

The sad case of Karen Klein: a bullied grandmother and the collapse of authority

By now, most people have seen the heartbreaking video of Karen Klein, a bus monitor, being endlessly tormented by a group of middle school students, who mocked, poked, and threatened her. Klein does her best to ignore the taunts, but at one point, she breaks down into tears. It's upsetting to watch, but also perplexing. What's wrong with these students? Don't they have any compassion for a 68-year-old grandmother?

As a teacher, I have seen firsthand the growing audacity of the youth. I had a healthy fear of my parents, teachers and elders instilled in me from a young age, but today, things are different. Most of my students are not malicious, and I never had to dismiss a student from class, a benefit of teaching at the college level. Yet, a growing number have no respect or deference for individuals in authority, and I am troubled by their casualness when they text message during lectures, come into class 10 minutes late, or chat with the person next to them. It's not a big deal for them to blatantly break the small rules, and they are surprised, even shocked, if asked to stop.

Few people are more qualified to discuss this topic than Father Val J. Peter, former director of Boys Town, an organization that helps youths with emotional and physical problems, and author of more than 20 books on childcare and spirituality. Initially, he offers an historical reason for the collapse of authority. Over the last century, many influential individuals have abused their power, causing people to fear all forms of authority. It's not hard to imagine why powerful people were questioned after Hitler and Stalin, and why we celebrate people who stand up and protest abuses of authority.

Father Peter contends this historical context led to a revolution in child rearing. After World War II, experts advocated adjusting the traditional model for raising children, and Father Peter labels Dr. Benjamin Spock as the leader of this

movement. His *Baby and Child Care* (1945) was the most sold book in the United States over the next five decades after the Bible, influencing a generation of mothers. According to Father Peter, the traditional style of parenting was interpreted by Spock as “authoritarian, unfair, and unproductive. Punishment, said Spock, is not healthy for child and mother. Punitive disciplinary practices need to be abandoned.”

Traditionally, parents were tasked with instructing their children that lying, stealing and bullying were wrong, and they punished their children when they did these actions. The new approach suggests counseling or negotiating with children when they misbehave, or better yet, not to punish misbehavior, only reward good behavior. A flood of new works in the 1960s and 70s upheld this new philosophy, and Father Peter offers a succulent summary of their approach: “Parents should be therapists, not moralists.”

I am not advocating a return to corporal punishment or dismissing the value of some of the new methods, but pointing out that modern parenting can result in children who do not know right from wrong, do not expect consequences when they do something wrong, and think they are above any system of rules. In short, it produces middle school children who torment an elderly lady on the bus, without one bystander sticking up for her.

To add to this discouraging story, the boys behind bullying have received countless death threats, and now they live in fear. We should be upset, but bullying the bullies is also wrong, needlessly perpetuating the problem.

Fortunately, the story has a happy ending. A fundraising site has been collecting funds for Klein, and contributions are over a half million dollars. Klein plans to help her family with the money as well as donate some of it to charity. Some of the boys also offered heartfelt apologies.

More importantly, the benefit of the video was that it shocked the nation into realizing our collective failure of parenting. If you think there is only one Klein in America, you are living under a rock. Every bus, classroom, and playground has children being mean and hurtful. We need to realize that our top priority is not to raise children who are good at sports or top in the class or have self-confidence, a

critical intellect, or strong personalities. First and foremost, parents need to instill morality into their children, and only then will they be respectful.