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The Comer Process

Tried, Tested, and True

Edward T. Joyner

The Comer Process is both a structure and a process for K–12 education systems to support young people's academic learning and personal development. Recognizing that no child can perform well academically if he or she is hungry or has never been read to, the Comer Process trains and supports all stakeholders in taking care of the negative forces in each child's life, and in replacing those forces with positive ones to enable each child to develop well and, therefore, learn well. With more than 35 years of success behind us, we know our process is tried, tested, and true.

THE INFLUENCE OF ADULTS ON CHILDREN: A RECOLLECTION

I can remember very vividly my anticipation of the first day of school in the little rural, southern community where I was raised. It appeared to me that every adult in town knew that a fresh crop of children, or "chirrens" (to use my beloved Black southern dialect), were getting ready to go to school for the first time. This was an important event in Farmville, North Carolina, and I remember being so anxious the night before—wondering if I would be able to do the school work, as well as keep away from the dreaded paddle that was standard equipment in most of the elementary classrooms of my time. As I walked outside on that warm August morning in my mail-order dungarees, white T-shirt, and "tennis shoes," I knew that I was about to embark on a journey that had the potential to change my life forever.

We lived in a rented A-frame house with one bedroom, outdoor restroom facilities, and an outside faucet that was shared with two other families. Both my parents had said that they wanted all their children to have better lives than they, even as they were thankful for what little they were able to accumulate. They had 10 years of education between them but wanted all their children to get at least a high school diploma as well as aspire to go on to college.

It was unanimous in our community that education and good manners were the appropriate choice of weapons in a world that doubted the worth and potential of children who were poor and, in our case, Black. In a community like the one that shaped my values and aspirations, schools, communities, and religious institutions spoke from a common script.

My school's principal, Mr. Frances Howard Mebane, was an imposing figure in our community. He was built like a linebacker, dressed immaculately, spoke with great eloquence, and could recite, verbatim, verses from Paul Laurence Dunbar to William Shakespeare. He created a school that was an extension of our families, and I can never remember him using corporal punishment, even though it was permissible by law at that time. When we acted inappropriately, he would constantly remind us in his deep baritone voice: "You are better than that."

This phrase became a part of me, because I realized that we children were the hopes of our parents, teachers, and community. They believed that we were better than the dirt roads, outdoor plumbing, and unpainted houses in which we were born. They believed that a passion for learning and strong feelings of self-worth would see us through the most difficult times.

The adults in our little village made us believe that we could overcome. They told us that "nothing beats a failure but a try," and that "trouble don't last always." So even at a time of limited opportunity, we had a supply of unlimited hope. We realized that we were born behind in the race of life and had to run faster (according to the late and great Benjamin E. Mays, past president of Morehouse College). This story from my childhood is an example of the power of the public school. But it also speaks to the power of the community to work with the school to ensure that children are taught well and fully developed. This web of relationships among school and community created the safety net that protected my generation from the hostile forces around us.

THE INFLUENCE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION ON SOCIETY

The founders of our great nation recognized that universal, free public education was the cornerstone of democracy. Our early public schools were shaped by the collective wisdom that emerged from a powerful coalition of forces representing the family, the church, and the community. This coalition allowed schools to transform our nation's youth into fully contributing citizens, thereby enabling the United States to become the most powerful nation in human history. The American public school stands as one of the most accomplished social institutions created by our social democracy. It has contributed mightily to the democratic ideal of *E Pluribus Unum*—out of the many, one—by providing a common arena in which the sons and daughters of slaves, immigrants, and Native Americans could teach together, learn together, play together, and continue to build a society based on justice, fairness, and equality of opportunity. While it has never been a perfect institution, our public education system has paved

the way for countless students who, under other circumstances, might have remained poor and uneducated. It also has unified this nation around a common core of ideas and has become the place where people who came to our shores willingly and unwillingly could contribute to the great mosaic known as American culture.

Our notion of education for the common good was conceived and carried out by schools and communities that spoke with a common tongue about what they wanted young people to learn and how they expected them to behave. There was near-unanimous agreement among adults regarding the values that they wanted to pass on to children and the content and skills that schools should deem necessary for work, play, and civic responsibility.

THE INFLUENCE OF JAMES COMER ON PUBLIC EDUCATION

Over the past three decades, Dr. James P. Comer has refused to let us forget that the work of schools is both the education and development of children. He has demonstrated that successful development requires good science and the best ideas from multiple disciplines. This is necessary to create a structure and a process to help schools prepare students to learn and prosper in a world that has become smaller and increasingly unpredictable. He has recognized, above all, that the American public school is the salvation for our nation and its youth. It is as vital to national security and world peace as our military because it is the central unifying and transformative institution in our culture. At its best, it has served countless children even when their families have failed them.

James Comer, who was born into a low-income family only two generations out of slavery, is a grateful beneficiary of this venerable institution. He has always made public his gratitude for the education that transformed his family's destiny and for his professional training as a child psychiatrist. He has dedicated his life to helping schools and communities develop the capacity to protect and widen the aspirations of children, especially those born into difficult circumstances. By virtue of his status as an academic and as one who has traveled the roads these children must travel, he knows the journey they must take to be successful in work and as citizens.

In all these years, Comer has not wavered in this magnificent obsession. Yet he recognizes that today's schools may face even more difficult challenges because of what he refers to as "troublesome changes in American culture and high technology devoid of high human contact." I agree with my mentor, and believe that the greatest threat to our culture is the social distance between children and adults at all socioeconomic levels. I grew up in a safer and more predictable world than did my own children. We must factor this into our thinking when we talk about what we want our schools to be.

CHILDREN AT RISK IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

We are faced today with a generation of young people of all racial and economic backgrounds who are growing up without the concerted support that many of the children

in my generation received. Marian Wright Edelman (1992), the president of the Children's Defense Fund, captures the plight of contemporary youth when she states,

> Too many young people—of all colors, of all walks of life—are growing up today unable to handle life in hard places, without hope, without adequate attention, and without steady internal compasses to navigate the morally polluted seas they must face on the journey to adulthood. Millions of children are drowning in the meaninglessness of a culture that rewards greed and tells them that life is about getting rather than giving. (p. 15)

Many indicators clearly support Edelman's point. The increasingly violent nature of our society graphically illustrates that we are a nation in rapid moral decline. Growing up in a violent environment puts young people at risk. According to Mary Schwab-Stone, a pediatrician at the Yale Child Study Center, exposure to violence is associated with more antisocial activities, with alcohol use, with lower social achievement, with less perceived harm from engaging in risky behaviors, and with more willingness to fight. She further reports that more than 55 percent of the 8th and 10th graders surveyed in a midsize New England city reported that they had engaged in sexual intercourse. These students were 4.4 times more likely to drop out than students who reported no sexual activity. National figures indicate that there have been more than 1 million teenage pregnancies a year since 1983. The infection of approximately 2.5 million adolescents annually with sexually transmitted diseases is a by-product of such frequently unprotected sexual activity (Schwab-Stone, 1995).

The troubling statistics among our young are directly related to two factors: (1) the failure of adults to provide positive models worthy of emulation, and (2) a fragmented effort by the caregivers who share the responsibility for working together to create standards of behavior that encourage youth to behave in ways acceptable to the larger society of responsible citizens. Comer has not only been saying this for more than three decades but has also created a national and international organization that has shown hundreds of schools in communities across the United States and abroad how to repair the damage. He has taught us that schools working with families and communities can play a major role in changing the disturbing trends that presently characterize American society. We can teach our young people how to behave in constructive ways, and we can get them to perform at high levels within the classroom, but we must begin by providing better examples for our children and by supporting standards of behavior based on moral principles of justice, fairness, and a sense of responsibility for self and others. The African proverb "It takes a whole village to raise a child" effectively captures the breadth and depth of the work that has already been done and must continue to be done.

WHO ARE THE ROLE MODELS, AND WHAT EXAMPLES ARE THEY SETTING?

Implicit in the saying "It takes a whole village to raise a child" is our recognition that children learn well and develop well when all their adult guides demonstrate the highest shared values of the community. In the United States, that includes agreeing

on the content and skills that children must learn in order to continue the work of American democracy. While this requires more effort today than in the past, Comer has taught us that teachers, parents, community members, policymakers, and college professors must continually engage in a conversation about mission. What kind of schools do we want for our children? What kind of behaviors—academic, social, and moral—do we want from our children? What examples must we set to guide them? This kind of conversation is fundamental to the development of what Ted Sizer (1992) refers to as "habits of heart and habits of mind."

We know that the quality of the relationships between children and the adults whom they deem to be significant can result in anything from building up to practically destroying a child's character. James (1890), Cooley (1902), and Mead (1934), agreed in principle that those with whom the individual identifies and who are important to him or her have the greatest potential for influencing that person's behavior. It follows that parents, teachers, and other school personnel significantly influence children's behavior. Children are socially anchored in their families and immediate communities. It is essential, therefore, that schools initiate structures and processes that enable them to collaborate with families and community groups to create a common set of values, principles, and expectations for students. Once critical stakeholders can agree on these, it becomes easier to create the programs and activities that provide the necessary experiences for students to develop their character and intellect.

Conflict or ambiguity among home, school, and community is likely to trigger inner conflict as children move back and forth among the social systems and attempt to assume the various roles required of them in each one. In contrast, when home, school, and community agree on the values and behaviors to be transmitted, children function better in all three contexts.

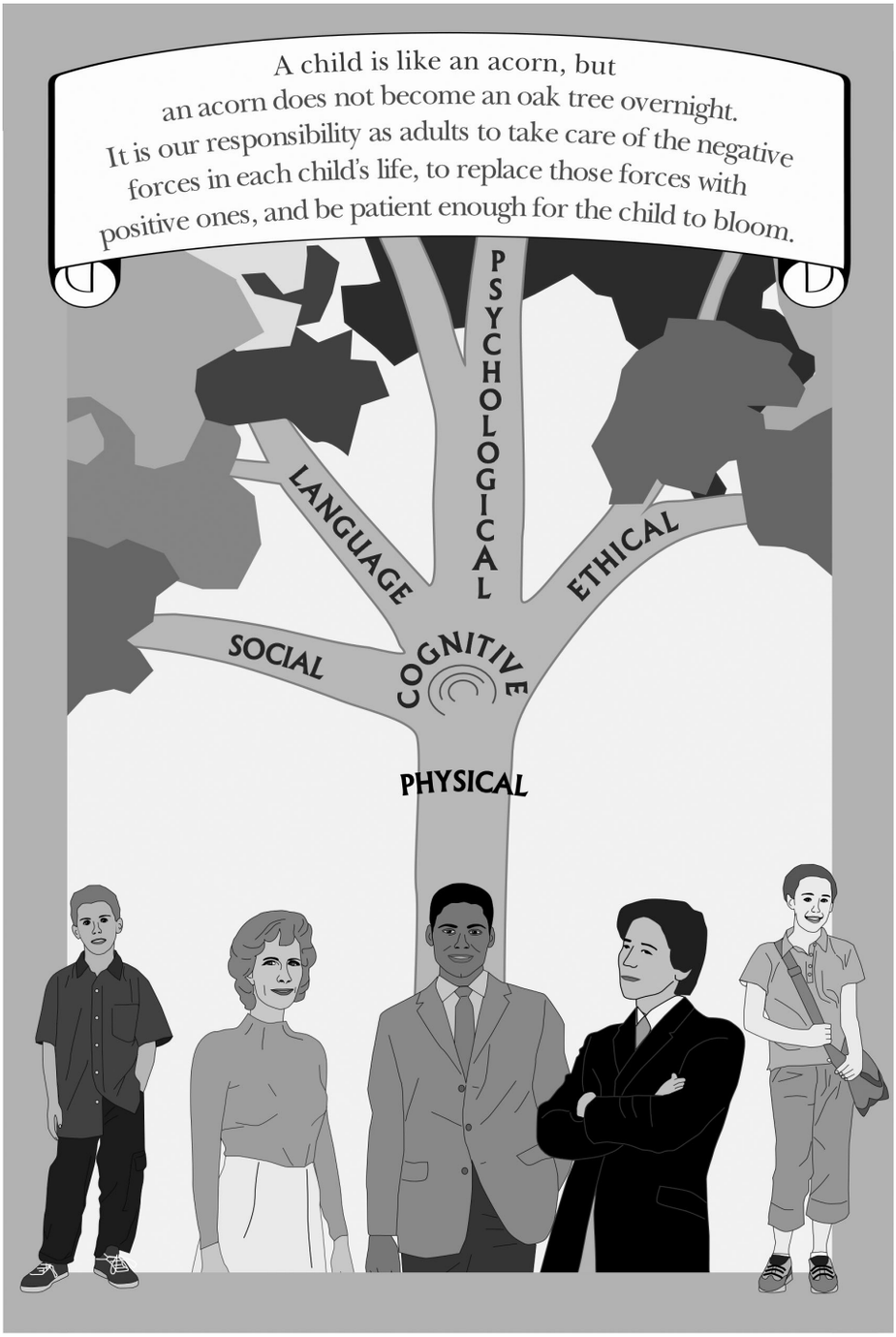
Comer has developed a structure and a process for all levels of our K–12 education system that supports young people's academic learning and personal development. He has developed a governance and planning process that uses systems theory and child development knowledge to create a "whole-village mentality" among stakeholders at the central office, school, family, and community levels.

DEVELOPMENTAL PATHWAYS AND THE WHOLE CHILD

Comer has identified six pathways that should serve (1) as a framework for analysis when assessing child and adolescent growth and development and (2) as focal points for activities and programs designed to facilitate that development. These pathways are physical, cognitive, psychological, language, social, and ethical. Taken together, they constitute what we refer to as the "whole child." Optimum development is a function of balance and synergy throughout a child's physical, cognitive, psychological, language, social, and ethical self (see Figure 1.1).

At the School Development Program (SDP), we train and support all our participating educators, parents, and community members so that they truly can have patience with development. An acorn does not become an oak tree overnight. Some children are born in very, very hard places, and that temporarily disrupts their development. It is the responsibility of the schools to engage in coalitions with parents

Figure 1.1 An acorn does not become an oak tree overnight



NOTE: A glossy color poster of this figure (11" × 17") for classroom use is available from www.comerprocess.org.

and community people to help these children. After all, the children do not have genetic deficits; they have *experience* deficits. No child will perform well academically if he or she is hungry or has never been read to. It's our responsibility as adults to work collectively to sweep away the negative forces in each child's life, to replace those forces with positive ones, and to be patient enough for the child to bloom.

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