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Violence in Schools: What Can Parents Do?

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"I don't understand what's happening with our kids today," a tearful mother lamented after a 14 year-old used a shotgun to shoot out the front doors of his high school. In this incident no one was hurt. Increasingly, though, tales of tragic school shootings dominate media headlines. Each incident brings a sense of despair and bewilderment. Why is this happening? Can the violence be stopped?

Violence on the Rise

Schools have, except for the occasional playground fight or classroom bully, been safe havens. Today, youth violence has increased dramatically both on and off school grounds. Almost 20% of all violent crime arrests in 1994 involved a child under the age of 18. Between 1985 and 1994, the risk of a 15- to 19-year old dying from a firearm injury more than doubled. In a two-year period (1992-1994), 105 school-associated violent deaths were reported. In 1994, firearm injuries were the second leading cause of death for young people ages 10 to 24 years.

While firearm incidents attract most of our attention, other types of crime are being reported on a daily basis. Twenty-five percent of eighth and ninth grade students have witnessed threats to teachers. Of sixth through twelfth graders, 12% say they were victims of physical attack, robbery or bullying in school. Fifty-two percent of secondary school principals report that their schools are struggling with serious gang problems. Ten percent of kindergartners through twelfth graders are attacked verbally or physically on a regular basis. The statistics paint a fairly bleak picture.

Why Does it Happen?

One explanation for youth violence comes from Daniel Lockwood, PhD. He cites four goals of students' violent behavior:

Retribution - punishing the "offender" for something she or he did.

Compliance - convincing the "offender" to stop an offensive behavior or course of action.

Defense - of one's self or others.

Promotion of one's image - by saving face, defending one's honor, or enhancing or maintaining one's reputation.

The thought processes behind each goal may be difficult to comprehend, so it is important to remember the immaturity of the youths' thoughts. The violent youth is able to justify his behavior through his immature beliefs and life inexperience.

What Can Be Done?

There is no sure way of keeping kids safe in school, just as there is no sure way of keeping adults safe in the workplace. The downward spiral of school safety did not happen overnight. Consequently, most aspects cannot be immediately fixed. There are, however, some measures parents can take.

Immediate Measures

Remove ammunition from guns. Lock up guns and ammunition separately. Instruct children to leave the area whenever another child produces a gun or other weapon.

Encourage children to tell a trusted adult when they hear threats of violence against other children. Take all threats seriously and report threats to the proper authorities.

Spearhead efforts to have your local school board adopt a “zero-tolerance” policy. The policies need to be strict and consistently enforced.

Parents need to show and teach their children how to peacefully resolve conflicts. Youths who are maltreated at home have a 24% greater chance of being violent with friends or family.

Long-term Actions

Parents need to be involved in parent group meetings, street patrols, and monitoring of in- and out-of- school activities. Parents’ presence can be a natural control factor, steering kids away from violence.

Youths need to be taught alternatives to violence. Prevention programs in school, church, and other community associations help kids begin to control their behavior.

Monitor your child’s TV viewing and video game playing. Violence on TV and in video games is prevalent. Children aged 12 and under have a difficult time distinguishing between fantasy and reality and often do not understand how violence truly can hurt another.

Talk to school administrators about their policies on and understanding of school violence. Administrators should be encouraged to form a committee on school violence, involving as many community members as possible. The committee should help assess the school’s security, including physical features and layout, policies and procedures, safety, and orderliness. Access to the school should be critically viewed. Consider alarms and surveillance cameras to reduce opportunities for outsiders to enter the building. The layout of the building may pose security threats. What could be done in each building to discourage opportunities for violence?

Insist that the school board provide ample adult supervision during recess and lunch periods.

Help schools create an orderly environment where teachers and administrators relate well to students and to each other. Student behavior is critical to school orderliness. Parents can help by supporting administrative decisions and talking positively about school to their children.

It takes time for a child to learn to walk or tie her shoes. Learning to be a peaceful member of society, too. Adults are responsible for promoting this learning process. Cooperating together we can reduce and prevent violence in schools.

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