

Assisting Teens Helping Teens Through Tough Situations

By Sharon Lewis (This article is presented courtesy of [National Safety Council](#), ©1999)

In April 1999, two teenagers opened fire on their classmates in Littleton, Colo., killing 13 people and wounding 23 others before killing themselves.

In Jonesboro, Ark., in March 1998, four girls and a teacher were shot to death by two boys, 11 and 13, who opened fire from nearby woods.

In December 1997, three students were killed and five others wounded in their school in West Paducah, Ky. The 14-year-old shooter is serving life in prison.

High school life is very different than it used to be. In addition to worrying about exams or whether they'll have a date for the prom, teenagers today deal with metal detectors, gangs, and TV images of students running for their lives from a school that looks more like a war zone than a place of education.

According to a report by the Department of Education, approximately 6,000 students were expelled during the 1996-97 school year for bringing firearms or explosives to school. "Some children and adolescents view weapons as a way of dealing with revenge, hurt or anger," says Charles Thompson, a professor of counselor education and counseling psychology at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville.

The recent school shootings and ensuing copycat acts by teens have left parents and community members wondering why they didn't see it coming or what they could have done.

What creates a troubled teen?

Geoffrey Canada, president/CEO for Rheedlen Centers for Children and Family in New York, works with families, schools and communities to provide low-income minority youths with after-school programs and safe community activities. "We need to recognize that violence and teens have become a national epidemic," says Canada. "This isn't contained in any one community."

The National Association for the Education of Young Children in Washington, D.C., reports that poverty, racism, unemployment, substance abuse, easy access to weapons, inadequate or abusive parenting practices, and frequent exposure to violence through the media are all responsible for the increase in violent behavior in young people.

In addition, kids are getting huge amounts of data that are uncensored and not monitored by adults, says Ed Dunkelblau, a violence-prevention specialist with the Institute for Emotionally Intelligent Learning in Hoffman Estates, Ill.

Keep an eye on these kids

Thompson, a former high school counselor and teacher, says he's seen two types of troubled teens. The first type is quiet and introverted. "These kids are fairly easy to spot," he says. They eat lunch alone, are picked last in gym class, are often teased, and they walk down the halls avoiding eye contact. "Some kids grin and bear it and never become violent, but others choose revenge."

Other teens, however, are not as inconspicuous and talk openly about liking violence and weapons. "A lot of these kids feel like their school is so big, they don't fit in. With 2,000 other students, it's hard to find your place," adds Thompson.

What can you and your school do?

Thompson says that school counselors need to actively seek out troubled students and intervene before a tragedy occurs. However, this is difficult when most high schools have only one counselor for every 300 to 500 students.

If a teen is having problems in school, parents should go in and talk with the teachers. Volunteer to work at the school or get the child a tutor. "Do whatever you can to get that child involved in some type of group," stresses Thompson.

Parents also need to reestablish the lines of communication with their kids. Learn what they're doing when they come home from school. Watch the same shows they watch and listen to their music -- even if you don't like it. "Be able to have an educated conversation about these issues," says Canada. "When kids say they like [the music of] Marilyn Manson, don't just say 'it's trash.'"

According to Dunkelblau, parents, teachers and health professionals should develop kids' levels of empathy, improve impulse-control skills, teach them how to create and maintain relationships, educate them on dealing with anger, and discuss how they can put their feelings into words. Other suggestions include:

- **Talk with your children early.** Shape their attitudes, knowledge and behavior while they're still open to positive influences.
- **Ask questions.** Does your child's school have violence-prevention programs? What violence controls are in place, such as metal detectors, IDs or locker checks? Does the principal have a good relationship with students, and is he or she open to suggestions? Have teachers been trained to recognize potential problems and handle disruptive students? Are students trained in pro-social skills or conflict resolution?

Keep kids out of trouble

"What did you do after school today?" many parents ask their teenagers nightly. "Nothing," is a common response. And what will kids do when they're bored? "They get into mischief," confirms Canada.

To prevent teenagers with "nothing" to do from finding trouble, parents should explore the activities offered by schools, park districts, clubs or their own communities. Then encourage your kids to get involved.

In addition, help your teenager find a suitable job working no more than 20 hours per week. Studies have shown that employment helps increase a teen's level of responsibility, self-esteem and independence.

It's a fact of life: Teens will get bored, be teased and become angry. But learning how to deal with these feelings appropriately can prevent a troubled teen from making dangerous or destructive decisions.

OTHER SUGGESTIONS

Don't Let Kids Get to Guns

Before some parents give their children permission to go to a friend's house, they might ask the other parent whether the kids will have access to cable TV or violent video games. But how many parents ask whether their child will have access to a gun?

Approximately 43 percent of American households have a gun. "If parents are gun owners, they must be responsible about how they store the gun," says David Bernstein, spokesperson for the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence. In addition, parents must educate their children about guns and the dangers associated with them.

If you are a gun owner, follow these guidelines:

- Explain to children that guns are dangerous and that they should never touch guns in an unsupervised situation.
- Teach children to tell an adult if they find a gun or see another child with a gun.
- Store guns unloaded and locked up.
- Lock and store ammunition in a location separate from your gun. Never let kids have access to the keys.

- It's the gun owner's responsibility to understand and follow all laws regarding gun purchase, ownership, storage and transport. Contact your local police for more information on these laws and for advice on safe storage and gun locks.

THE SIGNS OF A TROUBLED TEEN

According to the National School Safety Center in Westlake Village, Calif., be concerned if a child:

- Has a history of tantrums or uncontrollable angry outbursts
- Uses abusive language or calls people names
- Makes violent threats when angry
- Has brought a weapon to school
- Has serious disciplinary problems at school or in the community
- Abuses drugs, alcohol or other substances
- Has few or no close friends
- Is preoccupied with weapons or explosives
- Has been suspended or expelled from school
- Is cruel to animals
- Has little or no supervision and support from parents or a caring adult
- Has witnessed or been a victim of abuse or neglect
- Has been bullied and/or bullies or intimidates other kids
- Prefers TV shows, movies or music with violent themes
- Is involved with a gang or an antisocial group
- Is depressed or has significant mood swings
- Has threatened or attempted suicide

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Center to Prevent Handgun Violence

(202) 898-0792

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Rheedlen Centers for Children and Family

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