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## How to ease alienation - and avert violence

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I've talked in the past about how most children who commit acts of violence are alienated. But it's not just children on the fringe who are alienated. Increasingly, children and adults are alienated from one another, from themselves and from the larger community. Alienation, as I pointed out on The Inquirer's Commentary page last [Monday](#), can cause terrible suffering - and the cure is compassion.

When children are ridiculed, they are made to feel shame and humiliation. As shame increases, some people withdraw. Some explode. (Both types are alienated.)

In a recent discussion I had with middle-school children, about half complained that they had been humiliated by their peers within the past year. But when I asked how many of *them* "put down" other kids, all of them raised their hands.

How can we explain this discrepancy? If they know how painful this is for them, why would they do it to others? After all, these are not mean-spirited kids.

Most adolescents experience some alienation - it's a normal part of development. That's because the process of finding one's own identity usually involves emotionally detaching from family. As a result, they search for other venues to find their sense of belonging. This is why peer groups have such power at this stage. More often than not, when kids "put down" someone else, it is the group doing it to an individual. This allows everyone in the group to feel more identified with one another. They belong.

Peer groups and peer acceptance is probably more important today than ever before. That's because today's family is more fragmented and less available. Many of today's adolescents are being raised by single parents or stepparents or both. Many are being raised in families where both parents are working and have little time or emotional energy for their children. A report out of Washington more than a decade ago said that three out of five families move every five years, a number that has probably increased since then. Those families are doing more with even less support.

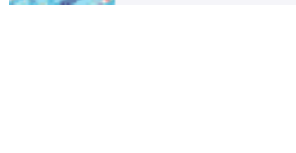
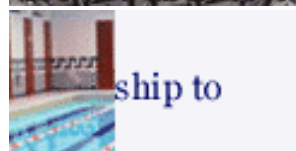
If adolescents are detaching from families that feel solid and reliable, they won't stray too far away from the family values. But if they come from families in which they feel misunderstood and disrespected, or if they feel their family support is unreliable, they will enter adolescence with a more fragile identity. You see, all children - indeed, all people - desperately want to belong to and feel part of some



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children - indeed, all people - desperately want to belong to and feel part of some community. Without a sense of belonging to a community, the alienation and loneliness can be terrible.

Most grown-ups I know are unable to cut their income in half in order to spend more time at home with their kids. So how do we realistically begin to create change? Our politicians are right when they emphasize the importance of schools. But I am concerned that with our educational system becoming so politicized, there will be even more pressure on both students and teachers to perform and produce.

We live in a culture that tends to react rather than reflect. But compassion, understanding and personal growth all require reflection. I fear that with increasing emphasis on "outcome measures," schools will become more efficient and less caring. And if caring is stripped from education, education will suffer. We are learning that lesson from the medical model of managed care.

Still, many things can be done. Peer mediation - demonstrated to be effective in resolving conflicts between students - should be available in all schools. Part of what makes it effective is that the process is empowering to everyone involved. The repeated complaint I hear from adolescents is "nobody listens to me - nobody seems to care about what I say." With peer mediation, not only are both parties listened to, but there also is little of the shame and awkwardness attached to bringing one's problems to an adult.

There are several excellent curricula and models available for teaching tolerance. Among them is "Memories, Voices and Choices" developed by the Gerda and Kurt Klein Foundation. This program teaches not just tolerance of others, but techniques for taking responsibility for alleviating others' suffering. This kind of message should be taught in every school, in every grade, and it should be part of the culture of the school itself. We don't need zero-tolerance programs; we need maximal-tolerance programs! Children need to be able to understand what it is like to live inside another's skin. They also need help giving voice to their own internal experience in an environment that is safe and accepting. Of course, this would be expensive and labor-intensive - but I have an idea:

Have every school in the country work like a co-op. When a parent registers a child in school, public or private, that adult would automatically donate four hours a week to the school. Employers would pay for the missing half-day. So for every class there would be several extra adults available all day, every day. Alienation is a byproduct of isolation. With more adults in the classroom, there would be more people taking an interest in more children. Certainly, there would be increased interest in the students' academic performance. But adults would inevitably take more interest in the students' problems, peers, peer relationships and concerns. They could assist teachers, be monitors, help students who need extra attention, and on and on. They could also help faculty research curricula for teaching tolerance and assist in implementing the program. This would cut down on the school's overall budget, help parents get involved with children, and help children as well as parents develop a sense of community. I envision wonderful relationships being formed between a variety of children and adults. Different "buddies" would likely emerge so that each child could have a grown-up that he or she could confide in.

Over the years, I have met many people who have endured incredible adversity in their childhood. Those who survived and thrived have all reported that what saved their lives was one person who believed in them. If we flood our schools with involved parents, each child will have a better chance of finding that person who believes in them.

If you are a parent, talk to your employer and your school. If you are a school administrator, please invite all parents to spend some regular hours, and hire a volunteer coordinator. If you are a student and feel alienated, please write or e-mail me with some ideas that could be helpful. And if you are a legislator . . . steal this proposal!

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