

The language of violence in our schools
by Lloyd Robertson

As a student teacher I was impressed with the amount class time taken with the subject of discipline. One got the impression that the primary job of the teacher was to keep on top of behaviorally disordered students and that if any real teaching occurred after, well, that was a bonus.

Unfortunately, some classrooms are just like that. I recall my grade 8 year. Like legendary head hunters our class feasted on teachers. We got rid of three before the school board brought in the drill sergeant. No kidding, he had been with the Canadian military before he came to us and some of his methods would have landed him in court today. The tough guys in our class respected him. He talked their language. Me, I preferred the intelligent, sensitive guy who had foolishly thought that nature could best be studied in the bush by our school.

I am not sure what happened to most of these former classmates. One fellow committed suicide after murdering his father. At least two more have been convicted of spousal abuse. The drill sergeant may have been able to keep them in line when he was around but he was unable to change their futures. For that they needed to talk a different language.

Tongue lashings (oral reprimands) are the most common disciplinary tactic of teachers today. This is followed in order of commonality by calling a parent, revoking privileges and suspension. Older students and boys are more likely to be suspended than younger students and girls.

Some people lament the death of corporal punishment. The problem is that this only works if someone bigger is around to administer the punishment. And what happens when the man or woman is on their own and imagines themselves to be the drill sergeant? Such is the logic of the language of violence.

Okay, most of us agree that we do not want drill sergeants in the classroom. But what do we do, throw the intelligent and sensitive teachers to the wolves? Well, that is exactly what school boards do when they tell teachers to change the cycle of violence and then fail to provide adequate support.

Psychologist Bill Jenson has noticed a pattern of escalating behavior he calls "Coercive Pain Control". The adult (teacher or parent) makes a request of the child or student and gets ignored. The request is repeated, often with pleading. The child delays. The adult says, in effect, "you had better...". The child excuses or argues. The adult issues an ultimatum. The child tantrums or turns to aggression. The adult (by this time often the principal or the other parent) talks reasonably, tries to see both sides and, in effect, withdraws the request. The pain stops. Momentarily. If this happens repeatedly at school the child gets suspended and sent home.

At the end of it all both the teacher and the student are convinced that the other is unreasonable. Many parents choose to believe the child's understanding. When this happens the student is doubly rewarded. He gets both a holiday and the opportunity to be indignant at the school who is denying him an education.

The irony is that the student probably acts in similar ways in both home and school situations. There is room for common cause here. That common ground can be found if there are professionals who can work with both the home and the school.

Out-of-school suspensions have become the ultimate consequence for bad behavior in school. They only work if they are a consequence agreed upon by both parents and teachers in advance and if the home has a work plan for the student. In-school suspensions are usually far more effective but take more resources on the part of the school. Full behavior modification programs that are individualized and take into account the student's motivations are more effective yet. But this takes even more expertise. An even more effective program would involve social skill development, effective use of peer pressure, academic self-esteem building, and lifeskills coaching.

If we decide that conduct and behavioral problems in our youth are a priority then adequate resources will be found; but, most importantly, parents and educators will work together.