

Understanding and Preventing Youth Violence

C. Sue Miles, Ph.D.
Extension Specialist, Family Life

The Bureau of Justice Statistics says that men commit about 13 million violent crimes each year. A little more than half are simple assaults, and 70 percent of the victims are males. Women commit about 2.1 million violent crimes. About three-quarters of those crimes are simple assaults on other women. Jack Levin of the Brudnick Center for Violence at Northeastern University in Boston says that women are using their fists the same way as men did in the 1960s and the 1970s.(1)

With such an epidemic of violent crime, we must learn more about criminals. In *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them*, Dr. James Garbarino, professor of human development at Cornell University, reports on his research team's in-depth study of men in prison.(2)

Children affected early in their lives by violence lived in communities with a high degree of poverty, racism, and many other problems considered risk factors to their healthy growth and development. Incidence of these issues parallels increased violence. The signs of the epidemic are plain to see across the entire country.

One factor contributing to violence is intolerance and discrimination against youths who are different. Understanding the cycle of oppression and strategies for teaching tolerance are the subjects of a two-page fact sheet, "Time to Face Reality" available at your county Extension office. That issue of *Treasures of the Trail* (ES/WVU #99-2) was written by Richard Fleisher, Extension international programs specialist.

Early Relationships with Abuse and Neglect Set the Stage for Problems

Boys who are both temperamentally vulnerable and victims of abuse and neglect form the most common

pattern of aggression. More than 3 million children were reported to be physically and psychologically abused last year. Abused and abandoned children have very few resources to make sense of the abuse they receive. They often develop negative ways to cope with life. These include:

- paying too much attention to negatives in their lives,
- not paying attention to positives in their lives,
- tending to respond aggressively when frustrated, and
- thinking that aggression will bring success in the world.

Anyone who has been around babies knows that some have easier emotional makeups than others. Some babies coo and smile and seem content with their lot in life while others are irritable, restless, and demanding. In *The Nurture Assumption*, researcher Judith Rich Harris defines the following as difficult emotional traits(3):

- having high activity levels,
- not taking the feelings of others into account,
- having no physical fear,
- being easily bored with routine,
- showing a tendency to seek excitement, and
- having less than average intelligence.

When a baby has a difficult temperament, it doesn't automatically mean he or she will grow up to be violent, but it does mean the child is vulnerable to being violent. It does mean the child needs highly skilled and motivated parents or caretakers to be in charge. Parents of such a child need much support to meet the child's specialized needs, make the child's

early relationships positive, and manage this extra vulnerability.

Violence Prevention Is Everyone's Business

A new report from a group of national leaders lists many of the problems of America's children that lead to a more violent society.⁽⁴⁾ *10 Critical Threats to America's Children: Warning Signs for the Next Millennium* tells about obstacles facing many of our children. These obstacles include:

A Plague of Poverty

Abuse and Neglect

Drugs

Children Having Children

Inadequate Child Care

Violent Crime

Absent Parents

Lack of Health Care

New Pressures in the Classroom

Poverty

One in five West Virginia children lives in poverty. These figures mirror national statistics. Children growing up poor are much more likely to experience an array of problems regarding their health, emotional well-being, school readiness and achievement, and their employability as adults.

Abuse

Children who have been abused and neglected seem to continue a negative pattern in their adult lives. For instance, within one year after leaving foster care at age 18, 25 percent to 40 percent will be homeless, only 40 percent to 50 percent will have completed high school, and fewer than half will have jobs. More than 60 percent of the young women will have babies within four years.

Inadequate Care, Development, and Supervision of Children

Unless quality time is spent with children, it is difficult for parents to know what their children are doing, whom they are hanging around with, and what they are thinking. As one school superintendent said in a recent WVU Community Forum, "Everything bad that happens—sex, drugs, guns, and trouble-making—happens between 3 and 7 p.m." Indeed, it does. In fact, this is true across the country. During this period, juvenile crime and victimization peaks in America.

Many West Virginia youths are not engaged in family, school, work, or their communities. The juvenile violent crime arrest rate increased by 43 percent in West Virginia between 1985 and 1995. Fifteen percent of West Virginia's 16- to 19-year-olds are not working and are not in school. Twenty-seven percent of low-income youths do not participate in any extracurricular activities.

Search Institute's 40 Development Assets

A group of researchers formed an institute to increase understanding about the needs of youth. It is called The Search Institute (<http://www.search-institute.org>). From research, they have identified the following 40 external and internal building blocks of developments that help young people grow up healthy, caring, and responsible.⁽⁵⁾

External Assets

Support

1. Family support – Family life provides levels of love and support.
2. Positive family communication – Young person and his/her parent(s) communicate positively, and young people are willing to seek advice and counsel from parent(s).
3. Other adult relationships – Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults.

4. Caring neighborhood – Young person experiences caring neighbors.
5. Caring school climate – School provides a caring, encouraging environment.
6. Parent involvement in schooling – Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.

Empowerment

7. Community values youths – Young person perceives that adults in the community value youths.
8. Youths as resources – Young people are given useful roles in the community.
9. Service to others – Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.
10. Safety – Young person feels safe at home, at school, and in the neighborhood.

Boundaries and Expectations

11. Family boundaries – Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person's whereabouts.
12. School boundaries – School provides clear rules and consequences.
13. Neighborhood boundaries – Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior.
14. Adult role models – Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.
15. Positive peer influence – Young person's best friends model responsible behavior.
16. High expectations – Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.

Constructive Use of Time

17. Creative activities – Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, other arts.

18. Youth programs – Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organization at school and/or in the community.
19. Religious community – Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution.
20. Time at home – Young person is out with friends “with nothing special to do” two or fewer nights per week.

Internal Assets

Commitment to Learning

21. Achievement motivation – Young person is motivated to do well in school.
22. School engagement – Young person is actively engaged in learning.
23. Homework – Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day.
24. Bonding to school – Young person cares about his/her school.
25. Reading for pleasure – Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.

Positive Values

26. Caring – Young person places high value on helping other people.
27. Equality and social justice – Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.
28. Integrity – Young person acts on convictions and stands up for his/her beliefs.
29. Honesty – Young person “tells the truth” even when it is not easy.
30. Responsibility – Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.
31. Restraint – Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active, use alcohol, or other drugs.

Social Competencies

32. Planning and decision making – Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.
33. Interpersonal competence – Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.
34. Cultural competence – Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.
35. Resistance skills – Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.
36. Peaceful conflict resolution – Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.

Positive Identity

37. Personal power – Young person feels he/she has control over “things that happen to me.”
38. Self-esteem – Young person reports having a high self-esteem.
39. Sense of purpose – Young person reports that “my life has a purpose.”
40. Positive view of personal future – Young person is optimistic about his/her personal future.

In our community, we might look at the above elements and consider how we can enhance existing programs and strengthen these elements for youths.

Discussion Questions

1. How can we help working poor parents gain better access to child care, health care, and higher education?
2. What are some ways to support more quality out-of-home care for abused children and streamline the adoption process?
3. What needs to happen in our communities to make sure destructive purchased guns stay out of the hands of children?
4. How can community residents assure that quality day care and after-school programs are available?

5. What are some ways community residents can support parental involvement in schools?
6. Is there a need to organize community mentoring for youths and sometimes their parents?
7. What additional problems need to be given attention in your community? What are some specific roles individuals or your group can play to lower juvenile crime?
8. Reaching parents with education today is a major challenge. Are there some ways that individuals/groups can work with employers to open the doors and support parent education at work sites or in some other creative ways?

References

- (1) Bacon, John and staff. “Nationline” in USA TODAY. Monday, December 6, 1999. P. 3A
- (2) Garbarino, James. *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them*. New York. The Free Press. 1999.
- (3) Harris, J.R. *The Nurture Assumption. Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do*. New York. Free Press. 1998.
- (4) Sachs, Ron. *10 Critical Threats to America’s Children: Warning Signs for the Next Millennium*. November 29, 1999. (http://www.nsba.org/highlights/ten_threats_pr.htm).
- (5) Roehlkepartain, Eugene C. and Peter L. Benson. *Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth*. Search Institute. Minneapolis, 1998.

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