

Hidden Dangers within Our Schools: What Are These Safety Problems and How Can We Fix Them?

by Betsy Gunzelmann

Safety in the schools involves much more than metal detectors and disaster plans. Although such catastrophe preparation is necessary, we often overlook less obvious beliefs and practices that put children's everyday safety at risk. According to the well-known pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton and the child psychiatrist Stanley Greenspan (2000), all children require physical protection, safety, and regulation in order to grow, learn, and flourish. Obvious safety issues are clear-cut and usually well addressed in our schools. However, there are less obvious, *hidden* dangers in our schools that impact the social, cognitive, and emotional well-being of our students.

These hidden dangers are not always directly observable, and therefore they are difficult to identify. However, I believe these hazards are contributing to an unprecedented crisis in our schools. We are seeing more violence than ever before; more diagnoses of learning, behavioral, and emotional problems; and more students unable to attain basic skills in rudimentary subjects necessary to succeed in our technologically advanced society. The key to identifying these concealed problems is in understanding school climate.

School climate is not a new concept. Originally, climate and environmental studies fell under the parameters of industrial and organizational psychology. However, over the past several decades, as more and more difficulties have required handling in the school setting, educational psychologists have become increasingly concerned with issues of climate. Peterson and Skiba (2001) view school climate as a reflection of positive and negative feelings regarding school environments, which may directly or indirectly affect a variety of learning outcomes. I define school climate as a unique combination of intellectual, behavioral, social, ethical, and

physical characteristics within a setting. They not only affect learning outcomes, but also impact the essential safety needs of our children.

The climate of a school is easy enough to define, but it is a difficult and elusive phenomenon to identify. In order to recognize problems within a school's climate, I look for "red flags" that can help to discover problems early in order to make needed changes. These flags include typical students who are nonetheless not thriving in school. Such children are like the canaries in the coal mines: they react more quickly to toxic (or unsafe) conditions within the school.

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The cases of Mark, Sally, Carol, and Luke are composite sketches of children I have known and interviewed over the years in my work as a psychologist and teacher. (Nicole Sanborn, a Psi Chi member and student research assistant during her undergraduate years at Southern New Hampshire University, helped to collect the data.) Case study names and identifying information have been changed to protect confidentiality. These children are "typical kids," who, I firmly believe, represent only the tip of the iceberg of the issues involved in schools with hidden dangers.

Mark

Mark is a ten-year-old child from a two-parent professional family. He is active and engaged with learning in the classroom. He enjoys several easygoing friendships with his classmates at school and within his neighborhood. His interests include current events, computers, cars, and sports. He finishes his homework without too much struggle, but certainly it is not his priority.

The Problems. Mark sounds like a typical preadolescent child with strengths and talents in many areas. However, just a year ago his story would have been written very differently. Mark had developed a reputation for hyperactivity and attention problems. Although this diagnosis was ruled out by his pediatrician and a psychologist, the label stuck within his school.

Unfortunately, labeling a child this way is not an unusual scenario. Many children are viewed as deficient or different because they learn differently, are not learning up to expectations, or are not behaving like most other children. Sometimes an accurate diagnosis is helpful, but a misdiagnosis can be harmful. The mislabeling and misperception may not be intentional, but it is frequently routine when a child exhibits some characteristic "symptoms" of a disorder. Nevertheless, the *misunderstanding* and *overuse* of diagnoses can occur at tremendous cost to the child. The school's motives are almost always well intended: school

personnel do not want to overlook a treatable problem. However, are we in turn overlooking other possible causes of school difficulties by simply labeling (i.e., putting the blame on) the child and undermining the child's security and sense of self, when changes within the school may be all that are necessary?

Additional Red Flags. Mark's case raises another alarming issue within many schools. Many more boys than girls experience difficulty in the classroom, particularly in the early grades. It appears that the emotional climate of most elementary classrooms favors the skills and traits of girls over boys (Connell and Gunzelmann 2004). Indeed, our boys are falling behind girls academically, a gap that begins in the early grades and continues into the college years, putting boys at risk emotionally as well as academically. Typical classrooms require students to sit still, speak fluently, color neatly, work cooperatively, and be neat and organized—tasks that many associate with female behavior. Many normal and healthy boys find such activities taxing.

To complicate matters more for boys in the classroom, there is a phenomenon that Dr. William Pollack describes as “The Boy Code”—an unwritten list of societal expectations of how boys should act. This unspoken code is reinforced everywhere—by parents, teachers, coaches, peers, and the media. Unfortunately, the code gets boys into difficulty in the classroom. In schools boys are less likely to speak up when they are having difficulty or when frustrated. Instead they act tough and hide their feelings. Over time the damage done to boys' self-esteem can be devastating. Many psychologists are seeing increased numbers of boys with lowered self-esteem, depression, and anxiety issues at young ages.

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A Change in School Climate. Mark needed a change in school climate. Such a change can be accomplished by helping teachers and administrators see that they must challenge many basic educational beliefs. Sometimes just changing schools is the easiest route for the student and parents to find a quick fix. Mark was transferred to a small private school that encourages lively interaction and discovery in the classroom. It was a great change indeed for Mark, but what about the others left behind in similar situations?

Sally

Lack of Constancy. Sally's case helps to illuminate safety problems that can be identified early when educators examine symptoms of children experiencing school-related anxiety. Sally's parents observed that she was anxious (not feeling safe) in school. She got off to a difficult start

in first grade when her teacher went on maternity leave and there were several temporary substitutes for the remainder of the school year. We know that continuity is important, particularly to young children (Brazelton and Greenspan 2000). Was this lack of stability in school causing some of Sally's anxiety?

Out-of-Control Classroom. By second grade, Sally reported finding it difficult to focus on her own work; she was worrying what might happen next. There were twenty-eight children in her class, two with severe behavior problems. At times these children threw chairs and other objects, or even hit other students. Naturally, the problems required considerable extra time from the teacher, who was not trained to handle behavioral problems of this magnitude. Sally often sat under her desk when things got out of control.

Overscheduling. By third grade Sally exhibited other concerns consistent with a high stress level. The classroom was always noisy and chaotic with students working in small groups. Could high levels of stress hormones in Sally's system have put her at possible risk for physical and emotional difficulties? Additionally, she was overscheduled with after-school programs including drama, soccer, and music lessons. (Her school actually required that she participate in after-school activities and marked her report cards accordingly! Readers may want to refer to *The Hurried Child*, by Dr. David Elkind [1988].) There was very little time to talk with her teachers, parents, or friends.



Sally reported not feeling safe or well cared for in this setting. She was stressed to her limit at school, but not at home or elsewhere. Her grades were dropping, as was her self-esteem and motivation. Sally was exhibiting symptoms because she was a bit more aware that things were not quite right in her school setting. (Instead of labeling Sally, we could say that she was demonstrating an adaptive response in order to cope in a setting that did not meet her needs.) We could and should have been looking at the problems in the school climate that were definitely affecting her learning—and were probably affecting her fellow students too.

Climate Change. Sally's parents observed the classroom on several occasions and knew their daughter well. In hopes that she would experience a better "fit," they decided to change her school. Since switching schools Sally has done very well. She enjoys school, feels safe, and is succeeding academically. There has been no question of anxiety disorder, attention deficit, or learning problems.

The smaller number of children in the classroom helps, but that is not the only factor. Sally and her parents describe the new school as more flexible: problems are dealt with immediately, with time taken to teach the children to respect one another.

Carol

The case of Carol illustrates different potential climate and safety problems. Carol is the only child of an intact professional family. During third grade her problems with allergies became chronic, and she was frequently sick with secondary infections. High levels of allergy medication caused her to feel tired and unmotivated. The side effects of the medication and numerous absences from school interfered with her academic progress.

Air Quality Concerns. After consulting medical doctors, Carol's parents requested testing the school building for air quality: specifically, for mold, which is not routinely tested. The results came back positive for significantly high levels of mold contamination. School administrators had wanted to "code" the child with the problem, when in reality it was the building that was unhealthy and unsafe for all its inhabitants! Carol just experienced symptoms faster and more severely than others.

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Carol eventually had to change schools because, in addition to her secondary infections, she had developed multiple antibiotic allergies. Carol is thriving in her new school and has suffered only one infection in the past three years. Her case represents one example of the serious

health and safety issues that clearly impact the long-term well-being and academic success of all children.

Other Environmental and Academic Issues. The condition of a school building is often overlooked as a safety issue, but it is a very real concern that affects the learning and health of all children for good or ill. Carol's issues were specific and could be documented clearly. But we need to question the healthfulness and safety of our schools in other areas as well—areas that may not be easy to measure except with longitudinal studies. Certainly the food our children eat is both a health and a safety concern, but the effects of poor eating habits may not show up for years as increased obesity and poor health in general take their toll.

We also must consider the curricula our children are required to study. Even here we may be adding to issues of anxiety, depression, and even violence. We all know that children are very impressionable. We also know that it is more difficult to keep children interested in the classroom today than it was thirty or forty years ago. Today's children are accustomed to technology with all the special effects; they can easily become bored with the curriculum. In an attempt to make the classroom an interesting place, many teachers are resorting to sensation-seeking materials that may be contributing to children's problems. I'm referring to curricula that include the darker side of children's literature, where violence and suicide are not uncommon themes; science lectures that focus more on the "guts and gore" than on understanding the process; and even history lessons that use the Hollywood version of war, all in an attempt to entertain the children. Unfortunately, they are learning lessons teachers never meant to teach, and as a result our children are at greater risk emotionally.

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The classic research of Albert Bandura (1965) and numerous other social cognitive theorists explains many of my concerns here. Both humans and animals are capable of vicarious learning or learning by observing others. The models presented in some children's literature, movies, and other media are not necessarily the ones we want our children modeling. Of course, not all children will adopt such undesirable behaviors; however, under certain circumstances, and with reinforcing consequences, many children will perform such undesirable behaviors. Even more disturbing, all children exposed to such models learn the behavior, whether they act upon it or not. I believe we have a responsibility to make sure our children are exposed to healthy models whenever possible and to *take the time* to help children process and fully

understand the harmful models they inevitably come across in the news and their everyday life.

Luke

Cliques. Luke is an adolescent who complained that school was interfering with his learning and development. Socially he did not fit in the “cool” cliques, and at times he was bullied by some of the other students because he was something of a loner. Students often made fun of him because he was not one of the more popular kids. He had two friends, but for the most part he sat by himself during lunch. Luke did not know how to handle this problem and felt little support from the school.

Although school personnel tried to help him with his “problem,” in some ways the faculty and staff were a part of the problem. Some believed he just needed to “toughen up,” while others tried to overprotect him. Both approaches left Luke feeling inadequate and unsafe in his academic environment and reinforced the macho code. It’s not that the school was not trying; it’s just that the anti-bullying policy was ineffective. All involved felt helpless, an attitude that breeds pessimism.

Unreasonable Academic Pressures. Luke is also conscientious about his schoolwork; some might say he is overly anxious (another label!). Luke speaks of feeling pressured about grades. He studies at home, yet does not do as well as he wants on tests. Certainly some of these pressures come from within Luke himself, yet he has learned such expectations from home, school, and society. Grades and test scores have become much too important to this young man. Intellectually he knows that test scores measure only a behavior at a specific point (and often don’t do that very well), and that performance over time is much more reflective of his abilities. Still he was unable to feel safe (confident) enough in school to demonstrate his best work.

Pessimistic Proliferation. Are many schools becoming breeding grounds for pessimism due to the focus on high-stakes testing? As most educators and psychologists are aware, many tests are designed so that half of all students will fail. Teachers are teaching to the tests in hopes that their students will beat the odds and fall in the upper 50th percentile, yet seldom will more than half of them reach that plateau. This approach breeds frustration, pessimism, and hopelessness—the very opposite of what schools need to be teaching. Schools need to teach students that hard work can pay off, that they can take control of their learning, that they can learn to overcome obstacles. (The work of Martin Seligman [1996] shows us that we can teach people to be more optimistic and children to be more resilient.)

Help for Luke. Luke exhibited a pessimistic outlook: nothing he tried helped, and he felt resigned to a future of feeling ostracized and

victimized by his peers. He was angry, frustrated, and depressed. After seeking professional assistance, Luke's parents chose a school for their son that focused strongly on the positive (although not in a Pollyanna-style manner). In a different school climate, Luke has been able to get back on track, feel safe and more optimistic, and become a valued member of his school community. He was fortunate his parents listened and took his concerns seriously, very possibly preventing more acute problems from developing.

Resistance to Change

Ideally, it is best to address problems in a school's climate so that all children can thrive. Positive changes in school climate will benefit all students, making school a safer and more productive place for all. Why then are we so resistant to considering the possibility that the child might not be to blame? It is unfortunate that some of these students had to be uprooted from their friends and neighborhood schools in order to have basic needs met. However, in some cases that was probably the best alternative because of a highly resistant school climate. All the parents involved believed that good people were trying to help their children at their first schools, but they were limited in what they could accomplish because of the climate at each school. Many critics would say that such students and parents are seeing only the negative issues in the schools, that they don't understand the complexities of the schools, and that they are not objective because the problems involve their children. Indeed, those are good points, but not always accurate; such positions may reflect a defensive pattern of denial that prevents professionals from seeing the real problems.

Resistance to change is natural; it is a part of human nature. It is difficult to acknowledge that our beliefs, our policies, and the approaches we've been educated and trained to use might not always be the best approaches. However, I believe that most of us in the fields of education and psychology want to help the children with whom we work. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that we be open-minded to the possibility of questioning our policies and practices. We need to keep abreast of the current research in our fields, consult with professionals outside our fields, and acknowledge our limitations. We need to look at all possible contributing factors to the problems we see affecting our children in the schools. We may need to make changes within our schools.

Safe and Healthy School Climates

In order to fully comprehend safety concerns within a school's climate, obtaining all sides of the story is essential. Over the years, I have talked with teachers, doctors, administrators, school psychologists,

school counselors, community members, and, of course, many parents and their children. I also have extensively reviewed the literature on issues related to school safety and climate. I wanted to know what characteristics are considered important for a healthy, safe school climate.

The answers are informative and go even deeper than the issues described in the cases of Mark, Sally, Carol, and Luke; they coincide with those of leading researchers and clinicians in the fields of psychology, education, and medicine and seem to get to the heart of safe and healthy school climates. It appears that the following characteristics are needed to ensure a safe and healthy school climate:

Essentials of a Safe, Healthy School Climate

1. *A strong, concerned administration with an open-door policy is in place.*
2. *The mission of the school clearly reflects practices in the school.*
3. *The children want to go to school.* They experience a sense of *belonging* and *achievement*.
4. *Violence and bullies are not tolerated.* Effective interventions are developed and implemented. Children with severe behavioral disorders are cared for appropriately, by trained faculty, so that no harm comes to any child, either physically or emotionally.
5. *Strong optimism is present in the school.* Children look forward to the future; they develop positive self-concepts and feel a sense of mastery, control, and therefore safety within their learning environment.
6. *Testing is not allowed to hold too much power!* In many schools teachers work too hard to get the children ready to take tests. In healthy schools standardized testing is routinely undertaken according to state requirements, but the school professionals realize the weaknesses and limitations of testing. They are able to keep the scores in perspective while not losing sight of the unique strengths of each child. The professionals are fully cognizant of the reasons that many children do not demonstrate their abilities on traditional assessment approaches. Testing is carried out for a purpose, and the results are used to demonstrate areas of strength and areas that need work. No major educational decisions are made based upon one or even a few standardized tests. Alternative forms of assessment are also used to understand the whole child more fully.
7. *Students are not overscheduled.* Long, extended days are not usually helpful to children. Along the same lines, too much homework does not necessarily improve grades. Children need to relax and to spend time with their families.

8. *Small classes have been established.* However, that finding need not be a stumbling block for large urban schools. Many such schools have successfully developed smaller communities, each with its own unique identity, within the larger unit.
9. *Teachers are not asked to handle more than they are trained to handle.* Specialists are called in as needed, and problems are handled in a manner that neither disrupts class time nor places others at risk.
10. *Parents and children are listened to and responded to with respect by all school personnel,* including secretaries, janitors, and lunchroom staff. Changes are implemented when necessary, without a lot of red tape.
11. *Behavioral issues are handled respectfully and quickly.* Problems are not allowed to get out of hand. Students are encouraged and expected to behave humanely; teachers, administrators, and staff model appropriate behavior.
12. *Physical structures are in good repair and environmentally healthy.* Classrooms are flexibly organized for student interactions and for individual space as needed.
13. *Children are not expected to be all alike.* Individual differences are respected and valued. The differences are appreciated; the child is not seen as different. Boys are allowed to learn and develop according to their unique strengths and styles.
14. *There are high academic expectations for all.* Everyone is expected to do good work that involves learning and being a part of a healthy, productive community. Cooperation and helping others are the expectation and the norm.
15. *Teachers appear to enjoy teaching and have a positive self-efficacy.* They are not afraid to challenge ideas and think creatively. They are able to challenge and motivate students without resorting to “tabloid mentality” approaches.
16. *School administrators and teachers are alert and watching for red flags that help to identify hidden dangers in their school.* They ask not what is wrong with a child, but what might be contributing to the child’s difficulties within the school climate.

Over the years, numerous studies have told us of the importance of healthy school climates, yet change seems to come slowly in our schools. We need to listen more carefully to the well-documented research of many psychologists, educators, and medical professionals. Certainly our children’s safety and learning are worth it!

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