RESISTING ZERO TOLERANCE

William Ayers and Bernardine Dohrn

Not long ago, the principal in our children's high school announced a new policy--*zero tolerance*. From now on, she said, there would be no excuse for violating certain school rules, notably the ban on student use of drugs and alcohol. At first, the announcement seemed harmless if a little odd – after all, there had never been any murkiness or ambiguity about alcohol or drug abuse in the school. Everyone already held the same standard of behavior: kids shouldn't drink or do drugs. What could a *zero tolerance* policy possibly add? Further, drug and alcohol abuse suddenly had a new and privileged position in the hierarchy of misbehavior – fighting wasn't on the list yet, nor were racial bigotry, disrespect, sexual assault, and a whole lot more.

Shortly after the new policy was implemented, we asked the principal about it. She explained that *zero tolerance* was simply an attempt to re-focus on existing rules, something to get the kids' attention. "We want to clarify what we already do," she explained, and she assured us that zero tolerance was a contemporary way of expressing what we already believed and practiced.

Zero tolerance policies have by now become commonplace practically everywhere, certainly in our schools and increasingly in our workplaces, and the phrase has been reduced to a platitude through overuse and misuse. Clichés are never clarifying, but a closer look at zero tolerance in practice reveals a disturbing pattern:

- A high-school boy pulls out a steak-knife in the cafeteria to peel an apple, and is expelled for weapon possession.
- A fifteen-year-old Chicago youth is assigned to bring an object from home in order to write a report for his English class; when he enters the school with a large, elaborately carved cane he is expelled for bringing a weapon to school.
- A fourth grader forgets his belt at home and is suspended for violating a school dress code.
- Another Chicago boy in a disagreement with a teacher over writing "I will not misbehave" on the board several hundred times says, "I'm going to take this to the limit," and is expelled for threatening a teacher's life.

In criminal law there are standards of intent, and there are presumptions of innocence as well as procedures of due process. Zero tolerance incorporates no such standards. What began, perhaps, as clarification has morphed rapidly into Frankenstein's monster, destroying children in its path.

Some 90 children are now suspended or expelled from the Chicago Public Schools each week. The vast majority are excluded from their schools for non-violent misdeeds. Schools everywhere – public, private, urban, suburban, rural, and parochial – are turning into fortresses where electronic searches, locked doors, armed police, surveillance cameras, patrolled cafeterias, and weighty rule books define the landscape. Ironically, elaborate security hardware fails to create school safety. Recent research indicates that as schools become more militarized they become less safe, in large part because the first casualty is the central, critical relationship between teacher and student, a relationship that is now being damaged or broken in favor of tough-sounding, impersonal, uniform procedures.

We need teachers, educators, parents, and school boards to reclaim schools as sites of learning and growth – places where incidents of misbehavior, poor choices, wrongdoing and, yes, even crimes, are generally handled *within* the school setting based on principles of repairing the harm, recognizing the consequences, and developing talents and assets. There are numerous models of school sanctioning that work for all but a few behaviors: old-fashioned remedies like detention halls, time out, letters of apology, contacting parents, losing school privileges; and more modern restorative justice approaches such as peer juries, community service, community panels, teen courts, intensive supervision. Obviously, any such system can become either mechanical or abusive, but these remedies could be part of a context of learning that engages youth themselves in a question of vital interest to them: What's fair?

School-based discipline might become, then, a pedagogy borrowing from the common practices of many parents and most early childhood educators, a concept that is a sharp rebuke to *zero tolerance:* "the teachable moment." When a group of four-year-old boys excludes the girls from the block corner, when two children tell another, "You can't play," when a kindergartner hits another child on the playground, this is recognized as a teachable moment, an occasion for conversation, for reflection, for empathy, for reconsideration. There are consequences and sanctions, yes, but always in the service of learning something important about the complexity of learning to live together.

This is more possible in an intimate community, a place where every child is known well by a caring adult, where parents can come together in common cause, and where teachers are fully responsible and accountable for the learning and growth of a manageable group of kids. And this helps explain a growing phenomenon that began in cities but is sweeping now through rural and suburban schools as well: the small schools movement is transforming big schools into smaller sites of learning. Small schools are safer, on every measure: suicide is down, violence dramatically reduced, attendance and grades up, graffiti and vandalism down. In small schools every student is known, no one gets "lost," and there is a stronger parent presence. While we may be fearful of, or angry at,

"other" youth we perceive as troublemakers, when they are our children, or when we get to know them individually, we want second chances and opportunities to recover.

This is what all children deserve. And so schools cannot abdicate teaching in favor of criminal punishment if we are in pursuit of a common, productive future. Teachers, parents, educators cannot cede their authority to police and prosecutors. We must stand with our children, saying, "We know you and we care for you; turn to us."

Now is the time for parents, teachers, citizens, and youth themselves to come together sensibly to resist zero tolerance. We begin by remembering that a child is a child, and that teenagers are negotiating a particular stage of human development. Adolescence, of course, is a border; on the other side, adulthood. It is impossible to think of adolescent development entirely outside the conflicts of our own adolescence, but neither do we think of teenagers outside the context of being here, where we are now, having made the passage with relative safety, residing now on the far shore of adulthood. Our memories are at once hyper-intense and hazy, and growing up is in some part an act of forgetting, a kind of ordinary amnesia. We wrap ourselves, then, in an illusion: we remember some of the facts and events of our youth, but not the all-encompassing atmosphere; we forget the despair and the soaring ecstasies, the profound loneliness, the vivid perception of adult hypocrisies, the anxiety, self-criticism and powerlessness, as well as the joy and energy and heightened expectations, the moments of discovery. Perhaps, most fatefully, we forget that adolescence is by definition a time of immaturity, of experimentation, of predictable mistakes. No human being, after all, is experienced before being inexperienced, wise before naive, polished before clumsy.

Adolescents need steady grown-ups to talk to, to think with, to bounce off of. Closing the door is a form of abandonment, of neglect. Closing the schoolhouse door can become, as well, an economic death sentence or a straight line to detention, for school attendance is a critical protective factor in keeping kids out of juvenile and criminal justice systems and away from a life on the streets. In a recent national survey, adolescents responded that the single thing they most wanted was an adult who listened. When adults become anonymous or unavailable to teens, when adult protection ceases, adolescents are left with only their peers, and, then, a pseudo-maturity that heightens their vulnerability.

Children are different from adults, and are likely to recover from misbehavior and mistakes when given proper guidance, challenge, and support. And each child is, of course, an individual, with particular strengths and needs. No one is entirely understandable through his or her worst actions, and so adults can not give up on kids, even those who get into trouble again and again, even

those who have been involved in a serious offense.

The seven young men in Decatur, Ill., for example, who came together in an unsavory and typical teenage brawl that frightened more than it harmed, are clearly distinct people with dramatically different records, needs, hopes and challenges. A fair approach, a common-sense approach, to their misbehavior would be to fashion a punishment that would teach but not cripple, educate and develop but not destroy. But in Decatur we see another all-too-common underbelly of zero tolerance – the racialized use of the concept in practice. After all, when everyone keeps insisting, "This isn't about race," race is the thing it is most assuredly about.

Teenagers are intensely curious, often idealistic, willing to work hard on projects that interest and engage them, willing to commit to a cause. Youth are easily engaged in the arts, for example, in conversations concerning the ethical; in fact the creative power of youth acting together transformed the world in Little Rock, Birmingham, Soweto and Tien An Mien Square. Yet, it is abundantly clear that purposelessness and despair can result in an obsessive interest in shallow sensationalism, a substitution of consumerism for identity, and scapegoating others when part of a crowd – group behaviors that we adults display in treacherous variety.

A safe environment for kids can only be achieved as part of something comprehensive. "Safe haven" is another high-sounding idea that educators promote, but there can be no safe havens in a treacherous world. In Chicago, for example, one high school last year had five shootings right outside its doors. Prohibiting weapons in school and failing to engage a larger community is a fool's errand. While youth crime is down by 50 percent over the past four years, and children are the primary victims, not the major perpetrators, of violence, most youth crime occurs *after* school and *outside* of school, in the hours from 3 to 6 p.m. If adults want to protect our youth, we will keep schools open late, fill them with exciting programs and activities, add healthy food and academic support, and help their working parents. If we want to protect youth, we will remove handguns from children's environments, address the issues of family violence (both child abuse and domestic violence), and assure even-handed methods of justice, not racially-disproportionate punishment for some and opportunities for others.

Zero tolerance began as a prohibition against guns. Fine, since getting guns out of kids' hands is sensible overall public policy. But gun removal, then, is an adult responsibility, not an excuse for sending more youth into prison. If we must have zero tolerance let it be for gun makers, gun dealers, gun owners who encourage or allow youth access.

For almost every kind of adolescent behavior, our response must be, *it*

depends. It depends on the context and the consequences, the intention and the competence. Like most ethical questions, it may not be immediately obvious. Is it right to rat on your friends? It depends. Is it right to fight back for your friends or family honor? It depends. Dimensions of complexity, of conflicting interests, of cultivating judgment among youth are part of the glory and challenge of working with adolescents.

Those fortunate youth with caring, if flawed, families – those who are not dedicated to sheer survival – are immersed in the developmental work of separation. Theirs is tough, heavy work, an effort undertaken to rid oneself of dependence and to gain fulfillment in freedom. Their boundary crossing is a time of push and pull, letting go and hanging on, falling and catching hold. It demands an engagement with caring and competent adults. We can neither accede nor withdraw.

Zero means none or nothing. Tolerance gestures toward understanding, generosity, kindness, benevolence, justice, forgiveness. Our children need maximum understanding, sensible standards, benevolence, justice, and then a chance to grow beyond their transgressions. We need to teach tolerance, and practice it too.

(William Ayers is Distinguished Professor of Education and Senior University Scholar at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His most recent book is *A Kind and Just Parent*. Bernardine Dohrn is Director of the Children and Family Justice Center at Northwestern University School of Law, Legal Clinic. She is the author of *Look Out Kid, It's Something You Did: Zero Tolerance for Children* in the forthcoming Violence and Children's Rights, edited by Valerie Polakow. Together they have three sons.)