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# A POUND OF PREVENTION: TEACHER'S GUIDE TO BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

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## THEY MUST BE IN

They come to school with one big urge: to be liked by the other children, to find a place they can fit in.

It is not a question of being in or out; IN they have to be. Children have only one choice: to be in on something good or to be in on something bad.

No child can stand to be ignored.

It feels better to be noticed for swearing, or for mistakes, or for forgetting, or for silliness, than not to be noticed at all.

Boasters, bullies, bad boys: it feels better to be in with them than to be in with nobody. Children cannot bear to be left out in the cold.

IN they must be. To get in children will do babyish things. To get in they will do forbidden things. But they *will* get in. Children are like that. At their age they cannot stand the loneliness.

Starting to school brings it all out. A new group. A new gang. New friends. This is the magnet that draws them on. Until they know that they are accepted, you cannot get the best work out of them. "Belonging" is the strongest pull.

## A GOOD FEELING TO HAVE

Once they do get IN, then you see a wonderful thing. You see children who feel set up. You see them find confidence.

You see them become better learners. The "belonging" frees them. It shakes them loose from wondering and worrying. They can put their minds on what lies at hand and pay attention better.

You see them change into better workers. They feel a push ahead and can give themselves to the jobs they have. They are IN and what happens matters to them; there is more point in what they do.

## NOW IS THE TIME

This is your job for as long as you teach. It is something you can give to all children when they start to school. But the troubled young-

sters especially need this now. They need a strong, warm glow that will make up for many things they missed.

Some hurt youngsters have been kept constantly on the jump—car trips, trailer living, housing projects, temporary quarters—they never had a chance to send their roots down.

And some have had just plain too many mothers. Gerald, for example, had nine of them. There was his own mother, Number 1, but that mother worked. There was neighbor-mother, Number 2, who kept an eye on Gerry. There was grandmother, Number 3. And maid-mothers, Numbers 4 and 5 and 6. Then Gerald went to a child care center; there he had teacher-mothers, Numbers 7, 8 and 9. No one stayed put long enough to give Gerald the feeling that he was IN.

Many children have had a better break. But for all youngsters these are hard years to be a child growing up. There is a tenseness in the air and the children breathe it. Parents are tired . . . nerves are on edge . . . the children carry inside of them the products of this strain.

“Belonging” can do for them the good things that it does to people. It can help them settle down into themselves; it can give them the chance to relax; it can fill them with the feelings that satisfy. “Belonging” is like having a full meal or a night’s sound sleep. One of their most important needs as people has been met. These children need this now.

“Belonging” is not something that automatically happens, but the stage is set: these children are ready now to come to school; they will come wanting other children to like them. It is up to you to give them a helping hand.

### SPOT THE MINORITIES

Some children are the lucky ones. They never are left out in the cold.

Sometimes their families are the answer: they live like most other families in the town; the world is with them. Their families have a real place of their own, their families belong . . . and the children are IN. They are accepted wherever they go.

These lucky children lead majority lives. Your problem is to spot those who live in the minority way. These are the children who may need “belonging” the most.

There are no simple tricks for doing this; minorities are different from town to town. You have to think about it, to study your own community, to do whatever you feel will make you more sensitive.

It may be the newcomer child . . . or the foreign-born . . . the child whose father works with his hands . . . the one who goes to a different church . . . the poorer child . . . the one with the darker color. The more you can be ready to help him, the better his chance to break IN.

Sometimes children are the answer: they have their heroes and the ones they dislike. Can you pick out the one who may be the goat: the child with big glasses? the one who is fat? the person too tall for his age or too short? the one who seems to have sissy ways? the child with a physical handicap?

### PULL THEM IN, DON'T PUSH THEM OUT

You want all children to belong, but you have to be on your toes. Without your even knowing it, some things you do may make it hard for all to get in.

Watch your publicity.

What do you praise and always call attention to? Cleanliness? Promptness? Politeness? Neatness? Quiet?

Broaden your list of good deeds. Make it so broad that every child can win some renown. Make your room one where all skills get publicity.

And watch your discipline.

You have to have rules and order in your room. A school cannot run without them. But if you clamp down too hard, some children will be pushed out.

If you are always the BOSS . . .

If all the time you tell them what to do . . .

If you never smile and if you are harsh . . .

If you push too hard to get your way . . .

The children have to find an out. They cannot get back at you; you have the upper hand. But without their knowing why they do it, they will find a scapegoat. They will begin riding someone . . . picking on him . . . pushing him out. That is their way of getting even.

So have rules but go easy with them. Smile and have a good time too. Be strict if you must but don't be harsh. Don't make your children find a scapegoat because you put too much pressure on them.

And beware of labels. Children live up to their tags.

Lazy. Slow. Pokey.

Dirty. Stupid. Mean.

Naughty. Crazy. Bad.

If you have to label a child, give him a name that makes him one with the group, rather than something that pulls him apart.

And when you discipline, do it face to face.

Be honest. Be straightforward and direct. But go easy with the public reprimand. You know how you feel when a policeman yells at you in public. Your ears tingle; your face smarts; you want to crawl into a hole in the ground. When you are "spanked" in public you do not always want to do better the next time; sometimes you are simply downright mad.

Children are the same as you. Embarrassment, shame and sarcasm—these are scissors which are much too sharp. They cut the children off from the group and they cut them away from you.

Never force a child to take an "out" position as his only way of getting IN.

#### AND LAST: MAKE ALLOWANCES

The children who are not IN are the ones who will cause you trouble. They are the ones who do silly things.

They can be the show-offs—the noisy ones, the daredevils, the boasters, the children who always have to do the simple things in a slightly different and aggravating way.

They can be disobedient—the children who talk back, who purposely cause trouble, the children who come late, the ones who find little ways that can make you awfully mad.

They can be the bad students—the children who forget, who lose their books, who do not pay attention, the ones who make you think that they are lazy.

These children are caught in a vicious circle. They do all their annoying things in the hope that somehow they will get IN. They do things to make somebody notice them. If you ignore them, they have to demand attention more; if you are too hard on them, you push them further out. It is a hard circle to break.

You have to make allowances.

You have to take what is biting them into account and let that temper what you do.

#### WORK IS CHILD'S PLAY

"This business of going easy on children! I'm not sure that's right. What they need is someone to make them toe the mark. Maybe it wasn't their fault, but some of these children try to get away with a

lot. I think it is high time that someone told these youngsters where to get off. I think they ought to be made to work. That's what I think. Meeting their emotional needs and going easy on them. . . . None of that wishy-washy stuff for me!"

Have you ever felt like blowing up this way?

If you have . . .

### HOLD EVERYTHING

No one is saying that!

These children had a hard time . . . yes.

Some of them are pretty mixed up . . . yes. They can cause you a lot of trouble in school. Some of them may do silly things and not mind you very well. Some of them may seem lazy and they may not pay attention and they may not work nearly up to their capacity. All this is right.

And it is not the children's fault. Yes, again.

They do not want to be that way. They are not naturally shirkers or dreamers or devils. Something has happened to them. Life—growing up—has made them the way they are. Living with worried parents, all the change and upset, the strain and the tension and the mixed-up family life. . . . It is not the children's fault. However they act, it is because of what happened to them before they came to school.

Right again. But the "go-easy" business—no one says that is the only thing to do.

These children can change. They do not have to stay the way they are. They need a lot of affection and understanding from you; you can call that "going easy" if you want to. But children really want to work. Give them the chance and you give them stability. But you will never do it if you think "going easy" is the only way.

### THE VERY OPPOSITE IS TRUE

You would be surprised at how much these children want to learn. All children do. It is one of children's strongest drives.

You do not have to make them; this is what children want to do. They want to learn, to grow up, to be more and more able. They want to look the world right in the face and understand it and fit into it. This is what learning means. It is another of children's emotional needs. There is no "going easy" about it.