

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,

"Everyone else can do things I can't. Everyone else receives awards I never get, no matter what I do."

As the fifth and sixth grades come upon him, he has now experienced several years of school as a place of failure, a place where he just gets through the day, a place where he is last in everything. He has learned to hide well or to get attention through mischief. He is used to the parent meetings and the principal's office and doesn't fear them much. A feeling of "me versus them" forms within him.

Puberty kicks in with its self-consciousness, and this makes his situation more apparent, more felt. Up to now, he has taken failure as children do: They feel its sting, but the world is still small, and adults take care of its business while you play. But as adolescence approaches, the need to have a place for oneself, a group of friends, an identity separate from others and from adults, begins to push at the child.

What this kid knows is that he is not one of the competent people, that school is painful and shameful, and that he is not a "good boy" to the adult world outside his home. Even at home, where he may be helpful and still a decent son, parents struggle to understand and deal with his growing rebellion and inability to act in school like "good" children do.

Seventh grade comes around, and the kid is moved to a huge school with hundreds or thousands of other students, and with many teachers. If he was struggling before, he is now completely lost. He quickly gravitates to others like himself—others who can't stand class, who can't read the books, and who live from threat to threat from parents and teachers and every adult they know to please behave and please try.

Teachers in our student's junior high school have 30 or 40 pupils per class. They must teach children who read from a second-grade level to above average, plan several lessons a day, and correct a load of papers each evening. Teachers immediately spot our student as one of the hyperactive, sullen, angry, unmotivated, or unprepared. They find it difficult to either contain or motivate this kind of student on a daily basis. For the good of the class, this child spends a lot of time in detention,

writing standards, or just sitting in his seat doing nothing, but at least being quiet under threat of punishment. This kid will seldom turn in homework or complete assignments, and the teacher feels she can do nothing to force him.

Our student quickly discovers by accident, and by tutelage from older friends, that in this big school, nothing happens if you don't go to class. He figures out the system: In only one of the six periods does the attendance office count to see if the student is at school. He shows up only for that class. He intercepts notes and phone calls from teachers and administrators. He hides report cards, forges signatures, and changes grades or lies to parents about their meaning. He quickly discovers that a teacher with six different classes, a homeroom, and 150 teenagers to deal with doesn't have time to call his home if he isn't in class or hasn't completed an assignment. The easiest trick he learns involves giving the wrong phone number when filling out registration forms. This simple maneuver frustrates the first few attempts to contact his parents.

Eventually, someone does find our escape artist. They call or visit his home and arrange a meeting with his parents. The teacher nags the parents, who nag the child. Eventually, too, the parents stop showing up for these meetings, but not before having made the child aware that he is a source of shame to the home, so that the street is now the only place with any source of reward.

Our student occasionally attends a class, and the teacher hates it. It creates another dilemma for a teacher who is already struggling to make the class work for the students who attend regularly. Now there is this kid who has no clue what's going on and no book, pencil, or paper. The kid makes a fuss if ignored, yet the teacher only hopes he doesn't create a problem, and searches for some way to keep him busy. At all inner-city schools I taught in, teachers looked forward to the passing weeks, as these students would eventually stop coming altogether, and then the teacher could relax with a smaller, more consistent class. This sounds negligent, but in their shoes, you would feel the same way.

