

# THE COUNSELOR

A PUBLICATION FOR PARENTS, COUNSELORS & EDUCATORS • PROVIDED BY: CHRISTIAN COUNSELORS OF HOUSTON

VOL. 2, NO. 3

Stephen Rossi, M.A., L.P.C.

AUGUST 1999

## SCHOOL VIOLENCE WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES

Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris went on a four-hour shooting rampage in their high school leaving twelve dead and twenty-three wounded, before they committed suicide. That happened four months ago in Littleton, Colorado. One month after the Columbine school massacre a teen opened fire in his school in Atlanta wounding six students. The students, parents, relatives, and friends are still grieving. Fear, sadness, uncertainty, anxiety, and unanswered questions linger in the minds of those in Littleton, Conyers, and America, as the new school year begins.

Since 1996, three teachers and twenty-five students have been shot to death, and sixty-nine wounded in their schools by boys. Overall, two hundred thirty-five school associated deaths occurred in our country since 1992. Four in ten American high school students say they have classmates who might be troubled enough to stage a Littleton-style attack at their school. Violence in the schools is the number one education-related concern.

### Underlying Issues:

Who are these kids? What is happening in our schools, homes, and society? Considerable controversy exists over the causes. Many blame the kids, their parents, the internet, music, cliques/peer pressure, violent video games, politicians, big businesses and guns. Who's responsible? A general climate of anger and violence prevails around our nation's schools, which cuts across all races and ages. A special report on troubled kids (Time Magazine) reveals that the children who are accused of school shootings are kids already close to the edge, many were depressed. One in twenty American preteen/teens suffer from clinical depression. Many children and teens today struggle with serious issues. They are in deep emotional pain, walking around with significant hurt, anger, resentments, fear, and unforgiveness. Life is hard for children and teens as they struggle with a fragile sense of self in a world of rejection, divorce, family turmoil, violence, and cynicism. Youngsters on the edge have little to draw from in the way of coping skills when they are faced with emotional hurts. Their pain is rooted in the deepest issues of the heart and soul.

### Impact / Effects

School violence impacts us at two levels. Primary survivors are the victims directly impacted by the trauma, their lives permanently altered.

They are left to grieve the losses and work through the emotional pain caused by the trauma. Traumatic memories are burned into their lives. The students, their families, the school, the community and the whole nation are also affected by the school violence. Those people indirectly affected by watching the news coverage of tragic school violence like the Littleton massacre are secondary survivors. We all feel the pain, the loss, and the agony of this disaster. Children all over the country wonder if this will happen in their schools. Students throughout our country are more sensitive to their peer groups, cliques, and rejection. The families and neighborhoods directly hit by these tragedies mourn the loss of their children, while the schools are challenged with the tragic aftermath and creating a safer learning environment. The ripple effect of Littleton spreads from one individual to the next, one community to the next, as they enter a new school year with heavy hearts, mixed feelings, and tremendous loss.

### Trauma and Grief



Survivors of devastating events like the Columbine massacre are prone to exhibit post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) behaviors. Parents and school officials should look for the following from children and teens who experience the trauma of school violence:

- Re-experiencing the event through vivid memories or flash backs.
- Feeling emotionally numb.
- Feeling overwhelmed by what normally are considered everyday situations, diminished interest in performing normal tasks or pursuing usual interests.
- Crying uncontrollably.
- Isolating oneself from family and friends, and avoiding social situations.
- Relying increasingly on alcohol and drugs to get through the day.
- Feeling extremely moody, irritable, angry, suspicious or frightened.
- Having difficulty falling or staying asleep, sleeping too much and experiencing nightmares.
- Feeling guilty about surviving the event or being unable to solve the problem, change the

event or prevent the disaster.

- Feeling fears and a sense of doom about the future.

The bereaved teenager experiences grief in many ways. Oftentimes they feel shock/disbelief. They may experience any of the PTSD behaviors listed above. If the teenager witnesses a traumatic death, this state of shock and disbelief could last for months. Some experience unusual happenings like hearing the voice of the deceased. Thoughts of suicide may occur as a way of escaping the pain or joining their loved one. Frequently adolescents will engage in sexual activity out of their need to be close to someone, both physically and emotionally. This can also serve as a distraction from their pain. They may use drugs or alcohol to numb the pain, they're getting high or drunk so they don't have to feel. Drugs prolong and complicate the grieving process. They feel anger over being abandoned through death. Their anger can become powerful. Tears are a natural part of the grief. If a teenager shares his tears with you, be still, be quiet and listen - don't try to fix their pain.

### Coping with the Tragedy of School Violence

There are ways to foster healing when tragedy strikes. Share your feelings, tell your children if you are afraid, angry, sad, etc. Let children express their feelings in creative ways through writing, poetry, and drawings. Help children find a course of action. Taking action and resolving conflicts in peaceful ways reduces stress. Prayer also works. Columbine High School has a Web page dedicated to victims and families. It gives a list of deceased, poetry, prayers, notes taken from deceased people's cars, and scripture. Prayers bring comfort and healing.

Expect a whole range of emotional and physical reactions previously noted. Be concerned if your child becomes withdrawn and refuses to talk with you; expresses thoughts of self harm or harm to others; has severe, persistent problems sleeping and/or eating; displays intense irritability and extreme behavior outbursts. Encourage children to talk about their reactions to the school events. Ask questions to help them share their concerns, fears, and feelings. Be supportive and listen.

### Causes/Factors:

An interaction of variables causes school violence. They predispose kids to commit violence. There are two types of causes. Internal causes come from within the individual. They include: cumulative unmanaged anger; unmet needs for relationships, approval, success, and power; and isolation. External causes include:

cumulative put-downs; early childhood abuse or neglect; witnessing violence at home in communities or in the media; sources for escape and denial (e.g. violent computer games); other alienated students; and easy access to guns. Counter culture heroes in music and media, lack of supervision and connectedness, and plenty of free time and money are also external causes.

**Peer Pressure/Cliques** - Every day can be a struggle to fit in. Intense pressure and hierarchies exist. This takes the form of cruel peer rejection, put downs, and negativity that tear at fragile kids, like Klebold and Harris. This form of mistreatment from schoolmates during adolescence when kids are most psychologically fragile leaves deep wounds.

Military expert and psychologist, David Grossman, explains how today's media conditions kids to pull the trigger. He says that children don't naturally kill - they learn from violence in the home, and most pervasively, from violence in television, movies, and interactive video games. The method is desensitization, similar to boot-camp. Hundreds of sound scientific studies demonstrate the social impact of brutalization by media. Every time a child plays an interactive video game, he is learning the exact same conditioned reflex skills as a soldier or police officer in training.

There is considerable stress on teens these days, with a rise in both parents employed, teens have part-time jobs, pressure, responsibilities. Half of America's teens have already lived through their parents divorce (1. 2 million divorces will occur in 1999). Numerous boys have been pained, hurt, mistreated. Society tells boys not to cry. Some become rageful and kill. There has been a 300% increase in teen suicide since the 1960's and a 1,000% increase in depression among children since the 1950's.

Forty-seven per cent of Americans say very few parents really know what their teens are doing. Ninety per cent of Americans say parents are not spending enough time with their teens.

**Bullying** - The boys who have been accused in various killings were all victims of bullying. Schools are beginning to take bullying more seriously.

**Popular music** like Nirvana expresses nihilistic values of hopelessness, sadness, and aloneness. The Millennials, people born around 1980, are jaded. They don't trust adults. They feel like they don't have any great achievements and that they have nothing to do with all the changes happening these days. Millennials are between the ages of 18 and 25, the most spiritually vulnerable time of their lives. The lyrics to their music glorify sadness, celebrate loneliness, and drone on about the emptiness of God and the pointlessness of life.

## What Can We Do

Considerable research on boys' problems reveals a consistent theme they need most: beyond a strong parental unit, a community of tribal elders (coaches, pastors, and Scout leaders) to help them negotiate adolescence. Girls need this too, but the difference is that they internalize their pain; they don't lash out as boys do. A boy in pain is more dangerous.

Parents can do several things to stop the violence. They can take an active role in children's schools. Parents can live as effective role models. They can listen and talk with children regularly. Parents can set clear limits on behaviors in

advance and communicate clearly on the violence issue. Parents need to help their children learn how to examine and find solutions to problems and discourage name-calling and teasing. They should also insist on knowing their children's friends, whereabouts, and activities. They need to know how to spot signs of troubling behavior in kids - theirs and others. Parents should work with other parents to support school policies creating a safe environment. Parents need the support of older adults who can pass on their wisdom about parenting or give them respite from the strains of child care. Ronald Stephen of the Mayo Clinic in Rochester says, "the most effective way to keep young people from unhealthy and dangerous behavior is for parents to be involved in their lives."

Eric Harris threatened to kill a classmate on his WEBSITE, which read, "I don't care if I live or die in a shoot-out." The warning signs were there but no one listened.

The National School Safety Center identified warning signs that indicate the potential for violent behavior in young people. If an adult checks off more than four of these signs in connection with an individual student, it would be wise to alert the school's student assistance professional/school counselor. Get help.

1. Has a history of tantrums and uncontrollable anger outbursts.
2. Characteristically resorts to name calling, cursing, or abusive language.
3. Habitually makes violent threats when angry.
4. Has previously brought a weapon to school.
5. Is preoccupied with weapons, explosives or other incendiary devices.
6. Has a background of serious disciplinary problems at school and in the community.
7. Has a background of drug, alcohol, or other substance abuse or dependency.
8. Is on the fringe of his/her peer group with a few or no close friends.
9. Has previously been truant, suspended or expelled from school.
10. Displays cruelty to animals.
11. Has little or no supervision and support from parents or a caring adult.
12. Has witnessed or been a victim of abuse or neglect in the home.
13. Has been bullied and/or bullies or intimidates peers or younger children.
14. Tends to blame others for difficulties and problems he or she causes in himself/herself.
15. Consistently prefers TV shows, movies, or music expressing violent themes and acts.
16. Prefers reading materials dealing with violent themes, rituals, and abuse.
17. Reflects anger, frustration and the dark side of life in school essays or writing projects.
18. Is involved with a gang or antisocial group on the fringe of peer acceptance.
19. Is often depressed and/or has significant mood swings.
20. Has threatened or attempted suicide.

Students with declining grades, history of lying and stealing, and come from single parent, blended, troubled and father-absent families are also at-risk for violence.

Recognize violence warning signs in others. People who act violently often have trouble controlling their feelings. People who behave violently lose respect. They find themselves isolated or disliked, and they feel angry and frustrated. Parents and teachers should be careful not to minimize these behaviors in children. Early treatment by a professional can help.

Conflict-resolution programs, peer mediators, and conflict managers help determine the source of the problem, and solve it through discussion. Although this does not deter all violence, it helps minimize violent acts.

Violence prevention programs should be established in every community. We need to teach young people to handle anger and recognize warning signs that are sent before children act violently. We also need to curb violence in media/TV. Teens must be allowed to talk, and adults need to listen. If anyone suspects that a kid is on the verge of destructive behavior, take immediate action before it's too late.

There are volumes of practical information on how to handle anger. Unless we address the underlying causes, the deep issues that predispose children and teens to commit school violence, the killing will not only continue but escalate. The root issues are emotional pain, issues of morality, parental involvement, love, hurt, cycles of abuse and neglect, and most importantly, the spiritual issues of meaning and connectedness with God. When we are disconnected from God, we are disconnected from each other, which places us in a place of spiritual vulnerability and crisis. Disconnection from God leaves a void. Gene Geitz of Promise Keepers said, "A heart turned away from God leads to disaster."

Get connected with God and with each other. Once we know the love of God, we can truly love others.

It easy to blame the kids, parents, schools, and businesses, however we are all responsible and accountable. We can help those traumatized by school violence and prevent it from happening again. We need to identify and reach out to those hurting kids and families on the edge of despair. We need to reach out to the lost and the least. God help us accomplish these things.

**F.Y.I.**

**Steve Rossi, M.A., L.P.C.**

**CHRISTIAN COUNSELORS  
OF HOUSTON**

9055 Katy Freeway, Suite 300  
Houston, Texas 77024  
(713) 984-1314 (Main Office)



**SPEAKING  
ENGAGEMENTS**

**INFO: 713.984.1314**

- 8/31/99 - School Violence  
Christian Counselors of Houston
- 10/31/99 - Wise Counsel: Youth and  
Behavior  
Second Baptist Church
- 11/14/99 - Wise Counsel: Suicide  
Second Baptist Church
- 11/16/99 - Youth Pastors' Forum: Divorce  
Saint Mark Lutheran Church