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*Nurturing that unprejudiced, youthful innocence  
may be the answer to better multicultural relations.*



# School Safety

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## School Safety

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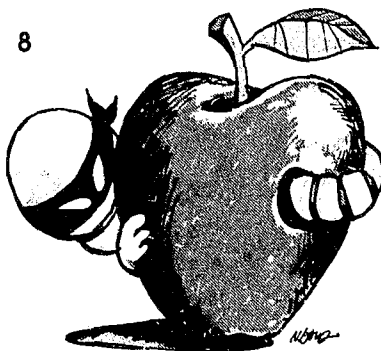
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### About the cover:

Kids playing in sewer pipes may be a sad commentary on available recreation for inner-city (San Francisco) youths, but it also suggests a multicultural camaraderie all too uncharacteristic among older youths and adults. Photograph by Stuart Greenbaum, Copyright © 1978. Hand colored by Hope Harris.

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*Educators are finding unique ways to help disadvantaged children, and strengthen bonds between schools and families — to help prevent "rotten outcomes."*

## Breaking the cycle of disadvantage

Many Americans have soured on "throwing money" at human problems that seem only to get worse. They are not hard-hearted, but don't want to be soft-headed either. Even when their compassion is aroused by moving stories of desperate families or neglected children, they feel helpless and are convinced that nothing can be done. Fear of actually doing harm while trying to do good, together with the threat of unmanageable costs, have paralyzed national policymaking.

It is a strange and tragic paradox that confidence in our collective ability to alter the destinies of vulnerable children has hit bottom just as scientific understanding of the processes of human development and the rich evidence of success in helping such children have reached a new high.

### **Society's stake and society's chance**

High rates of violent juvenile crime, school failure and adolescent childbearing add up to an enormous public burden, as well as widespread private pain. Our common stake in preventing these

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damaging outcomes of adolescence is immense. We all pay to support the unproductive and incarcerate the violent. We are all economically weakened by lost productivity. We all live with fear of crime in our homes and on the streets. We are all diminished when large numbers of parents are incapable of nurturing their dependent young, and when pervasive alienation erodes the national sense of community.

At a 1981 Harvard seminar, Mary Jo Bane of the Kennedy School of Government urged that we pay more attention to American adolescents who are afflicted with what she called "rotten outcomes" — the youngsters who are having children too soon, leaving school illiterate and unemployable, and committing violent crimes.

Because the antecedents of rotten outcomes are numerous and interrelated, not every factor that contributes must be changed before their incidence can be reduced. The correction of a vision problem or a good preschool experience, for example, will improve the prospects of success even for a child growing up in a single-parent home.

We can now identify the risk factors that we know are associated with later damaging outcomes and that we know we can change. And we are able to identify the interventions that can remove some of these risk factors. This new knowledge can become the founda-

tion of new action to radically reduce the occurrence of adverse outcomes.

### **Preventing rotten outcomes**

By the time adolescents actually drop out of school, become pregnant too soon, or are in serious trouble with the law, helping them to change course is a formidable, though not impossible, task. Adolescents in trouble can be effectively helped to make a successful transition to adulthood. Many need skills training coupled with intensive health, mental health and other supportive services, interventions that are scandalously underfunded, even though we now know they are effective. There is no excuse for neglecting these youngsters, even after they have gotten into trouble. But we must recognize that earlier help would have been better help. The more long-standing the neglect, deprivation and failure, the more difficult and costly the remedies.

Help early in the life cycle is likely to be more economical and more effective. Failure and despair don't have as firm a grip early as later. Life trajectories are more easily altered.

Many thoughtful Americans are uneasy about the idea that expanded social programs could lower rates of early childbearing, school failure and juvenile crime, because they see these outcomes as matters of character and values, and childhood as a time when

character and values should be formed within the family.

To view family matters as private matters, on which government and professionals should not trespass, is not unreasonable. If the development of a warm, secure and trusting relationship between young child and adult is the beginning of conscience and character, where, one may ask, does social policy come in?

Perhaps in *The Little House on the Prairie*, in pastoral, rural, long-gone days, children's characters developed independently of influences outside the family. But no longer. Not today, in an age of economic uncertainty, working mothers, shrinking families, protective services and foster care, teen-age unemployment, and ubiquitous street drugs.

In today's world, social policy can significantly strengthen or weaken a family's ability to instill virtue in its children.

The public role in developing children's values and behavior is attracting the attention of an increasing number of conservative thinkers. James Q. Wilson, the Harvard criminologist, once of the opinion that the only public policy that could deter crime was severe punishment, has become convinced that the key to reducing crime is the improvement of character. He now writes that the problems of family disruption, welfare dependency, educational inadequacy and crime in the streets require the federal government to take a role in "strengthening the formation of character among the very young" by supporting programs to better prepare children for school entry and to help parents cope with difficult children.

Liberals and conservatives used to talk about values and character in very different ways. Conservatives would extol their singular importance, and liberals would worry that rhetoric about values and character was being used as a cop-out by those who would not acknowledge the need for government programs. Today people with widely divergent ideologies can meet on the

common ground that the family is central, but, to assure that children grow into sturdy adults, the family needs to be buttressed by social institutions, including churches, schools, community agencies — and government.

All families need help from beyond the family, in the form of health services, social support and education. But for the families whose children are growing up at risk, effective services are even more crucial.

If the superb health, education and social services, now provided to a fraction of those who need them, were more widely available, fewer children would come into adulthood unschooled and unskilled, committing violent crimes, and bearing children as unmarried teen-agers. Fewer of today's vulnerable children would tomorrow swell the welfare rolls and the prisons. Many more would grow into responsible and productive adults, able to form stable families and contributing to, rather than depleting, America's prosperity and sense of community.

Utility and self-interest, as well as humanity, should move us to apply what we have learned to change the futures of the vulnerable children growing up in society's shadows, and thereby to break the cycle of disadvantage.

#### Schools — the balance wheel

*Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the conditions of men — the balance wheel of the social machinery. . . . It does better than to disarm the poor of their hostility toward the rich; it prevents being poor. That political economy, therefore, which busies itself about capital and labor, supply and demand, interests and rents, favorable and unfavorable balances of trade, but leaves out of account the elements of a widespread mental development, is naught but stupendous folly.*

— Horace Mann, *Report to the Massachusetts State Board of Education*, 1848

In times past, the children who had trouble learning because they were hungry, disturbed or distracted by problems at home, and the children who were handicapped by perceptual or cognitive difficulties — would simply give up on school. Others were pushed aside because someone in authority had determined, on the basis of sex, race or family background, that one or another child would not need a serious education. By getting out of the way, as they did in large numbers before World War II, these children helped to make the process of universal public education appear to be working smoothly.

But the mythology of what schools *could* do was very much alive, and it became the reason that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, soon after World War II, picked the schools as the arena in which to open its fight to desegregate America. In 1954, in *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*, a unanimous Supreme Court said that segregated education is inherently unequal. Although that finding hardly created a utopia, it did stimulate dramatic improvements in the education available to many blacks, and the court's decision was and remains an important symbol of American intolerance for the most blatant differences in access to opportunity.

#### The elementary school experience

For an astonishingly high proportion of youngsters in serious trouble as adolescents, the trouble didn't begin when they dropped out or became unruly or withdrawn or stopped learning in high school. Most had had many years of unrewarding and unhappy school experiences before they ever got to high school. Their school difficulties had begun in the elementary grades. School failure and poor reading performance as early as *third grade*, truancy, poor achievement and misbehavior in elementary school, and the failure to master school skills throughout schooling are among the most reliable predictors of early childbearing, delinquency and



dropping out of school.

Elementary school children are quite aware that learning to read, spell, write and do arithmetic is the number one mission assigned them by society. Those that come to see themselves as inferior to their classmates or as unable to meet the challenge of schooling, are likely to become alienated. Failure to master what is taught (whether or not that involves repeating a grade or placement in a special-education class) erodes whatever self-esteem they may have started with.

Such a child, having once concluded he won't make it, may stop trying to learn the things valued by those in charge and behave in ways that will turn low expectations into a self-fulfilling prophecy. It now becomes difficult to persuade him to obey the rules of the school — and of society.

In the absence of intervention, hostility, truancy and misbehavior are likely to become chronic and serious. Soon the child is suspended, loses whatever adult approval and support he had, and concludes that the future holds so little promise there is no sense investing further effort in acquiring academic skills.

Any remaining commitment to learning is likely to be scuttled by the evidence accumulating from outside. As he looks around him, the youngster growing up surrounded by deprivation may find very little to sustain the belief that school learning will be useful.

### Changing the school climate

As early as 1976, an intensive series of case studies of poor black children in Arkansas, Oregon and New Jersey found that academic success and failure could not be accounted for by the attitudes, attributes or behavior of "a particular parent, teacher or child, [or by] a particular social setting," but only by the cumulative effects of their multiple interactions. The researchers concluded that "gains are likely to be largest and to be sustained when there is support in the total ecology of the child."

Remarkably, there was wide agree-

ment on the attributes that various researchers found crucial to making schools effective. The spotlight shifted to the learning environment, the climate in which schoolchildren live, rather than isolated elements of the school or specific learning or teaching techniques. Compared to such controversies as whether reading should be taught by phonics or the look-see method and whether math teaching should emphasize computation or concepts, the issues that emerged were more global and subtle. The Hispanic Policy Development Project reported that "interpersonal harmony" was the most striking characteristic of effective schools. The students reported that "it was the teachers' caring what they did with their lives that was most important," and observers noted that "caring had been institutionalized as a value in the school and not solely an accidental relationship between a teacher and a lucky student."

The "effective schools" researchers have tried to hone their observations to readily identifiable characteristics, of which the following seem to be central:

- An emphasis on academics; classroom management that maximizes academic learning time; routines that discourage disorder and disruptions.
- A safe, orderly, disciplined — but not rigid — school environment.
- A principal who exercises vigorous instructional leadership; makes clear, consistent and fair decisions; has a vision of what a good school is and systematically strives to bring that vision to life; and visibly and actively supports a climate of learning and achievement.
- Teachers with high expectations that all their students can and will learn; collegiality among teachers in support of student achievement.
- Regular and frequent review of student progress; modification of instructional practices in light of information about student progress; public ceremonies honoring student achievement.
- Agreement among principals, teachers, students and parents on the goals,

methods and content of schooling; the belief that each student is capable of making academic progress; and recognition of the importance of a coherent curriculum, of promoting a sense of school tradition and pride, and of protecting school time for learning.

The theme that runs through all these individual attributes, observe historians of education David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, is that principals, students, teachers and parents share a sense of community, a "socially integrating sense of purpose" that allows people to complete a sentence that begins, "What we are proud of around here is . . ." The perception of a common — and special — purpose is also what has made magnet schools so attractive and popular in many communities. Once you have a quality school, observes a New York City school administrator, "If you have kids who've selected your school and their parents selected your school and the teachers selected that school, there's a sense of ownership. And that school's going to do better than a school where you had to go."

The large body of "effective schools" research leaves little doubt that the school environment in its totality has a powerful impact on student outcomes. Increasingly, schools are applying the wealth of new understanding about how children develop and learn and about how teachers, classrooms and schools function. The schools that are using the new knowledge to raise the odds of school success, especially for disadvantaged children, seem also to emphasize the importance of home-school collaboration to encourage children's learning. Extensive experience, as well as some research, shows not only that the school environment is powerfully influenced by what goes on in the students' homes, but also that the school can do much to help parents make the out-of-school influences more supportive of learning.

### A climate of achievement

We had been driving for only about 10

minutes after leaving the Gothic grandeur of Yale University, and had just passed the New Haven city dump, when we suddenly arrived at our destination. The Katharine Brennan Elementary School is located in the Brookside Public Housing Project, amid a scene of desolation in the middle of nowhere. All one could see was an expanse of uniform two-story buildings, surrounded by bare ground. No trees. At least a quarter of the windows were boarded up. Remnants of signs showed where a public library branch had been, where a convenience store had stood — the victim, my guide said, of too little income and too much vandalism. That meant a two-mile trip if you ran out of milk. And the buses stopped running at six in the evening.

Standing in front of the school, I thought: If James Comer managed to make his model intervention work in a school in this setting, there really are ways to uncouple poverty from its consequences for children.

For years I had read and heard about Dr. Comer's proposals to reform schooling for disadvantaged children and about his success in turning around several New Haven elementary schools. I had come, on this rainy December day, to one of the demonstration schools, and to talk with the famed child psychiatrist, educator and philosopher at the Yale Child Study Center.

Walking to the school, I steeled myself. I knew things had changed, but in my mind were vivid images from Dr. Comer's book *School Power*, in which he described the elementary school that he had started with. That school drew on a population very much like this one, the children predominantly black and very poor. About the beginnings of the program in September of 1968, Dr. Comer had written:

*On the first day of school, I walked down the hall and was almost attacked by a teacher in trouble. Yelling "Help me! Help me!" she pulled me into her classroom. What I saw was almost unbelievable. Children were*

*yelling and screaming, milling around, hitting each other, calling each other names, and calling the teacher names. When the teacher called for order, she was ignored. When I called for order, I was ignored. That had never happened to me before. We headed for the hall, confused and in despair.*

That was not the only classroom in trouble. They all were. Dr. Comer's book quotes from the log of a teacher from the Child Study Center, who had come to help out a first-grade teacher during the second week of school:

*There was constant disarray. It flared into wild disorder many times. There was no quietness, very little listening. There was fighting; there was thumb-sucking; there was crying. . . . Every transition, every change during the day, was a disaster. They screamed and yelled and pushed as they lined up at the door to go downstairs. They rushed down the halls, yelling more. It was impossible to get them quiet enough to read a story to them. Even if, by some miracle, everyone was seated, you could not be heard above the din. . . . I cannot describe the physical, mental and emotional exhaustion we reached by the end of the day, with two of us working every minute at the top of our completely inadequate capacity.*

#### **Fashioning new bonds**

The school I entered that morning 17 years later bustled with the energy of children and adults who were actively but serenely engaged with their world of learning and teaching. I visited classrooms where children were busy writing, computing, reading, looking things up, comparing impressions. In one room art objects were being devotedly constructed and in another young voices were harmonizing in exuberant song. I saw a gym where a serious basketball drill was under way and a library shown to me by the proud parent in charge. For all the world I

could not have distinguished the atmosphere at Brennan from the most prestigious and richly endowed schools I had visited in Washington, D.C., in choosing a school for my children.

Dr. Comer told me that the bedlam he had witnessed on that first day of school back in 1968 was not hard to understand. He believes that children from neighborhoods experiencing social stress enter school "underdeveloped" — socially, emotionally, linguistically and cognitively — and are thus unable to meet the academic and behavioral expectations of the school. They withdraw, act up or act out — and don't learn. The school labels them slow learners or behavior problems, when what they need is help with learning that the schools are not set up to provide.

The intervention that has evolved from Dr. Comer's work with the New Haven school system is disarmingly simple: changing the climate of demoralized schools by paying much more attention to child development and to basic management of the school.

No one institution can replace that sense of community coherence, especially not in the midst of today's urban decay. But the schools we have described, and others finding their own unique way to educate disadvantaged children, are fashioning new bonds — between schools and families, between children and their futures — that promise a lifeline even to families that have long lived without hope. In collaboration with families and other community institutions, such schools can play an important part in transmitting, even to children growing up at grave risk, a sense of belonging and of hope. □

*This article is excerpted from Within Our Reach: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage by Lisbeth B. Schorr with Daniel Schorr (New York: Doubleday, 1988). The book is available at bookstores or from Doubleday Reader Services, Dept. Z-27, P.O. Box 5071, Des Plaines, Illinois 60017-5071. (Reprinted by permission, copyright © 1988.)*