



# STICKS AND STONES

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I'm always telling my daughters stories from when I was a kid. By comparison, the world of my youth was rougher and meaner than the world that kids grow up in today.

So, here's my question: Did this rougher and meaner world better prepare me to be a well-adjusted, happy adult? I say yes.

When I was a kid, you could say we were less sensitive about a lot of things. I mean, just look at the commercials we watched. We had The Frito Bandito, the cartoon spokesman for Fritos. He was a three and a half foot tall Mexican thief! Can you imagine pitching that at an ad agency today?

"OK...The Frito Bandito? Alright Phil, you don't work here anymore. Yeah, you gotta go clear out your desk right now."

Some were violent. Hawaiian Punch? Every commercial was the same. A cartoon Hawaiian character walks up to an unsuspecting cartoon tourist and says, "Hey -- how about a nice Hawaiian Punch?!" "Sure!" says the tourist, which gets him punched directly in the face. We all thought that was hilarious.

Kids had to be tougher then, too. An occasional playground fight was expected. And as for teasing? My mom had a remedy for that. "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me."

She used to say that all the time, one of the seemingly endless adages she had at her disposal to deal with any of life's problems. But I think long and hard about the practical applications that statement had on my life.

"That's true," I thought, "if someone punches you in the chest it hurts no matter what, but with words, it all depends on how you think about it." You could actually choose whether or not to be hurt! You can't choose whether or not a punch hurts. But you can choose whether or not words hurt. That was huge.

Even though it had been repeated ad nauseam for generations, "Sticks and Stones" really was a powerful bit of philosophy to a kid. That's one of the great things about being a parent -- you can spout clichés til the cows come home and yet, to your child, it's all new. You come off as one of the great thinkers in Western Culture.

But does anyone really say "Sticks and Stones" anymore? I doubt there is a grammar school

teacher today who is even allowed to utter that phrase. They're much more likely to warn against the ever present danger of "hate speech" or "triggers" or hurting people's feelings. This is done in the name of teaching children to respect each other. It begins innocently enough by trying to eradicate teasing, but it continues into middle and high school, where there's no greater sin than offending someone's personal or cultural sensitivity.

We've seen what used to be called "Great Books" banned because of fear of offending. That would not have even occurred to us years ago! Of course, how could the physical abuse in *The Great Gatsby* harm us in high school when we spent our childhood watching Jerry the mouse staple gun Tom the Cat's tongue to the wall? How could reading an honest depiction of racial attitudes in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* harm us when we sang "Ai yi yi yi!" along with the Frito Bandito, or "Fat kids, skinny kids, kids who climb on rocks; Tough kids! Sissy kids! – they said Sissy kids – Even kids with Chicken Pox!" We sang that along with the Armour hot dog kids on our TV sets?

People look back and some feel ashamed that teasing was expected in childhood, and stereotypes were commonplace in our culture, but was growing up in that environment worse than the hyper-sensitive culture we live in now?

I look at the rough and tumble of childhood, and the process of learning to deal with bullying and being insulted, as a process of inoculation. After each instance of being offended, and then repeating my mother's "sticks and stones" philosophy, it was like a vaccine that built up my immune system. Eventually you're resistant. And often you weren't even aware it was happening!

I can't imagine my college-aged self, living in fear of "microaggressions." Yet, today there are full-time campus administrators whose job involves scrubbing the campus curriculum and social life of anything that might offend anyone. And these are college students – ostensible adults, headed into the job market... I don't want to offend anyone with a microaggression if they're holding a scalpel!

I try to laugh it off. I don't want my outrage to match theirs. The best thing I can do is tell my stories to my kids, and remind them that "Sticks and stones may break their bones, but names will never hurt them." They think I wrote it.

I'm Tom Shillue for Prager University.