

## Understanding and Preventing School Violence

Michael D. Ruch, Ph.D.  
Child & School Psychologist  
March 2008

In the aftermath of seemingly endless incidents of school and community violence, we all are left asking, "Why?" What causes a young person to engage in such unthinkable behavior? The recent school shooting incidents in particular have led to many attempts to autopsy and explain the social and personal causes for such aberrant human behavior. Many of the offered explanations are simplistic or motivated by the writer's personal agenda. The reality is that there are multiple reasons to help us understand violence in our schools and communities.

We must recognize that we live in a society that promotes and glorifies violent solutions to our troubles. Videogames, television shows, music lyrics, and movies promote the theme that expedient acts of violence solve problems. Children are exposed to thousands of vicarious experiences that teach them that aggressive actions allow one to gain power and control. Athletes at many levels show that sportsmanship has been replaced by a take-out-the-opponent mentality. Our young people may come to see violent acts as reasonable choices to deal with adversity.

While we emphasize and glorify the efficacy of violence, we focus precious little attention on the lasting human pain it causes. The terrible loss and grief suffered by the loved ones of the victims and the perpetrator are brushed aside in most television shows, movies, or news coverage. Our children are often left desensitized to the acts and effects of violent behavior and they may learn to view violence apart from the consequences.

Those who behave in the most bizarre and inhuman ways are made instant celebrities by the news media. Most of us can recite the names of several mass murderers, but few of us can recall a specific victim's name. We guarantee front page headlines to anyone who will strike out violently against others. And, the more extreme and vicious the crime, the more coverage there will be. This instant recognition and immortalization may be seductive to the alienated and wayward members of our communities.

We live in a society where the freedom of every good citizen to own and use weapons also makes them readily available by those who may misuse them. While the freedom of gun ownership is viewed by many as a sacred right, the ease of securing firearms contributes to the destructive violence of those who are seeking an expression of their unbridled hostility. We can imagine that in a weapon sanitized society, the maniacal few would likely have less destructive means of impulsively striking out.

Another contributing societal factor in understanding violent actions is the information available on the Internet. The explosion of web sites has allowed those who engage in bizarre behavior to feel validated and justified. Numerous sites feed and encourage an individual's paranoia and alienation. With a few mouse clicks, one can become affiliated with groups that espouse antisocial

or pathological behavior. It is frightening that information on such things as constructing bombs, disabling security systems, or stalking an enemy can now be easily accessed via the same computer mom and dad purchased to help their children write term papers.

There are many young people who feel disconnected and disenfranchised. They may have few positive social connections and the usual avenues of recognition, i.e., good looks, high achievement, and athletic skill, may not be readily available to them. Many attend increasingly larger high schools where anonymity and peer rejection are daily experiences. They may come from homes that have been marked by broken relationships, little care or supervision, and a profound lack of attachment. They may have been exposed to violence or even abused. These students are vulnerable to the negative messages of perverse groups. The students may respond to this rejection and perceived unfairness with despair and anger.

As a society, we have not done an adequate job of preparing many of our young people for the stresses of life. In our fast-paced world, we value instant success over persistence. We are intolerant of discomfort and expect to be happy and pain-free at all times. We anticipate rapid solutions to all of our problems. Too little time is spent teaching our children to be patient, to be tolerant of temporary discomfort, and to realize that they can recover from and rise above any of life's problems. This all may lead them to feel unable to cope with the inevitable frustrations, difficulties, and conundrums that are a part of everyone's life.

But even this does not explain the acts of murderous aggression against innocent victims we have witnessed. While the initial portrayal of these disturbed individuals may suggest that they were just a normal person until "something pushed them over the edge," this is never the case. Such actions cannot be explained through the routes of normal human experiences. These actions are, by definition pathological. These are not impulsive reactions to situations, but carefully planned out lethal activities against other human beings. There is not a logical connection between being teased and picked on and opening fire with an automatic weapon in a school cafeteria. Such primal aggressive behavior crosses the line beyond what most human beings are capable of acting.

While the initial portrayal of these disturbed individuals often suggests that they were just a relatively normal person until "something pushed them over the edge," this is never the case. These are deeply disturbed individuals who typically show many warning signs prior to taking action. The twisted mental process involved in such a supremely inhuman act, requires a suspension and distortion of realistic thinking. First, one must depersonalize the victims. In war, soldiers depersonalize the enemy by giving them names such as "Krauts" or "Gooks" or "Insurgents." In a similar way, the aggressor in these violent mass murders must convince himself that the victims are unworthy of human recognition. Second, any logical thoughts about consequences must be suppressed. Some may fantasize about an outcome that includes a dramatic escape to safety. Others may imagine an indefinite moment of grand satisfaction now that justice has evened the score. A few may not even allow their thoughts to venture beyond the rageful event. Third, one's feelings of anger and alienation must be expanded and maximized to an intolerable level. In order to justify the kind of aggressive violence normally reserved only for self-preservation, one must become convinced that the situation is extremely grave and hopeless.

Thankfully, the overwhelming majority of us do not possess this complex of mental distortions. We get angry, hurt, and confused. We may even fantasize about violent actions. But, we all live with inhibited impulses, and this is one of the things that separates us from other animals. We do not respond with unmodulated behavior to situations that trigger our emotions and fantasies. Those who perpetrate violent mass aggression behave qualitatively differently than most of us. They allow themselves to cross a threshold that violates the implied contract we share with fellow human beings. This contract supports mutual protection of the group. Empathy and altruism are understood as essential to positive human relationships. Those who respond with murderous violence put aside these human qualities and permit their selfish motives and desires to operate in isolation.

Here are some practical steps we can take to decrease violence in our society.

- The pervasive violent themes in the entertainment media must be discouraged.
- Our news media must balance their responsibility to enhance society with their desire to entice us with violent reporting.
- The public must wrestle with what limits we should place on the freedom to secure weapons in order to benefit society as a whole.
- We need to do a better job of identifying and responding to children and young people who are hurting, disconnected, and wayward. Looking for warning signs will help identify children who have unmet needs and are crying for help.
- We need to support families.
- Schools need to utilize safety plans and technology to help prevent and contain violent incidents.

While all of this will aid us in reducing violence in our society, we should not deceive ourselves into thinking that we will ever purge the world of all violent incidents. Because they are statistically rare, we should never exaggerate the threat from these acts. Likewise, since their occurrence at any given time is so unlikely, extreme acts are inherently difficult to predict and prevent. We must work to lessen the chance of such events, while acknowledging the disturbing truth that there will always be a very few highly pathological people capable of horrible destructive behaviors.



