

Protecting your Child from Bullying. The Art of Peace.

I read a statistic recently which stunned me.

Malta has the largest percentage of teenage brawlers in the world. As much as 49% of Maltese fifteen-year-olds claim to have been in at least one fistfight during the past year. (*The Economist Pocket World in Figures 2008*)

For those of you, like myself, who hitherto believed that Malta is a paradise of safety in a world of increasing alienation and violence, stop.

And let that statistic sink in.

Allow yourself now to reflect, as I have been since reading it, on what that means to your sons or daughters and to the Malta of the future. Allow yourself to think of the environment your children are having to cope with, most likely unbeknownst to you.

An environment in all probability as alien to you as to me.



If your thought processes followed mine you would have next found yourself wondering what has caused this, how can one fix it and how can one be sure that our youth are protected from harm and intimidation.

I am no expert in youth psychology or in the socialisation process and can only offer perhaps an educated guess as to the cause. I would be tempted to point to the complexity, speed and competitiveness of modern life and to the nature of relationships as transient and virtual now as they were once nurtured and valued.

As probably never before young people growing up in today's virtual world are searching, suffering, and struggling to connect. In an age of 24 hour inane television and non-stop advertising the young, underdeveloped mind is encouraged to rely on the false promises of advertising to make them feel good and soothe their emotions. Everything is a commodity. Including relationships.

I am sure that those amongst you who may claim some expertise in this area will smile at my oversimplification of what is undoubtedly a complex issue with, I suspect, multiple causes.

So while I can do little than speculate on the causes, as an Adult educator I can offer, with some confidence, a solution to the third question: how to be sure that your child can grow up with a calm, friendly, non-violent, connected disposition and without fear of bodily harm or intimidation, no matter how aggressive the environment he or she is presented with.

I can say that because of the experience of a great old Japanese man, now dead and the learnings passed on by his group of devoted disciples that now number in the hundreds of thousands around the world.

I can say that because I also experience it personally every day.

Morihei Ueshiba was born in 1883 and though raised in a somewhat privileged setting he was a rather weak, sickly child and bookish in his inclinations.

The young Ueshiba's first witness of fear and intimidation came first hand when he saw his father being attacked by followers of a competing politician.

Several other intimidating instances in his life caused the young Ueshiba to search for a system with which he could vanquish his and his family's enemies. Despite his naturally frail body he pursued studies in a number of martial arts and eventually through hard training (and undistracted by TV, the mobile phone and the Internet) excelled in them. Eventually Ueshiba came to be recognised as one of the greatest martial artists ever to have lived in Japan.

If it were only for his abilities as a Martial artist Ueshiba would have gone down in history as one of the greatest, but he would soon have been forgotten.

Instead he has become famous for developing a system of martial arts that has achieved the paradoxical: a highly effective self defence without violence or aggression. One that protects the attacker as much as the attacked. One that promotes love and cooperation not competition and exclusion.

Later in life Ueshiba, the great warrior, experienced a series of spiritual awakenings which culminated in one during the worst fighting of World War II when Ueshiba had a vision of 'the great spirit of Peace':

"The Way of the Warrior has been misunderstood. It is not a means to kill and destroy others. Those who seek to compete and better one another are making a terrible mistake.

To smash, injure, or destroy is the worst thing a human being can do. The real Way of a Warrior is to prevent such slaughter - it is the Art of Peace, the power of love."

As a result Morihei Ueshiba evolved his fighting expertise and created a new martial art. One he called Aikido: the way of harmonious spirit.

Aikido is sometimes referred as the 'gentle' martial art for its emphasis on controlling aggression by guiding energy towards harmless dissipation. Instead of responding to aggression with more violence Aikido focuses on leading an attacker's movement by using entering and turning movements. Students of Aikido neutralise an attack or several attacks by utilising various throws, pins or joint locks.

In the martial arts Aikido is unique in many ways. Aikido is cooperative not competitive. It does not feature punches (or kicks). It is not a sport.

There is no competition in Aikido. Instead, there is co-operation in an environment of mutual respect, courtesy and caring for others. Aikido teaches students how to handle violence both physically and verbally without themselves becoming violent.

The Aikido training place is a microcosm of real life where challenges are presented in a way that can be overcome with assistance from others. Slowly and with perseverance participants become stronger, more powerful and more confident.

With growth in self confidence comes a realization that limitations are often self imposed. This realization alone allows one to celebrate in being alive and liberates one from all kinds of negative attitudes. It allows for a world of unlimited possibilities to open up.

From my experience teaching Aikido to youngsters, I have found that they tune themselves very easily to Aikido's cooperative martial exercises. This is because they are natural in essence even when one is faced with the potentially intimidating attack

I have also found that teaching women Aikido sometimes is easier than teaching men. Women seem to perform the Aikido movements and techniques more easily and fluidly. Perhaps because they are forced to rely on techniques more than on physical strength. They are also less imbued with the dominant, 'aggro' male factor.

And if you are wondering on the effectiveness of Aikido as a defence system. Consider this. Aikido is one of the few Martial arts sanctioned by the elite Tokyo police. Aikido's martial framework promises an internal journey, where one can discover the true human spirit and where one can develop a calm, relaxed and centered mind that is not easily distracted or manipulated.

This is why I can confidently say that I know the right solution to the fear and intimidation that our young in Malta are experiencing every day.

Anyone interested in learning more about Aikido can visit the Aikido Yamato Club at the Maria Assumpta School in Hamrun or alternatively visit www.aikidomalta.net

Mr Kevin Bonanno is an Aikido Teacher of the Aikido Yamato Club – March 2009