

Last month's article about why junior high boys persist in hitting each other left off with a suggestion for you to reread Mark Twain's, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

For many years here at NPMS, I read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, aloud to my English classes. The girls in the class enjoyed the school house misadventures and were amused by Tom's inept romance of Becky Thatcher, but they were totally mystified by the unfathomable workings of an adolescent boy's mind. The boys, while separated by 150 years of time from Tom's world and activities, recognized that Tom was the boy they'd all like to be would only their mothers let them!

For those of you who didn't complete your homework, early in the book Tom wins a fight with the new boy in town and maintains his supremacy in the boy's pecking order despite the new boy being richer, better dressed, better educated and more polished socially.

Today after the fight in the street, there would be assault charges filed, Troopers involved and 'no contact' orders from the court would be issued. The times have changed a lot in the last 150 years.

Boys have not.

Last month's column explained how according to psychologist David R. Leaman, once the body's fight or flight response has kicked in, the brain and body enter a state where the likelihood of hostile action is increased, not reduced. The boys' negative thinking will lead them to believe physical aggression is the only solution to handle their feelings of helplessness, hurt, fear and guilt.

Our approach to these problems at NPMS has two components. We need to have a school where students are safe and feel secure, and aggression is recognized by students as an exception to the norm.

We also need to have a school where civil behavior is the standard. The social environment needs to be one where hostile or negative thinking doesn't have the opportunity to gain traction to begin with.

When students avoid falling into the 'negativity feedback loop' their minds are capable of practicing those skills Leaman suggested. A safe and civil

environment is one in which deep breaths and a sharing of feelings will bear positive results.

A safe school has practices that match the modern requirements. When I was a kid, school doors weren't locked. They are now. We didn't previously need safety monitors patrolling the building. All secondary schools in the district do now. We used to hide under a desk to survive a nuclear blast. Now we practice 'red' and 'yellow' safety lock downs. Mom used to come to the classroom door to collect me for an orthodontist appointment. Now mom would have to sign in and show the secretary her driver's license. I used to decide whose house I was going to after school and ride my bike there. Now kids have to bring a signed note from home or Mom needs to send us a fax so a student can ride a different bus home.

A civil school has many visible traits. Hats are removed in the building and isolation inducing iPOD earphones are put away. Pants are pulled up and so are blouses. A civil school also spends some class time formally examining social issues. A good example is having students study a topic like bullying and come to an understanding of the meaning, practices and consequences..... both to the victim and to the bully.

Students have learned about the the types of behavior that bullies may use. They have studied why bullies behave the way they do. They have examined the differences between bullying and more general conflict between individuals. Students have spent time learning about how tolerance for bullying happening around them is destructive. Students also are spending time learning how an individual can take a stand against bullying behavior and with the assistance of others make a difference in the climate of the school they attend.

This year many NPMS students have participated in the G.R.E.A.T. program being taught by officers from the North Pole Police Department. The goal of the G.R.E.A.T. program is to prevent violence while developing a positive bond between law enforcement and youth. G.R.E.A.T. lessons include those on bullying, good decision making, clear communication, practicing anger control, demonstrating respect for others and positive citizenship.

Ultimately, a civil school is a safe place to be. A safe and civil school is

one where today's Tom Sawyers and Becky Thatchers can master their long division and geography while they 'skylark' in the school yard secure in the knowledge that no one's pigtail will be dunked in the ink well or hat will be thrown up on the school house roof.

To learn more about those events or how to properly search for buried treasure and become a millionaire at age twelve, please go now and finish your homework assignment from last month!