Voices

The Principal

EDWARD R. WILKENS

It's Got HBO!

Larry was referred to me for the third time in two weeks. The first time he had been "swearing on the bus," using some very creative forms of various Anglo-Saxon derivatives. He readily admitted swearing but not "at anybody"—he was swearing at himself. The second time he had punched a child in the face, drawing blood, because "she poked at me." Today he was here because he had kicked, punched, and bitten two 8th graders who had tried in vain to rid themselves of his attention.

Larry is in 2nd grade. He has been in three different schools so far this year, six in his academic career. He is a child many teachers find disruptive in class but impossible not to love. Larry usually acts puzzled about my attention to his inappropriate behavior but contrite when he realizes my disapproval. He lacks what the manuals refer to as "age-appropriate social interaction skills," but not for lack of trying. Larry is willing to try just about anything to establish social interaction. That is part of the problem; he simply has a very weak basis for discriminating social choices. "Oh, you mean I'm not supposed to bite people?" "But I was just yelling at myself."

His family wants the best for him, but their daily struggles to subsist require too much energy and time. For Larry's family, food, shelter, and clothing are challenges rather than givens. He even asked his teacher not to throw away scrap paper and boxes so he could bring them home for their woodstove: "My Dad can use that stuff to keep us warm."

If daily subsistence is a challenge, holidays are a dream. Just prior to Thanksgiving, Larry announced that his family could not send money for the candy bar sale because they did not have any, and oh, by the way, "We can't have turkey and stuff either because we don't have any food left." That casual announcement, not intended as sympathy seeking, sent poignant ripples through those who heard it. Larry unwittingly provided us with a way to solve one problem for us and one for him. The Student Council had been collecting canned and dry goods from students to donate to deserving local families. Larry's status qualified his family, and the council delivered two boxes of Thanksgiving foods to his home.

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I did not place Larry on detention for his latest antics because after we talked about the dangers of punching, kicking, and biting anyone, much less 8th graders, he made another announcement.

> I'm moving Thursday, so I won't get beat up nomore. The house is in Wharton, but it's not the green one like we had before, it's a better one. The school is the one I had when I was in kindergarten and when I was in 2nd grade the first time and the bus driver probly knows where I'm gonna live even though it's not the green house this time but a better one 'cause it's got HBO!

Larry did not want to move until after Thursday because that was his birthday, and he knew of the teacher's traditional three small gifts (pencils, erasers, a notebook) to each child as birthday celebrations. Larry needed those gifts as affirmation. He refused to open any of them, insisting instead on taking them home to his family. That was one way of ensuring "I'll have presents to open tonight."

Questions and dilemmas abound when we consider Larry. He's an eight-year-old 2nd grader, a veteran of six, soon to be seven, school placements, who has no money for a one-dollar candy bar, no gas for the family car, no food for Thanksgiving, and no "age-appropriate social interaction skills." What should we do first? Feed him? Love him? Educate him? Keep him in one place for more than three months?

We all know Larry. We all do our best to provide for and meet his needs. He currently presents a happy, casual, "life's OK" attitude, but he's only eight.□

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