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Using Shame and Humiliation on Schoolchildren

By Marilyn Murray

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In any group of people, a mention of childhood always evokes memories of school — some happy and some difficult. This definitely is the case here in Russia.

My nephew, his wife and two children lived in Russia for 11 years, with the children attending Russian schools, starting in kindergarten. I had the opportunity to visit their schools and experience their special celebrations. I was surprised and impressed by the effort put into making each event truly a memorable occasion. For example, the decorations and costumes were elaborate. The teachers were kind and cooperated with my nephew and niece as their children struggled to learn to read and write both in Russian and in English.

When the family moved and the children eventually went to schools in Germany and the United States, they were disappointed to find that many of the wonderful traditions of the "first bell" marking the beginning of the school year and other formalities of Russian schools were absent. They often were dismayed at the language and the lack of respect displayed

by other students. They missed Russia.

Unfortunately, not all memories of Russian schools were as pleasant as theirs. While multitudes of teachers are wonderful and committed, many others were, and still are, unable to value their students.

Russian children were not allowed to ask questions or offer comments in class. When I first started to teach here 10 years ago, I often would ask the adult participants in my classes if they had any questions or comments. This was usually met by silence, which is certainly very different from U.S. classrooms. After several weeks of no response, I said: "It is OK to speak up. I really want to know what you are thinking." I let them know I regarded them as equals and it was beneficial for all of us if they participated. Now, this is no longer an issue.

As I listen to my Russian colleagues today, their memories of school usually contain more negative memories than positive ones. Almost all their stories reveal a blatant disregard of children as human beings — only as objects to be molded and formed into loyal Soviet citizens.

They say their schools were highly politicized. They were taught that their first and most important commitment was to the Communist Party. Each day the best students from their Pioneer organization were chosen to stand next to the party banner for an hour without moving. Every school in the Soviet Union was required to have a pioneer on duty by that banner at all times.

Soviet propaganda was dispensed daily at school, where classes teaching military skills were obligatory. There often were rooms covered with large photos of dead bodies from the Vietnam War, with commentary that U.S. militarism and imperialism were to blame. The students were shown graphic images of war and death to instill fear starting at an early age. There were gatherings for certain military and political anniversaries where everyone was compelled to stand and listen to a special speaker. One psychologist said the things they spoke about and the pictures they displayed were so violent she fainted. She was 6.

The children were told they would be attacked by chemical weapons and regularly practiced drills with gas masks. "The sun shines only over the Soviet Union" was a popular mantra, while every other place in the world was dark and scary. It became mind control by fear.

The Soviet system also manipulated its citizens by constantly setting excessively high standards and quotas that often were unattainable for the average person. The system then degraded them for failing. This philosophy of "only the best is acceptable and all else is worthless" spilled over into the education system. Teachers emulated what was role-modeled by the Soviet leaders, and children became victims of this ruthless strategy.

The Soviet system expected children to do things well and had no sympathy for those who were unable to excel. Teachers praised and humiliated students in front of their peers. Boys and girls who were not superior intellectually or physically, and especially those whose families members were repressed as "enemies of the state," were instant targets for mistreatment.

Many of my students related stories of horrendous things being done to children where

teachers were the instigators of verbal, emotional and physical abuse. The teacher, who should have been an example of how to treat others with respect, instead bullied, mocked and physically tormented children in front of the class. To make it even more horrific, this "educator" would then encourage the other children to join in this torment.

A physician in my class said, "My school experiences were terrible. One boy had kidney problems and wet himself. The teacher stripped off his clothes and had the other children spit on him. It was physical, emotional and moral abuse. They also picked on children whose parents did not drink. Sober people were considered inferior. One of my teachers was like a terrorist — she had the other children throw food at me. She raged and called me a stupid girl. It caused tremendous pain."

A university professor told me: "While some teachers were kind, most of mine were very cruel. I went to a music conservatory and was never allowed time to relax or play. In addition to my studies, I also had to practice the piano six or eight hours every day for eight years. My piano teacher swore at me and told me he would take off his boots and throw them at me on stage if I did not perform perfectly. I still suffer physically and emotionally from this torment."

A professor who was raised in an orphanage trembled whenever he spoke of his school years. He tearfully told of a male teacher who stripped an 8-year-old boy naked and made him run outside in the snow around a track until he collapsed. All the other children had to stand and watch.

There are many stories of children forced to stand naked in front of the class for long periods of time while being physically and verbally abused. Some were put in closets for many hours or even stuffed into boxes. Rarely were the victimizers confronted about their vicious behavior.

The tragedy is not only how these victims were abused, but that children were taught the correct way to interact with others is to praise those who excel and condemn those who do not. Many of my colleagues are sad to admit that in years past, they also followed this pattern of thinking and used shame and humiliation in their interaction with their children and many other people in their personal and professional lives. Today they value each human being for who he is, not for his actions.

Marilyn Murray is an educator specializing in the treatment of trauma, abuse and deprivation, with more than 2,000 people attending her classes in Russia and other countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States over the past 10 years. Her second book, "The Murray Method," was recently published in English and Russian. You can read her interview with The Moscow Times here.

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