

Playing the Panda Bullies and the Search for Resilience

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Geoffrey looked like a cuddly bear. A big mop of reddish hair that never seemed to be combed, freckles, a little fleshy around the arms and midriff, the way adolescent boys can get when their appetites are healthy, their bodies about to sprout, and their diet a seemingly endless snackbar of potato chips, softdrinks, and pizza, with the occasional green leafy vegetable snuck onto their plates. You likely know a child like Geoffrey. He usually sat at the back of my grade seven homeroom, slouched, his legs spread, doodling. Most days he seemed completely inoffensive, just another mediocre student teachers might have forgotten about if not for Geoffrey's knack of finding victims for his cruelty.

I was one of those victims, and I find myself often thinking about Geoffrey. Though I'm certain I'd have traded in my good marks if it could have made him notice me less, we remained glued to one another. Geoffrey needed someone's shoulders to stand on. He needed someone he could put down, intimidate and tease. He needed this someone if he was going to find a way out of that mediocre cesspit that breeds hopelessness in lower-class white kids from stable rural communities. Geoffrey knew he was going nowhere. His solution, it seemed, was to defiantly make a claim to whatever fame was close at hand.

I was an easy mark. I had been advanced a grade when I moved to Northern Ontario from Montreal just before turning 11, and I was smaller than the other boys. I did well at school. Most days, teachers liked me – or at least could ignore me.

But Geoffrey's abusive behaviour made the first three months of grade seven a long horrendous slog. Stomach aches didn't get me out of class. Hiding during lunch didn't let me avoid the taunts, punches and threats as I was routinely routed out of my quiet spaces and forced onto the playground by well-intentioned, rule-abiding teachers. I said nothing, of course, about what I was experiencing.

The Children at the Back of the Class

I'd like to say that this was all one awful experience. I'd like to tell you that Geoffrey was eventually caught and disciplined for what he was doing to me and to others. But that would not be entirely true. Instead, I'd like to thank Geoffrey. He planted the seed of an idea that would take another 25 years to bloom. Looking back at Geoffrey, I can now see that he was not a bad kid, but a kid like me who each morning rose out of bed and made the simple promise to himself: "Today I'm going to do whatever I have to do to survive!" And he did. He survived quite well, given the few personal, social and family resources he had.

Intervening with children like Geoffrey can be challenging. It can be even more challenging to convince those who control human and financial resources to put money where it is needed to implement the few programs we know work with these children. Multi-systemic therapy, wrap-

around, family group conferencing, intensive and well-supported foster care, after-school in-home supports, continuums of care: all these ideas now resonate with human service professionals who are experiencing success dealing with the most troubled children and their families. Each of these approaches shares common elements: they are community based, integrated services that are child-centered and family focused, socially and culturally competent, and respectful of the unique contexts in which they are used.

These resources work best, however, when we understand why they work. For years, I have either worked with, consulted about, or studied children who present with the four D's: delinquent, dangerous, deviant and disordered. Children who most need service come with one and frequently more of these labels firmly attached. Each label velcros to children, on the one hand constraining their options, on the other providing them a perfect script for how to play out their vulnerability. It is no coincidence that children perform their identities as one of these four D's in ever more creative ways.

The Problem with Labels

Taking my lead from children themselves, I resist labeling kids. I realize diagnoses are a shorthand way that professionals and other adults refer to children. But they are also totalizing. They define the child's life by one singular aspect of his or her narrative, or life story. A bully is not only a bully. He is also the son who must care for a mother when she is tired and hurting from the abuse she has had to endure from a husband who drinks. The bully is also the victim, ever under surveillance, ever vigilant to the truth that others want to lay upon him. These are children guarded against the fact that they have few prospects for the future, that they are not bright enough, strong enough, diligent enough, nor loved enough to succeed. If we put aside the labels, lay down the binoculars that we have been looking through backwards, appreciate the world momentarily from the point of view of these children themselves, we learn something about violent youth, about their victims, and about what effective ways of raising these children have eluded us in our conventional discourse. It all starts with hearing them talk about their lives on their own terms.

I never spoke with Geoffrey about his behaviour, of course. But looking back I can see there was much more going on in that classroom than I understood at the time. Geoffrey really wanted to be the class clown. He just couldn't quite pull it off. That's because there was a girl in our class who was a wise-cracking cussing angry grll who could – as sweetly as could be – kick a boy full force in the groin, then smile and step over him as he lay on the ground throwing up. Geoffrey, I think, wanted her power too, and it was easier to get than mine. All he had to do was to be every bit as evil.



Geoffrey became known among the boys for his sexually explicit jokes, his accounts of older brothers who let him peek while they had sex with girlfriends. He found in the pages of pornography the stories he needed to shock my pubescent peers and me. All this made relationships with Geoffrey more complicated. Though we were trying, like small sailing boats in a busy harbour, to stay out of Geoffrey's wake, there was something that pulled us to follow him from a distance and listen to his bathroom wisdom.

Children's Search for Resilience

Thankfully, we now have the means to help children like Geoffrey. One way of understanding these children – once I put aside the labels – is to understand them as searching for resilience. Over and over again they tell me that they navigate their way to definitions of themselves that are as healthy as they can be. Geoffrey taught me that children will adapt to survive.

In my practice I have found that children, when given a respectful space to tell their stories, talk about how adaptive their coping strategies are. I have come to like children like Geoffrey. I identify with their desire to survive as best they can with what they have. They adapt – but they are hopelessly trapped by their inability to adapt in any way other than through their problem behaviours. Isolated in these singular patterns of behaviour, they are like the great pandas of China.

Playing the Panda

Pandas have very little capacity to change. No matter where they are taken, they will eat only a few varieties of bamboo or perish. They simply cannot adapt, which is why encroachment on their traditional mountain territory has proved so fatal to their numbers. Not surprisingly, many of the high-risk youth who most resist changing their behaviours are also those who have committed themselves to a limited range of strategies, to one identity that brings with it the success they need to feel powerful. It's not that they can't change; it's that frequently their families, schools, communities, and we professionals offer them no other more powerful identity.

In my experience, most bullies – if we are to call them that – describe themselves as Pandas. And yet, in their own

descriptions of their behaviour, I hear stories of resilience. I hear about victimized children who learn to victimize others. I hear about children with little sense of who they are or what they have to offer. I hear about lives lived in the neutered wastelands of secure suburbs where there are few risks, few rites of passage, and even less attention to a child's need to impress others. Oddly, we often forget that advantaged children bully too. They can intimidate through overt consumerism, keeping others in their place through the misguided notion that "I am what I can buy."

My description of bullies draws me away from understanding them as victims, victimizers or some combination of both. Instead, the bullies I meet implicate their families, schools and communities in the unfortunate drama that becomes their lives. They say that their behaviour actually has many benefits. In fact prevention programs that inadvertently discuss bullying as a way children gain power over others sometimes have the unintended consequence of increasing episodes of bullying in schools.

The problem, then, is one that schools alone are sorely inadequate to address. The powerful identity that the bully finds at school is one that he or she transposes from one set of relationships to the next. We may be able to control the Geoffrey's in our classrooms, but we don't change them unless they find other identities every bit as powerful as the one we ask them to shed. Fortunately, because children are embedded in matrices of relationships, the vast warp of positive associations and weave of negative attention found in all communities can offer children endless possibilities to develop new ways of being themselves.

Of course, the other piece of this puzzle is the victims, the children who are bullied. We have a responsibility to keep them safe, to create environments where they can flourish in ways other than as victims. I believe we are most effective when we help Pandas, those children stuck in their identities as worthless, to be better at navigating between peer groups. Bullied children, like I was, are far less of a target for bullies when they are able to take on multiple identities. When they have the capacity to define themselves clearly as something other than the victim that the bully needs, when they are able to assert "No, you got it wrong, I'm not who you think I am. This is who I am," then they can begin to resist the role of victim.

Indeed, somewhere in this understanding of children's search for a powerful story about themselves, we as helping professionals and educators are going to find what we need to help better. Looking critically at our own paths to power and acceptance is a first step if we are to engage with children in an honest conversation about what works and what doesn't work when they search for resilience. Only then can we see clearly the unfortunately destructive expressions of resilience found in these "problem" children and offer them alternatives that even a Panda might try. ★

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