

# **DEAD CHILDREN CAN'T READ**

**CLASSROOMS OF COMPASSION**



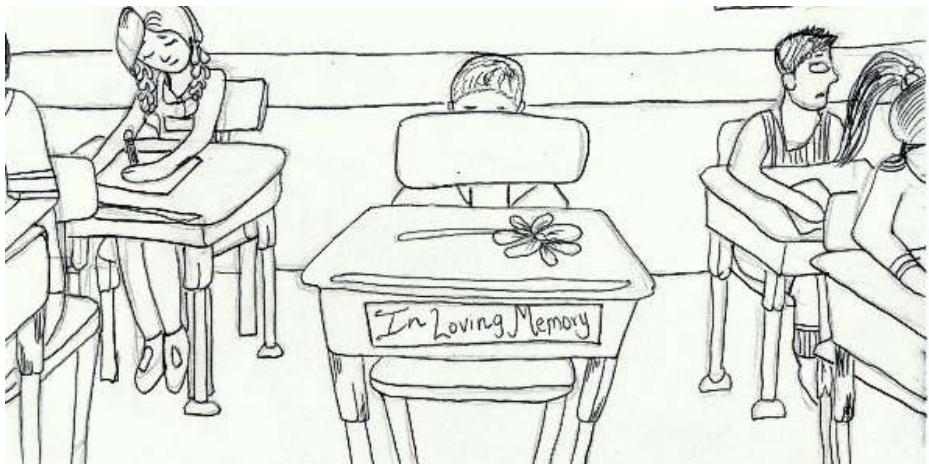
Promote  
child safety and  
development with  
compassion and  
responsiveness

**Darleen Claire Wodzenski**

Introduction by: Dr. Kathy A. Thomas

# **DEAD CHILDREN CAN'T READ**

## **Classrooms of Compassion**



**DARLEEN CLAIRE WODZENSKI**

**Foreword by: Leigh Purcell**

# **Dead Children Can't Read**

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## CONTENTS

Foreword.....	5
Introduction .....	8
Chapter 1.....	13
Chapter 2.....	18
Chapter 3.....	24
Chapter 4.....	31
Chapter 5.....	35
Chapter 6.....	44
Chapter 7.....	49
Chapter 8.....	56
Chapter 9.....	59
Chapter 10.....	62
About the Author.....	65

## FOREWORD

As the mother of two young daughters I am grateful to live in the Information Age, where I am privy to new evidence emerging every day on how best to raise developmentally healthy – and compassionate - children. We live in a time when knowledge is readily accessible and can be easily distributed and discussed. As a result of this collaborative process of information sharing, I am optimistic that future generations will grow to be high-functioning adults, operating to better serve humanity not just through innovation and ingenuity but also by kindness and love. Dead Children Can't Read is an example of such a piece of information that could improve the lives of children and therefore our own.

Darleen Claire Wodzenski lays out the first steps in this miraculous transformation, emphasizing the necessity of providing social, emotional, and moral instruction as early as possible, on the grandest scale possible, to help the largest number of children possible. Dead Children Can't Read is essential reading in order to understand the scope of one of our nation's most pressing problems and its simple solution. She exposes the problem of accountability for child emotional welfare and behavioral development within school systems and outlines a workable, easily implementable fix at an individual level. Darleen Claire Wodzenski has discovered a method to improve the lives of children as a whole, one child at a time.

For personal reasons I homeschool my own children, yet I fully support our public school system in its duty to create an informed and intelligent populace. This is how society works and I fund it with my tax

dollars. Children of all people are investments in the future and it benefits us all to support this structure, and as a sponsor of this system, I have a vested interest in what is being done in schools to shape young minds and hearts.

Two years ago, I enrolled in and completed a popular Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on the subject of happiness, examining the various scientifically-tested methods of increasing one's general feeling of happiness in life. Although many unexpected approaches were thoroughly covered, the third week's lesson made the most profound impact on me. It discussed compassion, an element I hadn't figured into the personal happiness equation. Initially this baffled me. Wasn't compassion just another term for pity? How could feeling sorry for someone increase one's own happiness?

Thankfully, the course instructors put my preconceived ideas to rest and presented several definitions of compassion, all related to empathy or pity but none synonymous with those concepts. The literal definition of compassion is "to suffer together," which felt negative to me. Imagine my relief when at least one emotion researcher agreed, instead interpreting compassion as the feeling stirred within oneself to end suffering<sup>1</sup>. This more palatable definition sticks with me to this day.

Compassion is not simply putting oneself in another's shoes, so to speak, or seeing the world as another sees it. It is not witnessing a negative event happening to another person and responding with a sigh and a frown. These are not examples of compassion. Instead, one

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<sup>1</sup> Keltner, Dacher, Ph.D., and Emilia Simon-Thomas, Ph.D. "GG101 x: The Science of Happiness." GG101 x: The Science of Happiness. September 23, 2014. Accessed February 11, 2017. <https://courses.edx.org/courses/BerkeleyX/GG101x/1T2014/info>.

must feel the urge to take action to alleviate the hurt and suffering caused by the negative event. That action could be simple, like a hug, or it could be complex, such as organizing a national protest. It could even be observing a gross injustice to children at the hands of an educational system and publishing a book to right the wrongs being done in order to create a kinder, gentler, more compassionate world.

This is precisely why editing this book for Darleen Claire Wodzenski appealed to me: not only does the book address the changes needed by the American educational system in order to produce truly educated human beings, but the book itself is a work of compassion.

*Leigh*

Leigh Purcell

Editor, Parent, and Humanitarian



**Leigh Purcell is an Atlanta writer/editor who is also a wife and mother. She has a special interest in teaching children to cultivate kindness, compassion, and self-acceptance toward themselves and the world around them. She supports mental health awareness, literacy, animal welfare, and love in general. Leigh can be reached at her agency AddVerbs Editing Services at email [LeighPurcell@gmail.com](mailto:LeighPurcell@gmail.com) or by phone at 404-931-4693.**

## INTRODUCTION

By Dr. Kathy Thomas



A safe and healthy environment is an essential and a critical component in building the academic pathway. The educator must be able to make changes to the environment - often and as necessary – to maintain a stimulating and vibrant climate of safety, integrity, compassion and respect that is imbued with a full range of academic and behavioral support for all the children, with or without identified challenges. Children who attend school in such an enriching and nurturing environment will be supported to learn, grow, and develop across the personal and academic domains.

The developmental psychologist, Uri Bronfenbrenner, presented his Ecological Systems Theory that articulated the notion of a sum total of all influences on the child as a driving force in the developmental process. We can move forward, as a nation, with more humane and

practical notions to support safe schools and effective education by pulling from a fusion of Bronfenbrenner's seminal Ecological Systems Theory with cutting edge developmental and educational approaches.

The reader may ask why Bronfenbrenner's model is germane to the exploration of safe and ethical educational systems in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is a critical question for parents, lawmakers, administrators, and educators alike. Stakeholders in the nation's educational system need to understand the interrelated systems within Bronfenbrenner's model from a holistic perspective in order to make critical shifts in the nation's educational fundamental paradigm. It is probably safe to say that an educator will then have a much clearer vision of the intricate developmental and cognitive pathways that move a child forward toward effective adulthood.

Children will move through layers of social and academic influence in and out of the social systems of the individual ecological system over time. If the child emerges with any problems and issues that surface prohibiting healthy progress, the teacher will be better prepared to intervene knowing how the systems are impacting the child's learning, development, and performance. Critical capacities such as executive skills and emotional self-regulation will naturally emerge from a more wholesome and developmentally supportive total learning environment that frees children's minds for learning.

Where school climate presents hostile, uncaring, or potentially dangerous influences, educators and administrators may need to modify the environment in order to restore an effective learning climate. Furthermore, to support a more unique understanding of the ecological systems and the impact on the developing child, the educator must then apply the appropriate knowledge and skillset in

the system, to reflect that heightened fusion of environment with pedagogy.

Though Bronfenbrenner does not “stage” development like Piaget, necessarily, it is extremely important to understand how these systems affect the child cognitively and developmentally, and when working within the circles of influence in the child’s personal ecosystem. All children will not move simultaneously through the developmental stages, or interact identically within the ecological systems. The educator must be prepared to individualize instruction and adapt the learning, creatively and innovatively to meet the needs of every child. Educators will require, in turn, that the school systems and educational paradigms support such developmentally and academically differentiated instruction in order to maximize learning and developmental outcomes of children.

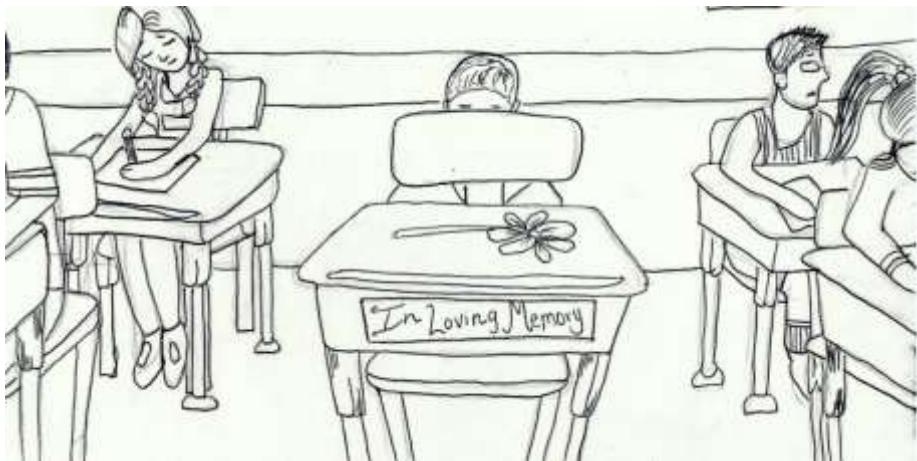
Like the developmental stages, the environment has an incredible impact on every stage of growth and development within the systems. If we want to include Piaget in this ecological system(s) framework, or for that matter, Vygotsky and Bandura, a diversified approach is necessary. An educator needs to understand socio-emotional development, and *Gardner's Multiple Intelligences*, reinforcing how children look at the world from a different lens and skillset. As an example, children who suffer from maltreatment or children with learning challenges, may present in a unique way with different reactions. Is the child aggressive or withdrawn, for example. An educator must be prepared to assess behavior at many levels, and consider influences from outside the school walls when contemplating the child’s developmental and educational needs.

Darleen Claire Wodzenski brings a unique and fresh perspective in explaining how the nation’s educational system must return to some

of the time honored traditions as gauging and addressing the developmental needs of children in order to create school climates that are hospitable to lawfulness, respect, compassion, and academic success. Her approach weaves in the fundamental developmental concepts inherent in the theories of Bronfenbrenner, Piaget, Vygotsky, Kohlberg, Bowlby, and Bandura into a seamless approach that is likely to be the “magic sauce” that elevates school safety and respectful school climates to support learning for all children.

### DIAGNOSING THE ILLNESS

*Author's note: I love teachers. They are some of the most dedicated and heart centered people I have ever known. Our discussion in this text focuses on the **problems within the educational system** and not on any individual role. What is more, these first few pages were written in the aftermath of Sandy Hook and express the tragic emotions that were rampant at that time. While the issue of child development across the nation's education system remains a critical focus, this plaintive tone is most evident in the opening pages but lightens as the story unfolds. Thank you for taking this journey with me on behalf of our editor, contributing experts, and a nation of children who are learning as they go.*



Artwork: Kara Hayden

America is a diseased nation. Unhealthy social influences are eroding our country and bleeding it out at the expense of our citizens' happiness and well-being. The sweeping breakdown of humanity has rendered the problem systemic. As our societal mores shift, the nation is turning into a sociocultural petri dish, nurturing the growth of emotional and moral bacteria. Children are giving birth to babies and the number of teenage parents is on the rise, as are cases of documented infanticide by girls and boys who would rather snuff out their newborn infants' lives than face the judgment of peers, family, and society. Bullying has quickly moved into a full-blown pandemic, witnessed globally in a theater called the Internet. Young people bring unresolved angst, fear, and anger into schools, massacring innocent people in a horrifying attempt to find some form of retribution and release.

As these youths grow into adults, we as a society must deal with our shortcomings as nurturers; we must shoulder the burden of having failed our youngest members by failing to prevent abuse and neglect and providing unhealthy school and community environments. By examining our children and addressing their needs from conception to adulthood, we ensure that the American sociocultural phenomenon is one that favors the growth of emotionally intact, conscious, and morally substantial citizens who are able to contribute to a healthy and happy America.

Our country is in distress and in desperate need of help. The prognosis is bleak, but there is an antidote; we can find it and treat this epidemic so that we can begin healing. It will be neither easy nor quick, but it is inexorably necessary to take that important first step toward being a nation of compassion and grace for children. Carefully and thoughtfully we'll implement the solution one family, one classroom, and one community at a time to restore compassion, love, security, and confidence to our country's population.

We must start by addressing the U.S. public education model, which works to serve our nation's children by transforming them into literate citizens who can read, figure numbers, and function effectively in society. The effort and work put into this system logically leads to an educated and well-informed populace that contributes to the workforce, technology, and humanity as a whole. What could possibly be the harm in that? Teachers dedicate their lives to this exhausting work, spending countless hours of their lives for the betterment of

society. These are all noble and important things and should be encouraged and supported, right?

Not exactly. In the name of academic excellence, schools of the 21<sup>st</sup> century purposely and proudly embrace a culture of power and control for the purported benefit of the pupils; but that determined philosophy has an unintentional and devastating effect on the very ones it's designed to help. The educational system's single-minded pursuit of scholastic success, especially in the subject of reading, comes at a serious cost to children. Increasingly, that cost is taking the most precious thing our children possess: their lives.

Children spend approximately 1,000 hours in school each year; this constitutes more waking hours in school than in any other setting outside the home, including the home in which they live. This large and daily presence of schools in the lives of our children lends itself as an excellent opportunity to offer children well-rounded support and assistance in life management skills. Instead, schools use these precious hours for rigorous academic instruction. A demanding curriculum with high learning standards sounds like our children are in the best hands possible, doesn't it? Thorough and meticulous scholarship appears the very pinnacle of achievement for an informed society. So what can be the harm?

During school, children are herded into classes by shepherds whose primary role – after ensuring basic safety – is an unwavering focus on a scholarly agenda lacking moral, ethical, or humanistic value. The tenacious pushing to succeed academically only pushes back at the child's innate need to grow developmentally. Individual, personal

growth is ignored at the expense of compared educational statistics. As a result, children do not learn the most vital lessons of childhood while at school:

- Love
- Compassion
- Respect
- Values
- Integrity
- Humanity
- Responsibility
- Sense of Belonging

Although school personnel actively work to keep children safe from sharp edges and abduction, they are impotent to protect children from violence, bullying, and dangerous exposure to inappropriate information. Many children are being irreparably harmed by school influences that lead to:

- Depression
- Suicide
- School Violence
- Bullying / Victimization
- Risky Behaviors
- Anxiety
- Self-Harming
- Learning Problems

Each day our children are lost to depression, suicide, self-harming, addiction, and bullying. Lives are being ruined by teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, running away, and public shaming on the internet. In some cases, the lives lost are the children directly impacted by these challenges; in other cases, they include innocent victims of school shootings and other forms of violence and abuse.

Students who are victims of domestic violence or child predators outside of school, or those with development challenges or mental illness, are all impelled to grasp the golden ring of academia. They're told that scholarly achievement is the most important lesson they'll learn. It is not. They grow up developmentally stunted; and developmentally stunted humans always find ways to compensate, drawing deeply from the immature and underdeveloped aspects of themselves. Using these qualities, they develop what they consider to be functional solutions to life's complex problems. The result is always chaos.

So how do we address this urgent problem? How can we give our children the hope of a promising and fulfilling future? We must start by thoroughly exploring this intensely uncomfortable topic in the following chapters. We will find solutions through compassion and innovation of educational design. Solutions exist. We can fix this together.

### **Early Childhood Development**

Infants learn from the moment they are born. The course by which their brains reach full development is determined by the sum total of environmental, social, cultural, family, spiritual, and nutritional factors. These associations have been tested and proven by science, and they make sense to parents, health care providers, educators, and legislators. A synthesis of these ideas and of theories of child psychologists, in combination with some basic facts about the brain and neural development of humans, leads to some clear and convincing concepts that can form a simple and quite obvious starting point to heal the nation.

The human brain is not fully developed at birth. Instead, it develops slowly, in response to stimulation in the child's environment. The quality of the environment has a direct impact on the quality of development of each child's brain. A child who is raised in an emotionally unstable, austere, and abusive environment will develop a brain that is relatively weak in the areas of emotional bonding and complex human relations. Conversely, a child who is raised in an emotionally intact, responsive, and nurturing environment will develop highly intricate neural pathways to support complex human interactions and capacity for social responsiveness. Sensitivity to the child is the single most important quality of a parent or caretaker with

respect to the social, emotional, and attachment development of young children.

Raising a child in the absence of warmth and love will cause the child to develop a brain that is less developed in areas that support human interaction, compassion, empathy, and perhaps even love. These children will have fewer emotional coping skills, will be more prone to irrational thinking and behaviors, and may have a lower level of intellectual capacity. They are also more likely to be at risk for decreased ability to self-soothe, self-calm, and self-regulate through the bumps and bruises of life.

Emotionally responsive and kind parents who demonstrate empathy and compassion are highly likely to raise children who mirror that same empathy, compassion, and emotional responsiveness. The importance of developing these capacities during early childhood cannot be overestimated. Conversely, children must also learn about social taboos and dangerous or unacceptable behaviors in a similar way. Each time a child violates a boundary, breaks a rule, or demonstrates a behavior that is considered to be taboo, the child will be disciplined. The discipline process is one of educating the child; it is not connected to physical punishing, such as spanking. The child's mirror neuron system will recognize the response of parents to these antisocial behaviors, and contribute to better social decisions and behaviors in the future. And now we have outlined the areas in which today's youth are being sadly short-changed in the current social and educational environment. In spite of the wealth of information and wisdom that has been gleaned from research into how children learn

and grow, children are still being raised and educated in environments that lack sufficient social stimulation and creative communication.

Severely socially and emotionally impoverished households and daycare environments may substantially interfere with the proper development of neural connections in the brain to support compassion, empathy, and social suitability. Herein are the developmental roots that affect many children in America, leading some to become self-centered adults and others to become physically aggressive and even violent. The best safety precaution for preserving the sanctity of American life is to raise up children to become wholly-functioning and sensitive adults capable of empathy and compassion. Only when a child is imbued with the capacity to love and have compassion for other human beings will the world be safe from school shootings and serial murders. The importance of this topic necessitates a deeper investigation of a complex human developmental process called “attachment” that supports the acquisition of social competencies and human relationship skills, including love, compassion, and empathy.

Children learn morality, compassion, and empathy from their parents and caretakers in addition to important information about appropriate behavior boundaries. If a child pulls a mother’s hair, the mother is likely to make a face or cry out in pain. The child learns about the facial expressions and vocalizations of someone in distress. These experiences over time will help the child identify emotions of others as well as avoid behaviors that cause distress to others, such as hair-

pulling. Similarly, a child will learn what social behaviors are acceptable or unacceptable by observing the reactions of others.

An infant or toddler who hits another toddler is likely to be firmly corrected; the timing and intensity of the reaction elicited by the child will determine how well the child begins to learn that hitting is an unacceptable behavior. Conversely, a child who hugs or shares with another is likely to be praised. This child will observe adults smiling and using kind voices to praise such prosocial behaviors. At each moment in time, the child's brain is monitoring and recording the reactions of parents and caretakers, creating new neural connections to support that awareness and to guide future behavior. Over time, human infants utilize special brain cells that allow them to mimic the conduct and emotions of others and imitate observable performance in social situations. This specialized neuron system supports the child in expertly acquiring the emotional responsiveness demonstrated by parents and caregivers.

Also involved is learning which individuals belong to which social grouping. Child development psychologist Erik Erikson observed how infants from different cultural backgrounds were exposed to different situations and limitations in order to help them prepare to function within that sociocultural environment. Childhood social and emotional development rests upon a firm foundation of family- and culture-oriented rules and guidelines. Schools have a differing set of rules and guidelines than most families and cultures, so children necessarily require fair warning of the expectations while in school. As such, children must be acculturated into the school environment in such a

way that the child is able to adjust to the new rules and regulations while maintaining a clear view of the self who is still part of the child's individual family and cultural group. A huge part of this acculturation and adjustment process involves social, emotional, and moral learning and development.

Sociocultural influences contribute to a child's development of a brain neural structure to support social, emotional, and moral capacities. Specific sociocultural factors can be administered to the child in a prescriptive way. Parents, for example, naturally sit and hold a child who has been hurt or frightened. A good dose of nurturing and compassion are excellent treatments for a child's pain and anxiety. Yet social and emotional influences are not as straightforward as, say, nutrition, which is often a cut-and-dried health factor. Parents can easily see that children need calcium and vitamin D to build strong bones. Beneficial environmental, social, and moral influences, however, produce highly complex reactions in the child, some of which may be beneficial – but not always.

A great example of the confusion that can result from misguided social, emotional, and moral training of children comes from children's television programming. Typically, the producers of children's television shows have a lesson in mind that they wish the viewer to learn. Research has demonstrated, however, that children sometimes walk away from such TV shows with an entirely different message than the one intended by the producers. The lesson here is that intentional training and education to promote social, emotional, and ethical capacities of children must be evaluated to make sure that children are

learning positive social, emotional, and ethical lessons that will help them succeed in school, the community, and life.

So the challenge for the American educational system is to determine a basic, fundamental formula for decent and humane treatment of children that results in the greatest likelihood of producing a socialized and self-sufficient citizen, capable of contributing to society and leading a meaningful life. The formula will be much more complex than determining the minimum dosage of vitamin D or calcium required to support bone health, but will be equally important for the overall good health and well-being of the child.

While the government cannot promulgate philosophical parenting roles and family culture, the nation as a whole can take a position that basic decency and the development of ethically responsive citizens is a necessity to protect the country. The United States of America can hold each parent, educator, mental health worker, and health care professional accountable for basic standards of human and ethical treatment of children that logically lead to healthy emotional development such that they are positive contributors to society.

The standards that must be enforced for minimum humane and ethical treatment of children can draw from substantial evidence and wisdom from the fields of education, psychology, and neuroscience. Legislation could be so bold as to determine a “Psycho-neuro-educational” minimum standard for the care and upbringing of the nation’s youth.

### What is the Significance of the Title “Dead Children Can’t Read”?

As a child and mental health professional, I have had the honor of advocating for children and their families within their school districts. It’s rewarding and fulfilling to help those who cannot help themselves, and most days I love my job. However, there have been several occasions on which I’ve stared in shock at desperate situations enfolding right before my eyes.

I have witnessed children engaging in self-harm as they sat in an administrator’s office, where the staff seemed inept at knowing how to talk a child out of a dangerous behavior like cutting or head banging. In other cases, educators engage in inappropriate behavior that places youth at risk.

Many years ago, I cautiously prepared the principal of a local high school for a youth with emotional and behavioral challenges I was enrolling the following week. The principal promised me that she would personally ensure that each teacher was aware of the child’s previous exposure to trauma and would handle this teenager with “kid gloves” (the current professional jargon for how to respond appropriately to people who have been negatively exposed to trauma, violence, or abuse is *trauma-informed approach*). Imagine my surprise when the teen was permanently expelled from the school in the

middle of the second week! This youth doodled as a coping mechanism for overwhelming emotions; a male teacher walked up to her in class and ripped her doodle paper out from her hands. Coming from a traumatic background, this young person automatically slapped at the teacher to try to retrieve her paper; but because the youth hit a teacher, the result was automatic, irrevocable expulsion. Neither the principal nor the teacher were ever held accountable for their failure to respond to the emotional needs of a traumatized youth.

More recently, a young child with a background of significant trauma and abuse was using his own fists to bash his head in response to an altercation in the classroom. The school staff passively observed the child repeatedly raise both fists in an assault on his forehead, with a great likelihood of at least some mild trauma to the frontal cortex of the brain. In this specific case, the school had been forwarded information about the child's severe mental health history and the need to identify behaviors that were expressions of the child's traumatic background and related challenges. Instead, the school ignored the protocols to promote the child's safety and healthy development and impose typical, punitive responses, which resulted in the child's self-harming. The school counselor unresponsively watched as I quickly calmed the child and interrupted the self-harming behavior.

In still other situations, educators have completely missed dramatic shows of developmental challenges and learning disabilities. Over the years, parents have reached out for help with a child struggling at school. Simple observation and evaluation of some of these children

indicated deep developmental or learning problems that were easy to spot. Speaking with teachers and administrators, however, I found a wealth of resistance and a complete lack of proper evaluation and documentation. Children with severe intellectual disabilities – who lacked the capacity to read or count – were being “passed” by the teacher in order to keep the child moving forward academically, while the parents were begging for help.

In one such case, the school was about to elevate the child’s learning objectives to adding single digit numbers, in spite of the fact that this child was not able to differentiate numbers from letters or even count past the number two. After referring the child to a developmental pediatrician, he was diagnosed with a pervasive developmental disorder. Based on my observations of the child and the diagnosis, it was evident that he might never be able to count to ten or read a sentence. So, I wonder, what was the school doing for the first three years that the child was in attendance? How did they keep passing this child, who was unable to count past two? How could they have believed the child able to progress to simple addition, when he was plainly unable to distinguish the difference between numbers and letters, or even correctly name a letter or number?

These situations were about more than mere academic education. Think of the damage to the doodling teenager who was kicked out of the local high school just as she was being placed in a therapeutic household to get help for her emotional problems. The school’s faulty response to her doodling in school contributed to her returning to her family, where they lacked the resources to help with her complex

difficulties. The consequences of the school's hasty actions were devastating and long-lasting to this child.

Imagine the devastation to the head-bashing child, who was still required to keep up with class work and homework assignments even while dealing with the emotional aftermath to complex trauma and abuse. This child had to work through layers of emotional challenges while attempting to tap dance to the tune of the school, rather than the school adjusting their tune to meet the developmental needs of the child.

The child with pervasive developmental disorder suffered through years of not understanding what was going on in the classroom. The complex demands of the teacher, peers, and classwork became overwhelming, as this child lacked the capacity to function beyond the level of an infant, perhaps a toddler. Sadly, the child's burden was made even heavier by years of academic failure that resulted from a lack of effective assessment and identification.

In each of these cases, laws existed to protect the child with special needs. Whether the law was the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or the Americans with Disabilities Act, children with exceptionalities are protected. The theory of protections for children with special needs is excellent, but the practice often falls short of the ideal.

Over and again I have challenged school administrators and educators who stress the need to keep children on a speedy learning track for reading and math when the child's developmental or mental health

status prevented on-track academic learning. Over and again I have explained the importance of promoting healthy child development – across all domains, not solely academic ones – in order to raise up children who are able to engage successfully in the education system.

Sadly, few education professionals have responded in a way that acknowledges the developmental needs of children suffering from developmental delay, attachment disorder, trauma, PTSD, mental health, and other challenges. I'd struggle to remain calm as educators, administrators, and other related professionals seemingly ignored the developmental and mental health needs of the student. "How could the situation have gotten so out of control?" I would ask. "Aren't plans usually in place for the child to receive specialized handling under such dangerous or disruptive conditions?" I would almost beg. "Isn't there a strategy to avoid a massive melt down that could result in harm or further destabilization?" I would implore. Sadly, the response of the educators is typically the same: Academic learning is their primary concern and they must not let the child's learning get off track.

After taking a deep breath and explaining that the student might be at risk for something like self-harm or suicide and could benefit from a flexible work schedule to allow for psychological healing and recovery, I'd receive an invariably dismissive response. The administration's answer was always some variant of "the student needs to be able to read on-level in order to succeed." I was told that education professionals industry-wide want "to keep the child moving forward with reading" and "we can't allow the student to fall behind." But success cannot be measured by academics alone.

After many attempts to explain why this was a faulty response to the serious situations at hand, I came to the conclusion that there was only one good response to the “got to read” rhetoric:

### **Dead Children Can’t Read!**

We must protect children from faulty social, emotional, and moral development that contribute to mental health problems, self-harming, or violent tendencies. The only area we should be focusing on children not “falling behind” in is developmental growth. In reality, some of these children suffer from significant challenges that interfere with normal activities of daily living. We must hold our educational system accountable for helping children catch up developmentally.

Disruption to this natural evolution gives rise to the violence, depression, self-harming, mental health disorders, and risky behaviors that steal the lives of our youth. Even when teachers and administrators are provided with detailed psychological reports, explanations of diagnoses, and instructions for modifications and accommodations to help support students in distress, the kneejerk response is often to override the professional mental health or developmental recommendations in order to “keep the child’s learning on track.” But healthy development – not reading or math – should come first!

The number of incorrigible children in the juvenile justice system has much more to do with the failure of the educational system and society to address critical developmental needs than anything to do with the child. The developmentally stunted teenager in juvenile

detention still really is the battered two-year old who was beaten after seeing his father assault his mother. The developmentally stunted youth who was expelled from school still really is the shattered 6-month old whose mother was too drunk or depressed to change her diaper and feed her more than once a day. These children need our help with human compassion, not academics. A system that does not check itself when children are in developmental distress is always doomed to failure.

### Defining a System Gone Awry

Children are being lost to a system that ignores human developmental needs of children in an ever-expanding and complex culture of 2-income families, single parent households, and families in poverty ... who lack the time and resources required to raise developmentally healthy children.

Schools focus, instead, on literacy and academic achievement at the cost of crucial social, emotional, and psychological development. Children from relatively more resilient families may thrive in an academic environment that lacks fundamental regard for human integrity and respect – because they are getting proper time, attention, and training at home. Children with less stable or supportive families – families who are struggling with myriad challenges like health, money, depression, divorce, addiction, mental illness – are caught up in a weird house of mirrors that reflects a distorted image of the child's true developmental profile and identity.

Most all parents try to do their very best to raise their children to be happy, healthy, and effective in the world. Oftentimes, really good families are simply overburdened with the challenges of modern day society. In other cases, one or both parents may have suffered themselves as children, only to bring inefficient parenting and life skills

to bear in raising a family. Still other complications stem from parents with mental health challenges, substance use disorders (addictions), legal status issues (citizenship status), problems with the judicial system (felony convictions and incarceration), violence (including intimate partner or domestic violence) and trauma, abuse, or neglect.

Raising children is hard work – the hardest job on the planet, in my personal opinion. I am not suggesting that the personal challenges of parents be paraded in public for ridicule. Nor am I ridiculing any parent. Instead, I am pointing out the reality that faces many children within the school system.

Research clearly shows that certain family challenges are associated with much higher rates of developmental challenges, academic failure, drop-out rates, incarceration, mental health disorders, and death. Every child in a school is affected by the waves of suffering and despair of children who live in unstable or unsupportive family environments. Everyone's child is affected by abuse of one child who attends a school. Every child is impacted by the suicide of one student. All students are impacted by cyber bullying and school violence.

Consider the types of family situations that can destabilize a child's development, potentially leading to further harm for that child as well as interrupting of healthy learning and development of fellow students. Some of the research-supported factors that can lead to disruptions in child thriving and development include:

1. Poverty
2. Medical Problem (parent, child, or sibling)
3. Mental Health Challenges (including post-partum depression)
4. Substance Use Disorder or Other Addiction (like gambling or shoplifting)
5. Violence (including neighborhood, gang, domestic, and/or intimate partner)
6. Trauma, Abuse, Neglect (including callous or nonresponsive parenting)
7. Single Parent Families (life is harder when there is only one parent; while many single parents are terrific parents, there are some single parent households who lack the resources – including time and money – to provide the necessary guidance, supervision, and support to help children thrive)

This non-exhaustive list helps to outline the many challenges that are documented by empirical evidence to contribute to much higher rates of developmental and mental health challenges, failure and drop-out rates, and involvement with the juvenile justice system. Once parents, teachers, and administrators understand the topography of the landscape in which children attend school, they will be better able to respond appropriately with a school environment and culture that has the ability to foster healthy child learning, growth, and development.

Delving a bit further into the implications of a rocky childhood, consider the Kaiser report from 1989 that investigated the long term impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES). It explained how early childhood chaos clearly contributes to a wide spectrum of

problems in adulthood. According to the ACES report, adults who suffered from such an adverse childhood experience were more likely to experience health challenges including immune disorder and cancer, suffer from certain mental health disorders, and have a substance use disorder.

Clearly, children who are left to their own devices in unstable family environments do not statistically fare as well in the world as their peers who were not exposed to ACES-related factors. Yet, schools are often the only place that children in distress are likely to be identified and referred for help.

The natural response must be to build more responsive and supportive school systems that foster connection between school and families, and offer a safe haven for children whose lot in life is less than favorable for healthy learning, growth, and development. A school that articulates a message of respect for all people – including the children – will provide the safest of havens for each child's personal learning, growth, and development.

### **Missing Links in the Current Educational System**

The evolution of how schools evolved to their current state is so broad and convoluted that it is best to simply focus on where we are today. My experience working with children and their families as they struggle to resolve serious challenges that involve education and school environment have pointed to a series of unfortunate illusions. The developmental woes of challenged children can be traced to a series of faulty beliefs wholly embraced by many educational systems, administrators, and even some teachers.

A clear view into a challenged child's perspective provides insight to the myriad contributions to his or her social, emotional, and psychological development. Whether or not one chooses to acknowledge the presence of a nationwide Social Dysfunction Syndrome, the evidence clearly supports the need for a rational response to the challenges facing today's youth. This kind of comprehensive response will rewrite the social rules within school systems, providing ethical and effective alternatives to the faulty beliefs that have preceded today's dark educational climate. A good starting point to constructing this solution is to examine some

alternative paradigms to correct the faulty notions that have led the nation's educational system astray, such as:

**Faulty Belief #1:** *Parents are responsible for the Social, Emotional, and Psychological (SEP) rearing of their own children (not schools).*

**Supportive Belief #1:** Children are shaped socially, emotionally, and psychologically by a complex grouping of factors, including family; genetics; culture; biochemistry; community; friends; and media exposure. The more time a child spends in school, the greater the exposure to risk factors that can challenge the child, subsequently demanding a rational, ethical, and research-based response by school personnel.

**Faulty Belief #2:** *Most parents are capable of SEP-supportive parenting.*

**Supportive Belief #2:** Indeed, it takes a village to raise a child. All parents are capable of some socially, emotionally, and psychologically sound parenting. Few parents are skilled in the multifaceted nature of the Social Dysfunction Syndrome running rampant and largely unchecked across our nation's schools. This complexity is, in fact, the reason for the existence of school counselors, school psychologists, and a host of mental health professionals who specialize in child development, youth issues, and family therapy. These are exactly the professional adults qualified and skilled to implement SEP solutions in conjunction with the parent(s) of the child(ren).

**Faulty Belief #3:** *Challenges inherent in school systems - and sometimes caused in and by schools - are within the scope of parents to address and manage with their child(ren).*

**Supportive Belief #3:** Current challenges inherent in school systems are often outside the skill set of parents. When a child's challenges relate to school experiences and exposures, parents need a helping hand. Parenting is hard work; parenting children who attend the typical public school is more than some parents can manage without assistance.

**Faulty Belief #4:** *Small SEP disruptions can be overlooked without repercussions because children will eventually catch up in their development.*

**Supportive Belief #4:** Developmental processes are inherent methods humans use to work through the necessary steps to grow and mature. Sometimes the repercussions of skipping over developmental tasks – whether intentional or unintentional - can be overcome with patience and support, but often these missed steps can contribute to further developmental challenges and dysfunction. Omitting steps along developmental pathways always produces unwanted outcomes and can destabilize a child for life.

**Faulty Belief #5:** *SEP problems that express as child disobedience, classroom disruption, noncompliance with school rules, or general misbehavior are willful displays of poor behavior that are under the control of the child.*

**Supportive Belief #5:** Children who act out due to SEP anomalies demonstrate a need for support in some critical area(s). Some of the ways children need developmental coaching and support include: social functioning; effective or rational cognition (clear thinking); executive functioning; impulse control; emotional self-regulation (calming and controlling reactions of the self); self-awareness; focus; attention; metacognition (thinking about self as a thinker); personal responsibility; sense of community or citizenship; respect; integrity; compassion; and humanity. All of these are teachable skills or capacities that are part of typical childhood SEP development.

**Faulty Belief #6:** *Disciplinary action and punishment are appropriate responses to a child's display of disobedience that result from SEP developmental challenges.*

**Supportive Belief #6:** Children require experience, information, examples, modeling, and reflective feedback about how they are doing. This type of developmental support can help children who are working on issues related to behavior, self-regulation, attention, and focus as well as academic and social issues. These are all components of effective and successful developmentally-oriented teaching and childrearing.

**Philosophical Question:**

**Is all dysregulated behavior a manifestation of a  
Social, Emotional, or Psychological Challenge?**

What if all forms of acting out, disrupting class, breaking rules, and shoddy work are not willful acts at all but instead clear indicators that the child is in distress? Must we have such a cynical view of children that we assume that their misbehavior and poor choices are willful and unkind?

Children who feel loved and safe, and who know they are cared for by their teachers will, in theory, *want* to do well in school. Even disruptive students are often motivated by a deeper need for a stable emotion they just have not received to-date. I recall several times when a teacher berated a student only to learn that the child was dealing with a serious challenge at home. Some children face these at-home challenges every single day, including violence, abuse, addiction or mental health challenge of a parent, or the loss of one or both parents through illness, incarceration, death, or removal by child protective services. What an observer sees on the outside is often only a tiny glimpse of what is really going on inside.

Several types of students are often considered exceptions to this, as their roles are more “typical,” or mainstream. This is also a faulty belief; these children may be crying out for help, too:

**The Class Clown** – Surely this character is seeking attention for personal gratification and just needs some good old-fashioned discipline, right? Well, a certain amount of attention-seeking may be typical behavior for some children, but excessive attention seeking and disruption of the classroom can have much more serious roots that demand the proper consideration and attention of parents, teachers, and administrators. I recall one student with a serious reading specific learning disability who had managed to escape undetected because he intentionally acted out whenever called upon to read aloud – something he was not able to do. His challenges began with an inability to read aloud, but over time spread to general challenges in keeping up with the curriculum due to his extremely slow reading speed. This is one example of a child whose class clowning was a sure sign that the student was in distress and required intervention and support.

**The Bored Child** – Some students are just plain bored by school. They may work at a level that is above the work being presented, and finish too quickly without much effort. Or the child may simply find a particular subject(s) intensely disinteresting. In some cases, children can be hooked on excitement. They can be adrenaline junkies who get pumped up at home with sports, play with siblings or friends, or in a negative way from exposure to violence, danger, or abuse. Whatever

the reason, excitement junkies can have a hard time settling down to engage in slow, calm, and highly structured activities. No matter what the cause, these are children who need help – either in the form of more challenging or interesting work, or support in learning how to adjust from happy excitement at home to the calm learning environment of school. In the case of excitement due to danger, abuse, violence, anxiety or the like – these children need supportive services to help them benefit from a more stable and appropriate home environment. And let us not forget that children who fight a jungle of gangs, violence, and drugs to come to school are highly likely to be in a heightened state of anxiety and awareness in order to remain safe and alive – but that heightened state is not conducive to classroom learning, where calm focus is needed.

**The Daydreamer** – This child with an internal focus is surely zoning out on purpose, refusing to pay attention to the teacher or keep up with the class, right? Or is there another motivation behind this type of behavior? Some children are naturally focused on their inner thoughts and feelings. All children must learn to direct their focus and attend to their thinking selves in order to get along in school. For some children who did not have the opportunity to develop capacities for self-awareness, focus, attention, and metacognition, daydreaming is almost unavoidable. For other children, escaping into an inner world is a way to protect themselves from threats (real or perceived) in the outer world. The threat can be potentially danger of physical harm from classmates (bullies and bully-victims), problems at home, or factors like hunger or shoes that are too small. Children require support in developing skills like focus, attention, and metacognition, if

children fail to make progress even with support for these developmental tasks, then the reason for the daydreaming becomes the next logical focus. If the reason for the daydreaming is related to a psychological defense mechanism for any reason, the child needs and deserves support to resolve the underlying issues in order to allow for further learning, growth, and development. As always, if the child's daydreaming is connected to some form of suffering, abuse, or neglect of any kind – identification, intervention, and support are critical to allow the child to gain control of focus and attention in school.

**Disinterested or Frustrated Child** – Is this child an example of a child who has given up on learning? Here we go again, investigating the reasons behind the child's lack of interest or extreme frustration with school and the learning process is likely to uncover the roots of the problematic behavior and lead to a developmentally appropriate resolution. Some children are experiencing challenges with the material, method of instruction, or form of testing or evaluation. A child who is unable to spell correctly due to dyslexia, for example, may eventually lose the excitement of learning when teachers, peers, and family members criticize the sloppy writing and spelling often associated with dyslexia. Sometimes teachers fail to teach students enough content to allow for success in future classes; for instance, a math teacher on extended maternity leave may be temporarily replaced with a long-term substitute who is skilled at keeping the class quiet and under control but who has no background in teaching algebraic concepts. Students in that classroom may find themselves struggling in the next school year of math, as they lack knowledge of

fundamental concepts, skills, and knowledge that are critical to the ever-growing foundations of mathematical concepts.

With these special cases in mind, we see that not every disruptive child needs punishment for being lazy, disruptive, or uncooperative; instead, consider that all children are in need of one, basic thing: a developmentally appropriate response that helps the child both identify personal challenges and acquire knowledge and skills to achieve more successful behavior in school and with learning.

Discipline that is punitive in nature may sometimes be added as a secondary response to behavior challenges. At all times, parents, teachers, and administrators must remember that the word *discipline* is connected to *teaching* and *learning*, not punishment, leading to the Golden Rule for bad behavior:

#### **GOLDEN RULE FOR BAD BEHAVIOR:**

**Socially, Emotionally, and Psychologically-oriented responses are  
always appropriate, in all situations.**

### Proposing Social Dysfunction Syndrome

Children tend to exist at the center of their own personal, cosmic realities with a network of influences surrounding them. Every moment of every day social, cultural, familial, educational, and legal influences bombard them with information, often conflicting. This **Net of Influence** interacts with the child's unique biopsychosocial makeup to produce notions, emotions, attitudes, and behaviors. As such, the child's Net of Influence is a powerful predictor of much that will follow in the child's life. Institutional influences typically marginalize the importance of the child's Net of Influence and attempt to override that fundamental programming with rules and rhetoric. Conversely, responsive systems acknowledge the Net of Influence, and help the child resolve conflicts between the Net of Influence and society.

Consider the experiences of a child in school. No matter the age of the parent, the child of today faces new and complex challenges that confound adults, and can be overwhelming to a growing mind. From violence to bullying, from sexual exploitation to drugs and alcohol – schools are a place where children are certain to learn about things for which they are wholly unprepared. This phenomenon contributes to the social, emotional, and psychological developmental challenges that

overwhelm many children within school systems, posing the important question of whether the current educational climate promotes its own unique brand of Social Dysfunction Syndrome.

One obvious challenge associated with this specific Social Dysfunction Syndrome involves the role of technology within school systems. Social media presents a real danger to children. Today's parents are ill-equipped to anticipate the needs of children in social media, as this is the first generation with that familiarity. This unprecedented territory of social interaction in a cyber world is new for all of us as a society. The responsibility then falls to the collective to establish boundaries and scout red flags. Above all else, cooperation is needed to create boundaries, and an education about social media as a potential hazard to our future generations.

The online presence of peers can also impose harm to unwitting classmates. Even children whose parents limit exposure to social media and Internet content can be exposed to racy pictures, concepts, and content through peers. Inappropriate exposure to Internet and social media content transcends generations, occurring across the population of children and their families. Many upstanding parents may be too busy attending business meetings, PTA groups, or church functions to give proper attention to their children's online and social media activity. The greater the access to devices and connectivity a child has, the higher the likelihood of exposure to inappropriate content.

Children are funneled overwhelming streams of information, some of which is developmentally inappropriate. Suitability for a young

audience can be gauged by considering what and/or who the content involves. Sometimes the content involves the child in question. Some children publicly shame their peers by posting illegally-obtained pictures of children dressing in the locker room or using the toilet. Other shaming can result from mean-spirited and false social media messages that depict a child in a negative way. Children lack the emotional maturity to effectively dissipate the surrounding negative attention that can result from damaging images and messages broadcast to the student body, the community, or the web.

Sometimes children are taunted about information related to their families and friends. The old phrase “your mother wears army boots” takes on new proportions as children are able to fabricate evidence about embarrassing, illegal, or immoral information involving a student’s family or friends. Other times, classmates may unearth some deeply private information that would otherwise have remained hidden from the child’s awareness were it not for the World Wide Web. Examples of potentially destabilizing information can include private information about parentage or adoption; medical conditions; mental health statuses; addictions or substance use disorders; legal statuses; charges, convictions, or incarcerations; infidelity; abuse or violence; poverty or bankruptcy; or termination or loss of employment. Many children start school optimistically, wide-eyed and innocent, only to become disillusioned and broken as they learn first-hand about a world of hurt and shame at the hands of mean-intentioned and out-of-control peers.

In some cases, older children share content that is developmentally inappropriate for minor children, which can cause psychological disturbance and interruption of stable development. Children who discover material related to such topics as pornography, child or animal abuse, torture, self-harming, suicide, violence, murder, war, and disturbing medical information may experience intense anxiety. Such inappropriate exposure can rob a child of the innocence of youth, deeply altering the natural path of discovery coinciding with maturity into adulthood.

The social and cultural climate of schools is of additional concern. Schools that employ dominating and authoritative teachers and administrators set the stage for a culture of domination, abuse, and dysfunction. Children in such classrooms may be exposed to inappropriate social interactions within the classroom, as coercive disciplinary techniques can lead to social imbalances that result in outcomes such as anxiety, fear, teasing, and bullying.

Painful memories of recent and distant school shootings and violence are additional factors that contribute to the social, emotional, and psychological development of children. Most students are aware of past incidents of school violence, and realize on some level that their school may not be exempt. Each child must find a way to cope with the diffuse fear of violence in the classroom or on school grounds. Fears and anxieties may be heightened in communities with high crime rates, for children whose families experience domestic or intimate partner violence or child abuse, and in schools with violence issues. Children's reasonable fears and concerns must be adequately

addressed by parents, mental health professionals, and educators, and all adults must find a way to transmit a sense of confidence and safety to students so these children will be able to mentally focus, settle down, and learn.

Last but not least, we must not overlook the presence in some schools of sexual predators. In some cases, the predator may be a peer or upper class member. In other cases, abuse can happen at the hand of a school employee, volunteer, or other adult from the community. Even if the abuse happens off of school grounds; for instance, while a child is walking home, sexual predation is still a part of that child's school experience.

The sum total of these and other challenges inherent in today's educational culture present children with, simply, more than they can handle. The result is a breakdown of classroom culture, respect, and integrity. For each child, the breakdown may be even more intimate, potentially affecting a child's sense of safety, security, personal identity, privacy, and personal space. The pressures on some children have led to self-harming, violence, and suicide, pointing to the possible need to identify a new condition of childhood that can be casually labeled as a modern-day social dysfunction syndrome.

### Educational Alpha-Numeric Soup

Parents and teachers often complain about the confusing alphabet soup of acronyms that represents complex processes and strategies within the scope of special or exceptional student education. Whereas Special Education was once known as SPED, the current and more politically correct term of Exceptional Student Education Program is represented by the acronym ESEP. To further confuse the situation, a child can be enrolled in an Early Intervention Program (EIP) prior to recommendation for ESEP evaluation. Be sure not to confuse EIP with IEP, which stands for the formal Individual Education Plan under the Individuals with Disabilities Act, or IDEA.

Although the acronyms are numerous and often similar-looking, they each represent a unique idea, organization, or program important to helping developmentally at-risk youth. The abbreviations actually have a great deal to do with this book. Education is an intricate and complex practice that is fraught with specific rules, regulations, and procedures that can confound teachers, parents, and students, alike. Even when the acronyms are used with precision and specificity, the ways in which these regulations are interpreted and implemented by school personnel can be downright mystifying.

In addition to the wealth of acronyms pertaining to exceptional student education, numeric titles of programs can factor into the educational equation as well. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) provides for students with disabilities under a specification called Section 504. Children who fail to qualify for ESEP services under IDEA may instead qualify for special considerations within the school setting according Section 504 provisions to promote the access of children with disabilities to Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).

Knowing when to reach for protection under the ADA's Section 504 or IDEA's IEP is a matter of law. Parents are sometimes able to negotiate reasonable programming for their child without outside support. In other cases, parents must engage the services of advocates, attorneys, and mental health professionals to smooth the way.

While IDEA applies to children in one of thirteen recognized categories of disability, the ADA theoretically encompasses all types. Consider, for example, children with Emotional and Behavioral Disorder (EBD) who are often unable to maintain composure and thrive in the educational setting. Such children may require specialized support to help them develop capacities for impulse control, emotional self-regulation, attention, and focus.

When a child's behavior is the manifestation of a disability, the school is prohibited from disciplinary action and must focus, instead, on following the provisions of the child's IEP or Section 504 Plan. However, when children do become disruptive in school, the line between protected behaviors and ones that are subject to disciplinary response can blur. For example, a student who rocks and yells when

the class gets loud and disruptive may be addressed in one of two ways, depending upon the interpretation by teachers and/or school administration:

- 1) Intervention - The student's behavior could be interpreted as a manifestation or symptom of EBD, triggering the school to respond with a predetermined intervention protocol to help the student self-calm and develop capacities to maintain composure.
- 2) Disciplinary Action – The student's behavior could be interpreted as an attempt to participate in the class's disruptive and noisy and disorderly outburst. Viewed as willful behavior on the part of the child, the school would enact a disciplinary response, which could include detention, suspension, or even expulsion.

This type of behavioral challenge is common among children with certain forms of Autism Spectrum Disorder, especially when combined with a sensory processing disorder that makes it difficult to manage noises, lights, and crowds.

Children who are victims of previous trauma, abuse, neglect, or pathological parenting can also be highly dysregulated. They can be emotionally unsteady enough that the instability, itself, becomes a disability. Even if that child is keeping pace academically, he or she could be legally considered to have a disability qualifying for modifications under Section 504. The Section 504 plan helps set up provisions for the child to have access to supportive and intervention services to ease difficult experiences, while promoting the skills to cope with future instances.

For students with intense developmental challenges, emotional disorders, mental health challenges, or developmental trauma or disruption of attachment development, the classroom can be a dangerous place. These children can have multiple emotional breakdowns in a single day. I have witnessed clients who hid under desks, rocked in bathroom stalls, or ran directly out of the school in attempts to drown out the sounds and experiences distressing them.

Unfortunately, school personnel are not typically trained in identifying manifestations of emotional, developmental, mental health, and behavioral problems. Consequently, school administration often responds to these situations with disciplinary responses that further aggravate the child's preexisting problems. As a result, I have had to repeatedly oppose teachers and administrators who overrule the recommendations of a student's pediatric or mental health professional in favor of punishment.

A common response to my challenge of administrators and teachers is that they, themselves, are education professionals and they can recognize misbehavior when they see it. I struggle to explain that to an untrained eye the manifestations of mental health, disability, and developmental disorder can appear identical to general "bad behavior" in a typical child; but to the mental health professional, and often to the parent of the child, the child's distress from causes unseen is glaringly loud.

To demonstrate the futility and senselessness of this inappropriate punishment, I provide this example to parents, teachers, and administrators:

**You cannot punish a child for behavior that is  
connected to a disability any more than you can  
punish a child without legs for not running in gym class.**

Sadly, I often find that school staff remain resolute in their determination that the child's misbehavior is willful. Some of these precious children are punished for displaying symptoms of PTSD from severe trauma and abuse. Other children could simply be high-strung products of violent and dangerous homes and neighborhoods whose behavior is easily triggered by displays of aggression. These children's responses could merely be protective reflexes against perceived danger, yet instead of being met with care and reassurance, are met with severe disciplinary action and even involvement with the juvenile justice system.

When I work with a child exhibiting problematic behavior connected to an emotional, developmental, or mental health disability, I encourage the parents to initiate the process for Section 504 planning. Often the child's pediatrician is able to complete the form by defining the nature of the child's disability. Sometimes a mental health or behavioral professional may consult with the pediatrician to identify an appropriate plan for responding to the child's problematic behavior within the school setting. The school participates in reviewing the proposed plan and typically engages in a negotiation of terms

acceptable to the school, the parents, and the professional(s) representing the child.

In my experience as an advocate for children, schools are willing to set up provisions but have difficulty implementing them. Parents and advocates must often work hard to reverse or amend unfortunate school disciplinary actions that are as insulting to the child as the hypothetical expulsion of a student without legs for failure to participate in track and field activities in gym class.

One solution to the *Dead Children Can't Read* dilemma is to secure protection under an IEP or Section 504 plan for children with behavioral and violence issues that are manifestations of a documented disability. This strategy may prove a good first line of defense against the grossly disproportionate number of incarcerations of African-American males, many of whom have their first encounter with the juvenile justice system while still in school. Schools are obligated to provide adequate support to students with disabilities, even when the symptoms of those disabilities look like anger, rage, or disruptive behavior. Children must never be allowed to act out violently toward others, but children do deserve supportive services to work through their challenges and develop the capacities of self-regulation and self-restraint. Over time, these students can learn to self-identify their triggers, calm themselves, talk through their feelings, and remain focused and productive.

This benefits the child by providing the space and support to heal and grow to become an effective and capable student. The school benefits from the addition of another successful, well-behaved student who is a

testament to the benefits of educational intervention, and society benefits from the addition of another contributory citizen.

In addition, our economy benefits from this strategy. The substantial financial cost of incarceration in America drains our country of funding for productive programs, not to mention the emotional costs associated with both the incarcerated person and his or her loved ones. The identification and early intervention of behavioral problems associated with a disability costs only a fraction of the expense associated with long-term incarceration of a child crossing over to the juvenile justice and criminal justice systems.

Focused planning for protection and intervention under the provisions of the IDEA and ADA is needed for many students suffering from emotional, developmental, and behavioral challenges. Our educational system currently fails to provide this safety net, sometimes causing undue early expulsions, unnecessary involvement with law enforcement, and an eventual transition into the American criminal justice system, which creates trauma in itself. It is time to end this senseless cycle of pain and begin the cycle of healing.

### Simple Steps to Getting Back on Track

Parents, educators, administrators, staff, and school district personnel must come together to declare their ethical orientation to the needs of developing children within the educational system. These adults are the stakeholders in the lives of the children and have the most interaction and impact on their lives. Because the very presence of these stakeholders can influence children's behaviors, it is in the best interest of our educational system as a whole for stakeholders to embrace their roles and take responsibility for the children under their care.

To get back on track with developmental education in our schools, stakeholders can identify children in need of help and take the following simple steps below:

- **Evaluation** - Get the child in question evaluated by a qualified mental health professional.
- **Partnership** - Have the parent/child sign a release form allowing mental health professionals – those with the education, training, and background to effectively assess the child – to fully participate as partners in the collaboration process.

- **Treatment** - Insist that the child's developmentally-based outbursts and behaviors are met with treatment, intervention, and education to fill developmental gaps.
- **Positive Usage** - Use positive findings from the evaluation and treatment to fuel accommodations, modifications, and protections for Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and Section 504 Plans for learning disabilities and/or ADHD in public schools.
- **Collaboration** - Call on other stakeholders to collaborate in this process.
- **Retention** - Retain focus on developmental learning and growth as the primary application of any educational, psychological, or juvenile justice-related services.

Look to community leaders to identify further solutions to promote favorable developmental outcomes for all children. Educator and leader Ron Clark has set forth a strong model for maintaining a classroom of integrity and respect, which is articulated in his books and related teaching materials. Meanwhile, the seminal works of Lev Vygotsky, Arnold Goldstein, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Albert Bandura contribute to an understanding of the subtle but vital factors that promote healthy child development. Teachers can embrace this notion of a classroom of compassion in order to raise up children who are

sensitive to the needs and feelings of others. We should look to each classroom to provide the loving and caring support to uplift each child – no matter his or her personal circumstances – to become an effective citizen who is above violence and the desire to harm others. In this way, we ensure the health, safety, and happiness of all children.

### Declaring a Solution

A first, practical step to address the myriad challenges disrupting the healthy development of today's students is for classrooms, schools, and systems to define a common learning constitution and verbalize a specific list of **Vital Capacities**. In order to design a vital, effective, and developmentally supportive school constitution, school systems must consider the following pieces of information:

*Continued on next page ...*

**Article #1:** Schools and systems must amend hiring practices to require teachers, administrators, and staff who articulate in attitude and demeanor the following **Vital Capacities**:

- i. Ethics
- ii. Integrity
- iii. Respect
- iv. Compassion
- v. Sensitivity to Similarities & Differences of Others
- vi. Authentic Caring
- vii. Responsibility
- viii. True Commitment to Betterment of Individual Students and Student Body
- ix. Willingness to Learn and Grow to Meet the Needs of Individual Students and Student Body
- x. Inspiration

**Article #2:** Adults in schools shall at all times model appropriate attitudes and behaviors that articulate the **Vital Capacities**.

**Article #3:** Classrooms, public areas, and private meeting spaces must conform to the standards of **Vital Capacities** on all days and at all times.

**Article #4:** Healthy development and maturation of children into compassionate and responsible adults become the primary focus of the educational system; academic learning becomes the secondary focus.

**Article #5:** All activities in schools shall be strictly oriented toward and around developmentally-appropriate childrearing and educational practices.

**Article #6:** All forms of evaluation, assessment, instruction, and intervention shall be ethically oriented around developmentally appropriate **Vital Capacities** that are adjusted to the child's age and developmental status.

**Article #7:** All discipline shall be instructionally oriented and developmentally supportive.

**Article #8:** Schools shall support families in uplifting effective humans who become positive contributors to family, community, and society and who demonstrate effective citizenship.

**Article #9:** The surrounding community shall nurture and uplift the school, the child, the family, and the stakeholders in the student's life in order to promote healthy child development and further strengthen the local community.

### **Fast Tracking Social, Emotional, & Psychological Development**

Shared social agreements are powerful directors of awareness and reality. Children learn about social agreements that are expressed as laws, rules, regulations, boundaries, and manners. Learning begins early as parents stop children from crawling toward the stairs or picking up old gum and putting it in their mouths. The parental reaction helps the child recognize things that are dangerous or taboo, and over time the child is able to extract an understanding of a structured social order for rules about safety, lawfulness, attire, decorum, and communication.

The early social programming is arguably the most dramatic, setting the stage for the child's awareness that rules exist. The larger the parental reaction, the more quickly the child realizes that a boundary has been set. For example, most parents vehemently object when a baby tries to place an object like a discarded cigarette butt or an old piece of chewing gum in their mouth. Reactions to less objectionable things, like banging a little too hard on the toy drum or dropping food on the floor during mealtime, typically receive smaller corrections. Another example involves helping children learn to control the volume of their voices. A parent might gently try to quiet a child who is

squealing in the grocery store or at the park. Put the same parent, child, and scenario in a different venue, such as a library, doctor's office, or place of worship, and the parent is likely to respond much more aggressively.

This structure of parental responses, modulated to match the intensity of the need for safety or social order, helps the child to recognize a complex set of rules to live by. Over time, parents transmit increasingly more complex instructions about the rules of society. *NEVER go outside without your pants on. NEVER tell grandma you hate the sweater she made for your birthday. Be QUIET in library. Do NOT swear in church. Don't EVER speak to me like that again.*

Many conscientious parents, educators, and administrators have been aware of the ethical and developmental deficiencies within the American educational system. Efforts to impose Character Education on children proved grossly insufficient by the lack of a substantive, ethical culture on which to carry it out. I watched in dismay as eager teachers introduced inner city elementary students to concepts like *perseverance*, when many of them were struggling with critical challenges like lack of safety and trust, food insecurity (chronic lack of nutrition), domestic violence, abuse, and neglect. Instead of being a fertile ground for child character growth, transmitting messages of caring, compassion, integrity, respect, and responsibility, the educational culture instead killed those ideas off, proclaiming them less important than academic pursuits.

Character education could never help most of those precious children overcome those serious deficiencies in basic care and protection. A

developmentally appropriate curriculum would have, instead, focused on helping the children explore ways to feel safe, cared for, and protected. Educational, mental health, and developmental experts within each community can serve as divining rods to direct the focus of school improvement boards in the direction of developmentally sound and ethical practices leading to wholesome learning environments.

Stakeholders aware of the current epidemic of Social Dysfunction Syndrome running rampant in our nation's schools must unite to voice their support for a new educational model. Schools, parents, teachers, administrators, and community stakeholders can connect to create potent and effective paradigms for social change. Only when children witness adults actively take charge of crafting and nurturing a developmentally ethical and sound educational system will they find the support they need to grow within a school community. Ultimately, promoting the social, emotional, and psychological development of each individual child, creates an entire student body that is ripe and ready to learn.

## About the Author



### Darleen Claire Wodzenski

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A mother and grandmother, Darleen Claire Wodzenski is a National Speaker and Author as well as Clinical Mental Health Counselor, Special Education Advocate, and Teacher and Parent Trainer. She brings a passion for helping children with learning and developmental challenges, drawing from an extensive background in brain-based investigation and practice. This title is one of a series of therapeutic and solution-focused books that shine a light on critical issues in the lives of children and youth. Please visit [OrchardHumanServices.org](http://OrchardHumanServices.org) if you would like to arrange for Darleen Claire to speak at your organization's conference, convention, or training event.

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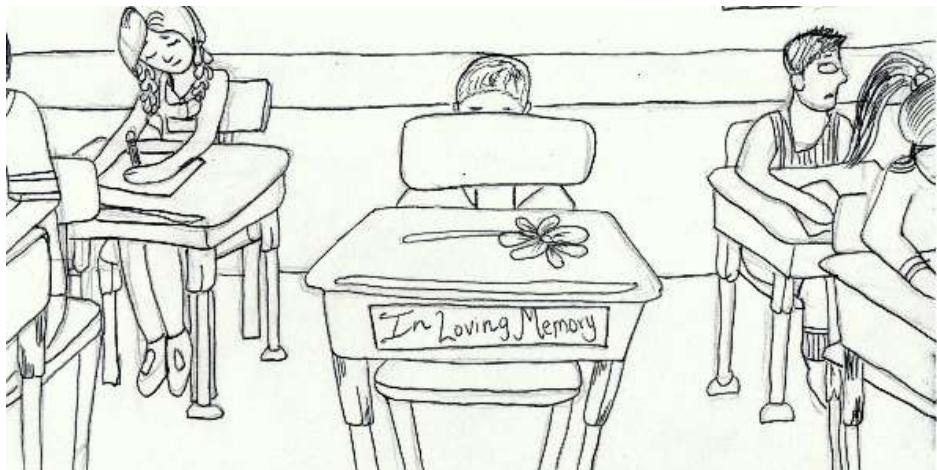
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