

THE COUNSELOR

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UPDATE: School Violence

It's been almost two and a half years since the Columbine High School massacre. I still remember the shocking news that day - fifteen dead and twenty-three wounded! One month later a fifteen year-old boy wounded six students at his high school in Conyers, Georgia. Five more people have been killed and eighteen wounded since then in school shootings. The victims were teachers and students from urban and suburban, elementary, middle, and high schools. Our nation's schools have worked very hard since the Columbine tragedy to address school violence. Numerous research studies have been conducted on this subject. Many more schools have crisis plans, intervention and prevention programs for school violence. Security mea-



asures have been increased too. Threats of school violence are taken much more seriously than they were a couple of years ago. What potential danger awaits our children this new school year? Despite the heightened awareness and aggressive prevention programs, school violence continues to plague our nation, threatening the security of our children daily.

dous toll on our kids today. They feel the pressures of growing up in a world of confusion, divorce, materialism, ruthless competition, and immorality. Internal factors related to school violence include: cumulative unmanaged anger; unmet needs for relationships; approval; success; and power; isolation; pain; and alienation from God. Motives for committing violence range from interpersonal and romantic disputes, gang related activities, random victim incidences, robbery, arguments over money or property, to drug-related activities. Other motives include achieving and maintaining high status, social identity, power, rough justice, social control, self help, and defiance to authority (University of Colorado, 1998). Much violence comes from unhealthy attitudes, inability to control impulses, and lack of empathy (Obsatz, 1998). Easy access and availability of firearms also contributes to the rise and continuation of school violence throughout our country.

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Current Trends

We have come a long way from the 1950's where smoking cigarettes and skipping class were the worst problems high schools encountered. Since the 1992-93 school year there have been 270 violent deaths. Most of these deaths were shooting victims.

The years between 1983 and 1993 were marked by unprecedented violence with an increase of 153% in the number of juveniles murdered by firearms. Students have mixed opinions and perceptions about school violence and safety today. In a CBS News study (Class of 2000), 96% of the students said they felt safe in school, but 53% said that a Columbine type shooting could happen at their own school. Most school districts, urban and non-urban report in national surveys that violence at school has gotten worse in the past several years (Kaufman, 1998). In another study (Singer, 1999), 70-80% of the students reported that they witnessed violence at their school in the past year. Rates of victimization, depending on the survey, range from 1 out of 3, to 1 out of 10 reporting being beaten up or assaulted in school. Eighty-four percent of our public schools have a low security system in place. Columbine was not considered a high risk school for violence. Few places are safe anymore from the threat of school violence.

Most school violence does not result in death. The most reported crimes in school are physical attacks or fights without a weapon. Chronic harassment and bullying are also considered forms of violence. Children are impacted even when they witness a single physical fight or if they are threatened. The most serious violent crimes usually occur in middle and high school. School violence should be considered along a continuum. Violent behavior from a first grader is different than violent behavior from a twelfth grader. Young children display aggression by kicking, hitting, spitting, and name calling. Violent behavior can become more serious with children as they grow older, often seen as bully-

Issues, Dynamics & Causes

A complex set of variables interact to cause school violence. External causes include:

Early childhood abuse or neglect; family problems; exposure to violence and victimization at home and/or school; bullying, cumulative put downs; peer pressure, rejection, stress, violence in the media, movies, video games; and music. Nihilistic values of hopelessness, sadness, and aloneness in popular music like Nirvana also contribute to violence. Children are desensitized to violence when they grow up seeing 96% of the TV programs emphasizing violent solutions to problems. Stress takes a tremen-

ing, extortion, and physical fighting. Violent incidents and threats of violence at school negatively affect students, school staff, and the educational process. It affects the student's mental health and academic achievement.

Aftermath

The Columbine High School community still struggles with their tragedy (ABC News 2000). The wounds are deep. There is considerable bickering over how to spend the millions of dollars received already. Families of the injured students claim they should have gotten more money than those of the dead ones. Disagreement exists on forgiving the killers and their parents. Many are consumed with blaming the parents, teachers, and police. Anger and bitterness are reflected in numerous lawsuits by the families of 15 victims. One mother of the paralyzed victims committed suicide in November 1999. Meanwhile, in West Paducah, the grieving families filed wrongful death suits. The sound of a book dropping on the classroom floor in Pearl, Mississippi, sent children ducking for cover months after their school shooting. The people of Jonesboro, Arkansas feel no sense of closure almost two years after a couple students opened fire on their classmates from the woods. While some of the survivors still have depression and flashbacks, the community of Springfield, Oregon have pulled together. Lives have been altered forever because of the school shootings. People have endured incredible pain and suffering and continue their long road to healing.

P.T.S.D. SYMPTOMS

- Re-experiencing the event through vivid memories or flash backs.
- Feeling emotionally numb.
- Feeling overwhelmed by normal everyday situations.
- Lack of interest in former pleasurable activities.
- Crying uncontrollably.
- Relying increasingly on alcohol and drugs to get through the day.
- Sleep disturbances. Nightmares.
- Poor concentration.
- Startle reactions. Reactions to events that symbolize the incident.
- Feeling extremely moody, irritable, angry, suspicious, or frightened.
- Isolating oneself from family and friends. Depression/Withdrawal.
- Feeling fears and a sense of doom about the future.
- Feeling guilty about having survived the event or being unable to solve the problem, change the event or prevent the disaster.

Youth Trauma

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (P.T.S.D) is an anxiety disorder that may develop after a terrifying event. It usually involves having persistent frightening thoughts and memories of the ordeal. Not everyone who experiences or witnesses a traumatic event will develop P.T.S.D. A violent act in a school affects everyone. Some students experience more emotional effects than others. The damage can continue or begin long after the event. It is more common for a traumatized child or adolescent to have some of the symptoms of P.T.S.D. than to develop the full blown disorder. People with full blown P.T.S.D. or symptoms can become debilitated and should receive professional help.

Intervention and Healing

Students exposed to or involved in school violence, especially school shootings, require immediate attention. School staff, parents, churches and mental health professionals should provide ways for students to address the trauma they experienced. This must be done with the utmost care and sensitivity. Do not force survivors to deal with catastrophic events. Depending on the situation, there may be considerable confusion and emotional pain. Go slowly and gently in encouraging them to talk about the incident. It takes time to process their reactions. Each person handles grief differently. They work through losses on their own time table. Identify children and teens with P.T.S.D. and make appropriate referrals. Allow and encourage students to write poems, develop support groups, internet sites, or other means of expressing their feelings and working through the tragedy. Anniversary commemoration ceremonies are crucial in promoting healing. The recovery period may take years. The Church can be paramount in the healing process. Pastors and church staff can minister to the families and the entire community by coming along side those impacted and offering prayer, support, and consolation. School violence should always be addressed, even when it does not result in death or serious injury. School staff should process and debrief students impacted by violence or threats. Students need a format to express their feelings and reactions. They should also be taught how to handle threats of violence.

Prevention

The Secret Service (2000) concludes that there are no psychological or demographic profiles for children and adolescents who pose as threats. None of the shooters in their study acted impulsively. There were warning signs and plenty of time to intervene. Watch for students who: have a history of tantrums and uncontrollable anger; frequently do name calling, cursing, or use abusive language; habitually make violent threats; previously brought a weapon to school; have a preoccupation with weapons and explosives; have a background of serious disciplinary problems; have a background of drug, alcohol, or

other substance abuse problems; have been on the fringe of their peer group; have few or no close friends; have previously been truant, suspended or expelled; have been cruel to animals; have little or no supervision and support from parents or caring adults; have witnessed or been a victim of abuse or neglect at home; have been bullied and/or bullies or intimidates peers or younger children; blame others for their own problems and difficulties; consistently prefer TV shows, movies, or music expressing violent themes and acts; prefer reading materials dealing with violent themes, rituals, and abuse; reflect anger, frustration and the dark side of life in school essays or writing projects; are involved in a gang or antisocial group on the fringe of peer acceptance; are often depressed and/or have significant mood swings; have threatened or attempted suicide.

We need to identify and reach hurting children and teens before they become violent. Teachers, students, parents, coaches, and church staff should always be looking for those children who are picked on, ostracized, rejected, and struggle socially. The children who shot up their schools were angry and hurting. They were ridiculed and rejected by their peers. They were searching for answers, desperately wanting someone to reach out to them. They were alienated from their classmates, families, and God. Many children and adolescents in our schools today have the potential to become violent. They can be reached. It takes work. They may push us away but we need to press ahead, caring for them no matter how tough or scary they look. We need to befriend them and show them the love of God. There's a lot of work ahead. Let's do it!

F.Y.I.

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- 9/30 - **Transformers
(Depression) Support Group
Second Baptist Church - Woodway**
- 10/14 - **Transformers
(Depression) Support Group
Second Baptist Church - Woodway**
- 10/23 - **Co-presenting on
The Holiday Woes
Youth Pastors Forum**
- 11/11 - **Fear, Anxiety and Worry
Second Baptist Church - Woodway**