

teach you something as well about working with disabled children."

## ***The Making of a Gang Member***

No one description applies to every person in a youth gang. But most share a recurrent problem. Most have difficulty in school, and at least half of them, when tested, have learning disabilities. *At least half.* Many studies find much higher numbers than this. Apparently, we have something to deal with here, and if it could impact half of our delinquents, that would facilitate a dramatic reduction in the scope of our gang problem.

Let me explain, from my experience of following kids in school for the last 20 years, how many kids become gang members.

You begin with a child who, in kindergarten, has trouble with the names of colors, letters, and figures. In first grade, he has difficulty remembering numbers and syllables, and he falls into the lowest reading group or becomes the least able member of a cooperative, mixed group. The effect is the same. The child might be a slow learner, or he might be an average or even bright student, yet he appears spacey, impulsive, introverted, disorderly, hyperactive, angry, or bored. The reasons are many, but the result is the same: He doesn't keep up with the others.

Sometimes this child is held back, but usually not. Either way makes no difference. Second grade goes similarly, and by the third grade, the child is significantly behind the other students. This is a critical year, because it is here that kids go from basal reading ("See Juanito run.") to content reading in academic areas.

The parents get called to meetings. In the early grades, teachers give suggestions, depending on the experience of both the teachers and parents, on how to help. These usually don't help much, and the parents begin to get frustrated and to frustrate the child. In the later grades, these meetings become mostly nagging sessions in which the parents are told to keep the child in line, make him do his homework, and so forth. If the

parents try hard to enforce the teachers' desires, then home also becomes a punitive place for the child.

The student begins to struggle with academic subjects. Historical information, geography, science facts, these mostly go by him. Very little seems to stick or to be meaningful. The texts are cryptic to him, tests are dreaded, and reading aloud is embarrassing.

The youngster begins to learn how to hide and how to distract the teacher and the class. He either bullies or disappears. The teacher isn't sure what to do. She tries not to embarrass the child, to give some work he can do; usually, this means dittos, fill-in-the-blanks, or cooperative group work where the kid can do some task for the group but in reality is learning very little. The student learns to follow a direction, how to fill up space. When I ask this kind of student what he did in school today, he answers, "We did work."

"What kind of work? What did you learn?"

"We did work, school work."

By fourth grade, the child begins to get a little bolder in his dissent. He might attempt to mimic gang attire if his parents are not wise to it. The student is now a problem in the class and has usually formed friendships with other such "problem children," both in class and on his block. Other children are aware of him and know he doesn't do his work, can't read, doesn't know his multiplication tables, and is always in trouble. The kid internalizes this description of himself easily, since he lives it daily.

Some schools try to shield kids from this by eliminating grades or using cooperative groups where individuals aren't tested. Some schools mainstream, others separate. None of this makes a difference, as kids will compare themselves anyway. Child psychologist Erik Erikson (1968) tells us that the elementary school age is the age of "competence," and children are constantly competing to see who measures up. They don't fool themselves. If a kid can't keep up, all the others know it, and he knows they know it, no matter how teachers may try to hide it. The importance of this cannot be minimized. A teacher may speak of every child having worth. What the kid perceives is,

