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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Selected News Releases

Weapons of Minor Destruction

by Marc Baranowski

The calculated rampage of two boys has left four classmates and a teacher dead and 11 others wounded at a middle school in Arkansas. It is a shocking, chilling disaster that begs for explanation. But there are no easy answers or quick solutions to violence as devastating as the murder of children by other children.

A wise sage once said, "When a society gets sick, teen-agers are the most likely to show the symptoms." American society suffers from a chronic disease not covered by most HMOs. I call this disease "LOV" -- Love Of Violence, and the Arkansas incident is but the most recent example of how this disease is occurring at younger and younger ages. The camouflage clad youngsters who lured fellow students and teachers outside the school to shower them with bullets are 11 and 13.

Rather than attempting to guess why the Arkansas event happened, perhaps it's more useful to look at prevention efforts that might reduce the likelihood that this type of killing will occur in the future. Many years of social science and educational research tell us that the following would help reduce the incidence of these types of behavior:

1. Reduce the number of times daily that violence is presented in the mass media as the best, easiest, preferred, most glamorous, most "manly" way of solving problems. In terms of television, ask that this be done at the cable level, the network level, the local level.
2. Through gun control efforts, reduce the availability of guns to children. With easy access to weapons, the probability increases that someone will use them. Almost all teen-agers either have access to such weapons in their homes, from friends, or from illegal dealers.

If they don't know someone who has these weapons, they know someone who knows someone who can get them. This is true regardless of race, creed, social class, or geographic location. It happened in Arkansas, Kentucky and Mississippi. It can happen here too, and "here" is everywhere.

While we fret over Saddam's "weapons of mass destruction," far more harm is being done to our children using "weapons of minor destruction". Throughout history, a small minority of teen-agers has always "gone crazy." Some brush it off as simply a phase of adolescence. But there has never been a time in history in which we've allowed teen-age craziness to be so potentially destructive by supplying the tools that make murder easy.

3. In ALL schools, from preschool upward, we should create and sustain meaningful, long-term conflict resolution education programs. Essentially, these efforts consist of teaching skills that give kids clear and direct alternatives to using violence.

It is clear from reported statements of one of the Arkansas shooters (that he "had a lot of killing to do") that he saw no alternative to murder. However, this type of rigid thinking can be changed *if* we make the effort. But such initiatives will not be effective if they are one-shot or short-term reactions to a devastating social tragedy.

Conflict resolution is learned best when started early in a child's life and continued through high school graduation. We will reduce the incidence of violence when we view such programs not as "frills" or "fluff" or "extras" in the curriculum, but as determinants of whether our children live or die.

4. Increase parent education efforts in all schools and communities. Research clearly shows that democratic styles of parenting reduce the likelihood of violence, while very authoritarian (punitive) and very permissive (hands-off or absent) parenting styles increase the likelihood. We can't always assume that parents "naturally" know how to sustain positive parenting efforts.

5. Consistently ask all adults, including ourselves, to monitor the "little ways" in which we promote and perpetuate violence. Let's all model peace instead of hurt in everything we do.

The life and death of America's children is the responsibility of everyone, not just parents and teachers.

(Marc Baranowski is associate professor of Human Development at the University of Maine and a specialist in adolescent development and issues).

Released: March 31, 1998

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