



You might say...

"I can't bear it—I listen to Jo as she talks to her kid and I don't know what to do. She is so angry with him and I saw her whack him the other day. We have a policy of no hitting at the school and I worry if she's really hurting him — I should report this to children's services but I don't really believe it will help anything.

I listen to the parents in the program talk about their kids and it's clear they are having many of the same problems in school that their parents did. Many of the students are really worried about this — they so want their kids to do better than they did. What on earth can we do to make a difference? Will anything ever change? "

I despair: What's the point of teaching adults when nothing changes and their kids are going to have the same problems?

...but did you know:

When we are in a tough place now, or if our parents were abusive, hurtful, or neglectful, it is very hard to develop the capacity to give children the positive environment they need. There can be complicated emotions when our children have opportunities that we didn't have, especially when they still complain, misbehave, or get into trouble. Sometimes parents are unhappy when children receive attention, particularly in the literacy program which they may feel should belong to them, and especially if there have been few places in life where they have been given attention and valued.



We need to recognize that humans have a capacity not only for evil but also for great generosity and kindness.

Educators often insist that parents help their children learn, but when parents are afraid they don't read well enough, aren't smart enough to help, or when children's schoolwork brings up bad memories of their own experience, they may avoid helping. They may "forget" and do nothing. They may get angry with the child, as if it is the child's fault that the parent is afraid of being unable to help, feeling stupid, being shamed, remembering past pain.

Many parents may be afraid for their children. Living in poverty increases the dangers that children will get sick, be hurt, join gangs, get into trouble with the law, or be taken away by children's services. These fears may lead parents, especially those who are subject to racism, intellectually disabled, or who have been entangled in the psychiatric system to be desperate to get their children back in line quickly when they misbehave.

Bearing witness to violence can be draining. We can easily lose hope for humanity when we pay attention to the dreadful things that happen in this world. But it may be equally exhausting to put our heads in the sand to try to avoid the pain. We need to find a balance of paying attention and acknowledging the evil that is perpetrated, yet avoiding relentless attention to every detail. We need to recognize that humans have a capacity not only for evil but also for great generosity and kindness. For many of us holding onto hope is important to balance the despair.

When as literacy practitioners we are surrounded by people who are struggling with difficult circumstances, and we are all working with limited resources, it may be hard to believe that change is possible. The system can feel utterly impenetrable and we may slide, without consciousness, into blaming the individuals in front of us. We may think, "Why don't they bother to read to their children?" or some other critical thought. We need places to take those feelings—to give ourselves and each other reality checks, and to avoid becoming bitter and despairing. All or nothing is so common a consequence of trauma that it shapes much of society. It can lead us to believe that if we don't see the full success we hoped for, there is only failure. We need to recognize incremental change—the middle ground—to avoid burnout and despair.



What can I do to help everybody learn?

1. Support parents to help their children

- **Create a group, or occasional gathering, for parents to talk about the challenges of parenting.** Make it OK to talk about complex feelings if they are present.
- **Help parents to learn how to spark and support their children's learning and avoid discouraging or shaming, and putting out the learning flame.**
- **Create children's programming and model supportive ways of engaging with children's learning, good boundaries, and gentle discipline.**

2. Hang on to a belief in the future and the possibilities for change

- **Look for opportunities to explore "middle ground" and help students, volunteers, and staff move out of "all or nothing" ways of thinking:** we may not be perfect parents, teachers, or students, but we aren't dreadful either. Over time we can learn to notice and record small increments of change; perhaps we can map the change in some fun way, with a collage, a graph, or a journal to show the change over a week, a month, or a year.
- **Try not to look to students' success to help you feel good about your work.** They have enough to do! Look for other places where you can be "fed."
- **If appropriate in your program you could hold a dreaming dreams party!** Create a playful and fun time to explore dreams for children, self, the world, to live in peace.

3. Increase the circle of people addressing the impact of violence on learning

- **Teach other practitioners, tutors and students to address the impact of violence on learning.**
- **Create, or join, a network of practitioners in your region acknowledging and addressing the impact of violence on learning.**



Where can I find more information and ideas?

Each of the six information sheets in this set will look at a learning problem through a typical journal entry and give more information about what might lead to the problems practitioners see.

Go to <http://www.learningandviolence.net>

In **Changing education**— family literacy:
<http://www.learningandviolence.net/changing.htm>

Explore **Making Changes** for ideas on how to work towards community change:
<http://www.learningandviolence.net/violence/community.htm>

Go to **Dreams of a different world** to think more about how intervening in cycles of violence might help to create change:
<http://www.learningandviolence.net/dreams.htm>

Check out **Learning to teach** for resources to help you teach others about how to address the impact of violence on learning:
<http://www.learningandviolence.net/lrnteach.htm>

This is one in a set of six information sheets for adult literacy practitioners on learning and violence, written by Jenny Horsman, Spiral Community Resource Group. Funded by literacy coalitions in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Alberta, NWT and BC. October 2009.

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What is literacy?


Literacy is **the** essential skill.


It is the ability to use printed information to function in society, at work and in the family.


It is the combination of thinking and social skills we need to analyze and use information to control our own lives, achieve our goals and develop our knowledge and potential.

How to reach us...

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