

Understanding and Preventing Youth Violence

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School violence claimed the lives of 15 young people in Littleton, Colorado, and focused the nation's attention on the issue of youth violence. The first children affected by violence lived in inner-city communities exhibiting a high degree of poverty, racism, and many other risk factors. The problem of youth violence now has infected segments of our population earlier thought immune to such problems.

The Problem Has Increased

From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, the youth homicide rate increased by 168 percent. Boys are 10 times more likely to commit murder than girls, and girls are more likely to contemplate suicide than boys. More boys complete suicidal acts than girls, partly because boys choose more lethal methods than girls. Boys use guns, and girls tend to use pills.(1)

From birth, boys have greater vulnerabilities than girls. For example, boys tend to have more health, learning, and social problems. In almost every culture, boys are more aggressive than girls. Girls who get sad, get depressed. Boys who get sad, get angry and become very skilled at hiding their sadness. Since boys are incarcerated for violent and often horrific crimes, they have been the subjects of in-depth study by James Garbarino and others in an attempt to better understand youth violence. Garbarino reached the following four conclusions(2):

1. Children need to believe that adults are in charge and are able and willing to protect them. Violent boys often have lost confidence in adults and concluded that they must take their safety into their own hands.
2. Children need to believe that somebody in the world is crazy about them. Boys are drawn into a

world that values accomplishments, but they need to have someone who cares about them, no matter what. Resiliency may be undermined if caring is lacking. A lack of caring also contributes to a spiritual emptiness that is typical in violent boys. Without a connection to a loving presence in the world, these boys may lack the sense that life is worthwhile and has meaning.

- The dark side of our culture may rush in to fill a spiritual void.
 - A boy who lacks positive meaning in his life has nothing to fall back on in times of trouble.
 - A spiritual foundation creates limits. A spiritually empty boy doesn't grasp the unacceptability of an unlimited response.
3. While we can agree that all children need healthy environments for optimal growth, psychologically vulnerable children particularly need a less socially toxic place to grow. Research indicates that the following social toxins affect aggressive boys more than other children:
 - violence in the movies, television, and video games;
 - large high schools have negative effects especially on students whose grades are below average; and
 - drugs and guns.
 4. Children need nurturing and caring adults who help them learn to break the "code of silence" that keeps them from reporting their concerns about potentially violent youth.
 - By third grade, children can identify other children who hit people. Without intervention, children who hit will be hitting people in their families 30 years later.

- “Friends don’t let friends drive drunk” is a motto that has caught on and affected the problem of drunk driving. We need something like that for violence intervention.
- Principals, counselors, therapists, teachers, and parents need enough time and expertise to find ways to get the attention of and intervene with young people who show early violent tendencies.

Violence Prevention Is Everybody’s Business

Although the problems of youth violence can seem overwhelming, some effective measures can and must be taken. These include:

- Helping adolescents understand the power of kindness rather than taunting.
- Training teachers and parents.
- Providing community-oriented classrooms.
- Detoxifying the social environment.
- Developing supporting and nurturing communities that demonstrate they value young people by protecting and caring for them, setting consistent limits to their behavior, and building connections such as 4-H youth development programs with disconnected young people.

A Pattern of Violence Begins Early

During the first years of life, children learn how the world values them. Kids who are loved consistently and unconditionally—regardless of their temperament—learn to trust. They grow to see their world as a safe place where they can succeed. Other important factors include(3):

- Demonstrated caring and service;
- Relationships that teach values and boundaries;
- A supportive extended family;
- A positive outlook on the future;
- A predictable home environment where the child feels safe to take advantage of opportunities; and

- Families who affiliate with and respect the diversity of their community.

Children living in such environments can grow to feel connected and devoted to the dignity within everyone.

When adults provide emotional security for all children, teach them about tolerance and conflict resolution, inspire children, and serve as role models in nurturing settings, they go a long way toward raising peaceful children. Nurturing environments for children are organized and predictable with people in charge whose roles are clearly defined and consistent.

Ultimately, violence is least likely when healthy relationships teach very young children the joy and satisfaction gained from caring about others. Such learning creates inner peace – a stronger power than the urge to commit violence(4).

References

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- (2) Garbarino, James. *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them*. The Free Press. New York. 1999.
- (3) Leffert, Nancy. Et al. “Factors for Healthy Child Development from the Carnegie Task Force on Meeting the Needs of Young Children” in *Starting Out Right*. Developmental Assets for Children. Search Institute. Minneapolis, MN. 1997, p. 14.
- (4) Gorski, Peter A., “Early years are learning years,” *Safe Schools Can’t Save Children*, Release #99 (B)

2000: 10M

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