

An emergency response to 'going off your face' at school

by David Epston



Glen, aged nine, has been threatened to be expelled from an exemplary school on account of his uncontrollable and dangerous rages. David Epston contrives with Glen and his family to 'team up' against the reputation this had earned him as 'mad' on behalf of his desire to be known as an 'ordinary kid'. The school's call for action leads to everyone taking emergency measures to prevent his expulsion from his school, something everyone agreed would have very unfortunate consequences.

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I had met, Glen, now aged nine, eighteen months before, along with his parents, Jan and Ron, and his eleven-year-old sister, Tracey. He and his family had been troubled by his tantruming at home but happily this yielded to the 'temper tantrum party approach'¹ after our first meeting. We had all parted company in good spirits after our celebration at the second meeting held to review this and, when I said good-bye to Glen, I didn't expect to see him again. At a six-month phone review, there had never been a re-occurrence of a tantrum.

But now Jan had rung seeking an urgent appointment, as the school had issued them with an ultimatum. They had been warned that, if Glen was involved in one more brawl, either in class or in the school grounds, the principal intended to start formal proceedings with the school board to have him expelled. The family had not quite realised how numerous these rows were, as their frequency had increased dramatically over the previous month or so. This threat from the principal was quite unexpected by Jan and Ron, as they understood that Glen attended a school that was attached to a university teacher training degree program and was justifiably staffed by exemplary teachers and benefited from the contribution of many students in training. The principal explained that what had become so intolerable about these brawls from her own and from the school's point of view was that it was now taking three or four able-bodied staff to subdue Glen in the midst of one of his 'rages' when, as Ron put it colloquially, 'Glen goes off his face!' or 'spits the dummy!' The week before, while being restrained, Glen had yanked off their hinges some plumbing fittings affixed to a brick wall which, up until then, had survived sixty or seventy years of student wear-and-tear. Such was Glen's strength in these states of mind!

'Do you think the school is becoming afraid of his rages?' I asked Ron.

He thought this was a distinct possibility.

In addition, as it was a small public school with a strong community outreach, most of the teachers, students and parents were well-known to each other. Consequently, Jan was humiliated and utterly exasperated by the situation and the reputation Glen had gained along the way. Ron had been working twelve hours a day, seven days a week attempting to rescue from bankruptcy his small family business established by his grandfather.

When I asked what the prospects were for the family business, he told me, 'It is just a matter of time'.

He ashamedly admitted that the only possible response he could think of, given Jan's desperation which he shared, was to physically punish his son.

He could not meet my eyes when he told me, 'I am so unhappy I am doing this but I don't know what else to do.'

Jan started to cry: 'I am holding the fort and I don't know if I can hold it much longer!'

Glen had a coughing tic, which meant he was continually clearing his throat when I first met him and that continued into this meeting. His parents also mentioned that he was as 'twitchy and can't sit still' as had been the case when we had met previously. I suspect the school had another description for his parents' vernacular account. Although this 'twitchiness' and coughing tic had not abated, they informed me that the school found handling such behaviours well within their means. They urgently drew my attention to the fact that the daily brawls he was engaged in this was with classmates, and the 'rages' had led to the current emergency.

Where to from here?

Without any difficulty we soon established that everyone, and most definitely Glen, really wanted to continue on at this school as, apart from anything else, it was merely a two-minute walk away from home. Ron and Jan were desperate, as they were convinced that the schooling he had been receiving there was the best possible and they were beside themselves considering his prospects at a more remote school that would be less generously and ably staffed.

When we came to discuss the 'rages' and the 'brawls' and why they had been on the increase in the last month or so, everyone reached the conclusion, and foremost Glen, that both began – first the brawl and then the 'rages' – with the provocations of his classmates, which, no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't resist.

His parents had counselled him time and time again with, 'Sticks and stones will break your bones, but names will never hurt you', hoping that this maxim would allow Glen to ignore these taunts and walk away from any further engagement with his provocateurs.

Ron told a story of how, when he was going to and from school at about Glen's age, some kids his age and older, walking in the opposite direction to a school sponsored by a different religion, would call out taunts, and how his parents had taught him this adage and how this had allowed him to stop getting involved in shouting matches, which had often deteriorated into what he referred to as 'religious wars'.

Despite this time-honoured advice, the names, all of which alluded to him pejoratively as 'crazy', did more than hurt him, they rendered him seemingly insane and beyond anyone's attempt to reason with him. The only measure the school had at its disposal was to physically restrain him. These taunts included 'hypo', 'temper', 'maniac', 'nut case', 'Carrington' and 'Oakley' (the last two were names of nearby psychiatric hospitals that had been closed down some years before). Tracey attended the same school and mentioned that she too was distressed by being teased mercilessly with regard to her brother's so-called 'madness'.

We discussed at length how these rages were contributing to giving him a reputation and that according to everyone, but to Glen in particular, this was very unfair, especially since he had seemingly 'cured' his tantrumming at home virtually overnight.

Some of the questions I asked were:

(to parents and to Tracey) 'Do you think this problem is giving people the wrong idea about Glen?'

'Do you have any idea why this Problem would want people to get the wrong idea about your son [brother]?'

Glen looked on baffled at first by this line of questioning, but became intrigued by their responses as each in turn roundly reproached the problem as 'wrong-headed'. I turned to Glen to break him from his intrigue and asked him whether the problem was 'wronging' him.

Still somewhat confused, he nodded his head in agreement. We reached a general consensus that the family knew Glen better than the problem did. Perhaps for the first time, Glen grinned. I then looked straight at Glen and sought his advice as to how we might proceed from here.

'Glen, do you want to prove this problem wrong about you and to prove your family right about you

'Glen, if this problem knew your family as well as I do, especially how you did away with tantrumming overnight, thanks to your family's help, do you wonder if it would reconsider getting you into so much trouble?'

They all spoke at considerable length about his athletic prowess, which had already led to a series of medal-winning victories in the hundred-metre dash at recent athletic events around the city. He had been diligent in his training, followed to the letter his coach's advice about what to eat the morning of a race, and how to get off the blocks when the starting pistol went off. I then asked a question that was a culmination of many diverse and detailed enquiries of everyone, but primarily Glen, in regard to his prowess. As it turned out, many of his classmates had no idea about his success, as none of them were in his athletics club.

I asked, 'Could a crazy, maniac, nut case kid win the hundred-metre race that you won a month ago at Eden Park?'

'Is this evidence that the problem that is persuading people Glen is "crazy" is itself "crazy"?''

Jan, Ron and Tracey wholeheartedly agreed that perhaps the problem was crazy and not Glen. Glen smiled with some satisfaction when he denounced the problem as crazy and disavowed himself of that reputation at the same time, with his family as his witnesses. By the conclusion of this line of enquiry, Glen and his family had no doubt that they were a match for such a problem that was 'giving everyone at school the wrong idea about you!'

'Glen, do you think you and your family would be interested in "teaming up" and making trouble for the problem?'

David, This Is An Emergency!

As we had passed the halfway mark in our meeting, Jan, perhaps wondering where all this reputation/counter-reputation talk was going, in a very kindly manner, again drew to my attention that this was an emergency, as Glen was at a real risk of being expelled tomorrow or the day after.

As a result, everyone thought it was wise to assume the role of an emergency responder when I asked, 'You're quite right! Do you think we should all immediately take up the role of emergency responders, including you, Glen?'

Everyone agreed. Jan looked relieved but then we again launched into another enquiry: how do emergency responders go about responding to emergencies? We shared our ideas about how fire fighters, ambulance drivers and police officers respond to emergencies in the line of their duties. Ron's uncle had been a fireman, so he had the inside story on fire-fighting emergencies. But one thing we realised that all emergency responders have in common was that they prepared ahead of time and knew what they were doing before the emergency started. As you can imagine, such reflections took their time. Once again Jan's relief was turning into exasperation in front of my eyes, especially when the bell rang at my office door signaling the arrival of the next family. I saw her glance down at her watch and I thought I had better do the same.

Eight Minutes to Plan the Emergency Response

'We have eight minutes to go. Have you guys got any ideas?' I earnestly requested.

Ron seemed to be losing his patience with me and said, 'If we knew how to do this, David, we wouldn't be here!'

'Well, in that case, what about if I think about all the ways I have learned over the last fifteen years in which young men and women and their families have made a lot of trouble for problems such as "going off your face" and "getting into rages". Can you give me a minute to think them up and tell you about them? We don't have much time so I promise I will write a letter to you and deliver it to you on my way home as it is only five minutes out of my way to cycle past your place.'

I searched my memories and came up with the following emergency practices, each of which had all played a significant part in a young person making trouble for a problem of this nature.

'As we only have a minute left, can we take a vote on these proposals?'

They happily agreed and I read each one aloud and waited for everyone to vote. I did wonder how Glen would respond to the 'writing letters' proposal before I suggested it to everyone. I was in luck, as almost immediately after I outlined this, Tracey started to laugh out loud, nudged Glen in the ribs and said, 'This has got to work!' She thrust her arm in the air to indicate her vote. Ron and Jan also reassured him of this and quickly followed suit. He somewhat more reluctantly voted in its favour. Then everyone joined Tracey in her laughter. After this, every proposal was hastily and unanimously supported and just in the nick of time as the hour was up.

I prepared the following letter and delivered it later that evening, as I had promised. Jan was very appreciative when I handed it over to her. Without this detailed documentation, I doubt whether they could have set in motion the 'Family Emergency Measures'.

Dear Jan, Roger, Glen and Tracey,

Glen, it was pretty obvious to me that you had decided to get the better of your temper. It has been making you look silly and you are 'sick of it'. And we all believed you when you declared that. Over a year ago, you overcame your temper tantrums at home just like that – more or less overnight. You appeared to do it all by yourself, according to how your Mum and Dad remembered the 'temper tantrum party' that never took place.

The other day, I also noticed that you are more and more controlling your cough. You said that you are ready and able to take your self-control another step forward by becoming more mature. Why is this so important? Because these Family Emergency Measures may require you to more or less grow up overnight, like you did last year.

You also have to win yourself a new reputation at school, as everyone there, including your teachers, is getting the wrong idea. As you put it, 'They believe I am a nutter'.

Well, your family and I know you are not and we all came up with some emergency measures to help you be the kind of 'ordinary kid' you told us you wanted to be. So here goes.

Emergency Measures Until Everyone Agrees You Are the 'Ordinary Kid' You Want To Be:

1) At all times when this family sits down to meals, pre-prepared cards with the words HYP0, TEMPER, MANIAC, NUT CASE, OAKLEY AND CARRINGTON should be placed in front of each person's dinner plate. That person then becomes that word for the rest of the meal. Each time you address the person known as 'hypo' or 'Carrington', you are to start every conversation or request by using that night's name.

Here are some examples:

'Carrington, please pass the butter?'

'Hypo, did you get wet on the way home in the rain?'

'Nutcase, is your back still sore after digging the garden over the weekend?'

'Temper, are you working late tonight? When do you expect to get home?'

Try not to respond to any comment that is not prefaced with your name for the meal. Please exchange names every meal to make sure no-one gets stuck with the same name two nights in a row. That would be mean.

2) Ron, whenever you return home from work and it doesn't matter what time it is (even after Glen has gone to sleep), check with Glen by asking him something to this effect:

'Glen, did you win or lose today?'

Do not accept any excuses whatsoever. A win is equivalent to getting through that particular day without losing his temper, even if he was provoked. A loss is not getting through that day, even if he was provoked

Can you respond to a win as if he had won an all-Auckland track athletic event; can you respond to a loss by firmly showing your disappointment and saying something to this effect:

'I won't have to do this tomorrow because I know you are a winner, not a loser. You are my son!'

Jan, you have been in the front lines for a long time with Ron being so taken up trying to keep the family business afloat. You might prefer not to discuss this matter at all with Glen but leave it up to Glen and his dad when Ron comes home. If he tries to engage you in discussion and you feel too full of desperation and concern, say something to this effect:

'For the time being, this is between you and your Dad!'

3) Tracy, this is optional. You told us that your classmates think your brother can't control himself and you know as well as I do that they are wrong about Glen. Now you can help yourself and Glen by doing the following. Ask your classroom teacher if she will read a letter like this to your class. Here is a sample letter:

'My brother, Glen, used to be controlled by his temper but this is no longer so. He is now taming his temper and is not going to look silly anymore and go "off his head" when people call him names. At the end of every week, I will give you a report on how he's doing. Glen is grown up in every other respect except his temper is a bit younger than him. I know my brother can and will grow his temper up to his age.

How do I know?

Because he is my brother and I am proud of him.'

At the end of each week, ask your Dad what Glen's score was for that week and then report it to your class. For example: my brother, Glen=7; his temper=0. If anyone teases you, just say to them something like this: 'My brother is taming his temper. I will let you know at the end of each week how his Temper Taming is going.'

4) Jan and Ron, sit down with Glen and help him write letters to the following: Wayne, Mathew and Michael, all of whom Glen considers to be agents provocateurs of him 'going off his face' and then brawling with them. But first, you should discuss this whole approach to get Glen a new reputation with Mrs Wilson, the school principal. I expect we will need her co-operation.

Here is a sample letter:

'Dear Mathew/Michael or Wayne,

Up until now, my temper often got the better of me and made me look like a fool. No wonder you call me 'hypo', 'maniac', 'temper', 'nutter' and 'Carrington'. But that was in the old days. I have decided to get the better of my temper. I know I can do this because I have won three all city one hundred metre races at athletic events at Eden Park. My temper was a bit younger than the rest of me but now I am catching it up to my age with my Dad's help. Tempers are childish and both you and I know that.

In the next month, I am going to win against my temper. However, I will need your help in the days to come. Will you please call me the following names as much as you can. Here are the names I want you to call me- 'hypo', 'nutter', 'temper', 'maniac', 'Oakley' and 'Carrington'. I need lots of practice, so the more names you call me, the better it will be for me. I know I can count on you to be 'good mates' and lend me a hand here.

Thanks a lot.

Your friend,

Glen (retired hypo, nutter, Carrington, Oakley, temper and maniac).'

At the beginning of each week, can you sit down and help Glen write a letter to each of his 'mates' telling them his score. For example, '... the week of June 6-12, Glen=7; his temper=0.' He could phone them directly if letter writing is inconvenient and let them know that way. You might be well advised to supervise this.

This emergency response involves Glen controlling his temper and being immunised against provocation and, perhaps most importantly, winning a new reputation at his school as an 'ordinary kid' and proving to one and all that the problem is wrong about the kind of person you know he really is.

Good luck in this Emergency Response.

David.

I must confess that I couldn't wait to see them a month later, when we had scheduled a review. Glen was proud to report that he had made a fool of his temper twenty-eight times and it only made a fool of him on two occasions.

When I asked how he had turned the tables on his temper, he recounted in a matter of fact way, 'When they call you names, you ignore them. When they called me names, I'd think about it and it would make me cool down. I'd think about controlling and stopping it and it just doesn't come out.'

According to Glen, this appeared to have considerable effect on his provocateurs.

'They're getting tired of it. They've even given up calling me names.'

The family had had a prize-giving evening the week before, with Glen being awarded a facsimile Olympic medal on a red ribbon, which he proudly was wearing on this occasion. I read the inscription on it, which had his name and 'First for Effort'. I am sure I saw tears in Ron's eyes as we all extolled Glen's virtues that had led to him showing the problem he was about as invincible in his classroom and playground as he was on the athletic track.

Tracey, as it turned out, had decided against writing letters to her class. In lieu of that, 'I only went to a few people. There were about two of them. I told them he is trying to overcome his temper and is doing very well. They just walked away. They couldn't get to me. Now they come up to me and say, "Instead of beating up people, he's a little angel!"'

The family did the name exchange at every dinner, except on the occasions when they had friends over for a meal.

Ron said, 'The fact the things were on the table, they become commonplace quickly. We didn't call out the names religiously. We didn't find it necessary to do that.'

Ron had also discovered how important his relationship with Glen was to his son.

'Regardless of what time I got home, sometimes eleven or twelve at night, he'd burst out of the door and come and tell me before I could even get out of my car.'

To settle the matter conclusively, I asked whether Glen was willing for me to give him a 'lie detector test' to see if the names could hurt him any more. He grinned and confidently told me to proceed with the test.

I declared to those in attendance, 'I am about to give Glen, aged nine, a lie detector test in which I will dare to call aloud all the names that in the past led him to going "off his face" and out of his own control and doing things he did not want to do. Glen, can you place your hand in mine, so I can feel by your grip if you are in control of yourself or if the words take over control of you.'

Everyone looked on with anticipation as we engaged ourselves in a very firm grip. I then shouted the names aloud. There was no physical response whatsoever and, as a result, I formerly pronounced that he had certainly cured the problem with the same pomposity a very senior surgeon might make a similar pronouncement at a medical grand round.

Jan had sought the school's co-operation before the letters were sent to his classmates.

'They all got involved. They immediately could see Glen was trying.'

Luckily she had, as an incident arose not too long afterwards, when Glen refused to be baited and was then frankly assaulted by one of his provocateurs. However, the mother of the boy who had assaulted him, still lodged a complaint against Glen with the school.

Jan said, 'He had got his good reputation back by then and they were prepared to hear the matter fairly. They saw he was making an effort and the change in him.'

At this meeting, according to Jan, Glen's assailant had 'performed like Glen used to do'.

Glen commented that his classmate had acted, 'like a maniac', but that he had refrained from calling him that to his face. When I enquired about the letters, Glen immediately handed over a written reply he had received from one of his ex-provocateurs. It read,

'Thanks for your letter. We all have faults and you are good to admit yours and try to rise above it. Good luck in the next month.

Your friend,

Michael.'

(The following is abstracted from the transcribed recording of this meeting.)

Ron: He was a bit shy about that (the letters). It took him a few days to write the letters.

Jan: I think that was the hard part for Glen.

Ron: It was hard work but once he'd done it ... that was probably as important as anything else. Because, once he had done it and posted them, he committed himself. He's not one to break his word. He stuck with it.

DE: Do you agree with your Dad that once you wrote those letters, you really were committed to winning and showing up your temper and showing those people what you are on the inside of you?

Glen (confused): Sort of ...

Ron: He had a bit of anguish. He was really quite concerned about writing those letters. He was really worried. But it was a little mountain. Once he had written the letters, it was downhill all the way. That was the hard bit. He absolutely convinced himself that he had to do it then. We didn't force him into it. He did it because he wanted to.

DE: Your Dad and Mum think writing the letters was pretty important for your success. How did writing the letters help you, Glen?

Glen: Well, Wayne, he helped me by calling me names.

DE (mishearing): Wayne didn't call you names?

Glen: No, he did!

Jan: He wrote to Michael but he was embarrassed, so he didn't call Glen any more names. But Wayne wouldn't be embarrassed.

DE: So it worked either way – either they called you names to help you like Wayne, or got embarrassed and stopped calling you names like Michael?

Jan: Glen's teacher actually watched Wayne when he received the letter and first read it. She told me that he shook his head and off he went. But Michael took it all in and he never called Glen names or fought with him again. One of the failures Glen had was with Wayne but (to Glen) Wayne will continue to be a good help to you for the rest of your life, as long as you are at the same school as him, by giving you more practice.

DE: Glen, it's nice of Wayne to help you like that, isn't it?

Glen: Paul read the letter too but he didn't help me like that. He already helps another way by telling people to leave me alone.

When I asked whether Glen's maturity 'had showed up in the nick of time', everyone agreed that Glen was, 'just getting more mature'. They provided me with evidence that he was controlling himself in a number of ways: his coughing tic had now disappeared completely; he was no longer violent to his sister when she teased him; according to his parents, his concentration had improved; and he was no longer 'so twitchy'.

I was in touch with them on occasions for another two years since the events I am writing about in this story. There were no further incidents of 'going off his head' at school.

Note

1. This has been described in considerable detail in a much earlier publication (see Epston, 1992, below). The last time a 'temper tantrum party' approach was used was reprinted in Epston, 2008). In a research study reported in that paper, a survey of 131 cases showed extremely impressive results: 45% of those engaged never ever tantrummed following the introduction of the 'temper tantrum party' approach; in 42% of instances, tantrumming was dramatically diminished; and another 8% showed a substantial reduction in tantrumming. I have employed this approach on 69 occasions between 1981 and 2003 with a 100% success rate whereby the tantrumming desisted immediately. Given its complexity, it cannot be summarised in this story.

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