

I was the boy with a uniform made from billiard table cloth



I STILL hang on to the belief that all children are basically good and want to learn. This view has been sorely tested over the years. I don't think I was bullied at school all that much. However, as an average sized, useless footballer, I had my share.

The biggest bully I ever met was called 'Beezer'. At secondary school, he would punch and 'nut' anyone that upset him. He would even 'nut' the lintel of the door when entering the classroom. My favourite memory was when he mistimed his 'head butt' and knocked himself out, ending up lying flat out on the floor of the classroom.

I learned from long experience that the four most dangerous places were the school yard, the toilets, the journey to and from school and school trips.

In 1956, I was about to start Grammar School fully equipped in my new blazer, which my mother had made from billiard table cloth, the closest to the official school colours. She also had embroidered the school badge.

I must admit I did stand out compared to the other children in their Raymond Barnes shop-bought outfits. It is hard to imagine today the sight of 11-year-olds walking to school in short, grey trousers and wearing a school cap. Just to make it clear we also wore shoes, long socks, a blazer, white shirt and tie.

The school yard was where my daily ritual humiliation took place, when the football teams were being chosen. I would stand waiting for my name to be shouted. Eventually, I was the one not picked. An argument would then ensue. "You can have him.....No you have him."

Eventually one of the captains would concede defeat and accept me - "as long as I stayed on the wing and kept out of the way."

Many years later, I gave a speech in London and talked about my experiences of being argued over in the school yard. I asked if anyone in the room had suffered the same fate. Among the small number who remembered a similar experience were: the Editor of the Times Educational Supplement, the Chief Executive of the Education Funding Agency and Lord Hill, the Minister for schools. So what doesn't kill you makes you stronger?



► It is critical to remember that bullying in whatever form it is manifested is unacceptable because it is damaging to victims and perpetrators

The outside toilets or 'netties' were certainly dangerous places to go. I was used to outside toilets at home. However I always remember being very frightened of sitting alone in the outhouse, with the candle to stop the pipes freezing, flickering in the background. On the first day at school, my cap was pushed down the outside toilet and my tie had been used to garrote me in the playground.

In those days, the headteacher would keep a 'punishment book'. One notable entry said: "Peter Smith caned four times for urinating at competitive altitudes over the toilet wall."

When I was an 11-year-old boy I always thought that this banned activity was really impressive and deserved more positive recognition.

Then the dreaded journey to school. As the 'only Grammar kid' in my village I had to walk in the opposite direction to all my previous friends and enemies, wearing my new uniform. I really did wish at the time that the uniform could have been in camouflage green and grey.

As I walked to school, I was faced with IKE Chariton. (IKE pronounced like IKEA without the A). Ike discovered he was a vampire at the age of six. Most nights, as I walked back from primary school, he would jump out of some bush and try to bite my neck. The onions I used to hide in my pocket didn't seem to work.

I also had a secret admiration for Ike particularly when it became known that he had played truant from school and turned up in the

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audience of the 'One O'clock Show'. The One O'clock show was shown every weekday on Tyme Tees TV. Ike actually met Wacky Jackie and the rest of the crew! Jack Haig, who played Wacky Jackie, later played Monsieur LeClerc in BBC's 'Allo 'Allo'.

One of our school trips in primary school was to see Peter Pan at the Theatre Royal, Newcastle. Peggy Cummins, who later was a girlfriend of John F Kennedy, played Peter Pan. Frank Thring was Captain Hook. He was later famous as Pontius Pilate in Ben Hur.

Tinkerbell was dying and Peter Pan had just told us that if anyone says they don't believe in fairies, a fairy dies. I was going through a severe case of guilt and shame as I recalled my own doubts as to their existence. Peter Pan called to the audience to shout 'I believe in fairies'. As we all started to shout 'yes, we believe!' Ike, in full view of the hovering teachers and packed auditorium, shouted 'Die, yer bastard'.

I have always had a belief that children are essentially good and want to learn. Ike may be the exception that proves the rule.

Children today are still dealing with bullying and isolation. I also know that schools work much harder today to address these issues than in my day.

Today the majority of schools have much stricter processes for dealing with bullying in all its forms. School visits are now governed by strict guidelines. High standard toilet facilities for children are increasingly being provided. The playground is seen as a positive environment to aid learning.

However, it is critical to remember that bullying in whatever form it is manifested is unacceptable because it is debilitating and damaging to victims and perpetrators alike. Bullying is not a rite of passage, nor is it inevitable - it can and should be tackled in all its forms.

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