



## Youth Violence Prevention

### A Balanced Living Special Edition Newsletter

In the past week, our nation has seen an unfortunate rise in violence. Not the violence that takes place behind closed doors or appears as a dispute between two people, but the violence that erupts in very public places. The kind of violence that touches the innocent and can turn any one of us into a victim. From the terror inside the Nebraska mall, to the church-related attacks in Colorado, to the shootings that took place at a Nevada High School bus stop, it can seem as if nowhere is safe.

Awareness is the key to unlocking violence prevention. And exercising awareness in the home is the first step to stopping emotional distress from manifesting as a violent attack. Parents cannot afford to let the events in their own lives supersede their responsibilities to their children. If you are unaware of what your child is going through day-to-day in the classroom, among his or her friends, or even online, you are helping create a space through which misguided emotions can develop into anger-driven actions.





This special edition newsletter was crafted with parents in mind. Within these articles, parents will discover ways to connect with their children, understand what warning signs of violent behavior to look for, and learn how to respond proactively to the issues their children face. All it takes to make a difference in your child's life and disarm a future filled with violent emotions is to make a commitment to being involved on a daily basis. Be there for your children and you will succeed.

## **Risk Factors for Youth Violence**

When we say that something is a "risk factor" for youth violence, we mean that when that factor is present, a child is at greater risk for becoming violent. Risk factors can be characteristics of the individual child, the child's relationship with family or peers, the child's school, or the child's environment.

Risk factors for youth violence include:

- **Individual factors** (such as a difficult temperament as an infant, low intelligence, hyperactivity, impulsivity, and attention problems).
- **Home factors** (such as a lack of parental emotional support and involvement, little parental monitoring of activities, and harsh and inconsistent discipline).
- **Peer factors** (such as peer rejection in childhood or friendships with antisocial peers during the teenage years).
- **School factors** (such as poor school achievement and school failure).
- **Community and societal factors** (such as poverty, joblessness, discrimination, societal acceptance of aggression, exposure to violence in the community or media, and easy availability of drugs, alcohol and weapons in the neighborhood).

Typically, the more risk factors present in a child's life, the higher the likelihood that a child or teen will tend to act aggressively. Different risk factors take on a greater or lesser importance at different stages of a child's life. While family factors appear to play an important role in the development of aggression in young children, the role of friends and peers becomes much more crucial during the teen years.

Although many children are exposed to one or more of these risk factors, only a small number of children become highly aggressive. Researchers have proposed a number of "protective factors", such as a commitment to school and a positive relationship with a supportive adult, which may shield children and teens from developing aggressive behavior, even in the presence of a number of risk factors. Interventions that seek to increase protective factors and reduce risk factors can significantly reduce aggressive behavior in children and teens.

Researchers have identified a number of factors that increase children and teens' risk for becoming involved in serious violence during the teenage years. For children under 13, the most important factors include: early involvement in serious criminal behavior, early substance use, being male, a history of physical aggression toward others, low parent education levels or poverty, and parent involvement in illegal activities.

Once a child becomes a teenager, different factors predict involvement in serious violence. Friends and peers are much more important for teens, and friendships with antisocial or delinquent peers, membership in a gang, and involvement in other criminal activity are the most important predictors of serious violence for teenagers.



Teens that commit acts of serious violence are often involved in other types of criminal behavior and often live a lifestyle that involves a number of risky behaviors, including using drugs, carrying weapons, driving recklessly, and having unsafe sex.

## **Responding to a Potentially Violent Child**

If you are concerned about your child possibly committing violence, you need to arrange for him or her to be seen by a qualified mental health professional. Look for a child/family mental health professional who is experienced in working with adolescents and their families. The goals of treatment typically focus on helping the child to: learn how to control his/her anger; express anger and frustrations in appropriate ways; be responsible for his/her actions; and accept consequences. In addition, family conflicts, school problems, and community issues must be addressed.

If your child is exhibiting a number of warning signs for violence, get help quickly. As a precaution, make sure that your child does not have access to weapons, and remove other dangerous materials or objects from your home. In an emergency situation or if your child refuses help, it may be necessary to contact local police for assistance or take the child to the nearest emergency room for evaluation.

Researchers have identified a number of warning signs that suggest that a child may be at risk for violent behavior. The presence of one or more of the following increases the risk of violent or dangerous behavior:

- Past violent or aggressive behavior (including uncontrollable angry outbursts)
- Access to weapons
- Bringing a weapon to school
- Past suicide attempts or threats
- Family history of violent behavior or suicide attempts
- Blaming others and/or unwilling to accept responsibility for one's own actions
- Recent experience of humiliation, shame, loss, or rejection
- Bullying or intimidating peers or younger children
- A pattern of threats
- Being a victim of abuse or neglect (physical, sexual, or emotional)
- Witnessing abuse or violence in the home
- Themes of death or depression repeatedly evident in conversation, written expressions, reading selections, or artwork
- Preoccupation with themes and acts of violence in TV shows, movies, music, magazines, comics, books, video games, and Internet sites
- Mental illness, such as depression, mania, psychosis, or bipolar disorder
- Use of alcohol or illicit drugs
- Disciplinary problems at school or in the community (delinquent behavior)



- Past destruction of property or vandalism
- Cruelty to animals
- Playing with fire or burning behavior
- Poor peer relationships and/or social isolation
- Involvement with cults or gangs.
- Little or no supervision or support from parents or other caring adult

Typically, the greater the number of these warning signs present, the greater the risk. **It is important to realize, however, that many children exhibit these warning signs and never resort to violence.** Even so, these signs can be a cue that something is wrong, and the individual needs help.

## **What Parents Can Do to Help Prevent Youth Violence**

**Give your children consistent love and attention.** Every child needs a strong, loving, relationship with a parent or other adult to feel safe and secure and to develop a sense of trust.

**Communicate openly with your children, and encourage them to talk about all aspects of their lives:** school, social activities, and their interests and concerns. Listen respectfully and solicit their opinions. Then, if a problem or crisis arises, they will be more likely to come to you.

**Set clear standards for your children's behavior, and be consistent about rules and discipline.** Involve your children in the setting of rules whenever possible, and discuss the reasons for rules with them. Make sure they understand what you expect and the consequences for disobedience, and then enforce rules consistently.

**Make sure your children are supervised.** Insist on knowing where your children are at all times and who their friends are. Try to get to know their friends' parents and your children's teachers. Encourage your children to participate in supervised after-school activities such as sports teams, tutoring programs, or organized recreation.

**Promote peaceful resolutions to conflict by being a good role model.** Deal with conflict at home calmly, considerately and quickly and manage your anger without violence. Talk with your children about handling disagreements, and help your children learn how to examine and find non-aggressive solutions to problems.

**Talk to your children about the consequences of drug and weapon use, gang participation, and violence.** Explain in detail how getting involved with these can result in injury, jail, even death. Also, make sure that all weapons are kept out of the reach of children.

**Try to limit your children's exposure to violence in the media.** Monitor the programs your children watch, the music they listen to, and the video games they play. Take time to watch television programs with your children and discuss any violence with them. Is the violence realistic? What would be the real-life consequences of such violence?



**Try to limit your children's exposure to violence in the home or community.** Work toward making your home a safe, nonviolent place, and always discourage violent behavior or hostile, aggressive arguments between family members. If the people in your home physically or verbally hurt and abuse each other, get help from a psychologist or counselor in your community. If your children are exposed to violence in the street, at school, or at home, they may need help in dealing with these frightening experiences. A psychologist, a counselor at school, or a member of the clergy, are among those who can help them cope with their feelings.

**Take the initiative to make your school and community safer.** Join up with other parents, through school and neighborhood associations, religious organizations, civic groups, and youth activity groups. Talk together about your concerns about youth in the community, including issues related to alcohol, drugs, and violence, and share your common parenting concerns. Support the development and implementation of school and community plans to address the needs of youth.

*Content for this newsletter was made available through the National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center.  
For more information visit: <http://www.safeyouth.org/scripts/index.asp>*

