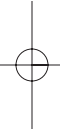
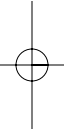
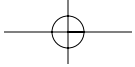


Part One



The Changing Context of Child Development





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“Something’s Gone Way Wrong”

By the time high school students cross the stage to receive their diplomas, they have spent barely 10 percent of their lives in school. School may have been their activity center—the place where they have gathered, made friends, worked, and played. And as the commencement speaker suggests, school may have developed skills and awakened interests that prove lifelong—perhaps even life-shaping—for some graduates; we should never underestimate the potential of a teacher to affect a student. But nine-hundred-plus hours of schooling per year, spread over thirteen of a graduate’s eighteen years of life, offer a relatively small window for influence. Indeed, by the time they finish school, typical seniors have been spending three hours in front of the television for every two in class. For quite a while, it has been clear that the impact on students of their many thousands of nonschool hours are complicating and undermining the efforts of teachers. I thought I knew this, but I rediscovered it vividly when I had to go back to dance duty.

For the entire thirty years after I left teaching I didn’t have to chaperone a high school dance; I never missed it once. Then my wife became a high school principal, and I found myself on dance duty again. My first event was the “Semi-formal.” It was breathtaking. It could have been the *Semi-nude*, given the tiny, tight tops and tiny, tight skirts the girls wore—two postage stamps connected by a kite string, a matching shiny loincloth. It could have been the

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Semi-safe sex, given the dancing the students did—safe only because they were not actually naked and not actually having intercourse; they just looked like they were. They were freak dancing. If you haven't seen this, you ought to. It's just what the Baptists have always said dancing would lead to. Here's how one reporter described it:

It looks like sex, but it's dancing. . . . A girl might be on all fours, with one boy's pelvis pressed into her face and another's pressed into her bottom. [School officials] see boys on their backs with girls spread-eagled over them; girls bent forward with boys' hips thrust into their backsides. Students know it by different names in different towns: freaking, grinding, jacking, booty dancing, the nasty. . . . Articles of clothing sometimes come off.¹

I felt like a dinosaur.

I wasn't alone. A teacher, surveying the dance floor, said, "Every time I see this, I can't help thinking that something's gone way wrong." As we talked, I remembered myself as a new teacher in the late 1960s. Back then, I had dismissed the dinosaurs of that era who thought miniskirts and long hair and the way teenagers (and we young adults) danced were signs of decadence; I had been sure I'd never become one. Watching the dancers, I reminded myself that the waltz was scandalously sexual when it was introduced in the early nineteenth century; so was Elvis Presley wiggling his hips in the 1950s. Today, of course, the waltz is a relic and Elvis is easy listening. The new and dangerous inevitably become old and quaint; radicals inevitably become dinosaurs. And yet, something really does seem different about many aspects of child and adolescent behavior today. It is hard to imagine a world in which freak dancing turns out to be as comparatively staid as Elvis now is, let alone the waltz. I haven't met an adult who can watch it without feeling that something has gone way wrong.

Freak dancing, by itself, is not a perfect symbol for America's youth—the top students in most schools perform at levels far higher than anyone could have predicted back when Elvis was the rage—but it's an accurate one. To the professionals who teach and treat children, the idea that something has gone way wrong isn't just an occasional observation to be made at school dances; it's a constant, gnawing certainty, visible in a host of symptoms, not all as vivid as freak dancing but many more important and more worrisome. Teachers, child care workers, pediatricians, and human service providers are, as John D'Auria, principal of the middle school in Wellesley, Massachusetts, notes, our nation's seismographs; they register the tremors of social trouble early and keenly.² For some time now, there has been broad agreement among them that far too many of America's young people are showing steep declines in their performance, behavior, and values. In 1990, a special commission cosponsored by the American Medical Association concluded that for the first time in American history children were "less healthy, less cared for, [and] less prepared for life than their parents were at the same age."³ In 2003, the Commission on Children at Risk confirmed this trend, pointing to "high and rising rates of depression, anxiety, attention deficit, conduct disorders," as well as suicide.⁴ The public at large shares the professionals' concern, though from a different perspective. In survey after survey, two-thirds of Americans, when asked what comes to mind when they think about teenagers, choose adjectives like *rude*, *irresponsible*, and *wild*; for younger children they choose *lacking discipline* and *spoiled*. Forty-one percent complain that teenagers have poor work habits; nearly 90 percent feel that it is rare for youth to treat people with respect.⁵

To most child development professionals and to much of the general public, the immediate cause of these declines lies with parents. Large proportions of those surveyed say it is very common for parents to have children before they are ready to take responsibility for them, that they are far too permissive and have let standards slip, and that they no longer teach children good moral values.

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Interestingly, parents themselves agree with these critiques. Fewer than 20 percent of them think it's very common for their fellow parents to be good role models and teach children right from wrong. Half feel it is routine for their peers to equate buying things for children with caring for them, and most say that couples divorce too easily, without regard for their offspring, and fail to discipline them sufficiently. It is easy to engage almost anyone in discussions that move in these directions. Of course, public opinion surveys are suggestive but not conclusive. They often tell us what the conventional wisdom is, not more. In this case, however, we have reason for real worry; the conventional wisdom is on target. Virtually anyone can confirm in the course of ordinary daily living the evidence of deterioration in the behavior and attitudes of young people and their parents. The clearest proof is found at school.

Over the past ten years I have spoken with educators from several thousand schools across the country—public and private, elementary and secondary, urban and suburban, large and small, rich and poor—and have visited nearly six hundred schools myself. Without exception, teachers and principals report that students are harder to reach and teach, their attention and motivation harder to sustain, their language and behavior more provocative—and at ever earlier ages. They also note that parents are increasingly anxious about their children's success, yet increasingly unavailable to support and guide them, and increasingly distrustful and critical of the school.

"It's an utterly different world," a high school headmaster recently said. "We're seeing more performance and conduct problems than ever before, and more of the exceptionally serious kind. We can't keep up with parents' relentless expectations and we can't get used to their inability to engage with their kids and to set clear limits on them." When asked why he and his teachers didn't set clearer limits on behavior themselves—he had been complaining not just about students freak dancing but about them making out in the corridors and trashing the cafeteria—he shook his head. "We do try,"

he said, "though in all honesty, not as hard as we used to, largely because the parents almost never back us up."

From the schoolhouse, the crisis looms as two pyramids: the first of children, the second of parents. At the very top of each the problems are the most dramatic but rarest; lower down they become less intense and more common. We begin with children.

Pyramids of Problems: Children

The peak of the child pyramid is occupied by acts of violence that, although truly exceptional, are the extreme examples of a much broader pattern of problem behavior. When I first began this chapter, four consecutive years had been marked by eruptions of school murders that at first stunned the nation—episodes in Alaska, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Kentucky, Mississippi, Oregon, and Pennsylvania in which students, some of them not yet teenagers, shot and killed teachers and schoolmates, sometimes in large numbers. The preceding decade had seen much publicity and concern about acts of lethal violence by urban youth, such as drive-by shootings and gang assaults. Although the nation's crime rates have dropped noticeably, episodes of school violence continue. As I was revising the chapter, students in Arizona, California, Maryland, Minnesota, and Washington killed or seriously wounded fellow students at school. By some estimates more than 135,000 students bring a gun to school each day. More than 125,000 teachers are attacked physically by students each year. Some urban high schools now start very early in the morning and dismiss early in the afternoon without serving lunch because students are too unruly in the cafeteria to be controlled. And many high schools I visit report more outbreaks of fighting both among competing teams and among spectators (notably parents) in sports from boys' football to girls' volleyball—fighting that sometimes results in serious injury and even, occasionally, in death.

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Less extreme but far more extensive is an accelerating trend toward behavior that, though not violent, is antisocial. Here are a few episodes cited by educators at schools I've recently visited:

- Third graders scrawl graffiti on the walls of the school's main hallway.
- Sixth graders break into the school office, photocopy classmates' report cards, and distribute them at a party.
- Ninth graders pursue a year-long, organized, carefully planned scheme of cheating on tests and exams.
- Tenth graders create a Web site devoted to attacks on a teacher, accusing her, among other things, of having sex with various colleagues; later they attack individual students in the same way, inviting visitors to post their own derogatory remarks about the victims.
- Eleventh-grade boys download hundreds of pornographic pictures from the Internet onto computers in the school library.
- Seniors at one school publish a "scum sheet" accusing some classmates of drug abuse and ridiculing the appearance, race, and religion of others; seniors at another school use a new technology lab to produce sophisticated counterfeit \$20 bills.
- Students at a boarding school secretly videotape a boy and a girl having sex in a dorm room, use their computers to copy the tape onto compact discs, and distribute these throughout the campus.

Events like these cause no physical harm, but they threaten a school's "psychosocial safety," its sense of community, and its norms

of fairness. They damage the confidence and trust of all students, not just those who are slandered, and threaten all students' freedom to express themselves. But the larger concern they raise is about fundamental issues of character, responsibility, and values. When officials at the boarding school disciplined not only the students who made the videotape but those who watched it, many of the latter insisted they had done nothing wrong. "What kind of young people are we raising in this country?" asks an administrator there. "How have we managed to produce such insensitivity, such thoughtless cruelty—and so little sense of responsibility?"

Finally, at the base of the student problem pyramid, at the least extreme but broadest level, teachers and administrators see a growing crisis of readiness, one that involves the fundamentals of learning, working, and being part of a group. It is reflected in symptoms like these:

- More children, beginning with the very young, start school lacking the basics of organization and cooperation on which schooling depends—how to follow directions, form a line, listen while someone else speaks, share toys, and engage in age-appropriate cooperative play. Preschool and elementary teachers now encounter more children who literally can't tolerate not being the center of attention.
- More students also show a lack of basic social awareness. For example, elementary teachers complain that, at dismissal, with no sign of malice but also no apparent concern, students awaiting carpool pickups routinely step all over one another's book bags, knapsacks, and sports equipment, even on the hands and feet of those who are sitting on the floor, and can't fathom what they've done wrong when teachers correct them.

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- More students at all grade levels show a pronounced unevenness in their functioning, such as strong, sophisticated verbal skills accompanied by bursts of remarkably immature social behavior, notably selfishness and aggression.
- More students at all grade levels show difficulty in paying attention to their work and sustaining their concentration—this refers not just to an increase in those formally diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder, but more broadly to a decline of the attention span and of the ability to delay gratification.
- More students, including the very young, are presenting serious symptoms of mental illness and behavior disorder. Though still few in number they are increasing rapidly and are extremely difficult—and costly—to treat, teach, and manage.
- More students are uninvested in the educational process (a trend that becomes more apparent among older students), unmotivated to be active learners, and unconvinced that there is a serious price to be paid for tuning out and turning off.

The key word in this list is *more*. None of these problems at the base of the pyramid are new. Teachers have always had to work with students who are not school-ready, who lack social awareness, who function unevenly, who have trouble paying attention, and who are hard to interest and motivate. But they have never had to work with such large numbers of them and never with so many who present these problems in kindergarten and chronically throughout their school careers. It is nearly impossible to spend a day in a school, let alone a week, without seeing forceful evidence of the negative impact of these behavioral issues on teaching and learning (although current school improvement mandates virtually

ignore it). The only problems that draw more comment from educators are the changes in parent behavior.

Pyramids of Problems: Parents

Surveying the dancers at the Semi-formal, one of the teachers shook her head. "Whenever I see this," she said, "I wonder how their parents could let them out looking like this and raise them so they could act this way." As worried as they are about the trends among students, many educators are even more concerned about parallel trends in parents' own performance, behavior, and values, which they see as fostering the problems presented by students and as a new and distinct area of difficulty in their own right. At the top of the parent pyramid are examples like these:

- When a school decides that a second grader is not ready, academically or socially, for third grade, her parents demand that she be promoted, sue the school, and write an open letter to all the school's families detailing their complaints and demands. Then they contact local news media and make the child available for interviews.
- When a science teacher discovers that students have used a Web site to plagiarize on a major project and gives them zeroes, their parents object and convince the school board to order that the assignment be given a reduced weight in the semester's overall grade—this despite the fact that both the students and their parents had signed an agreement acknowledging the importance of the project and the penalty for cheating.
- Learning that a sophomore has planned a wild party (with beer kegs already ordered) for a weekend when his parents will be away, an administrator calls the

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boy's mother to alert her and is subjected to a tirade of denial and accusation that begins, "How dare you accuse my son of such a thing!" and escalates into enraged profanity.

- For an after-graduation party, parents of seniors rent a hotel suite where alcohol will be served. When school officials express concern, parents explain that this will keep their children from driving drunk and that no students would come if the party were alcohol-free.
- The parents of serious offenders, including those described at the top of the student pyramid—the ones who cheated, counterfeited money, downloaded pornography, and published the scum sheet—hire lawyers to contest the discipline meted out by the school. Neither apologetic nor apparently concerned by the nature and impact of their children's behavior, they concentrate on the fine points of school discipline procedures. The father of one shouts at the principal, "You didn't read my son his rights when you questioned him!"

To many noneducators these items—especially the last—might seem unbelievable or an occasional silly nuisance, fodder for Jay Leno and David Letterman jokes on late-night television, but school people know better. Parents now sue schools not only over discipline imposed on their children for major infractions but for a student being cut from a sports team, or just not getting enough playing time (in a Nebraska case, parents brought stopwatches to games to measure their children's playing time). They also sue over a student's being dismissed from the marching band, or receiving a D, or not being chosen valedictorian. In my favorite incident, parents sued when a boy injured himself by tripping over his own pant leg.⁶

Administrators everywhere spend much more time in legal training and in consultation with school attorneys and in actual court

proceedings than ever before. As one superintendent says, "We used to see serious behavior problems as potential 'teachable moments,' where the student could learn an important lesson. No longer. Now they are potential legal confrontations where the parent downplays the student's misbehavior and attacks our policies and procedures."

Further down the pyramid lie episodes that are more common and less confrontational, though hardly friendly. These often involve parents' worries and challenges about performance in academics and sports, but they also include parents' refusals to support school efforts to structure a good learning environment:

- In a topnotch school in a wealthy suburb, fourth-grade teachers report that if they give a student an A-minus they now receive calls from parents asking two questions: "What could he do to get an A?" and "How come you only gave her an A-minus?"
- Despite their concern about their children receiving good grades, more and more parents take them out of school for family vacations that do not coincide with scheduled school breaks, and think nothing of asking teachers for a full week's worth of special lesson plans and assignments—work that, in most cases, the students do not complete.
- When an elementary principal, concerned about fifth- and sixth-grade girls wearing the same provocative clothes as their high school counterparts and eager not to encourage premature sexuality, invites parents to consider a voluntary, minimal set of limits for school attire, she is roundly criticized by mothers, who accuse her of being antifeminist and of violating their daughters' constitutional rights.
- After athletic contests coaches everywhere now receive calls and faxes and e-mail messages from parents offering

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advice on strategy and especially about which students should be playing the most.

- More and more parents take their children's complaints and stories about incidents at school literally; they don't hesitate to call the principal or write accusatory letters about teachers and demand prompt corrective action based only on their child's account of an event.
- Anxiously—and aggressively—seeking the absolute best teacher for their elementary children in the coming year, mothers lobby principals intensely to put their child into a particular classroom; if next year's potential teachers include young married women, mothers accost them to make sure they have no plans to get pregnant (thus requiring a maternity leave and a substitute teacher).

These kinds of events leave school staff shaking their heads in dismay and frustration and feeling that parents do not respect their professional judgment or the school's authority—or their own children's resilience.

At the bottom of the parent pyramid, schools face an epidemic of anxiety—and sometimes, it seems, of helplessness. Educators now field many more requests from parents to intervene in the most basic parental and family matters. I recall sitting with a principal who received two urgent phone calls the morning I visited, the first from a mother begging him, "Please tell my ninth-grade daughter to stop dating those senior boys," the second from a father asking him to make a rule forbidding kids to drink at home on weekends. When I told this to a middle school principal, he replied that the parents of a student had just asked him to tell their daughter they were going to divorce. I have since met many principals who have faced such a request. And parents now routinely seek elementary teachers' advice about fundamental matters of child care and family liv-

ing, such as bedtime (the mother of a first-grader recently asked her child's teacher, "Is it all right if I insist that my son go to bed at ten o'clock, even if he really doesn't want to?"). Preschool teachers report that many fewer parents seem to be comfortable just playing with their children. "They have to instruct or tell their kids how to do things," says a day-care director. "They can't just sit with a child at the dollhouse for a while and play some make-believe. Lots of our kids are hungry for just plain *play with me, be with me* time with their parents."

What *Has* Gone Wrong?

These lists of behaviors merely skim the troubled surface of deeply troubled waters. The evidence is abundant: schools are facing a cohort of students that is harder to interest, motivate, and engage, and a cohort of parents that is less effective, supportive, and trusting than any in recent generations. Of course, anecdotes and empirical facts, by themselves, are one thing; it is how we understand them that determines how we respond to them. If, for example, we concentrate simply on the needs of children it is easy to blame parents for failing to fulfill their responsibilities. From a pure child development perspective the evidence of growing parental irresponsibility and incompetence is unmistakable. Thus, many teachers I meet, whose primary devotion is to students, see the shortcomings of parents as essentially a matter of "won't" rather than "can't." To many of them, parents are focussed on entitlement, aggressive, and selfish, ignoring their children's needs to gratify their own. If, however, we look at the dilemmas of being a parent today, we often find people struggling to do the best they can in conditions of high demand and high uncertainty. Many of the same troubling facts look much more like "can't" than "won't." Responsibility shifts to larger trends in America's social, economic, political, and cultural life that leave even the most caring, devoted parents anxious, confused, and isolated.

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There is truth in both of these perspectives, and the following chapters explore each of them, addressing the question asked by so many worried teachers, psychologists, pediatricians, clergy, and dance chaperones: What *has* gone wrong? I want to ask this question quite literally, however, not in the exasperated tone that conveys accusation or the dismissive tone that sniffs about things' not being what they used to be. A crisis presents not just a real threat but a rare chance. To understand the challenges confronting our schools and our nation, we need a template, a framework for understanding the changes in children and parents. This requires a pause to step back and reflect, to seek perspective on the larger enterprise of childrearing, to review its fundamentals and to see how current practices accord with those fundamentals. That means beginning where education does, in the home, examining the basics of successful parenting that should be in place long before children reach school and should sustain them throughout their school careers.