

## **Kick Em Out or Keep Em In Exclusion or Inclusion**

Jack Pearpoint & Marsha Forest

Youth who exhibit severe aggressive behaviours constitute a formidable challenge to educators in terms of inclusion and maintenance of all students in the mainstream of school and community life. In regard to students who exhibit such behaviors, there are two competing themes in the educational literature: 'kick 'em out or keep 'em in'.

On the 'kick 'em out' side, in Connecticut for example, a 6.9 million dollar institution was recently planned for children who are so 'severely behaviourally disordered' that they need rooms with video surveillance and all sorts of special facilities. When asked who actually would be served by this building, no clear answer was given.

However, on the 'keep 'em in' side, with the recognition and utilization of innovative support options, inclusion is not only possible but highly desirable. In addition, by using millions of dollars to support educational reform rather than build institutions, we believe we can come up with more worthwhile alternatives to the 'kick 'em out' model.

The process toward inclusive education is indeed a process - a journey to create an education system where excellence and equity walk hand in hand and where the highest values of our nations are respected, honoured and achieved. The purpose of this chapter is to help make inclusive education a viable option for students who have or could potentially exhibit severe aggressive behaviours. We will do this by presenting emerging possible solutions that have been successfully used in keeping or returning such students to the educational and community mainstream.

### **THE PROBLEM**

In a perfect world, all children would grow up in a nurturing environment, in strong families (which could be variable in design), and thus feel secure, loved, and confident about their future. They would have hope, dignity, self esteem. They would have friends. They would interact with and for people because it was right - not out of greed or selfishness. They would have learned how to learn, to accept challenges, and to push themselves to their own limits -- whatever they might be.

However, the future is not so rosy for an enormous number of children -- many children are experiencing little other than frustration and failure within our educational and social system, others have all ready fallen through the cracks. Many have already learned to be 'incurable'.

Increases in teenage suicide are a barometer of how many youth view the future -- they don't see one. They are imploding with despair at the very time when they should be vibrant about their lives.

In a society rampant with cynicism and defeatism, it is hard to face reality optimistically. But that is exactly what we must do. We must immerse ourselves in life -- with real people. It is hard, but it is healthier than the latest food/clothing or technology fad. It is real. And it is economically sound. There are massive numbers of students having school problems who are screaming at us with their behaviours. They are telling us that school is irrelevant, boring, dull, not meeting their needs, and driving them crazy. These students drop out, form gangs, and get in trouble and we continue to blame the victims rather than looking deep at ourselves and our school system for creative answers and alternatives.

## **STUDENTS AS SOLUTIONS**

The following two case studies illustrate how students can serve as both valuable and very effective resources in helping classmates who exhibit challenging aggressive behaviour.

### **Jane's Story**

Jane, a generally well behaved 12-year-old started doing strange things at school. The principal, teacher and resource person agreed to call in the 'behaviour' specialists to design a 'compliance training' program.

For a short while Jane stopped being a nuisance and life went on until Jane suddenly attacked a schoolmate on the school yard, knocked the girl to the ground touching her breasts and genital area. She had to be physically pulled away.

The 'attack' frightened the other child involved but did not seriously injure her.

The principal immediately phoned both sets of parents and to his surprise, the mother of the 'attacked' student did not get hysterical as soon as she realized her daughter was not hurt.

Jane's entire family was called in for a serious talk with the principal.

Enlist Student Help The following is the process used to involve Jane's classmates in helping Jane to be more accepted and welcomed by her school peers and concurrently eliminate her undesirable aggressive behaviours.

Rule #1 Go to the students. Be honest with them.

'Hi, I'm Marsha and I just heard about what happened in the yard between Jane and Melissa. I think it's important that we talk about this frankly and confidentially.' I asked them what confidentiality meant. They understood. A pin could have dropped in the room.

Rule #2 Talk to students as If you were talking to your own friends. Don't lecture Make the discussion a conversation.

Teachers know how to teach, but many have forgotten how to talk to children or young adults as people. Children hate it when you water-down Important issues or skirt around the truth. Be direct.

Rule #3 Ask questions. Ask opinions, such as WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Simply ask, 'What do you think is happening to Jane? What's your view of the Incident? Tell us your opinion.'

A torrent of pent up thoughts gushed forth and the adults later said that they were amazed at the seriousness, thoughtfulness, sincerity and depth of the children's answers.

The students basically said they felt Jane was totally isolated at school, had no friends and was miserable and unhappy. Jane's parents, they added, treat her like a baby and won't let her go out of the house. She's a real pest at school, bothers everyone and is getting more and more out of hand. The following is an actual list of what the students in Grade 8 said about Jane:

- \* lonely
- \* depressed
- \* empty
- \* like an outcast
- \* bored
- \* horrible
- \* upset
- \* like in jail
- \* like committing suicide
- \* dead

Rule —4 Ask students to *halo*. Value their opinions. Make them part of a team *with the teachers to solve real problems.*

We've always been suspect of simulations. There are enough real-life issues and problems to deal with. We don't need to role-play and make up games. This was real. The children were involved and captured by the reality of helping a flesh and blood life person solve a genuinely serious problem.

Rule —6 Stop talking about the 'problem' person and turn the conversation around to each students' own life

When the conversation about Jane got quite heated, Marsha asked everyone to forget Jane for a moment, and think of their own lives. She did this by having each student construct their own illustration of their circles of friends. Marsha gave each student a sheet of paper

and asked them to draw four concentric circles from a small one in the centre of the page with each of the others progressively larger around the smaller ones. She told them that the four circles should be large enough to cover the entire page. She then said:

A. In circle #1 the smallest and closest to the centre put the names of people who are the closest to you in your own life - the people you love most.

(When everyone was finished Marsha asked for responses. 'Why did you put those people in circle one? What do you do with the people in circle one? How do you feel about the people in circle one? How do those people feel about you?')

B. Circle #2 is exactly the same except the people aren't quite as close as circle #1. Follow the same procedure.

C. Circle #3 are groups of people in your life -- sports groups, teams, Boy/Girl Scouts, church groups, etc.

D. Circle #4 are people paid to be in your life ie.. teachers, doctors, hairdressers, and the like.

(Throughout the procedures students were requested to share and discuss their insights).

E. The students were then asked to switch gears for a moment and think about how they would feel if they had just a few or no people in their circles. (A circle illustration of a person whose life included a few friends was shown to the students.)

F. How would you feel if your life looked like this?

G. How do you think you'd ACT if your life looked like this drawing? Here is a list of actual student responses:

- \* silly
- \* I'd lie
- \* act mean
- \* do bad things
- \* act stupid
- \* I'd commit suicide
- \* I'd be scared to death
- \* I'd think I had to go to an institution
- \* I'd annoy people
- \* I'd hurt people

When we have done this with children and adults, without exception they connect the 'behaviours' to a person's attempt to send messages. In this case, everyone realized that Jane was behaving a certain way because she was sending a message to us. It's our

job to figure out the message, respond positively, and thus change the destructive behaviour.

The circle process can't be done by lecturing. People have to experientially relate Jane's suffering to their own lives and see that how people behave has something to do with the environment they are in. We can't simply 'fix' the person without looking at the person's whole life.

The Grade 8 students immediately saw that Jane was acting in almost the same ways that they had described in their lists. What particularly scared them was the part about suicide. The final question involves ACTION...

H. What can WE do to get Jane back on track? Again, a flood of response:

- \* tell her right away that we're her friends
- \* tell her we like her
- \* invite her to our parties
- \* go shopping with her
- \* phone her
- \* visit her at home
- \* make sure she's not alone

An interesting event happened during this discussion. The principal of the school got so excited about the process that he went to his office and cancelled recess that morning so the discussion could continue and he could participate.

To make a long story short, the students did what they said they'd do, and Jane's behaviour has changed remarkably.

Rule #6 There has to be a strong adult in the environment to facilitate and assist the circle to grow and stay together

Jane must also be present at all (or most) meetings. The group should name itself, but not use the name of the person.

The special education teacher took on the task of nurturing what Marsha had started. A group of 17 students from the class decided to name themselves the S.W.A.T. Team (Students Who Are Together).

### Follow Up

Marsha returned to the class two months later to follow up the situation and find out in their words what was happening. The following is a summary of the discussion:

'Our S.W.A.T. team has a weekly meeting with Mrs. Gill (the resource teacher). Jane comes to every meeting. At the first meeting we told Jane we wanted to help and be her friends. We told her that no matter what she did,

we'd be there for her. We apologized for not being around enough before. Sarah invited her to a party and Sue went to visit her at home. Danny, Rose and Linda call her a lot. Jane's happy now cause she's got the S.W.A.T. team and because she has friends. Were all making new friends too. Jane's whole attitude has changed and she hasn't hit or attacked anyone since we talked to her.'

### Educator Response

The teachers reported that they are amazed at the change in Jane and that she is:

- \* more included in everything the other kids do
- \* knows everyone in the class now
- \* is generally happier
- \* is much friendlier and
- \* hasn't been in the principals office in two months

### Students' Response

I asked the S.W.A.T. team to write a few notes about their experience with Jane. Here's what they had to say:

#### A Poem About Jane

*Jane came three years ago  
No one did she really know  
We tried to teach her wrong from right  
Tried to make her days sunny and bright  
Still she walked around so sad  
And we knew that we had  
To make her feel like one of us  
And over her wed all fuss  
Now Jane has many good friends  
And I hope `our' friendship never ends.*

(Tammi Washnuk)

`Jane has changed since her first meeting with the S.W.A.T. team. These past couple of weeks she's really opened up. She now feels she belongs, and she knows *WE ARE* her friends. She hasn't been acting up or annoying us like she used to. Instead she's been very friendly. She used to ignore us, now she's cheery and always talks to us.

She was just recently invited to her first party with boys. She really enjoyed it. I think Jane has really changed. She used to be so quiet and always kept to herself. Now

she is more outgoing and talkative. Like any teenager Jane needs friends and a social life.'

(Melanie McDermott)

'Before S.W.A.T. I found Jane moody, babyish, she swore, she spat and once in awhile she would pee in her pants. When S.W.A.T. started helping, Jane was overjoyed.

Jane would always say she didn't care about anyone or about school. About 4 days after saying how she didn't care about school she got suspended because she touched a kid in the private spot.

Because of S.W.A.T. she is really changing now. I called her at home and she talked to me for ten minutes on the phone. Jane is trying to act like us! She's becoming LIKE us'

(Krystyne Banakiewicsw)

'When Jane first came to this school I could tell she was nervous so I became her friend. As time went on, Jane started following me everywhere I went and she wouldn't even let me talk to my friends in private.

Finally a group in my class formed the S.W.A.T. team. Jane began to change. She stopped swearing and doesn't follow me everywhere I go. She's more open to everyone. I think the S.W.A.T. team really has improved Jane's behaviour and attitude toward other people.'

(Nicole Salmon)

### **Jeff's Story**

Jeff is another student at Regina Mundi school. He too was described as a major behaviour problem. His teacher was concerned that Jeff would be in big trouble in high school.

After hearing what had happened with Jane, Jeff's teacher wanted to give it a try for Jeff. But everyone was concerned that the Grade 7's were not as good a group as the Grade 8's and wondered if they would they respond in a similar fashion. (Jeff's story, while described more concisely here, operated on the same rules described in Jane's story.)

If anything, the Grade 7's surpassed their classmates in Grade 8 and surprised everyone by their sensitivity to Jeff. The following is the student oriented intervention sequence that occurred for Jeff.

A. 'What are some words to describe Jeff?' They said:

\* he fights all the time

\* pushes

- \* acts rough
- \* picks on the little kids
- \* hides
- \* swears a lot
- \* doesn't talk
- \* bothers the girls
- \* is lonely
- \* makes rude noises when he eats
- \* takes things and doesn't give them back

B. `Can you think of anything good about Jeff?' They said:

- \* he says hello to some people,
- \* finishes his work,
- \* offers to help some people,
- \* listens,
- \* participates well in gym
- \* tries hard.

(It's interesting to compare the Grade 7 responses with the Grade 8 group.)

C. `How would you feel if you had no one or few people in your life?' They said:

- \* suicidal
- \* depressed
- \* lonely
- \* sad
- \* I wouldn't care about anything or anyone
- \* down In the dumps
- \* weird
- \* nobody loves me

D. `What would you do and how would you act if your life had no or few friends?' They said:

- \* quiet
- \* aggressive
- \* rude
- \* mean
- \* disruptive
- \* lost
- \* unable to concentrate

- \* fail
- \* immature
- \* centred out
- \* try to get attention
- \* lying
- \* making up stories
- \* steal
- \* bored
- \* crying for help
- \* lonely
- \* want attention
- \* want to be alone
- \* need someone to talk to

With the help of the teachers, the class drew a picture of what Jeff's life actually looks like:

Circle #1: Jeff is very close to his older brother.

Circle #2: Jeff likes Mrs. Gill and another teacher.

Circle #3: He's not involved, in any after-school activities.

Circle #4: teachers, doctors

The students were shocked and surprised at the drawings of Jeff's life. It had few, if any, friends.

E`How do you think Jeff feels about his life?' They answered:

- \* depressed
- \* lonely
- \* sad
- \* angry
- \* upset
- \* down in the dumps
- \* weird

They all agreed Jeff needed friends who could understand his isolation and anger. Almost the whole class volunteered to get involved.

### **Conclusions: Student Solutions**

Jane and Jeff aren't real names, but they are real children. These stories can be replicated for any child at risk of being left out or kicked out at any age. There are no children anywhere, be it in Toronto, Los Angeles, or a small rural town In Iowa, who do not

respond to honesty, openness and truth.

Children, and especially teenagers, know the pressures of life these days. They relate to suicide, death, war, disease. They don't want to run away from these problems. They want and need to face them head on. They need teachers to help them face life, not run from it.

It is the adults who are frightened to confront the pain of growing up and growing older. We are creating new labels to mask our Ignorance and our fear. Diseases are born: L.D. (learning disabilities), B.D. (behaviour disorders), A.D.D. (attention deficit disorders), M.B.D. (minimal brain damage). Living, however, is not a disease to be cured by the medical profession.

What we suggest costs little and is based on common sense and human kindness.

LET'S TALK TO OUR CHILDREN AND TO EACH OTHER. LET'S LISTEN TO THE JOY, SORROW, AND PAIN OF OUR NEIGHBOURS. LET'S NOT PRETEND WE LIVE IN A POLLYANNA WORLD.

Jane and Jeff could have ended up in jail, group homes or on the street. Instead they are going to parties, going to the mall, and heading for a decent future.

The above is practical. It is not magic. It is not an answer, it Is a process, a journey. What do we need to make more Jane and Jeff stories:

*time-*  
*time to listen*  
*time to dream*  
*time to hear*  
*time to cry and laugh*  
*time to work*  
*time to act and*  
*time to listen again and again and again*

## **COMMUNITY MEMBERS AS SOLUTIONS**

The following is one case study of how a community member who experienced exclusion for his undesirable behaviour used his experiences to assist youth considered to have severe behaviour problems to learn to function and succeed In the educational and community mainstream. There are a number of such cases that can be cited but only one is included here to illustrate that community members, including those many people considered to be a problem, can provide solutions If given the opportunity and support.

## Charlie's Story

Some years ago, Frontier College in Toronto, began a small program -- originally to respond to our expectations about the 'literacy' needs of prisoners in Canadian jails. We learned a great deal by listening. First, we had to learn how to listen; not just to the words, but to the meaning. And when we listened we discovered that reading & writing' wasn't uppermost in prisoners' minds. They wanted to get out of jail. They wanted a job. We adapted and decided to help people get a job when they were released.

We knew most inmates didn't have enormous 'job skills', that tests wouldn't tell us much about what people could or would do, and that we would simply lose credibility by resorting to them. We devised a very simple 'test'. Over coffee, we asked people 'What do you like? What do you want to do?'

We made all kinds of excellent guesses about what people wanted and needed. Usually we were wrong. But we listened, and because we actually tried to find jobs that people said they wanted, our small program worked remarkably well.

Then along came Charlie.

Charlie Tann had been in prison for 27 years. He was 'released' to see us largely because he was dying of cirrhosis. He had been given three months to live, and it was going to be more convenient to have him die 'on the outside'. We were a bit traumatized by Charlie, but didn't know what else to do, so we asked, 'What would you like to do?'

Charlie replied, 'I'd like to work with kids'

When we regained consciousness, Charlie made his case. He had been in front of juries before and we were just another jury. He argued that he had completely wasted his life, had been addicted to every drug, messed up in every conceivable way, and that was exactly what he had to offer. He argued that none of us could really communicate with kids who were already on the skids, but that he could. He could tell them that he was just like them and that if they weren't smarter, they would end up just like him - dying - after having spent most of his life in jail, for nothing. Charlie argued that he could do something we couldn't, and that he deserved the chance. He said he wanted to do something decent in his life, and he didn't have long to do it.

Charlie was convincing. He sold us. Then the nightmare began. We talked to school board people. That was a bust. No responsible official would be caught dead allowing a life long criminal like Charlie near children. We retreated to the prison system. There was a 'lockup' where young offenders were stored -- after everyone had given up. We talked to them and reluctantly they agreed. They had young offenders who had frustrated their best efforts again and again. Fundamentally it was a waiting game -- waiting for death by suicide, overdose or murder. Those were the choices. No one had

anything to lose. Charlie got access to some kids.

Charlie's `technique' was extraordinary. He went into the lockup, picked the toughest kid, and appointed himself his/her friend for life. It was remarkable. He would walk In, sit down and say, `Angie, I'm your friend'. That was it. That was Charlie's technique. He would tell them, `I am self-appointed. I have decided that I am your friend. There is nothing you can do about it. There is nothing you can do to offend me, because I have done worse. And I will find you -- and I will be your friend. You are stuck with me.' This message of unconditional love coming from a hardened life long criminal was staggering to kids. They didn't know how to deal with it. Each, in their own way, tested Charlie. They ran, did drugs, stole his money and clothes. Charlie always found them and offered more. Mostly he gave the only real thing he had to give -- himself -- a commodity that was in very short supply.

Not all of Charlie's kids survived, but Angie and Kelly made it.

I found out about Angie by accident. I was at a HELP staff meeting (HELP is a Frontier College program that employs approximately 37 ex-offenders to find jobs for ex-offenders). A young woman came up to me and asked, `Remember me?'

I drew a blank. She said, `I'm Angie...Charlie's Angie'

She was on our staff, and I didn't even know. Since then, she has become a loving mother and a part-time graphic artist.

But at that moment my world closed in. You see, Charlie had died -- four years after all the doctors said he couldn't live another day. Charlie drove himself beyond bodily limits - because he had to live to save more kids. And he did. Angie was the first of Charlie's kids. She was one of the toughest women offenders in Canadian prison history and today she is Angie...

And there isn't just one Angie. There were hundreds. Charlie even married one of his `stray kids'. I got a call the other day. She just graduated from University at the top of her class. Her professor called as well. He had never had a student like Kelly. He didn't know why. I did. Kelly was one of Charlie's successes.

The problem Charlie, a rejected community member, became part of the solution; a number of `incurable' teens through his help and others like him were able to turn students from undesirable behaviours toward more acceptable positive behaviours through acceptance, friendship, inclusion, and success in the mainstream of educational and community life.

However, Charlie couldn't have used a wasted life to salvage doomed youth if some `straight' people hadn't been willing to trust and work with him. This isn't a traditional partnership. It isn't based on a negotiated contract. But if anything, the bonds are more

powerful and the implications more dramatic.

Conclusion: Community Members

It is easy to think that Charlie was wonderful, but what does Charlie have to do with oil spills in Valdes, the school crisis, etc.

Our point is that there are Charlie's everywhere. Hopefully most won't have to waste 27 years in jail before someone connects with them. But in your family, your classrooms, across your fence or street, at work, school and in your church or synagogue, there are people who you can partner with.

As long as we push people out -- reject them -- devastation and despair will continue. People will grow more angry, more frustrated. Violence will erupt -- anarchy will reign.

We don't have to let that happen. We can begin now -- at home, with our families, our friends, our classrooms, our communities.

The accumulated anger and frustration of decades of systematic failure and rejection will not disappear overnight. There are no 'microwave' solutions to long term problems.

Charlie Tann couldn't possibly have helped kids. Think about It. He was an uneducated life-long criminal.

But Charlie did save lives. He and others like him are among our best teachers.

## **SUMMARY**

Students who display severe behaviour difficulties, like all children, can and should be included in the mainstream of our schools and communities. The key to making it possible is relationships. It should be no great mystery that if we can't lean over the back fence and talk to our neighbours as people, similar trends ooze into boardrooms, international negotiations and prison ranges. There is a common factor -- people relating.

A fundamental element of relationships is that everyone has a role to play. Not everyone can or should be the same. And as we all know, someone with a Ph.D. in theoretical physics may not be a master at human relations or be able to repair the lawn mower, while a 'mere untrained farm hand' could talk his way through a country auction and be 'Mr. Fix-it'. The point is that we all have strengths -- and often the people we identify as 'the problem' are a key to the solution.

Together, in new and genuine partnerships, it can be done -- the impossible just takes a little longer. If we invite the people who are our charges and/or are 'labeled as problems' to join with us, the talent, commitment, creativity and resources are there.

It is a matter of will.