

Responding to Concerns about Serious Violence at School

Recent events in other areas have caused apprehension about safety in school communities. It can be helpful to review what we understand about serious school-based violence, and what efforts we can make to ameliorate the psychological effects of seeing this violence in the news, as well as preventing further violence.

It is important to put events of lethal school-based violence in perspective, and to realize that such events are very rare. As with other extreme and unusual events, a number of factors coming together are responsible for extreme school-based violence. Aspects of the individual's social and cultural environment over a long period of time lay the groundwork for violent acts. Witnessing violence at home or in the community, being a victim of abuse and violence, or hearing values which condone violence as a solution all can play a role. Bullying and social rejection at school can play a role, and thus one aspect of prevention is to prevent and deal effectively with bullying and social exclusion at school.

Social and cultural factors include media violence, which provides a "script" to angry persons for violent and vengeful actions. That is, the media provides ideas of what is within the realm of possible responses. As Chester Quarles observes in his book, *Staying Safe at School*, (1993), "Americans are taught to fight. Our T.V. productions report it, subliminally support it, and teach us how to fight and kill on shows intended to entertain. When someone is wronged, Bronson, John Wayne, the Equalizer or Clint Eastwood is going to fight through the system, and correct the wrong. That culture is reflected in our schools." Since American media productions penetrate our culture, this also becomes part of the psyche of the Canadian teen and adult. Media violence has been shown in many studies to increase violence measurably on a societal level, and to desensitize persons who view it to the effects of violence on people. Individuals already at risk for violence seek out the most violent media (American Psychological Association, 1993). The availability of information on the construction of weapons and/or the availability of firearms provides the means for revenge fantasies to be realized.

Alienated and angry youth may experience a "triggering" event such as a perceived loss or rejection, and lose balance in their thinking to the point of

considering violence as a response. Triggering events may include rejection by a romantic partner, a humiliation in front of others, being denied a highly desired goal, perceived betrayal or exploitation. Persons who commit homicides are predominantly male (e.g. in 1997 in Canada, 42 males and 12 females under the age of 18 were charged in homicide cases. With regard to aggravated assault, 260 male youth, and 68 female youth were charged. In the U.S., in 1994, among persons under 18 years of age, 2,838 males but only 178 females committed a homicide).

In some youth who fit the above profile, a factor of incipient mental illness may contribute to faulty problem solving and unbalanced emotions, although the vast majority of those with various psychological problems and psychiatric syndromes are not more violent than other individuals (Harris and Rice, 1992). Youth who commit common assaults and participate in school yard fights usually fit the conduct disorder profile (consistently not respecting parents or teachers, breaking most rules, being repeatedly aggressive to peers, vandalism), but youth who commit sudden very violent acts such as shooting schoolmates or teachers may fit a different profile. One can perhaps be thankful that these homicidal events at school are so rare that a good study of the profile of the perpetrators is not widely available, if it exists.

Risk factors for serious violence at school

It is generally agreed that some behaviours and indicators which *may* signal potential lethal violence include (usually several of these indicators will occur together):

- ◆ Threats of violence at school or against individuals who attend the school (Serious threats of physical harm where the individual has the means to carry out the threat, may well fit the Criminal Code definition of threats, which are chargeable offences for persons 12 or over.)
- ◆ Past history of violence
- ◆ Access to guns or weapons
- ◆ Access to information on building weapons
- ◆ Severe pre-occupation with violent themes, media, war games or themes, violent video games, etc.

- ◆ Paranoid ideas (grossly over interpreting perceived slights and threats)
- ◆ Thoughts of suicide
- ◆ Subscribing to a set of beliefs which promotes violence or excuses killing
- ◆ Acting in a secretive manner, being extremely withdrawn
- ◆ Severe depression with anger, particularly when accompanied by a temporary rebound in mood and energy level
- ◆ Past history of severe physical, sexual or emotional abuse, or witnessing abuse at home (however, abuse alone is not enough to indicate risk of violence)
- ◆ Social rejection and isolation, or belonging to a rejected group of peers
- ◆ Being a victim of bullying in the past, where the victim has threatened to get even

For students who are not violent, but are very concerned about their safety, reassurance that severe violence at school is rare is important. For younger children, advising parents to limit their access to television news reports of violent occurrences may be very helpful, when possible, as young children may have great difficulty in understanding that the events on television are rare.

Reassurance that the school and their parents are participating actively in implementing safety measures and violence prevention is also an appropriate response. Older students can be involved in violence prevention strategies and plans. For example, they may take part in anti-bullying initiatives, help students who are new to a school or isolated, participate in peer mediation, and learn conflict resolution skills. Reporting concerns about violent threats or actions by other students is also a very helpful activity. Parents can be helpful in bringing threats to the attention of school personnel also.

School-based initiatives to create a safe, inclusive environment and prevent violence through education are most often mentioned as measures for preventing violence at school. For example, clear, consistent standards for behaviour, strong measures against bullying and harassment, a wide diversity of extracurricular activities, and the availability of rewards to a wide variety of achievements and individuals are important in preventing violence. Studies in institutional settings have shown that clear and consistent behavioural standards and consequences, together with a high rate of availability of positive reinforcement yield lower violence rates (Harris and Rice, 1992).

The availability of school-based helping services for students, including guidance, social services and mental health assistance, and alternative education programmes for troubled youth are also cited in preventing violence (e.g. Goldstein et al, 1994).

Teaching emotional literacy, conflict resolution skills, and prosocial values is also helpful in reducing overall violence.

There is no substitute for knowing a student who is troubled, and having a personal relationship with him or her, in terms of predicting their behaviour. Having one adult person who is supportive is often cited as a most important protective factor for children and youth. If you are an educator, and know a student who you feel is troubled and might have potential to act in a violent manner, consult with psychological services, social services and administration in your school.

Finally, we all must also take care of ourselves, and take time to develop our social and information support systems, so that we can be more available to others in times of stress.

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Resources, Further Reading:

American Psychological Association. **Warning Signs**. Pamphlet available on the Internet at: helping.apa.org.

F.W.T.A.O. Newsletter, (1994). **No to Violence** Issue. An excellent issue for violence prevention initiatives, classroom activities, and background information.

Goldstein, Arnold P. & Jane Close Conoley. (1997). **School Violence Intervention: A Practical Handbook**. Deals with school safety planning as well as intervention. (Althouse library)

Lawrence, Richard R. (1998). **School Crime and Juvenile Justice**. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press. (Althouse library)

McLean, Ann et al. **65 Friendly Lessons in Violence Prevention**. Richard and Jean Ivey Foundation & Board of Education for the City of London. For grades 4-12, field-tested across south-west Ontario, easy to use, can be integrated into different subject matter. (Many copies in schools).

Peters, R. DeV., Robert J. McMahon, and Vernon Quinsey. (1992). **Aggression and Violence Throughout the Lifespan**. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Psychological research on violence. (Weldon library, U.W.O.)

Schmidt, Fran. **Peacemaking Skills for Little Kids**. (1993). **Getting to Win Win** (1994) (for older students in high school or intermediate). These are easy to use teaching strategies and materials. Peace Education Foundations, 26276 Biscayne Blvd. Miami FLA 33137