



Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones: The Problem of Youth Violence

We as therapists at the Institute of Family Living have been concerned about the increase in youth violence. Stories of school shootings, drive-by shootings, and stabbing deaths among our young people have been splashed across the front pages of newspapers and made the top stories on the nightly news.

The resulting injuries and deaths of the victims and the killers continue to produce the question, “Why?” As much as we would like the problem to exist only in big American cities, the reality of our young people killing and being killed is in our own front yards too.

What Contributes to a Child Committing a Violent Act?

Like any problem, solutions do not lie in a single cause but in a complex set of influences.

Both genetic and environmental factors influence our young people choosing violence.

Some children may be born with learning problems that affect their ability to process information about the world. Parental rejection and neglect, the crass materialism of our culture, mass media violence, and negative peer groups can amplify these in-born challenges.

If a child perceives that he or she does not belong and feels that he or she has no future, there is a chance that he or she will struggle with meaninglessness.

Although there is no equation for predicting which of our vulnerable children will turn to violence, teaching positive values within safe adult relationships can help compensate for the bad things that happen within a toxic society. This means that we, as adults, can foster resilience in our children.

Resilience in human beings is the ability to recover from being wounded. Spiritual, psychological, and social anchors give the type of support our vulnerable youth need to develop a healthy self-esteem, possess meaning in life, and enjoy intimate relationships.

Without a sense of purpose and meaning, a young person growing up cannot live in the present with an eye on the future. There is a relationship between the young person feeling abandoned by adults and let down by the social structures that should have provided protection, and a mind-set of surviving only for the present. Thus, if our children experience abuse, high-conflict families, or other traumas that rob him or her of a secure future, the routines of daily life become meaningless.

Trauma as a child is even more difficult to make sense of when your thinking and reasoning abilities are still developing.

Young people that I have counselled who see life as meaningless, speak of a lack of hope for the future. When I have asked at-risk youth about life after high school, some have commented, “I don’t know — what’s the point?”, “Who cares?”, and/or “Life sucks, then you die.”

Young people need to feel connected to at least one person that loves them. This helps them to make sense out of the world. It makes sense to respect authority if you know that your elders will care for and protect you. It makes sense to love if you feel loved. It makes sense to care about others and the world around you if you are connected to a higher spiritual order that differentiates right from wrong.

There are three ways that we as a society can help our children grow up with a sense of purpose and meaning. These include spiritual, psychological, and social anchors.

Spiritual Anchors

When a young person's need for something that is good and lasting is deeply violated, there is a chance that he or she may try to find meaning in a negative identity or evil behaviour. Spiritually-based coping strategies are related to positive coping behaviours because they lend meaning in difficult times.

Psychological Anchors

Our vulnerable children adapt either for better or for worse in the face of trauma. Boys tend to develop anti-social behaviour and aggression. Girls tend to develop eating disorders, obvious depression, and self-destructive behaviour.

Finding the positive out of a hard experience is a good thing. Average intelligence, social support from adults outside the family, and being able to combine traditional male and female characteristics help to weather a crisis.

Social Anchors

Children need stability within their relationships both inside and outside the home. Healthy social environments foster economic equality with a commitment to basic human rights and a perception that each of us is a regular member of society.

Bad things happen, and we should expect it. There is no quick fix because the problem is complex. Fostering and maintaining spiritual, psychological, and social anchors in our youth will result in a better world and a better future for generations to come.

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For Further Reading:

Clark, Chap. *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004.

Garbarino, James. *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them*. New York: The Free Press, 1999.



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