

# Kevin

. Unfriendly

. Uncontrollable

. Unwanted

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## Meeting Kevin

It's never too late to enroll a child in a public school. On a warm April afternoon, as I returned to the office from supervising the lunchtime playground, a man and woman, with a young boy between them, were standing at the counter talking to the Office Manager.

Walking through the counter's low swinging door, to go to my office, I saw the Office Manager step away from the people she was talking with. Before I could get to my desk, she was behind me, calling my name. She sounded tense. When I turned to face her, she looked upset.

*The following story occurred in a  
Title I Elementary School  
in South Los Angeles*

"Those people want to talk to the Principal about enrolling that child," she said. "I hope you'll refuse to enroll him. He shouldn't be here. He needs special placement."

This was the first time, in my dozen years as a school principal, that I had heard a secretary suggest that a child be denied enrollment. "What kind of placement does he need?" I asked.

"You'll see when you talk to them. Just tell them we can't accept him!"

She turned and left me standing in the middle of my office, contemplating her demand. Almost immediately, the woman and man who had been standing at the counter were standing at the doorway of my office without their child, and without the Office Manager to introduce them.

I invited them to come in, introduced myself, and offered them seats. "Where's your child?" I asked.

"We left him sitting out there so we can talk to you privately," the man said. He was looking nervous.

"We're group home counselors," he continued. "You haven't seen us before, because we serve middle and high school students. Kevin's our first elementary school aged placement. He's a fourth grader."

Before I could ask what I could do for them, the woman spoke. "Kevin ran away from home in Texas. LAPD (Los Angeles Police) found him wandering the streets in the middle of the night. They told Children's Services that he had walked to L.A. by himself!"

*Walked to L.A. from Texas by himself? What kind of 'special placement' would this kid need? I wondered.*

"We're the latest in a string of Foster Care placements for Kevin," the man continued. "Regular foster homes couldn't manage him. He's a fighter. Children's Services thought he might calm down if he was with older kids, but he hasn't calmed down. He tries to fight with everyone, even us!"

The woman continued, "We don't know what school he went to in Texas, or why he ran away. No Missing Child Report, anywhere in the country, matches his description! No one's looking for him!"

The tragic nature of her last comment was quickly passed over by her

partner's preoccupation with Kevin's aggressiveness.

"He wants to fight with anyone who looks at him, or speaks to him! We asked Children's Services to move him, because he was trying to fight with everyone in our home, but they said they wouldn't move him again. We hoped we could settle him down before bringing him here, but they told us to get him in school right away, so we're here."

"The lady out there said Kevin needs a special placement, and shouldn't be here," the woman said. "We don't know what that means. We'd like him in a school near us. We're sorry about bringing this problem to you, but we'll come anytime you need us. Someone is always on duty. We can come anytime you call."

The woman appeared exhausted as she pleaded to have the child admitted. She looked at her partner, checking to see if they had forgotten to say something, and then looked at me without saying anything more.

"Does Kevin have an IEP?" I asked. (An Individualized Educational Plan that describes goals and services for a child with special needs)

"Children's Services didn't mention an IEP," the woman replied.

Still wondering what kind of special placement the Office Manager was talking about, I said, "It was very thoughtful that both of you came to talk with us about Kevin. Thank you for offering your help. Do you have an

idea about why he wants to fight when people look at him, or talk to him?"

The group home counselors looked at each other and shook their heads. "I don't know," the woman said. "Everyone tries to be nice to Kevin. Our kids take his abuse, and just walk away! We're proud of them, for that. They don't talk back to him. When he hits them, they don't hit back! It's like they understand him!"

"I guess we'll face the same problem here," I said.

"You're accepting him?" The man asked. The worried looks on their faces disappeared.

"We're accepting him. He would need an IEP to be placed in a special program, but we have some special programs here. If he has special needs, we don't know what they are. Would you approve our School Psychologist doing an assessment of his needs?"

"Yes!" the woman said joyfully.

"If we decide an assessment is necessary, our School Psychologist will contact you. Have you asked Kevin why he doesn't want people to look at him?"

They shook their heads.

"He might be afraid of being bullied," I suggested. "It could be his self-defense strategy. Maybe when he discovers that no one will bully him here, he might relax and make some friends. We have a Psychiatric Social

Worker, two days a week. I'll ask him to meet with Kevin. We'll see what he recommends, but we won't permit Kevin to threaten, or hit other kids. Can I meet him?"

The man stood up, walked to the doorway, and called Kevin. I moved to the front of my desk to greet him when he came in.

Kevin entered my office looking dejected, head down, shoulders slumped forward. He was looking at the floor as if he expected rejection. He stopped in front of me without looking up.

"Welcome to your new school Kevin!" I extended my hand. "I'm Mr. Bell. I'm happy to meet you!"

Kevin didn't look up or extend his hand, but I kept mine extended, hoping he would decide to shake it.

After an awkward silent moment, Kevin reached out with his left hand, without looking up from the floor, and lightly tapped the back of my right hand with two of his fingertips. He then quickly withdrew his hand.

"Come on Kevin!" I said. "You know how to shake a man's hand . . . with your right hand!"

With his head still down, still looking at the floor, Kevin slowly reached out with his right hand, and lightly touched the palm of my hand with four of his fingertips. Then quickly, he attempted to withdraw his hand, but this time, I clasped and shook it. "Welcome to your new school Kevin!"

He didn't respond.

"Would you like to have a seat on that chair behind you?" I asked.

Without answering, or looking up, or turning around to see the chair behind him, Kevin lowered his head even more to see the chair behind him, shuffled backward, sat down, placed his hands under his legs, and continued to look at the floor.

Nothing about Kevin's appearance suggested that he was a fighter, or a runaway who could have survived walking across several states. He had no visible scars. He was small. He looked more like a second grader than a fourth grader. He appeared meek, weak, and vulnerable.

I wondered why was he kept looking at the floor? Was he afraid of me? Had something terrible happened the last time he was in a Principal's office? Was he worried about the 'special placement' the Office Manager had mentioned? What caused him to run away from home in Texas? Why did he walk to Los Angeles? Why had no one in his family, or at his prior school reported him missing?

Hoping to engage him in conversation, I asked, "What grade are you in Kevin?" He didn't answer.

"He's a fourth grader," the woman responded with a smile, as if she thought she was being helpful.

Without speaking, I looked at her for a few moments, hoping she would understand that she should not

answer for Kevin again. Finally I said, "I think you'll like this school Kevin. Kids here are friendly. They don't fight."

Kevin looked up from the floor, to look at me, with an expression of disbelief. His lips were twisted at one corner, his neck cocked backward, his body language saying: "That's a lie!"

"You might not believe it Kevin, but kids don't fight here. They don't fight in class, or on the playground, or even in the neighborhood. You won't need to fight."

Kevin rolled his eyes, pulled his hands out from under his legs, placed them on his hips, and looked away from me to focus on the corner of the office behind me. With his head held high, his hands on his hips, and a disapproving scowl on his face, he seemed defiant and self-confident, no longer meek or vulnerable.

"This school might be different from your last school Kevin. Kids get along here. If they think they might have a problem with someone, they'll talk to an adult about it, but they don't need to ask for help because no one bothers them." Kevin was looking at me again.

"You can ask any adult for help, Kevin, or you can ask to see me, and I'll be happy to help you, but you may not yell at anyone, or hit anyone. Do you understand?"

Kevin didn't answer. He looked back at the corner behind me.

"If you want to talk to me, Kevin, ask

your teacher, or an adult on the yard. They'll send you to the office to see me. If I'm not here, the Secretary will call me, and I'll come to see you."

Kevin turned to look at me again, as a flash of surprise crossed his face.

"Would you like to meet your teacher?" I asked. He shrugged his shoulders, and looked at the floor again.

"We'd like to meet his teacher," the female counselor said. Kevin scowled.

I buzzed the Office Manager's phone, gave her the name of Kevin's teacher, and asked that she call to request a monitor to escort Kevin and his counselors to meet him. She hung up without speaking.

While we waited for the monitor to arrive, I explained, "Our students don't fight with each other, or bully each other, because they share five Personal Goals. They pledge their goals, every morning after the Flag Salute."

Kevin looked at me quizzically.

"The kids in your class will explain the goals to you, Kevin. I mentioned the goals, because kids on the playground might ask if you know about the goals when they meet you. If you say you don't know about them, they'll explain the goals to you. Personal Goals are very important here."

Kevin's male counselor asked if I'd share the goals with them.

"You'll see the goals posted on a chart in Kevin's classroom, near the Flag. You'll also find them in the enrollment packet you'll receive when you return to the office."

At that moment, two smiling monitors arrived from Kevin's classroom. They introduced themselves first to the adults, but when they extended their hands to introduce themselves to Kevin, he looked at the floor, and put his hands under his legs.

The monitors looked to me for an explanation, but I simply thanked them for coming to take Kevin and his counselors to meet their teacher, and explained that Kevin would begin school tomorrow. I asked them to show Kevin where to line up for breakfast, and where their class lines up when the bell rings.

Kevin was standing, even though his guardians had remained seated. Apparently, he was ready to go.

I quickly wrote a note to the teacher, asking that he come to talk about his new student, after school. I gave the note to the monitors, and they escorted Kevin and his guardians out of the office.

About an hour later, after dismissal, Kevin's teacher knocked on the back door of my office. He had come through the parking lot instead of the main office. When I opened the door, he appeared angry. Standing on the stoop he asked, "What's wrong with that kid?"

I asked him to come in, but he didn't move. "I need to leave! What's the deal with Kevin? He stood in my room looking down at the floor, and wouldn't shake my hand! He wouldn't look up when I introduced him to the class! The adults seemed nice, but something is seriously wrong with him!"

I asked the teacher to come in, so that we could talk. He came in, but he wouldn't sit down.

"Kevin acted that way when I met him," I said. "If you have a few minutes, I'll tell you what I've learned about him."

The teacher agreed to sit down, but he seemed more and more upset as I explained what Kevin's counselors had told me about his history.

When I finished, he said, "You knew my class was working well when you decided to give Kevin to me! He's going to destroy my class! How am I supposed to work with him? Why didn't you put him in someone else's class?"

"Your colleagues have more students than you do, even with Kevin enrolled. I had to assign him to your class."

"His needs appear great! Doesn't he need Special Education? What am I supposed to do with him, make a miracle?"

"We don't have an IEP for Kevin, but if he isn't able to function in your class, we'll ask the School Psychologist to

assess him. His counselors have already agreed to have him assessed."

The teacher was looking very unhappy, so I tried to reassure him: "We don't know why Kevin acted so strange today, but we know he's been through a lot. He might be different tomorrow. Let's give him a fresh start tomorrow."

"You're an excellent teacher," I continued. "Maybe everything will be o.k., but if you have problems with him, let me know right away. I can remove him from your classroom, if that's necessary. Our Psychiatric Social Worker will meet with him. We'll see what he recommends."

The teacher didn't speak.

"Let's take this one step at a time. Hopefully he won't act strange tomorrow. If he does, let me know."

The teacher got up without speaking, and left.

### **Kevin's First Day In Class**

The next morning, I was on the playground, before the bell, hoping to see Kevin with a counselor from his group home, but the bell rang three times, summoning me to the office. I left the yard without seeing them.

At the beginning of recess, Kevin's teacher walked into my office. "I sat Kevin down out there," he said, visibly upset.

“You knew this Kevin thing wouldn’t work, but you gave him to me anyway! He wouldn’t sit peacefully next to a boy, or a girl. I had to move him three times! Finally, I put him at a table by himself at the front of the room facing the wall. Even that didn’t work! He kept turning around to see if someone was looking at him. He yelled at kids to stop looking at him. I couldn’t teach! He got out of his seat twice, to threaten kids! He kicked a boy before I could get to him. He ruined my kids’ morning. I won’t have him back today.”

I wondered why the teacher had not called the office for assistance? “Did you bring an Office Referral?” I asked.

“I didn’t have time to fill out a referral! All I could do was try to keep him away from the other kids, and get him here. I’ll send a referral later. I hope that’s o.k., because it’s the best I can do!”

“Take your time on the Referral. We don’t need it right now. Kevin will stay in the office for the rest of the day. Thanks for bringing him to me.” The teacher left.

I approached the Office Manager’s desk, without looking at Kevin, and told her that Kevin would sit in the office for the rest of the day. “I’m going to visit some classrooms, starting with Kevin’s, so that I can thank the teacher for his efforts today. If Kevin doesn’t sit quietly, please call his group home and ask that someone come to get him. I’ll talk with him later.”

“I heard what the teacher said,” the Office Manager replied. “He deserves a thank you. Don’t worry about Kevin. I’ll take care of him. He’ll be o.k. Just visit your classrooms.”

Her support meant a lot. I wondered what made her believe that Kevin would be o.k., sitting in the office?

Before I left the office, I told Kevin that we would talk later. “If you need anything, ask a Secretary,” I said.

Kevin’s teacher was at the front of his class, when I arrived. I stood at the back of the room to wait for an opportunity to speak with him. Almost immediately, he asked his class to wait, and he walked to where I was standing.

I thanked him for trying so hard to work with Kevin, and told him that I would have come to get Kevin if he had called the office. “Will you stop by this afternoon, so we can talk about what we’ll do when he returns from tomorrow’s suspension?”

“You’re suspending him?” The teacher looked surprised.

“Kevin needs to know that he can’t yell at, or hit students, or get out of his seat without your permission. Your class needs to know that we won’t allow anyone to threaten them. You can tell your class what I said.”

“Why not tell them yourself?”

I was happy to receive that invitation. “Boys and girls,” I said, “Kevin’s in the office. He’ll be suspended tomorrow.”

You know that we don't allow anyone to threaten you, in or outside of your classroom. I'm proud of the way you followed your goals this morning, not making the situation worse by arguing or fighting with Kevin. When he returns, please give him a fresh chance to work on his goals with you, as if nothing bad happened."

The class applauded.

I thanked the teacher again, for his efforts to make things work for Kevin, and his class, shook his hand, and left the classroom. As I left, the class applauded again.

An hour later, after visiting several classes, I returned to the office and was surprised to see that Kevin was still seated where his teacher had left him. I asked the Office Manager how he had done, and she said, "He didn't disturb anyone. He just sat there watching the comings and goings."

I asked Kevin to come into my office. He walked in with me, and sat down in a chair at the front of my desk, like he belonged there.

I showed him several telephone messages that the secretaries had left for me. "We'll talk about why you're here, and what we're going to do, after I return these calls, Kevin."

Kevin listened to my telephone conversations, with a half smile, apparently enjoying watching me; but when I finished and spoke to him, he turned to look at the back corner of my office, signaling that he didn't intend to talk.

"Can you tell me why your teacher brought you to the office?" I asked. He didn't answer. Rather than engage in a power struggle with him, I returned to my desk work.

After about an hour, near the end of the lunch period, I asked if he wanted something to eat. He said "Yes," so I called the Cafeteria to ask that they send a lunch to the office for him.

When his lunch arrived, I walked him to the adjoining Nurse's Office, placed his lunch tray on a table there, and asked that he put his trash in the wastebasket, and return to sit in the main office when he finished eating.

While he was eating, I called his group home to let a counselor know what had transpired in his classroom. I explained that Kevin would spend the rest of the day in the office, and be suspended tomorrow. The group home counselor offered to come for Kevin immediately, but I said that wouldn't be necessary.

"It will be good for Kevin to sit in the office with nothing to do until dismissal," I suggested. "Can someone come for him about fifteen or twenty minutes after dismissal? That way, kids in his classroom won't see him being walked home."

The counselor said that he would come for Kevin, late, and asked if he would be given homework during his suspension.

"We won't give him any work to do," I said. "The only place he'll receive schoolwork, or homework, is in his

classroom. If he wants work to do, he'll have to get it in his classroom."

"That sounds good," the counselor agreed.

After finishing my call with the group home counselor, Kevin had returned to the seat in the office where his teacher had placed him earlier. I walked to the Nurse's Office and asked how he had done while he was eating there. The nurse said that he had been fine, left no mess, and didn't bother anyone while he was there.

I asked Kevin to come into my office, so that we could talk. He took the same seat as before, and smiled when I told him what the Nurse had said, but looked at the back corner again, without answering, when I asked him to tell me why his teacher had brought him to the office. He continued to look at that corner, while I summarized what his teacher had told me. He didn't deny anything that I said.

"Why don't you want anyone to look at you, Kevin?" I asked. He didn't answer.

"I'm looking at you, Kevin. Does that bother you?" A faint smile appeared on his face, and disappeared as he shrugged his shoulders.

"Kevin, you're not going to be able to come back to school tomorrow. I'm suspending you for disturbing your class several times this morning, shouting at other kids, threatening them, telling them to not look at you, getting out of your seat without your teacher's permission, and kicking

another student. Those are the reasons why you are being suspended. Do you understand that?"

Kevin looked at me, silently, but his expression was non-committal, flat. "If you have something you'd like to tell me, Kevin, I'll listen." He didn't respond.

"Someone will come to pick you up, later. You can take a seat in the main office, and wait there for them. They might be late." In unexpressive silence, Kevin stood up and left my office.

After dismissal, Kevin's teacher brought his written Office Referral, and asked why Kevin was still sitting in the office. I explained that I had asked a group home counselor to pick him up late.

"What's he been doing?" the teacher asked.

"He ate his lunch in the Nurse's Office, and he's been sitting with nothing to do. I tried to talk with him about what happened in class, but he refused to say anything."

"I told a group home counselor that the only place he'd be given work to do, would be in his classroom, so he'll not be given work to do while he's on suspension. I explained that he will return to class, only if he promises to not get out of his seat without your permission, and not to argue with, yell at, or hit other children."

The teacher was smiling. "I'll see you tomorrow. Thanks for your support!"

About a half hour after dismissal, Kevin's group home counselor brought him into my office to say goodbye, before taking him home. Kevin didn't speak.

I told them that Kevin would have to promise to leave other children alone, to not yell at them, or hit them, before he would be permitted to return to class.

The counselor asked Kevin if he understood, but Kevin didn't respond.

"Kevin understands," I said. "He understands everything."

Kevin looked at me with a *'How do you know that!'* expression on his face.

I reinforced my message: "When Kevin promises to treat other kids with respect, he'll return to his class, otherwise, he'll sit in the office."

The counselor and I shook hands, and he left with Kevin.

### **Kevin Returns From Suspension**

When I drove into the parking lot, the morning after Kevin's suspension, he and a group home counselor were waiting where I parked my car.

"How are you Kevin?" I asked.

"O.K." He replied.

I thanked the counselor for bringing Kevin to school, and together we

climbed the steps to enter the back door to my office.

"Would you like to return to class, Kevin?" I asked. He nodded his head, without energy or enthusiasm.

"Can you tell me what you'll do, so that you can stay in class, Kevin?" He didn't answer.

"You know what you need to do, Kevin. You know what you need to say. We'll talk about this, after your counselor leaves. You may have a seat."

Kevin took "his seat," in the same chair he had used twice before in front of my desk, while the counselor and I left to walk to the front gate. On our way, the counselor suggested that he wait to take Kevin home, in case he didn't agree to the conditions for returning to class. I thanked him, and said that Kevin would remain in the office with nothing to do until he agreed. We shook hands, and the counselor left.

Kevin was waiting, in his chair, when I returned. I asked him, again, "Do you want to go to class, Kevin?" He nodded.

"Tell me what you'll do so that you can stay in class, Kevin?" He didn't respond.

"If you can assure me that you'll follow your teacher's directions, and leave other kids alone, you may return to class. So tell me, what will you do if someone looks at you?"

Kevin shrugged his shoulders.

“Kevin, if someone bothers you, or threatens you, you can tell me about it, and I’ll take care of it for you, but looking at you is not hurting you. Do you want to go to class?”

Kevin nodded. “Why do you want to go to class, Kevin?”

“I want to learn.” He said.

“Then you’re going to have to tell me what you’ll do, if other kids look at you.” Kevin remained silent.

“If you have nothing to say, Kevin, you can sit in the office until you’re ready to talk.”

“I’ll raise my hand and tell the teacher! Can I go back to class? I’ll raise my hand and tell the teacher!”

Kevin sounded annoyed and looked frustrated, like he’d been forced to say something he didn’t want to say.

“You can’t disturb the class, just because you think someone is looking at you. So tell me, what will you do if someone looks at you?”

“I’ll ignore it. Can I go to class?” He sounded angry.

“No one has been mean to you, Kevin. No one is going to be mean to you.” He appeared to relax a little. “If you think someone is being mean to you, what will you do?”

“I’ll raise my hand and tell the teacher. Can I go to class now, **p l e a s e!**”

“O.K., Kevin. I’m going to count on you to ignore it if someone looks at you, and you’ll tell your teacher, or me, if someone is being mean to you. I’ll call for a monitor to escort you to class.”

“I know where my class is! I don’t need anyone to show me where it is!”

“Then you can go by yourself. Please give this note to your teacher when you get there.”

I handed Kevin a note that had been folded but not sealed, asking the teacher to notify the office when Kevin arrived, and to let me know if I needed to come for him.

The teacher called the Office, a few minutes later, confirming Kevin’s arrival. Kevin remained in class for the rest of the morning. It seemed like progress, until a Cafeteria Worker brought him to the office during lunch.

Kevin stood beside the Cafeteria Worker, looking at the floor, while she told me that he had pushed a couple of children’s lunch trays off a table, onto the pavement.

“Were their lunches replaced?” I asked.

“The children were taken care of.” She said.

“Who picked up the ruined lunches?”

“I did,” the Cafeteria Worker said.

“Kevin should have picked up the mess he created. Did he eat?”

“No. He got out of line to push those girls’ trays off the table, so I brought him here, before he got his lunch.”

Kevin was still looking at the floor.

“Thank you for bringing him to me. If there’s any food left, after everyone in the school has eaten, please ask someone to bring a lunch to the office for Kevin. He’ll eat, if any food is left.”

The cafeteria worker said “o.k.,” and left the office.

“Would you like to tell me why you pushed those lunches off the table, Kevin?”

“They were looking at me! They were staring at me. I don’t like people staring at me!” He spoke as if he had been wronged.

“So you think it was o.k. to get out of line, and destroy their lunches?”

“They were staring at me! I don’t like people staring at me!”

“Wasn’t this your first time in line at the cafeteria, Kevin?”

“Yes.”

“Could those girls have been looking at you because they had not seen you before? Could they have been wondering who you are? Why didn’t you just wave, and say ‘hi’?”

“I don’t like people looking at me!”

“You could have said hello, Kevin. They weren’t hurting you. They

weren’t being mean to you. What happened to your promise to ignore it if people looked at you?”

Kevin shrugged his shoulders.

“So tell me Kevin, how would you know they were looking at you, unless you were looking at them?”

Kevin looked surprised by the question. He didn’t respond, so I asked it again.

“Why were you looking at them, Kevin?” He looked at me with an expression of having been caught doing something wrong, and shrugged his shoulders.

“What you did to those girls’ lunches was mean Kevin. I won’t allow anyone to be mean to you, and you can’t be mean to anyone. Have a seat in the office, and we’ll wait to see if a lunch is available for you.”

Kevin took a seat in the outer office. Staff notified Kevin’s teacher that he would remain in the office for the rest of the day.

About ten minutes before the end of the lunch period, a child brought a tray for Kevin. He ate in the Nurse’s Office, and then sat in the outer office to wait for dismissal. A counselor came late, again, to escort him home.

The counselor and I met with Kevin before they left, and decided that he would eat his lunch in the office, and would not go out to play at lunchtime, until we could be sure that he would leave other children alone. He wasn’t suspended.

I called our Psychiatric Social Worker and our School Psychologist to update them on what was happening with Kevin. The School Psychologist said that she would call the Group Home to ask for someone to sign approval of an assessment she would begin on Friday. The PSW said that he would talk with Kevin the following morning.

Before leaving, that afternoon, Kevin's teacher told me that Kevin had not complained in class about kids looking at him. He had done some work, and cooperated. He told me that Kevin had not gone out to play at recess, but had stayed in the classroom with a couple of other kids to do make-up work. He had not yet been on the yard to play with other kids.

I told the teacher that the School Psychologist would begin assessing Kevin on Friday, and the Psychiatric Social Worker would talk with Kevin tomorrow at some point tomorrow morning. We agreed that Kevin would sit in the office during recess and lunch, until we saw how he would do during supervised P.E.

### **Kevin's "Progress"**

Before the bell rang to begin Kevin's third morning at school, he and his group home counselor met with me to discuss what had happened at lunch the day before. I told them, that Kevin would be sitting in the office during recess and lunch, until he could assure us that he would keep his hands and his feet to himself on the playground,

and in the cafeteria.

"You mean like the Personal Goals?" Kevin asked, smiling, as if pleased by what he had just said.

*Kevin had heard his class recite the Personal Goals once, after the Flag Salute. "I will keep my hands and my feet to myself," was one of those goals.*

"Yes Kevin, you'll need to show us that you can follow your Personal Goals before we agree to let you play on the yard, and eat in the Cafeteria. I'm glad you remembered the goals. What goal is this about?"

Kevin shrugged his shoulders before answering, then said, "I will keep my hands and my feet to myself."

"What does that goal mean to you, Kevin?" He shrugged his shoulders again, and said nothing.

"Shrugging your shoulders won't get you to the cafeteria, or to the playground, Kevin. You're going to have to think about what you are going to need to do, or you'll be sitting in the office during recess, and lunch."

Kevin stood there, showing no emotion, and receiving none from me.

"I'm writing a note to your teacher, asking him to let you copy the goals from the chart, so you can carry them in your pocket and look at them whenever you want. We'll talk about the goals today, during recess or lunch, while you're in the office."

Kevin's counselor asked if he could go

to Kevin's classroom to observe for awhile, so I added that to the note, and he accompanied Kevin to class.

Kevin remained in class until recess, then came, by himself, to take a seat in the outer office. When I asked if he had copied the goals, he took them out of his pocket, and showed them to me, so I invited him to come into my office to read them to me.

Kevin read through the goals. Then, I asked him to give an example of what each goal meant. As he gave examples of what each goal meant, it was without feeling, as if the goals didn't matter to him.

He explained the goal "*I will respect all people and their property,*" by saying, "I won't touch other people's stuff without permission." It was an o.k. explanation, better than a shrug of his shoulders, but when I asked if yelling at kids, kicking them, or dumping their lunches on the ground, was respecting other people and their property, Kevin just said, "No".

While Kevin and I were discussing the goals, his teacher came to see me. In front of Kevin, he said: "No one has said anything to Kevin in class, today, but Kevin is still shouting out about people looking at him. I'm trying to keep him in class, even though he does very little work, but his yelling needs to stop."

Kevin didn't look at his teacher, while the teacher spoke. He was looking at me, as if wanting to see how I would react to what his teacher said.

I told the teacher to send Kevin to the office if he shouted at people in class again. I said that Kevin shouldn't be on the playground during recess or lunch, until he showed that he would follow his goals to 'respect all people and their property,' and 'keep his hands and his feet to himself'.

"Is yelling at people showing them respect, Kevin?" I asked.

Kevin didn't respond. He sat in the office during recess and lunch on Thursday and Friday, but he was able to remain in class throughout those days. His teacher took him out to the playground with the class during P.E., and Kevin had no problems playing. It seemed like progress.

On Monday of Kevin's second week, the teacher and I agreed to give Kevin an opportunity to play handball with his class during recess. Kevin had said that he would like to play handball with his class. His Teacher Assistant would supervise. It didn't go well.

Kevin refused to wait his turn. He socked a boy who had the ball, took the ball and kicked it over the fence. The TA brought him to the office.

Kevin and I walked out to the playground to see where the ball had landed. I unlocked a gate, and we crossed the street together, to retrieve the ball. I asked Kevin to carry the ball back to the handball court, and give it to the boy he had taken it from, but when we got there, his class was gone.

Kevin gave the ball to two girls from

his class who were sitting there on a bench. I asked if there was something he would like to say to the girls. He remained silent.

When we returned to the office, I asked Kevin why he had socked the boy, taken the ball, and kicked it over the fence. He shrugged his shoulders.

“Kevin, you hurt both the boy, and your class today. They couldn’t play handball because of what you did with the ball. You’re going to have to decide what you’re going to do, to make up to that boy, and to your class, for what you did today. When you decide what you would like to do, let me know. Until then, you’ll not be playing at recess, or lunch, or P.E.”

I walked Kevin back to class, and told his teacher that Kevin would not play on the playground again until he decided what he was going to do to “make-up” to the boy and the class, for what he had done on the handball court. Kevin stood there, listening.

During the remaining days of Kevin’s second week in school, his teacher kept him in the classroom at recess to do make-up work. He sat in the office during lunch, and ate his lunch in the Nurse’s office. He didn’t apologize to the boy he socked, or to his class. I didn’t ask him about that incident again.

Kevin’s visits to the restroom were supervised by the teacher, or by the TA, because the one time he was allowed in the restroom without supervision, he wet paper towels and threw them up to the ceiling to see if

they would stick there.

The Psychiatric Social Worker (PSW) met with Kevin twice, but Kevin wouldn’t talk to him. The School Psychologist began an assessment of Kevin’s needs, but found no learning needs. It seemed that Kevin’s reading and math skills were at, or above grade level. She thought that his behavior might qualify for an SED placement (a class for children with severe emotional disturbances).

Kevin’s group home counselors were willing to approve an SED placement, but the PSW and I hoped another solution could be found. Kevin never exhibited emotional problems, and had never caused a problem while he sat in the office, or while he ate in the Nurse’s Office. He just seemed content to be by himself, doing nothing, and talking to no one.

Two grandparents who regularly volunteered to help supervise children on our playground at lunchtime, tried to befriend Kevin while he sat in the office. They suggested that if they could develop a relationship with him, he might be able to play on the yard while they watched. I thought that was a wonderful idea, but Kevin wouldn’t talk with them.

The Resource Specialist Teacher, who helped assess children’s needs for special educational services, and provided some of those services in her classroom, took an interest in Kevin. She arranged with his teacher, to send Kevin to her classroom for an hour each day. Kevin visited her classroom a couple of times, but wouldn’t talk to

her, or do any work while he was there.

On Thursday of his second week, Kevin threw a chair at a boy in his classroom, and then viciously hit and kicked him. Fortunately, the boy was not hurt. "He was looking at me!" Kevin asserted. Kevin was suspended.

On the following Monday, the day Kevin returned from suspension, his teacher brought him to the office at recess, and requested that I suspend him again. Kevin had pushed the boy in front of him, as the class was descending the stairway.

The boy who Kevin pushed, stumbled into the child in front of him on the stairway, causing that child to stumble into the child in front of him. Miraculously, no one was hurt.

I scheduled a conference, after school, with Kevin, his teacher, a group home counselor, and the PSW, to discuss what had happened on the stairway, so we could decide what we were going to do about it.

Nothing we had done, during Kevin's first two weeks with us, had helped him adjust, peacefully, to being in school. His behavior toward his peers remained aggressive, and dangerous. In my view, another suspension, more time in the office, more counseling offered no hope of a solution.

Kevin had, again, caused no problems while he remained in the office until dismissal, since pushing the boy on the stairway at the beginning of recess. I tried to discuss the stairway

incident with him, but as usual, he wouldn't speak.

"Your teacher was walking behind you, Kevin. He saw you push the child in front of you. It didn't look like an accident. Is there anything you want to tell me about why you did this?" Kevin just looked at the back corner of my office, and said nothing.

The PSW and I met to discuss our pending group meeting. I wondered if he had a suggestion.

"It's bewildering," he said. Kevin's fine when no children are around. He seems perfectly happy to sit in the office for hours, with nothing to do. Maybe an SED placement would help him. It would be a small group."

"Are you endorsing that option?" I asked.

"No." He said.

We then sat in my office awaiting the others, not having a solution to recommend. When had arrived and been seated, I thanked everyone for being there.

"We're here this afternoon to consider what we're going to do about the fact that Kevin doesn't seem to like the young people around him in his class, and in this school." I said. Kevin was looking at the back corner of my office.

I continued, "Today, Kevin pushed a young man who was in front of him on the stairway. That boy tripped and fell into another boy in front of him, who also tripped and fell forward on

the stairway. Kevin, would you please tell us why you did that? Can you tell us why you pushed that boy on the stairway?"

Kevin continued looking at the back corner of the office and did not respond.

"Kevin," I said, "pushing that boy on the stairway was a very dangerous thing. It caused at least two people to stumble. Someone could have been hurt. It was a mean thing to do. Is there anything you would like to say?"

Kevin continued looking at the back corner of the office, and didn't respond. Suspending him was justified, but it was unlikely to cause a behavior change. Something else was needed. The other children had to be protected from violence.

"Kevin," I said, "I will be suspending you for two days for pushing that boy on the stairway today, but this will be your last suspension. I'll never suspend you again."

Kevin looked away from the back corner. He looked bewildered. His teacher's mouth had dropped open with shock.

"Kevin, you were suspended for threatening people, and for kicking a boy who you thought was looking at you. Your behavior did not improve. You knocked two girls' lunches onto the ground, you hit a boy, took the ball from his hands and kicked it over the fence. You've been sitting in the office at recess and at lunch, and you've been eating your lunch in the Nurse's

office. Still your behavior has not improved. You threw a chair at a boy in your classroom. Now, you're being suspended again for pushing a child on the stairway. If you ever try to hurt someone again, you won't be suspended. You will be expelled. Expelled means you will ***never*** come back to this school."

Kevin's mouth opened as if he was going to speak, but no words came out. Tears welled in his eyes and began flowing down his cheeks. His counselor, teacher, and our PSW looked at him in amazement. None of us had seen Kevin cry.

**"I don't want to leave this school Mr. Bell!"** Kevin wailed, loudly.

"Why don't you want to leave this school, Kevin?" I asked.

**"We have Personal Goals here! I've never had Personal Goals before!"** It sounded like he was pleading. Tears were flowing down his cheeks.

Kevin's teacher and counselor were looking at him with expressions of amazement.

"Kevin, if the goals are that important to you, don't you think you should try to work on them, and try to achieve them?" I asked.

**"Yes!"** Kevin said. His yes sounded like steam escaping from a pressure-cooker.

"When you come back from this last

suspension, Kevin, you'll have another chance to work on your goals, but it will be your last chance. Can you tell me what your goals are?"

Kevin shifted in his chair. Now sitting crisply erect, he brushed tears from his face with both hands, looked directly into my eyes, and began chanting the Personal Goals loudly, as the Student Body always did at the end of each Monday morning assembly on the schoolyard.

**"In order to be proud of myself and my school, I will:**

**Respect all people and their property,**

**Keep my hands and my feet to myself,**

**Listen and follow directions given by adults,**

**Leave gum, candy and toys at home, and**

**Put forth my best effort in all that I do."** After finishing, he kept his eyes focused on mine, waiting for my response.

"Are those *your* goals, Kevin?" I asked.

He seemed surprised by the question, but quickly said, "Yes!"

"If those are your goals, Kevin, maybe you'll want to work on them when you return. You'll have a chance to do that. We'll see what you do."

No longer crying, Kevin faintly smiled.

"When you come back, Kevin, some things will be different. You'll no longer be sitting in the office during recess and lunch. You're going to go to the playground and the cafeteria, with your class, like everyone else."

Kevin's eyes were wide open with a look of amazement.

"You may come to the office, if you want to tell me how you are doing with your goals, and if you want to show me the work you are doing in class. When you have something to share with me, you can ask your teacher to let you come to the office to see me. Will you do that?"

Kevin nodded.

I asked the teacher if he'd let Kevin come to the office when he wanted to see me. The teacher said, "Sure!"

"O.K. Kevin. We have an agreement. There will be no more suspensions, no more hurting people. You'll work on your goals, and you're going to let me know how you are doing. You'll not be sitting in the office anymore. If you need help with anything, you'll let your teacher know. Would you like to shake on that?"

Kevin stood right up, but instead of reaching across the desk, he walked around it, to shake hands with me. He actually squeezed my hand!

Standing up, the teacher said, "Kevin, I'll be happy to shake your hand on that too."

Kevin smiled, walked to his teacher, and shook his hand, apparently with a squeeze, because the teacher looked startled.

“When you come back to school on Monday, Kevin, we won’t have a conference, but I’d like you to say good morning to me. If I’m in the office, say good morning to me here. If I’m on the yard, see me there, so that we can say ‘good morning’ to each other. I’ll see you then.”

The Group Home Counselor stood and shook my hand. “We’ll see you Monday morning!” He said, and then he and Kevin left.

Kevin’s teacher looked unsure. “Am I supposed to just release him to the playground and see what happens?”

That’s what we’re going to do,” I said. “We can’t continue as we have been. If this doesn’t work, Kevin will have to go, probably to an SED class. We’ll see what he does.”

“Should I change his seat, and put him at a desk with another student?” The teacher asked.

“Leave him where he is, unless **he** asks to be moved. If he asks to be moved, let him find someone who will agree to be his desk partner. Let your students decide. If that happens, you’ll have produced a miracle.” We both smiled.

“When Kevin returns greet him like a student you expect the best from. Remind everyone, before you dismiss them to the yard, or to go home, that

they should remember their Personal Goals, and let me know if you need me to come for him.”

The teacher said, “O.K.,” and left.

The PSW was smiling, but with a look of doubt. “Do you really think this will work?” He asked.

“We’ll see,” I said. “It will be disappointing if we have to send him to an SED class.”

### **Kevin Returns From His Last Suspension**

Kevin, and one of his group home counselors greeted me on the yard, on Monday morning before the bell. I shook hands with both of them. Kevin was looking around the yard, as if it was his first time seeing it.

“Have you had breakfast, Kevin?” I asked.

“I’m not hungry.”

“You can wait for the bell with me, or you can walk around until the bell rings.”

“I’ll stay with you.” Kevin said, looking around the yard like it was a strange place.

“We talked about the goals at home, and on our way to school today,” the counselor said.

“You’ll do everything like everyone

else today, Kevin.” I said. “Remember your Personal Goals, and don’t forget to come to show me your work, and to tell me how you are doing.”

“I will.” Kevin replied.

“Thank you, Mr. Bell. Have a good day Kevin!” The counselor said, as he prepared to leave.

The counselor and I shook hands, and he made his way toward the front gate, as Kevin watched.

Kevin remained by my side as I walked around the yard greeting students until the bell rang. When the bell rang, Kevin left to line up with his class.

“Have a good day, Kevin!” I said. He waved and took his spot at the end of his class line.

I watched as teachers met and escorted their classes from the yard. Kevin’s teacher was late. He arrived with one of his student’s parents, said good morning to his class, and motioned to the line leaders to move toward the stairway.

The lines moved past the teacher, and Kevin followed at the end of one of the two class lines. I watched him climb the stairs, with his teacher following. They turned the corner at the top of the stairs, and disappeared on the other side of the building.

I returned to the office to make an All Call PA announcement, with Kevin on my mind.

*“Good Morning boys and girls! I’m happy to tell you that I got a call yesterday, from a lady at the L.A. Zoo. She told me that the two classes from our school that visited the Zoo yesterday, were the best classes she had ever seen.*

*She wanted to know why our students were so polite, why they paid such good attention when she spoke to them. She wanted to know why no one dropped any trash on the ground. She wanted to know why our students are so good.*

*I told her, it must be because you have Personal Goals, and you work on your goals wherever you are.*

*She asked if all our students are that good, if you all follow your goals? I told her that all of you are just as wonderful as the students she saw yesterday.*

*She said that she wants to see some more students with Personal Goals, so she’s giving us two free busses to bring four more classes to the zoo.*

*I will be visiting the classes that went to the Zoo yesterday, so that I can thank them for doing such a good job, and making our school look so good!*

*I’ve told you that people notice what you do. They see how wonderful you are when you remember your goals.*

*Good things happen when you remember your goals, and when you help each other to achieve your goals. I’m proud of all of you. Have a very good day!”*

After the All Call, I visited the two classes that brought that recognition to our school, and thanked them.

After recess, while I was visiting other classes, the bell rang three times. A Secretary on the intercom told me that Kevin was in the office waiting to see me. "Tell him I'm on my way," I said.

Kevin was sitting on "his chair," in front of my desk, when I arrived. When he saw me coming, he stood up with papers in his hand and a smile on his face.

"I've been doing good, Mr. Bell! I brought my work to show you. I did everything my teacher asked me to do. He said I did a good job. I went out to play at recess, too. We played handball. I didn't kick the ball over the fence!" He grinned at his joke.

"Thanks for sharing your good news, Kevin! May I see your work?"

Kevin held out his papers with both hands, like a present, and watched as I examined them.

"Your handwriting is very neat, Kevin. Your work looks good! Thanks for sharing your success with me!"

Kevin was smiling as I handed his papers back to him. "Let me know if you need anything." I said.

"O.K.," Kevin said as he turned to leave.

"Wait Kevin, I'd like you to take a note to your teacher." The note thanked

his teacher for allowing Kevin to come to see me. It was folded but unsealed.

"Remember your goals, Kevin, and come to see me again, to show me how you are doing."

Kevin smiled, took the note, and left. I called his group home to share his good news.

Late that afternoon, just before dismissal, Kevin came with a note from his teacher that said: "Kevin will see you in the afternoon from now on, so he doesn't miss important class time." Kevin told me the contents of the note before I read it.

"How do you feel about this, Kevin?"

"It's fine! I'll see you tomorrow afternoon!" We said 'good-bye' and Kevin returned to class.

Kevin's teacher didn't stop by the office that afternoon, but came to see me at lunch the following day.

"One of my boys asked if Kevin could sit next to him, 'so that he could be part of the class'. I moved Kevin this morning. Both kids are happy. There have been no problems. I hope this lasts."

That afternoon Kevin came to see me, carrying some of his work with a big smile. "I'm sitting at a desk with Andre now," he said. "I'm not facing the wall anymore!"

"That's great Kevin! How's it working out?"

“Like it’s supposed to. We’re both following our Goals.” He said.

I wanted to hug him, but asked, “Would you like to show me your work?”

Kevin handed me his stack of papers. His handwriting was very neat, and the work was complete. When I returned his work to him, he had a message for me.

“I don’t think I’ll be coming to see you unless I have a problem, Mr. Bell. Things are fine now.”

“That’s fine, Kevin. You can see me anytime you want. I’m glad things are fine now.”

*I flashed back to talking with the PSW and the School Psychologist about a possible SED placement for Kevin. It didn’t occur to us that he could be gifted. He had simply appeared as an uncontrollable tornado in our midst.*

Kevin reached out to shake my hand. He no longer seemed like a ten year-old. He seemed so grown-up! We shook hands, and he returned to class.

During the next two weeks, Kevin required no special attention. He didn’t come to the office to see me. He played on the yard, ate in the cafeteria, and participated fully in his classroom.

I stopped by his desk when I visited his classroom, and occasionally saw him playing with other kids on the playground.

Kevin was absent during the first three days, of the third week following his last suspension. When the Office Manager told me about his absence, I asked her to call his group home to find out how he was doing. She returned to tell me that he was no longer living there. The group home counselor told her that Kevin had asked Children’s Services to move him to a regular foster home. They didn’t know where he was placed.

Kevin’s move felt like a terrible loss. I wondered whether Children’s Services had told him that moving might mean changing schools?

When I shared the news about Kevin with his teacher, he said, “Kevin must have wanted to be around kids his own age. He probably decided that he could take his Personal Goals with him.”

Kevin’s new school didn’t request his records. We never heard from Kevin again.

## Afterword

Lots of people tried, but no one could help Kevin, but Kevin himself. There's much about Kevin that we don't know, other than his determination to be in control of himself. Adults know this determination, and prize it for themselves, but find it disquieting in the children they believe they should control.

Teachers are taught, and expected to control students. They are advised to "make sure your students know your rules, post your rules in your classroom, and enforce your rules consistently." None of this worked for Kevin.

There's special vocabulary for this expectation: "maintaining student discipline," "classroom management," "rules enforcement," "being in control". Teachers who do it well are rewarded with school administrators' smiles, and positive annual evaluations, but teachers routinely lament the amount of time a relatively few students' discipline takes from instruction.

There was nothing reasonable, or lawful, or ethical, or humane that any adult could do to "control" Kevin. He was a perfect example of the inappropriateness of the expectation that a human being be controlled, or that control of young people is the job of teachers. Yet this expectation is so common, so traditional; it seems sacred beyond question, even though it doesn't work and causes great harm, especially for identifiable groups of children.

The following data show the harm being done, and the need for students to be empowered, not controlled:

a. **Young people of color (especially Black), in schools serving low-income communities, are punished more,<sup>1</sup> and achieve less,<sup>2</sup> than peers in schools serving more affluent communities,**

b. **After fifty-five years of Title I Compensatory Education funding to reduce the gaps in student achievement correlated with family income, those gaps remain.<sup>3</sup>**

c. **Between 1 in 3, and 1 in 4 students, particularly those perceived as "different," have been bullied in school, some with effects that last into adulthood, or cause youth suicide.<sup>4</sup>**

Students' Consensus Personal Goals didn't magically eliminate these problems, or Kevin's problems, but unlike schools where these goals do not exist, the students' consensus personal goals gave Kevin and his peers, a path toward, and a means by which they could work together to eliminate these problems.

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<sup>1</sup> "How Black Girls Get Pushed Out of School," <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/04/us/politics/black-girls-school-racism.html>

<sup>2</sup> "Have We Made Progress on Achievement Gaps?" (See the last paragraph) <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2018/04/17/have-we-made-progress-on-achievement-gaps-looking-at-evidence-from-the-new-naep-results/>

<sup>3</sup> "Why Federal Spending on Disadvantaged Students (Title I) Doesn't Work," 11/20/2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/why-federal-spending-on-disadvantaged-students-title-i-doesnt-work/> (Establishes the need to do something more.)

<sup>4</sup> "Facts About Bullying," <https://www.stopbullying.gov/resources/facts>

Kevin wasn't alone in experiencing a positive impact from his and his peers' consensus goals.

James, a gang member in a heavily gang involved family, was the first student to achieve a positive personal transformation by adopting and pursuing his peers' consensus personal goals. His transformation also seemed to have involved his family. His story may be found at <https://www.pdf-archive.com/2018/08/21/james-for-www2/?fbclid=IwAR2nbbPXY4uqk6iAMWtkrxqdPa5XI78NZf5oPb125IVvJv7y0R1ZU4Z8H7E>

A second grader, in Kevin's school, presented a \$20 bill to me, in the presence of the Director of the Pasadena Branch of the 'I Have A Dream' Foundation, saying, "I found this in the hallway, and told my teacher that I should give it to you, because of my Personal Goals. It's someone else's property."

Community members called the school told the secretaries that our children no longer left trash on their lawns, sidewalks, and streets. A community member said that none of our kids picked flowers from her garden anymore. They wanted to know why. It wasn't because we asked. It reflected a goal that the students created and took seriously: *'I will respect all people and their property'*.

That goal, along with *'I will keep my hands and my feet to myself'*, resulted in the school's children no longer having fights in the neighborhood. They eliminated bullying without being asked. These were outcomes of

their having established a community of consensus goals.

Teacher referrals of students to the office for discipline were dramatically reduced, and Kevin was the only student to be suspended from school, after students adopted their consensus goals.

On the occasion of a Principal's Meeting at our school, an attending Principal asked if we were putting something in our children's food. "They act like they're on something, like they're drugged," she said, after being escorted to the auditorium from her parking place by a couple of fifth graders. "They asked me if my students have Personal Goals. When I asked them what that was, they explained the goals and said that my students should have them."

Young people with consensus goals prove that they don't have to be "held accountable" for their behavior. They hold themselves accountable to their goals. They also reduced their underachievement by realizing that they could help and encourage each other to achieve their shared goals.

Young people aren't ignorant, lazy, irresponsible, or helpless. Research at Yale's Infant Cognition Center proved that from just a few of months of age, they all prefer what is good, fair, and right.<sup>5</sup> Their consensus goals made it possible for them to focus on, and live out their shared preferences.

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<sup>5</sup> "The Moral Life of Babies," Yale's Infant Cognition Center, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/09/magazine/09babies-t.html>

Giving young people an opportunity to develop and pursue consensus personal goals, treats them as the competent, complete human beings they are, regardless of their parents' educational achievements, jobs, or finances.

Schools and teachers who wish to give students' consensus personal goals a try, may find implementation steps at <https://www.facebook.com/5PersonalGoals>

Direct Link

**Consensus Students' Personal Goals  
Rationale, Process and  
Expected Results**

[https://www.facebook.com/5PersonalGoals/photos/ms.c.eJw1y8EJAFEIA9GOFqNGY~;~\\_NLX7w~\\_piBSd4zg4gc5ocFBSQzhOGateAVB81d2DoYvMIPEvbA5iD0FvCgfAuwf0F2Gz0~- .bps.a.1088279934668293/1088279991334954/](https://www.facebook.com/5PersonalGoals/photos/ms.c.eJw1y8EJAFEIA9GOFqNGY~;~_NLX7w~_piBSd4zg4gc5ocFBSQzhOGateAVB81d2DoYvMIPEvbA5iD0FvCgfAuwf0F2Gz0~- .bps.a.1088279934668293/1088279991334954/)