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Reflection for First Unitarian Society
2/11/18

I spend a lot of time thinking about kids. My own son of course, but as a school social worker I spend much of each day thinking about other people's children. The ones who are brought to my attention the most are those in crisis or those with behavior problems.

You've heard about these kids from your own children or even on the news. These are the students who curse at teachers, fight other students, run around the school, and throw desks. We call these students naughty, troubled, high flyers, disrespectful, out of control, violent.

But what if we reframe a bit and say these students have maladaptive behavior. Maladaptive, not as easy to say but more accurate. Often, not always, but often, the behaviors we see are an adaptation developed over time and in response to something. In the case of children with maladaptive behaviors, **the frightened become the frightening.**

Children aren't born swearing and fighting. Babies are helpless and need to be cared for and loved. But what happens if the people who are supposed to care for the children don't or are unable to.

A constant complaint from teachers is that students, particularly black students, are disruptive and disrespectful. They talk too loud and too much and insult peers. Consider a child who grows up in a home where everyone is boisterous, loud and seems to talk over each other. They tease and call each other names. That child learns over time what is acceptable in their family. If that child isn't loud too, they don't get noticed. If they don't interrupt others, they don't get their needs met. That child has adapted to their home and brings those same skills with them to school. They aren't negative behaviors, rather, they are skills for inclusion and survival in their family.

Now imagine that when a baby cries they don't know if an adult will pick them up and hold them, hit them, or ignore them completely. Sometimes they are held, rocked, fed and changed. But not every time. Frequently no one comes to help them. Sometimes the person who comes hurts them. This happens when they are babies, toddlers, and preschoolers. They come to associate adults as untrustworthy and frightening. They learn it is safer for them to be the aggressor, the one who hurts others, rather than allow others to hurt them. They have adapted to their environment. The behavior keeps them safe. They don't know that the behavior isn't needed in school. They don't know how to adapt quickly enough to the new school environment and get in trouble.

Another student knows when they make a mistake at home they will be punished. Punishment includes yelling and getting a whooping. They also know that if someone else in the family gets in trouble that all the kids within reach will get whooped too. They learn to get out of the way. They run to another room or even out of the house until the angry adult is calm and it is safe to return. This same survival skill comes with them to school. When they do a worksheet and mess up they feel scared. Past experience tells them they will get hurt too, so they run out of the room to escape before the teacher sees their mistake. Or, they see the

teacher getting upset with another student and they know, again from past experience, that they might get in trouble too. So, they run out of the room to keep themselves safe.

We would respond differently to these students if we remembered their behavior was based on their successful adaptation to their lived experience. In schools we know that the tools we have aren't working. So, we look for the "shiny new thing" that will solve the problem. We need more equity training. We need new social emotional learning curriculums. We need better classroom management training. We try to innovate our way out of the problem that is really a philosophical problem. Instead of coming up with a shiny new training program, curriculum or methodology we need to shift the way we see our students. We need to remember that adaptation is a process. We first need to admire their adaptation before we can help them continue that process. And with the right support the frightened and the frightening can become anything.