disaffection while stifling the goods associated with it: status, power, dominance, agency, mastery, pride, social-affiliation, social-approval, loyalty, self-respect, and self-confidence. It is argued that the distribution to students of power and authority, plausible substitutes for aggression, would enable them to express aggression in a legitimated manner and simultaneously encourage their attachment to school. A vibrant anti-violence program that attracts children will find a way for caring, amiability, sympathy, and kindness to live in tandem with competition, power, assertiveness, and anger tamed by institutional constraints.

## **Suppression of the aggressive impulse: Conceptual difficulties in anti-violence programs**

Schools affirm the affiliative, caring, cooperative impulses of human nature while discouraging, to the point of forbidding, aggressive ones. Yet, despite prohibitions on violence, as well as broader expressions of aggression, anti-social behaviors continue to be endemic school problems.<sup>1</sup> Appeals to long-term self-interest, rationality, empathy, and social cohesion confront children who are nonetheless captivated by aggression; it absorbs their out-of-school lives as it absorbs the larger culture in which they participate. With five to six violent acts per hour on television and an average weekly viewing of 28 hours – and that estimate excludes electronic games – violence saturates children's after-school lives (Report of the American Psychological Association, 1993). We are hungry for aggression while trying to eliminate it. Paul Willis (1997), in his analysis of a progressive working class school in England has noted its appeal:

There is a positive joy in fighting, in causing fights through intimidation, in talking about fighting and about the tactics of the whole fight situation.

Many important cultural values are expressed through fighting. Masculine hubris, dramatic display, the solidarity of the group, the importance of quick, clear and not over-moral thought, comes out time and again....

Violence opposes the conventional with 'machismo.' It is one way to make

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<sup>1</sup> I understand aggression to mean, under most circumstances, the intent to inflict harm. It can be verbal, psychological or physical. Violence, a form of aggression, involves the use of physical force (Dodge, Coie, and Lynam, 2006).

the mundane suddenly *matter*....Boredom and petty detail disappear (p. 34).

Unlike other behaviors that educators would like to expunge from children's repertoire – thumb sucking, bed wetting, tantrums, biting – the mere progression of years is not a predictable cure and reliance on disciplinary policies has been unresponsive to the concern.<sup>2</sup>

As teachers and students increasingly report that schools feel unsafe (Barton, Coley, Wenglinksy, 1998), an avalanche of anti-violence programs has found their way into the curriculum. As with character education, the mounting number does not reflect great variety.<sup>3</sup> In this paper I review common tenets and approaches of the anti-violence programs, arguing that the core features are overly repressive. There is an excessive appeal to rationality and pro-social emotions, along with a failure to acknowledge the moral and emotional power of aggression: features that make it beneficial to human development, as well as pervasive and resistant to extinction. This is not to say that the programs are unsuccessful. Limited evidence suggests they have had some positive impact (Mytton, et al, 2002; Samples and Eber, 1998). Rather the criticism goes to the total reproach of aggression and assertiveness that sometimes includes determined striving, and exuberance.

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<sup>2</sup> According to the National Center for Education Statistics, Indicators of School Crime and Safety (2009), in 2007 over 30% of all teachers found student misbehavior interfered with their teaching, over 30% of all students claimed they were victims of bullying, and over 30% of Black and Hispanic students reported gangs in their school

<sup>3</sup> Erika Kitzmiller took on responsibility for collecting information on anti-violence programs

The anti-aggressive stance may arise, in part, by equating aggression with violence. Yet aggression is often expressed in rational argumentation and passionate views; in organized activities such as sports or political campaigns; in desires, fantasies, and written work; in self-assertion and protest. Violence, ranging from serious to mild, is but one of its forms. Aggression is not necessarily destructive; that is the assumption at issue. It can have benevolent as well as malevolent intentions and outcomes. When incorporated into the authority structure of a social order, it can be a vehicle for fulfilling worthy institutional purposes. My argument is that aggression should be valued and channeled productively, not buried in an unnatural and eventually futile over-emphasis on being amicable and peaceful. If schools foster only the affiliative side of the psyche, while trying to silence its assertive aggressive face, they miss an opportunity for fully engaging children, cultivating other beneficial characteristics, allowing them authentic voice, and sustaining a vibrant community.

In what follows I initially sketch the themes of anti-violence programs: their condemnation of aggression, their advocacy of developing children's emotional and cognitive controls. Next I discuss the entrenched hold of aggression in humans as critical to fulfillment as affiliation and attachment. In the third section I review the goods of aggression, both psychological and moral. As an outlet for more seriously motivated aggression, I suggest in section four that power and authority be distributed to students. Power may be sought simply because it enhances a sense of self or injures another, but it may also be sought as an instrument of justice (getting-even, fairness). If student power-seeking is shaped



and legitimized by a school, rather than arising through random encounters and often turned *against* the school, then aggressiveness may find a socially acceptable conduit. When a child is given power to further institutional objectives – from oversight of a group charged with cleaning the lunch tables to participating in a disciplinary proceeding – she may experience the range of satisfactions that aggression affords: status, power, dominance, agency, mastery, pride, social-affiliation, social- approval, loyalty, self-respect, and moral self-confidence. The anger and hostility formerly associated with inter-personal aggression might even, in some instances, mutate into anger and hostility associated with violations of school norms to which students are committed. The resolution then becomes less about getting personal satisfaction than about securing a just resolution. Such a depersonalization of aggression – I am angry not because of what you did to me but because of what you did to the community – would also buttress the school culture and students' adherence to it. Securing this engagement is itself a factor in preventing violence, as acknowledged by the American Psychological Association (2008). Offering genuine authority to students, within the framework of a school's legitimated goals, adds to power-exertion an opportunity for autonomous decision-making, thereby increasing a student's range of influence. It is suggested as supplemental to the suppression of assertiveness in anti-violence programs.

### **Anti-violence programs and the suppression of aggression**

To select a subset of anti-violence programs for review, we consulted four sources: *The National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices*

(NREPP), a service of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (2008); *Blueprints for Violence Prevention* by the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (2008); *The Model Program's Guide* by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Preventions (MPG) (2008); and a review by Leff and associates (2001). Each of these sources had conducted comprehensive searches to determine programs of the highest scientific merit. From the top-rated ones we eliminated those that were directed primarily to drugs, alcohol, and smoking; were therapeutic rather than preventive or home-based; and did not continue beyond first grade. This yielded 13 programs.<sup>4</sup> We then surveyed their relevant web sites and related articles.

Generally programs are oriented to elementary and middle school students. Curricula are spelled out in teacher manuals and bundled into discrete lessons totaling roughly 10 to 25 hours. Lectures, discussions and rule development may be supplemented with DVD's, puppets, cued conversations, role-playing, *in vivo* demonstrations, rehearsal (of positive behaviors), posters, photos, and parent training.

The pervasive aspiration is that children should be calm, cooperative, and pro-social. Adults, in turn, should establish a classroom atmosphere that is kindly, warm, and caring, while remaining firmly in charge. Aggression, and more

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<sup>4</sup> Brain Power; Coping Power; Early Risers: Skills for Success; Incredible Years Training for Children; Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers (LIFT); Olweus Bullying Prevention Program; PeaceBuilders; Positive Action; Promoting Alternative thinking Strategies (PATHS); Resolving Conflicts Creatively Program (RCCP); Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP); Second Step; Too Good for Violence.

broadly impulsive behavior, is to be eliminated. Schools should strive to become peaceful sanctuaries. Much of the programmatic content concentrates on developing children's capacity for inhibition. In so far as possible, children should avoid confrontational situations. If unable to do so, they should ignore provocations, walk away from put-downs, and inhibit their anger. They are taught, and afforded opportunities to practice, non-responsiveness to aggression. For example, in Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers (LIFT), children are advised to withdraw from teasing by going into their turtle shells where '[i]t's nice and warm and safe. You can't get into trouble and have time to think about what you can do to keep from getting into trouble' (Eddy, Reid, and Fetrow, 2000, p. 169). Impulses to instigate aggression should be 'managed' and 'controlled.' Words such as self-control, self-discipline, self-management, emotional regulation, frustration tolerance, anger management, and pro-social problem solving are rampant in program descriptions. As noted by Lyn Mikel Brown, we ask girls always to be 'nice and kind' and boys to 'never lash out' (2009, p.5). We burden children with expectations that adults would refuse: to obey all rules regardless of their apparent unfairness and never to resist the aggression of others.

In addition to these extraordinary demands on inhibitory powers, students are asked, as a means of distancing themselves from confrontations, to invoke sophisticated cognitive processes: to recognize emotions (in themselves and others); label what they feel as a way of increasing self-control; develop empathy and insight into the aggressor's mental state, thereby achieving perspective on

the conflict at hand; understand the likelihood of making misattributions, that is the tendency to perceive an event – a bump or spilled lunch tray – as hostile, when it is accidental.

Consider, as an example, the popular Second Step anti-violence program that extends from kindergarten through eighth grade. According to its web page (2009), in thirty lessons given once or twice a week, children learn and practice skills of 'anger management, cooperation, respectful behavior, and problem solving. These skills help decrease students' negative and violent behaviors – fighting, name-calling, and stereotyping.' In each grade there are units on empathy training, impulse control, problem solving, and anger management. Under empathy, fourth-grade children (my random choice) are instructed to recognize and understand that people have different reactions to the same situation, they have conflicting feelings, feelings change, and one can recognize others' feelings from their physical and verbal behavior. Students should be wary of attributing hostile impulses to others and show concern for them. Under impulse control and problem solving, fourth-graders practice calming-down, giving and receiving compliments, brainstorming solutions rather than acting impulsively, keeping conversations friendly, taking responsibility by acknowledging mistakes and apologizing. Under anger management, fourth-graders are again taught to recognize the signs of anger, calm down, reflect, and problem-solve. Cognitive understanding and emotional repression are the solutions for anger. Other recourses are not offered.

The programs are clear on their normative values. There are good and bad acts, good and bad (or positive and negative) emotions. Aggression and anger are bad (often euphemized as 'inappropriate') and do nothing to resolve conflict; nonviolent norms should be inculcated. Pro-social problem solving, that is maintaining peaceful interactions, is good. For example, Resolving Conflicts Creatively (RCCP) asserts categorically that aggression does not resolve conflicts. Instead it urges children to use 'I messages' – referencing their own feelings rather than blaming others.

Aggressive students are widely perceived as problematic: they are socially inept, have deficits in social information processing and, if their behaviors remain unaltered, are likely to become delinquent. They 'tend to be suspicious of others, have difficulty reading nonverbal cues, and often misinterpret ambiguous events as hostile. Socially, children at risk for violence insult their peers, disrupt classroom activities, and engage in higher rates of physical and verbal aggression than socially competent children' (Embry and Associates 1996, pp. 91-92). Since aggression is believed to be largely the product of the primary caretakers' negativism, permissiveness, and power-assertion (spanking and violent verbal outbursts), the school must provide an alternative model.

Admittedly, there is some variation to the bad-child view. RCCP recognizes that cultural factors can be the source of aggressive norms and behaviors, though that does not make aggression more tolerable. While prohibiting aggression, RCCP also acknowledges that conflict is an inevitable part of life to be handled by teaching and negotiation. By mutual consent peer

mediators are engaged in dispute resolution. The emphasis, however, is on problems to be solved, not wrongs to be righted. Aggression has no claim to moral standing.

The programs emphasize peace and amicability rather than justice. They are inattentive to the compelling moral clashes that often promote aggression, and the moral satisfactions resulting from self-assertion. They do not address, perhaps because they cannot resolve, the dilemma of children living in conflicting worlds of conflicting values and the possibility that their behavior gains moral approbation and is adaptive (Ferguson, 2000). Despite contrary prevailing norms in their communities, and often in their families, students are expected to accept school principles, to regulate their emotions and manage their anger accordingly.

In condemning aggressive acts, schools reject a world view adhered to by many. Where aggression is most conspicuous – in our inner-city largely ethnic-minority schools – it also meets with most social approval as a form of achieving justice and social status (Anderson, 1999; Fagan and Wilkinson, 1998). This rejection has to be openly faced: students must be persuaded that there is more honor in walking away from a confrontation than in resisting it; that turning to adults for assistance is preferable to handling conflicts themselves. It may be a hard sell, for ‘telling an adult is anathema’ (Ferguson, 2000, p.181), and aggression is justified by values of respect and fairness.

### **The embeddedness of aggression**

The classical theorists of aggression have long disputed whether it is a native instinct or an acquired motive, but they agree that, like the drive for

affiliation, it is easily primed. Both emotional states make their appearance in infancy, are shaped by parenting and social context, yet appear to be experienced as primitives. A casual observation of toddlers reveals that they hunger for intimacy and attachment, while they eagerly do battle against any human or non-human obstacle interrupting their pursuits. A child who did not go after her wants – a parent, bottle, or toy – would be as aberrant as one who did not pursue parental attachment. Indeed, aggression has been noted to reach its peak in the preschool years and to diminish through socialization thereafter (Dodge, Coie, and Lynam, 2006).

It has long been acknowledged that we may well be endowed, or quickly acquire, a dual nature. 'In the same individual we find infinite capacity for tenderness, sympathy, charity, love, and infinite capacity for cruelty, callousness, destruction, hate' (Ardrey, 1966, p.285). And, as with many polarities, the two ends are closely connected. Even in the case of a familiar toddler, one often cannot predict if, when stimulated, she will respond aggressively or affiliatively. Later, in a school situation, when under threat she may equally unpredictably seek the teacher's support or lash out at the offender. Suggesting their evolutionary roots, Konrad Lorenz (1966) and Robert Ardrey (1966) noted the proximity of love and hate in the animal kingdom as well. Objects of love are also objects of aggression and the two responses often occur simultaneously. Amongst humans enmity and amity are not just occasionally commingled but, according to some, fully interdependent: '[I]t is *E* – enmity, hostility, antagonism, aggression, however you may care to express it – that is the major ingredient in

amity's making' (Ardrey, 1966, p. 271). Threat by an enemy (another gang, the 'wrong' kids) can result in the suspension of mutual antagonisms: 'With every addition to the value of *E*, there has been produced an additional value of *A*' (Ardrey, 1966, p. 274). When enmity subsides so too does amity. More recently, it has been noted (Phillips and Taylor, 2009) that aggression is the counterpart to love and affection, often closely linked to caring about moral wrongs.

Lorenz observed in animals (mostly geese) that bonding is enhanced by aggression. Creatures who live together entirely peaceably do not form strong attachments. '[A]n individual friendship is found only in animals with highly developed intra-specific aggression; in fact, this bond is the firmer, the more aggressive the particular animal and species is' (1966, p.216)...'[I]ntra-specific aggression can certainly exist without its counterpart, love, but conversely there is no love without aggression' (1966, p. 217). Lorenz bemoans that man in his civilized state, 'suffers from insufficient discharge of his aggressive drive' (1966, p. 243).

Unquestionably aggression, along with love, altruism and sexuality, can be inhibited or redirected. This is true at the individual and group level. There are communities in which violence prevails (for instance the Ik described by Colin Turnbull, 1972) and in which cooperation prevails (Eskimo and Amish, see Montague, 1976). Unlike Lorenz's goslings (1963) that, upon hatching, are imprinted by and then faithfully follow the goose (or person) they first see, our behaviors, despite predispositions, are not under full genetic control. An ongoing theoretical dispute is whether the aggressive disposition in humans must be



discharged or can be eliminated without a serious detrimental impact. Lorenz was aligned with the must-be-released camp. If not redirected – banging the table or battling it out in ritualized games – aggression will cause unbearable dammed-up tensions. By contrast, the anthropologist Ashley Montagu (1976) maintained that the disposition can be inhibited or unlearned through a social environment that meets the child's need for support and attention, for humans are by nature 'neither naked apes nor fallen angels' (p. 315); they are what they are made.

The psychiatric tradition is also steeped in a dualistic drive theory. Sigmund Freud wrote of the two dominating drives as life and death, love (libido, eros) and hate (aggression). Initially the two drives are fused, expressed in infancy by undifferentiated agitation or excitement. With development, libidinal and aggressive satisfactions can be recognized independently yet are regularly blended in varying proportions. Against the conventional Victorian views of his day, Freud (1961) adamantly and pessimistically asserted that aggression, along with eros, is 'an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man, and ...that it constitutes the greatest impediment to civilization' (p. 69):

'[M]en are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for

work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him.... In consequence of this primary mutual hostility of human beings, civilized society is perpetually threatened with disintegration.... Civilization has to use its utmost efforts in order to set limits to man's aggressive instincts and to hold the manifestations of them in check (1961, pp 58-59).

Freud also saw aggression as acquired as well as innate. It can be a secondary reaction to helplessness, dependency, and frustration; it can be inhibited, repressed, displaced to other objects and pursuits, and sublimated (replaced rather than displaced), but it is tenacious (Freud, 1932/1953; Freud, 1950; Freud, 1961; Hartmann, Kris, and Lowenstein 1949; Van Haute and Geyskens, 2007).

Anna Freud and her colleague Dorothy Burlingham (1943, 1972), astute observers of children, also concluded that aggression, like the pro-social drive, is innate and primary; children are born 'savages.'

If we observe young children at play, we notice that they will destroy their toys, pull off the arms and legs of their dolls or soldiers, puncture their balls, smash whatever is breakable, and will only mind the result because complete destruction of the toy blocks further play (1943, p. 22).

Parenting in the early years is substantially about limiting their aggressive and destructive drives.

On the other hand, John Dollard, the psychological counterpart to Ashley Montagu, concluded that '*aggression is always a consequence of frustration*'

caused by obstruction in achieving a goal and not innate (1939, p.1, italics in original). Frustration does not necessarily produce aggression, but it is the sole trigger. While no environmental manipulations can eliminate frustration, because aggression is a conditioned response it can be inhibited by the anticipation of punishment.

Whether instinct, predisposition, or learned, that we are an aggressive species is obvious. Why is aggression compelling, given its obvious detrimental effects?

### **The goods of aggression**

Contrary to Dollard (1939), it would seem that the intense pleasure derived from aggression is, alone, sufficient to obliterate calculations of consequences. The joy in pitting oneself against another, the exhilaration and exhaustion that accompany impassioned defiance, the thrill of domination are hard to match (Campbell, 1993; Opatow, 1991; Willis, 1977). Children have a compelling itch to fight, so compelling that hostility is not generally its primary cause, rather its effect (Bovet, 1923; Peterson and Flanders, 2005). 'They like to start them [fights] watch them and hear about them' (Opatow, 1991, p. 420; also, Lightfoot, 1997). They tease and irritate others as a pretext to get on with the fight, or they abandon pretexts and engage in play fighting strictly for the fun of it. The strong sense of agency and heightened arousal offers a heady contrast to the insipid 'mawkish and dishwatery' (James, 1910, p.13) conditions of peaceful relationships.

Pure good soon grows insipid....[E]veryone reads the accidents and offences in a newspaper, as the cream of the set: a whole town runs to be present at a fire, and the spectator by no means exults to see it extinguished (Hazlitt, 2005, p.105).

There is the added heroic dimension, particularly for adolescents, of courting danger, risking outcomes, defying probabilities, breaking rules, and making dramatic displays (Fagan and Wilkinson, 1998). Under such psychological conditions, it is unsurprising if negative adult admonitions are ignored. While a perpetrator may acknowledge that aggression carried out in revenge for an attack or initiated as a put-down of the other is self-defeating, and that strife begets strife, when his anger is aroused such considerations have little hold; he is likely to find it self-enhancing.

Beyond the intrinsic pleasure, aggression and violence serve worthy instrumental functions. Without expressions of anger, there cannot be mutual understanding. According to the contemporary philosopher, Mary Midgley:

[T]he wish to collide, to invade another's world, is a real one. Without that contact, each child would be isolated. Each needs the direct physical clash, the practical conviction that others as well as himself are capable both of feeling pain and of returning it. Surprising though it may be, that interaction lies at the root of sympathy. The young of other social animals play in the same mildly aggressive way, and derive the same sort of bond-forming effects from it (1984, p.89).

We should welcome our aggressive drives, claims Midgley, for strong social attachments are dependent upon physical attack and resistance:

Besides play, however, children also need at times more serious clashes. Real disputes, properly expressed and resolved, seem essential for their emotional unfolding. In this way they begin to get a fuller sense of the independent reality of others. They find that there is somebody at the other end....A quarrel which is worked through and made up can be profoundly bond-forming.... Mild, occasional anger is a necessary part of all social relations (1984, p.89).

According to the psychology of Alfred Adler (1930; Ansbacher and Ansbacher, 1956), the goal of children from earliest infancy is to overcome inherent feelings of inferiority by resisting submission and achieving superiority. Their basic orientation to the world is therefore hostile. Observing children at play, Adler noted how they want to be top of the heap, play the driver rather than the horse; in my observations, be the parent not the baby, dictate the game rules to insure winning, keep control over an activity and rebuff proffered help even when that help would be facilitative. To deny them self-assertion is to increase their sense of inadequacy.

While, in contrast to Adler and Midgley, one constantly observes relationships (and whole societies) that apparently thrive without aggression, Freud might contest a description of 'thriving' that involves so much repression. All long-term close relationships, he claimed, contain 'a sediment of feelings of aversion and hostility' (1951, p.54). In schools, even where overt fighting is rare,

children who may not express hostility towards their friends still regularly share with them a common hostility towards others. Intimacy and comradeship are enhanced by gossip, harassment, bullying, teasing and ganging-up on other students (Campbell, 1993; Johnson and Johnson, 1966; Simmons, 2002; Wiseman, 2002). These individual and small group behaviors, so pervasive as to seem required for closeness, can be extended to a school or society. Lesko (1988), observing a Catholic school, noted that its major themes were caring and contest. Lorenz (1963), describing larger social groups, commented that, 'the feeling of togetherness which is so essential to the serving of a common cause is greatly enhanced by the presence of a definite, threatening enemy whom it is possible to hate' (p. 285). Similarly Freud observed: 'It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness' (1961, p. 61).

While common enmities strengthen collective goodwill, within-group aggression also produces recognition, respect, and power (Anderson, 1999; Campbell, 1993; Hartup, 1974; Hemmings, 2003; Simmons, 2002; Willis, 1977; Wiseman, 2002). Obtaining respect can be dependent on domination. Aggression further appeases moral claims of justice (Opatow, 2006). For students, revenge (pay back) and retribution (punishment) are often perceived as morally compelled, although unprovoked aggression is condemned (Astor, 1994). Preschool children, easily swayed by adult injunctions and reliant upon adults for both protection and punishment, will condemn hitting back, but older children

often approve of a blow for a blow. Equalizing the parties' power restores a moral balance (Piaget, 1965). If retaliation is inhibited, the thwarted drive for revenge may persist for years with a consequent lowering of self-worth. When satisfied, it relieves one's suffering while restoring self-esteem, identity and pride (Frijda, 2007). An extensive philosophical literature speaks to the virtue of justified anger and resentment (Brudholm, 2008; Fridja, 1994; Jacoby, 1983; Murphy and Hampton, 1988; Murphy, 2003).

In our society revenge is taboo, while in honor societies it is obligatory. We see it as instigating counter-aggression; others see it as a deterrent, a rational strategy inducing cooperation (Fridja, 1994). According to Susan Jacoby (1983) our real objection is not to vengeance itself but to uncontrolled vengeance for, properly administered, proportional revenge is core to our justice system. She goes on to argue that measured retribution is also central to rehabilitation.

The ancient concept that an offender must pay a penalty before being restored to society embodies a profound psychological as well as social need – and embodies it for the criminal as well as the victim p.179....[T]he elimination of retribution as a legitimate social value rules out any possibility of genuine atonement and forgiveness (p. 330).

Obviously aggression is problematic and violence beyond a scuffle unacceptable in schools. Fighting, furthermore, can thwart as well as achieve just resolutions, undermine as well as bolster self-esteem, cause as well as release stress, create as well as resolve animosities, deny as well as offer respect, alienate as well as bond, produce helplessness as well as competence. For

every winner there is a loser. With so much at stake, it is unsurprising that schools are reluctant to indulge students' passion, even if they see the upside. Instead of assertiveness, anger, indignation and conflict they urge respectful discourse. If one is insulted, talk it out with a neutral party, understand and find compassion for the other; if one is victimized or treated unfairly, tell a teacher, don't retaliate in word or deed. Students should stay calm and rational, keep their fury suppressed. The desire to mitigate one's own suffering by another's suffering, though universal or near-universal (Fridja, 1994), is deemed unworthy. Robert Solomon's argument that revenge against evil lies 'at the very foundation of our sense of justice, indeed, of our very sense of ourselves, our dignity, and our sense of right and wrong' (1994, p.305) is rejected. Nonetheless, where psychological and moral considerations are in tension with school policies, on both pragmatic and ethical grounds it is questionable if just one set of values should be legislated for. A deeper understanding of, and respect for, aggression as an aspect of life not without value would enrich school life.

The problem is not that schools encourage children's sympathy and kindness; it is, rather, their extreme condemnation of aggression combined with lack of interest in finding viable alternative outlets. By daily dampening and managing children's feelings, schools risk extinguishing their spiritedness, substituting apathy along with repressed (often temporarily) rage. As Polakow (1992) has noted despairingly, the constant attempt to control, manipulate, and suppress behavior results, if successful, in excessive domination and domestication of youth. By adults insisting so steadily on submission to their



demands, by denying student agency, disengagement is all but inevitable. While this is intended benevolently, the recipient experiences a coercion and power denied to him. Of course students must learn restraint – that is a major task of socialization – but so too, I am suggesting, must educators restrain their impulses to repress.

We should listen to children who believe fights are more constructive than destructive (Ferguson, 2000, Opatow, 1991). We should ask how schools can develop substitutes for aggression that will satisfy their students. We should heed the findings that whereas serious violence is rare and not increasing, disruptive behavior is common and probably increasing (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Barton, 2001; Johnson and Johnson, 1996). Why the disruption and what are alternatives to it? Are there institutional structures that can transcend an I-win-he-loses form of aggression, yet still leave students feeling powerful?

### **Legitimizing aggression through power and authority**

Although unfettered aggression is ethically unjustified, while causing physical and psychological harm, gratifications from exercising power can have good outcomes. The institutionalized distribution of power to students, we suggest, may diminish the pressure for combative outlets and simultaneously enhance social responsibility along with school allegiance. In transferring power to students, the teacher draws them into the normative network of the classroom, thereby co-opting their loyalty. A child is more likely to connect with a school in which she is part of the power structure. Contrariwise, the arrogation of all official

control by teachers seeds natural student resistance. Given their quest for power, and the absence of approved school outlets, it also makes more probable inter-student nastiness, bullying, cliques, and violence.

The power a teacher shares can be minimal as in directing a student to gather homework papers and lead a class line, or maximal as in shared disciplinary decisions and participation in teacher hires. However, while power from a teacher is likely to increase a child's sense of agency, there are limitations to informal teacher-distributed power: First, as long as shared power is at the discretion of the teacher, and not woven into institutional structures, the child, in carrying out the teacher's directives, is merely deputized to fulfill tasks as directed. The teacher retains the real power, granting and retracting it as she sees fit. The student is bound to her will, making the power ephemeral and the child without a claim. Second, power exerted by students may be as oppressive as power exerted by teachers; the possessor's fulfillment coincident with the subject's resentment. Third, although obtaining power should increase the child's identification with school norms, the identification is subject to failure absent prior commitment to those norms (Cuban, 1993). When, for instance, a student given a negotiating role in a dispute resolution believes the process is rigged, with only a limited subset of outcomes permitted, she will not welcome the power.

To address these difficulties, power, whenever possible, must be transformed into authority. Authority, unlike power, requires a legitimizing source that restricts its range and prevents arbitrariness. That source can come from the mission (culture) of the school, the charisma of the teacher, the perceived value

of the instruction, or the interest of the task. Power, according to Max Weber (1947), 'is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests' (p.152). A teacher who holds or delegates power alone can claim no justification beyond, 'Because I say so.' Her success in wielding it depends on the availability and effectiveness of sanctions. Obedience to authority, by contrast, is premised on 'a certain minimum of voluntary submission' (p.324). It is the *voluntariness* of submission by individuals or groups, to commands accepted as valid, that makes authority legitimate, just as *involuntary* submission to commands perceived as illegitimate marks power relationships. Authority, explains Phillip Selznick (1992),

may be defined as a rightful claim to deference or obedience....We cannot make sense of authority if we do not distinguish it from naked power.

Authority generates a *kind* of power – the power to win assent, deference, obedience – but its distinctive basis is a recognized claim of right. The claim to deference must be accepted as rightful by a relevant class of persons. (p. 266, italics in original).

Note the emphasis on the 'relevant class' that grants consent. When an administrator secures a teacher's compliance through threat of sanctions she has lost her authority just as the teacher whose student refrains from cheating because of the consequences he anticipates, or whose conduct more generally is ruled by grades and external discipline, has lost hers. Without the legitimacy of the demand, the obedience of such a student is coerced. Eventually, as

alienation from the institution increases, the consequences may also lose their bite so that compliance is degraded. Grades and discipline may serve as bulwarks of, or incentives for, authority; alone they cannot establish it and may not even succeed in sustaining it.

One who exercises authority retains, in addition to legitimacy, a degree of discretion denied the pure power implementer. Even in hierarchical bureaucratic organizations, where employees fulfill explicitly delineated roles, the bureaucrat, according to Weber, is expected to perform independently and imaginatively. Their selection for employment is premised on expertise; exercising judgment is essential to the employee's success (Weber, 1947; 1968). The extent of freedom will vary depending on the nature of the organization: a physician in a managed care setting presumably has more independence than a dental hygienist in the same practice; principals have more freedom than teachers, teachers more than students, older students more than younger ones. However, when freedom approaches zero and the exercise of discretion is stifled, one (teacher or student) is increasingly either subject to, or an enactor of, pure power. The child assigned to be a line leader or to collect papers exercises only proxy power: he has no authority because he has no discretion. Only when he independently considers the options and determines how best to carry out the task can he be said to possess authority. On the other hand, when freedom approaches 100% it operates in a vacuum of constraints; there is, then, no legitimating source that can compel adherence to decisions (Swidler, 1979). In a shift to extreme freedom, the support and delimitations established by higher order purposes (the

legitimizing principles) are lost. Whenever genuine authority exists, there is a combination of power and freedom (Simon, 1940).

To establish genuine authority relationships in a school, students need to be persuaded that what the school demands of them they want for themselves. In the early elementary grades this is usually unproblematic; they readily identify with school goals as they have with parental values and interests. With maturity, however, the child is pulled towards non-parental and non-school identifications and for many students consent to authority must be co-opted. I do not use the term pejoratively. The induction of children into a belief system that they can adhere to, at least provisionally, is part of their identity formations. Active consent keeps the will of the subordinate engaged. When the subordinate agrees that a rule is fair, for instance that not doing home-work or cheating violates norms to which he as well as the teacher subscribe, his obedience feels self-imposed rather than commanded from above. Obedience is then an act of freedom not repression.

Consent is often secured by a teacher's superior knowledge, use of lively assignments, or strong personality. The durability of such person-dependent legitimacy, though much to be admired, is fragile, reliant upon the gifts of particular teachers. More compellingly it lacks the connection between an individual and those stable, school-wide (or more broadly based), publicly endorsed shared values to which all students can form loyalties (Swidler, 1979). When consent emanates from institutional mandates or missions, legitimacy comes 'from above' and the personal appeal of the teacher is not required to

secure it. Teacher and student are bound to the same authority not of their own devising. Kenneth Strike (2003) has summarized the nature of a school mission.

A shared educational project has a vision of the education it wishes to provide, which is known to and agreed upon by the members of the community. This vision is rooted in a common vision of human flourishing, and it involves aims that require cooperation in order to secure. This is the basis for articulating roles within the community. It grounds the community's educational practices, rituals, and traditions, grounds the community's governance practices, and is the basis of the community's ability to achieve the goods of community such as belonging, loyalty, mutual identification, and trust (p.74. original italics removed).

Strike emphasizes the social values of commonality, community, and cooperation. Within a mission-driven institution, whether it tends towards the conservative as in some military and religious schools or the liberal as in democratic schools, there is the opportunity for students to be given authority. Kim Hays (1994), describing military boarding schools, notes that the cadet officer 'has the right and the responsibility to make his own choices: to consider the safety of his men, the morality of his orders, and the dictates of his conscience in the context of the group's goals, and then to decide what steps to take' (p. 48). Further, before issuing an order, leaders consult underlings who can object, offer suggestions and criticisms, and even decide to disobey if they think it illegal. Though difficult to carry out, there is an 'ideal of shared authority based on trust and dialogue' (p. 175). The structured, moralized roles provide

outlets for pride, power, self-respect, influence, approval, and justice thereby absorbing impulses that promote aggression.

In democratic schools considerable authority is disseminated to students who, directly or through representative legislatures, make decisions binding on others and accepted by them. Students may have substantial say over the agendas and extensive decision-making power, but to sustain their authority, they must abide by common premises that legitimate and shape it. For the Just Schools, initiated by Lawrence Kohlberg and colleagues, that norm was justice. While giving students a major voice in discipline and student life, it was assumed that decisions were premised on fairness to the interests of all (Power, Higgins, and Kohlberg, 1989a). Like military schools, democratic schools are committed to a moral vision. The 'most distinctive feature,' according to their major chronicler F. Clark Power, 'was not the use of participatory democracy but the goal of becoming a moral community...a group that shares an explicit commitment to a common life characterized by norms embodying high moral ideals' (2004, p.50). These include the master virtues of 'caring, trust, collective responsibility, and participation' (Power, Higgins, and Kohlberg, 1989b, p.138). The alternative venues for aggression provided by military schools are also found in the moral authority assumed by students in democratic schools.

## **Conclusion**

I have observed my city celebrating a World Series victory. Even those not participating in the massive celebration were filled with high spirits, pride, and a heightened sense of well-being. Having prevailed over all opposition, we were

number one, the best. It would have sounded absurd to suggest that the celebrants be sensitive to the losers, consider their feelings, and modestly reject the glory that was ours. This was our conquest, our venue for aggressive pleasures.

Children, I have argued, also deserve an opportunity to release aggression, not just the animal-spirited aggression of sports but aggression arising from motives for control, status, and moral anger. A vibrant school that attracts children will find a way for caring, amiability, sympathy, and kindness to live in tandem with competition, assertiveness, anger, power, and authority. Competition is good when against oneself or rival teams, classes, and schools. Assertiveness is good when provoked by creativity, leadership, achievement, and righteous causes. Anger is good when provoked by injustice to person or group. Power and authority are good when tamed by institutional constraints. As Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham contended, good education directs the aggression to 'fight the difficulties of the outer world – to accomplish tasks of all kinds, to measure one's strength in competition' (1943, p.23).

The difficulty lies in getting the institutional constraints right. An excessively authoritarian mission, even when accepted by the school and its community, can be as damaging to student education as the absence of purpose. Too single-minded a mission will depress individuality and self-expression (for teachers as well as students), even as it allows students to exercise power. Public schools that compel attendance cannot emulate the military or Amish community. We are not preparing students for war or religious



redemption, but for living responsibly in a world where many fellow citizens will disagree with them. Weaker missions, as in democratic schools, also have vulnerabilities. Commitments to fairness, participation, and collective responsibility may be poorly constrained. What happens when a few strong students form a majority and outvote the weaker but perhaps wiser minority? Their penalties may be too severe, attitudes too unforgiving, vision too short-term. Adults then overrule the democratically made judgments and students feel undermined. When rules are few and determined by many through elected procedures, space is created for demagogues. Under both over- or under-constrained missions, a few may have positions of power while the bulk of students are shut out.

To be sure, schools exist that apparently can sustain a productive learning atmosphere without self-consciously creating an explicit legitimizing authority, social solidarity, or student authority. Their mission, like gravity, is ambient. If pressed they might articulate it as the maximization of academic and personal growth, promotion of high expectations, opportunities for inquiry and participation (Louis and Miles, 1990; Newmann, 1996; Mosher, Kenny and Garrod, 1994). Because the individualistic goals are internalized by most, a strong group mission is unnecessary: children meet the tasks presented, that's what one does. The culture is sufficiently assimilated that a relatively relaxed atmosphere is maintained and teachers have few 'discipline' problems. Issues of boredom and passivity may arise, but not significant aggression or power struggles. Though even in such settings one might advocate shared authority, the urgency is

considerably less than in schools where extensive and repressive control is exercised by adults, and students have not accepted the school conventions. In such settings, where buy-in is scant and teachers highly authoritarian, the experiment of distributing authority to students might have the biggest pay-off. Not able to call upon a shared if unvoiced ambient mission, these institutions can still formulate articulated purposes, try to create a community consensus and, as established, gradually pass on increasing responsibilities to students (who have more influence over their peers than most adults).

There are credible fears in giving children power. Beyond the remote likelihood that a corps of petty tyrants will emerge, there is the stronger threat of inadvertently encouraging stable hierarchies of dominant and subject students; the latter then become a disaffected class. Such a threat can be mitigated by rotating roles, yet undoubtedly leaders will arise. Schools cannot prevent the differentiation of students. But this is not to be decried; indeed it affords another venue for students who may not excel elsewhere. The task is to be sure that the structures and processes of selection are perceived (and are) fair so that the capacity for leadership is nurtured. Outlets for authority and power, combined with a school culture perceived as fair and purposeful, will absorb a portion of students' drive for assertiveness and domination: a useful supplement to anti-violence programs that attempt to inhibit such impulses.

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