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# Preface

There on the front page of *The Daily News* in Halifax, Nova Scotia, was the headline that I knew was coming: “‘Loser’ kills one at Alberta School” (1999), announcing another shooting at a high school just days after the mass shooting at Columbine in Boulder, Colorado. I had said to friends and family after I heard about Columbine that it would be only a matter of time and there would be another copycat incident.

Sadly, I was wrong. There hasn’t been *just* one, but many similar incidents. There have also been literally thousands of threats heard throughout schools and other public institutions from youth who feel as if they have nothing to lose and everything to gain by acting violently. It was that bolded word “Loser” in the headline that made it all so inevitable.

Thanks to the miracle of mass media, that young boy thousands of miles from Columbine was shown exactly what he could do if he wanted instant notoriety. *We* handed him the script. In a world where there are few options for such a dramatic shift in identity, this loser found a way out of a lifetime of stigma and exclusion. If he had instead found a group of similarly disenfranchised youth who had managed other ways to make the same statement, could he have borrowed from them some of their status to shore up his own flagging self-image? Was there no other alternative to violence and murder?

Of course we could blame his family or his teachers for allowing him to be bullied. Or if we are of a different political stripe, we could argue that he would have been deterred from his crime if only we had harsher punishments for young offenders. We might debate issues of gun control and speculate on how we ever let a boy his age in his state of mind get hold of a gun. But the sad truth is that none of these political and ideological musings will solve the problems kids face. The truth is that while that boy may have been a loser before, he will from this point on have a much more powerful identity, one partly of his own design but one that shares the status given a growing number of school-aged children: “Murderer.”

This book is about preventing these tragedies, both great and small. Young people don't have to cope with their problems by becoming violent or acting out in other socially unacceptable ways. Over the years, adolescents and their families have shown me that they survive best when they are helped to find healthy and *powerful* identities that others recognize both at school and at home. This approach to "problem" youth, whether they are acting out violently or simply beginning to cause their teachers and caregivers worry, offers hope. It looks beyond the psychopathology and bad behavior of our youth to better understand them and their ways of coping as adaptive, no matter how irrational their behavior may seem at the time. This book is meant as a roadmap through the facade of dangerous, delinquent, deviant, and disordered behaviors found among troubled kids. It will show that educators, like parents and other adults, still play a large part in the lives of these teenagers and, what's more, that teenagers want and need adults to be there for them.

## How to Use This Book

This book will help you to look at youth differently. It begins with a discussion of problem youth, offering an innovative way of seeing them as *pandas*, *chameleons* and *leopards*. These three "labels" are ways youth and I have found to describe young people's patterns of coping and surviving. Pandas are stuck with one pattern, chameleons adapt to the environments they find themselves in, while leopards change the environments around them. The first two chapters will share many stories about these youth, including my own experience as a teenager, in order to show how kids use these coping strategies to nurture and maintain resilience. Chapters 3 through 5 provide six strategies that I use in my work with troubled youth and their teachers and families. Each strategy builds on the strengths youth show as pandas, chameleons, and leopards, encouraging a more positive and individualized understanding of why youth act out in troubling ways. There is much in these chapters for educators and caregivers struggling to find the tools necessary to help the youth in their care.

Chapter 6 applies these strategies to kids who bully. There are a number of problems that could be discussed. Bullying, however, like other forms of violence, is one of those pervasive problems that we are struggling to address in our schools and communities. Looking at bullies as pandas, chameleons, and leopards and applying the six strategies for intervention will bring together all the ideas presented in earlier chapters into a comprehensive model of strengths-based intervention.

Chapters 7 and 8 provide a short assessment tool, the Resilient Youth Strengths Inventory, for educators and caregivers of problem

kids. The tool is not meant to add the label of resilient or nonresilient to individual youth; it is instead a checklist of items we should examine when we consider how best to help our children become more resilient. In the discussion that follows the presentation of the Inventory, I stress the need to see even problem behavior as signs of resilience in contexts that lack resources for healthy development. Scoring the Inventory helps us to appreciate the unique solutions our young people use to survive.

## **A Collaborative Effort With Young People**

None of the ideas in this book are mine alone. The adolescents and families whom I have met along the way have been my greatest teachers. It had to be that way. How else could I have come to understand something as complex as the way teens find healthy and powerful identities without listening closely to their own stories?

It is too easy to make assumptions as adults that the way we perceive the world is how the world is. It is changing as we breathe. The many youth who shared their lives with me and my colleagues who helped to clarify my thinking all played an important part in crystallizing a snapshot of how youth survive *and thrive* despite the adversity they face.

This book is about resilience as it is negotiated between people. It is not just a checklist for what to do and not do to help kids. It is not meant to pigeonhole kids into categories so that we can feel comfortable with the labels we assign them, though I do use labels that kids themselves have helped me create. My hope is that by using the six strategies I discuss, others will come to hear the same stories of strength I have been privileged to have had shared with me.

## **Note: The Youth and Their Families**

In order to protect the privacy of all the individuals with whom I have had the privilege to work, the reader must know that the stories I share in these pages are both real and imagined, based on bits and pieces of lives lived, cobbled together from anecdotes common to the many young people and their families that I have met through my research and clinical practice. Each of the composite sketches of youth and their families that appear are substitutes for individuals whose identities must, of course, remain confidential. None of the people portrayed actually exist as I describe them, though some readers might think they recognize in these pages someone in particular. I would suggest the resemblance is more coincidence than fact.

Perhaps, if the stories sound familiar, it is because throughout my career in a number of communities, big and small, I have met hundreds of youth who shared much in common with one another. My hope is that readers find here stories that ring true for them and those for whom they care.