

"The more I give them, the more they want from me": an expert's formula for an essential change for young people in the fight against bullying

As the creator of an active bullying prevention method that has been applied in Europe and Argentina for over two decades, Mónica Toscano says that the pandemic has led to a "regression" among children, adolescents and adults

By [María Elena Polack](#)

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"Many teachers say that they are not trained to read the group dimension," says the psychologist Monica Toscano, when discussing the need to train teachers to understand violence in the classroom

Social media's emergence in everyday life has expanded the boundaries of bullying, which now encompasses the students' entire day, both inside the classroom and outside it. In the past, problems took place inside schools; today, they play out on mobile phones, and children can no longer feel comfortable even in the privacy of their own homes, because their actions or attacks on them by their peers can go viral very quickly. Social media were also affected by the restrictions on movement and normal life imposed throughout the world, including Argentina, due to the Covid pandemic. There were fewer hours of face-to-face classes, and there was more screen time for everything, with its increasingly visible and obvious pernicious effects.

"I think the pandemic has taken us into a new paradigm. It's a paradigm in which we have all regressed to previous stages in different ways," says Mónica Toscano, the Argentinian psychologist who has developed a system for preventing violence in the classroom which has been implemented in various public and private schools in Argentina, in Paris (at the request of the city authorities), and in Lyon, Barcelona and Germany for more than 20 years.

"This regression has led to an increase in violence in the family environment and during the return to the classroom, where today we once again have to work to construct situations to reduce violence that we had previously put in place," says Toscano, who will chair the III International Conference of the MONICA TOSCANO PREVENTION IN ACT® Method at the Alliance Française in Buenos Aires next Thursday, which will be examining the various aspects of "Violent groups. Violence in the classroom, violence in social media." She will also be presenting her third book, entitled *El pronunciamiento de los jóvenes. Un camino de la imposibilidad a la posibilidad* (The pronouncement of young people. A path from impossibility to possibility), and she is putting the finishing touches to the opening of a training centre for teachers in Buenos Aires, which will train teachers in the method for the active prevention of bullying in the classroom.

The event in Buenos Aires comes days after the tragedy involving the Argentinian twin sisters Alana and Leila, who threw themselves from the balcony of their home in Sallent, Barcelona, which was possibly triggered by the bullying one of them suffered at the Instituto Llobregat secondary school they attended.

How has the pandemic influenced the feeling that problems have worsened in the classroom and in family relationships?

"I think the pandemic has taken us to a new paradigm. A paradigm in which we have all experienced regressions to previous stages in different ways. As childhood and adolescence are times when constant evolution takes place, and situations that are not fully understood appear, the threat of infection and the fear of losing loved ones led many young people to regress to stages of development

that they had already gone through. A young person needs to go out, socialise with their peers, experience disagreements with their friends, and become stronger as a result of conflict while they relate to their group of friends. That whole process came to a standstill, and we have frequently seen processes of regression, when the natural process would have been development and progress. In our fieldwork, we have found that this regression has led to an increase in violence in the family environment and during the return to the classroom, where today we once again have to work to construct situations to reduce violence that we had previously put in place.”

Your third book is called *El pronunciamiento de los jóvenes. Un camino de la imposibilidad a la posibilidad* (The pronouncement of young people. A path from impossibility to possibility). What is this path, and how is it travelled?

“In our everyday lives, we are constantly shocked by the various expressions of violence which young people are victims of, and this creates a network with social relationships, in which they are caught up in overlapping charades of freedom, and the results are subjugation, pain and an absence of their right to speak. What is the narrative that young people use today? Who is it created by? Has violence become normalised, and can I do and say anything in the name of freedom? What kind of freedoms are expressions of submission to a power of the group, which calls upon them to stop thinking and being themselves, in order to give them the excitement of belonging to a group and being part of its delusive happiness? That means that they can only articulate anguish, anxiety, loneliness, and they feel trapped in suffocating networks that often end up having dramatically traumatic results. "I want to be with them, I want to be recognised by them, I want to be part of what they do. Please accept me!" And that is the trap: "The more I give them, the more they demand from me. The more I need them, the more they ignore me and leave me all alone." The boundaries of the problem have expanded from the school to social media. That great instrument for investigation, which should be freedom, growth and investigation for our children, and which it fortunately is on the vast majority of occasions, is used for regressive expressions of cruelty *en masse*, and it becomes a torture chamber in which young people are manipulated, lost in its sinister labyrinths, and traumatised. I think this book is another opportunity to stop being active witnesses to what we do not do, and to be able to work with young people at a time when they are coping with risks perhaps more frequently than ever, building a path from impossibility to possibility, and renewing our hope of actively helping young people, supporting them in their declaration[u1] .”

Do adolescents and children in Argentina and around the world face a common problem of bullying today?

“In our research, we found that in various socio-economic and cultural settings in different countries, when we went into schools, young people of the same ages wanted to talk about their everyday lives, about their group of friends, about the situations of violence and pain they were experiencing. And that was their main concern. We could say that the variable that is becoming common in children of the same age, above and beyond their socio-economic and sociocultural environment, is that they suffer from the same situations of bullying, violence, fears and pain expressed in their relationship with their group of friends, and in the social environment of their school.”

What impact do you think your method has had in the classroom and on the future for the next generations?

“Having spent over two decades applying our method, we can see that the children who have gone through the experience are today able to reflect on their actions, in a way that is consistent with understanding the consequences of their actions. It helps them move beyond a single perspective, in which they themselves are the only reference point, in order to recognise that other people are different. It gives them support in their discovery that other people who are different must be respected. We have seen that if a ten-year-old boy can begin to think about responsibility for his actions, and that his actions always have consequences, by supporting him as he moves away from the idea of "I won't do it to you so that you won't do it to me" and enabling him to say "Do I have the right to hurt other people?", the questions will transcend his experience. That is one of the objectives of the method - to move beyond the here and now, to move towards constructing a possible future, in which expressions of violence are limited, when young people say: "You can't abuse him, you can't say what you're saying to him." If we extrapolate this, perhaps they are beginning to understand what it means to deal with other people, both male and female, in their future affective relationships. It is an idea that of course needs further study.”

Is it possible to say whether a generation that has experienced your method has better strategies for coping with the difficulties of adulthood?

“Workshops on the method were held with approximately 32,000 students, 7700 principals, teachers, educators and 10,000 families in schools in Buenos Aires, Rosario, San Martín de los Andes, Barcelona, Madrid, Paris, Lyon, Düsseldorf and Vienna between April 2000 and March 2022. As a possible endorsement of the method for addressing future difficulties, we can offer the testimony of some of the principals who believe in the benefits of its application, such as the director of a school in Barcelona: "When we did our most recent secondary school assessments, we found that in the previous years, our results were not as good as those in the years when we implemented the method on a continuous basis. We

teachers believe that this is possibly related to the team cohesion that means we all work better, with the space for prevention that we have been able to apply in the twelve, thirteen and fourteen-year-old age groups, which are precisely those where we have all noticed better results. This has led us to realise that releasing children from some of their problems helps them work better."

Apart from the Toscano method, is the lack of training for teachers on resolving conflicts in the classroom a factor in positive results in the long term?

"Yes, many teachers say that they are not trained to read the group dimension, which is a variable that is almost constant, and is essential for understanding and acting preventively when dealing with the expressions of active and passive violence that young people experience. The dimension of the "power of the group" is a crucial parameter in the method, which as the directors and teachers have told us, "we're not used to reading". This "power of the group" can be expressed in high-risk situations with "regressive expressions of cruelty *en masse*", which have serious consequences, such as increasingly violent expressions towards others, and painful and irreparable manifestations, such as the increase in suicides among adolescents. Putting them together based on our role in order to rescue them from a cruel power of the group: that is the greatest challenge we face today - a challenge that is even greater when the power of the group is expressed on social media."

Does migration as a consequence of Russia's invasion of Ukraine lead to more or less conflict than the language and cultural barrier of joining institutions in other countries?

"One of the most commonly observed fears in adolescence is the fear of what is different. On the subject of immigration, we have to work in the classroom on the conflict that arises in accepting what is different. Young people experience the cultural and language barrier as a process they have to go through. That applies to both children who arrive in a different country, with the pain of having left their own, and children who are already there, who don't fully understand what is happening. As for the language barrier, it is not easy, because we must remember that the human being is spoken by a mother tongue. Our mother tongue has made us what we are. At a time of so much change, like the transition from childhood to adolescence, where the strengthening of our word and our relationships with other people are so important, when cultural changes are very abrupt, when the mourning for what we have left behind has not yet taken shape, and neither has the mourning for the changes in the child's body, what we can see are expressions of violence towards others, as well as phenomena of anguish and anxiety that can lead to serious problems and depression."

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