

F O U R

From Pearl to Littleton and Beyond: How Personality and Environment Influence Violent Kids

I just said I had explosives in my locker; some teacher heard me. I was just playing. I lie just to lie. It pleases me.

—remarks made by a fifteen-year-old boy I interviewed after he was charged with threatening to blow up his school with a bomb after the Columbine bombing/shooting in Colorado.

Tim

“**A**dults treat kids like criminals. They don’t treat us fairly. They don’t distinguish between good and bad... like you don’t get rewarded when you are good and they pay attention when you are bad. It’s messed up. I really just like to exaggerate a little, that’s all. I don’t know why everyone takes it so seriously. Like the time I threatened a teacher I was going to get revenge on her. I was put in in-school suspension. I was just playing. I’ve only been in juvenile once before, for punching my mother in the stomach. But she had it coming. She was pregnant with a... you know... a mixed kid.” Tim is sitting in a room in a juvenile detention center waiting for his court hear-

ing; he has been charged with making a bomb threat at his high school after the Columbine shootings in Colorado. He does not appreciate the seriousness of the charges and smirks openly whenever I ask him about his threats. His mother is with him the day of the interview as well as his attorney and a case worker from the group home where he has been staying since he was charged by the court. The attorney and case worker looked put out by Tim's nonchalant attitude and perturbed by his shenanigans. The attorney sat with his arms crossed and a look on his face that I can only describe as one of slight boredom mixed with disgust. The case worker, a rather prim looking woman, kept silent for much of the interview but nonetheless looked put off by her obnoxious charge. Tim's mother, on the other hand, seemed used to her son's belligerent ways and resigned to his way of doing things.

She sighed as she told me about Tim's childhood. "He was no trouble until the age of three. After that, he was always daring," she said, "and never seemed to have any fear of anything." Tim grew up in Florida and has two sisters and a brother. His mother remembered that he had been injured on his left side in a fall when he was around three. He then started banging his head against the wall when angry and throwing terrible temper tantrums. At age four, he was diagnosed with Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity-Disorder and later with Bipolar Disorder (manic-depression). He was placed on all sorts of medications by various doctors including Lithium (used to treat manic-depression) to try and control his violent mood swings. He would get enraged at the slightest requests. His mother said the drugs did not work for him, and his anger and temper tantrums continued. Tim's father left the family when Tim was eight years old and his parents formally divorced when he was eleven. According to court records, Tim's father sexually molested him during visitations and he was placed in state custody once this was found out by case workers but later returned to his mother. In Florida, he was placed in psychotherapy and then a day treatment program to help him cope with the sexual abuse and his violent mood swings.

His mother had tried to use discipline at home but it usually failed. Her technique consisted of telling Tim to go sit in his room after he had gotten angry or violent; she would also take his music away from him. He would get mad and bang his head against the wall until his mother would "crack" and give him his music back. She agreed that rewarding her son for his aggressiveness was not the most appropriate way to get her son to stop his behavior, but she felt at her wits' end most of the time. She admitted to being intimidated by Tim, with good reason. When she was pregnant with her youngest child by a black man, Tim became so enraged that he punched her in the stomach. She did call the police then and Tim spent twenty-eight days in juvenile detention for assault.

Tim made it clear that he felt mistreated when he was forced to stay in the detention center after abusing his mother (much like he felt today—it was unfair, he thought, that he was being charged with a bomb threat when he so clearly had been joking). He felt that his mother had brought on his anger and he should not have been held responsible: it was really her fault for doing the things that enraged him. Tim had little in the way of empathy for others and seemed bewildered that other people were upset by his threats when to him they should have known he was not serious. (It seemed to me, though, that a boy willing to punch his pregnant mother in the stomach would be quite willing to commit other violent acts). One day, in eighth grade, he made a threat against a teacher, telling her that he would get revenge on her (by going to her home) after a disagreement. He was appalled that he was given in-school suspension for this "minor" infraction. The teacher, he thought, should have known he was joking. In fact, Tim's mother pointed out that her son always joked around a lot about serious matters all the time. If they were driving down the interstate and there happened to be a wreck, Tim would roll with laughter and wanted to get up close to the accident and get a good look at the victims for the entertainment value. Tim started laughing as his mother described his behavior. His mother quickly pointed out that her son was just laughing to hide his emotions or hide

the pain he was feeling. I found this implausible. He actually seemed to find the descriptions of others being injured funny, and saw others' pain as amusing. His descriptions of how other people should behave revealed his lack of empathy for others. For example, one of his teachers, he described as "a stiff." When I asked him what made the teacher a stiff, he remarked, "he should have been there to entertain the class, but he was strict. Teachers like that are just there to harass you." Tim did not see the teacher as being someone who had his own agenda (to teach the kids) but as a kind of jester, there for his amusement. Like most narcissistic people, Tim lacked any insight into how his behavior affected others. When asked if his peers and family liked him, he smiled and exclaimed jovially, "Of course, everybody likes me. I get along with everyone! Everyone cares about me!" By the exasperated looks of the people in the interview room that day, I knew this was not the case. When asked what he did when he felt lonely or sad, he scoffed and stated, "I've never felt that way." He did admit that other kids at school made fun of him which upset him greatly. However, rather than admit to any feelings of rejection, he stated that he would become angry as a response to his classmates' insults. He completely denied any feelings that showed his vulnerability.

Tim saw nothing wrong with making a bomb threat at school. Actually, he had done it on a dare. One of his classmates, he said, had dared him to say he had explosives in his locker and he did it as a joke. Certainly everyone at his local high school should have understood that when he threatened to blow up the school with explosives in his locker, he was fibbing. "I lie just to lie. It pleases me." Tim had the typical characteristics of a sociopath (or antisocial personality); he thought that he was entitled to special privileges that should make others overlook his behavior. He felt that he was above punishment: that was for other people. He seemed to have no idea of the trouble he was in or that even his own attorney was put off by his antisocial antics.

Tim filled out a survey for me on his view of violence which will be presented (along with the responses of other vio-

lent kids) in chapter six on profiling dangerous kids. I asked him to make some figure drawings so I could compare them to violent inner-city and other suburban kids I had interviewed. He was cooperative and seemed to like to draw, smiling as he made a picture of a male, female and a self-portrait. He took his time drawing each picture. I emphasized that he should draw a whole person, but he ignored my request and drew only heads for each of the three pictures. His pictures looked familiar to me, as I had seen the same large head in drawings of other suburban and rural kids who had severe emotional problems.

Sexually abused clients often draw the body missing to indicate that the body and mind are separate. This could be to spare themselves the pain that would be caused by acknowledging what their body was going through at the time of the sexual abuse. However, I have found that violent suburban kids often show a head without the body in their drawings and wondered if the cause was sexual abuse or violent tendencies. I decided to take Tim's drawings to an expert, Dr. Leonard Handler, a clinical psychologist at the University of Tennessee who is a nationally recognized expert at interpreting figure drawings. Dr. Handler pointed out that Tim was not just being oppositional by drawing only the head and not the entire body. He noted that the detail used in the pictures indicated that Tim had taken his time and tried his best. It is more likely that he drew only the head for different reasons. Dr. Handler's first instinct was to ask if Tim was black because the male picture he drew looked like a minority figure (see Figure 4.1).

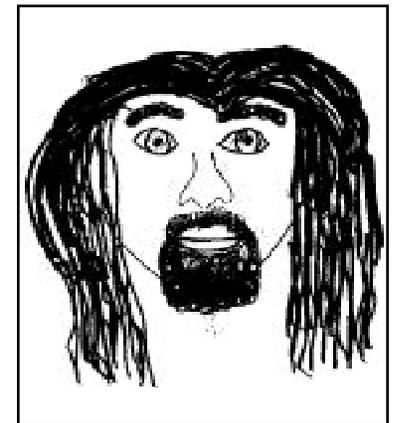


Fig 4.1 Male figure drawing by a 15-year-old suburban boy who threatened to bomb his school after Columbine.

I stated that he was white. Dr. Handler shook his head and stated that perhaps Tim had drawn a minority male figure with hyper-masculine, threatening features because this is what he wants to identify with—a person to be feared. Tim’s anger may stem in part from trying to deny his anxiety over his gender identity. Remember that court records said that Tim had been sexually abused by his father; therefore, he may wonder, “am I like my father, am I gay?” His female picture (Figure 4.2) looks fairly normal except for rather large, paranoid eyes. Finally, his self portrait looks more like an age-appropriate picture (see Figure 4.3) with less facial hair and less of a menacing look. Perhaps this is to distinguish himself from the male picture and show that he is not like his father. Unfortunately, whether or not the large head is indicative of violence, sexual abuse or both is another research study that is beyond the scope of this book. However, in chapter five on violent girls, I found the same phenomenon—that violent girls also draw large heads; Perhaps this could be reflective of sexual abuse as well. I made a mental note to my-



Fig 4.2 Female figure drawing by a 15-year-old suburban boy who threatened to bomb his school after Columbine.

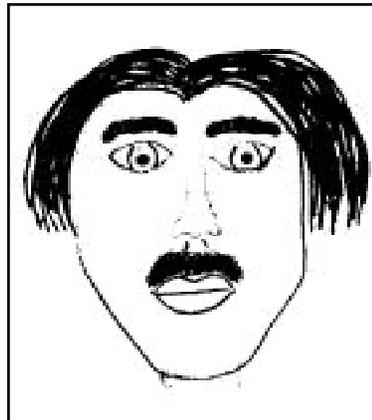


Fig 4.3 Self-portrait of a 15-year-old suburban boy who threatened to bomb his school after Columbine.

self that this would be another project for the future.

Overall, Tim’s drawings and interview showed him to deny any feelings of anxiety. This certainly fit with Tim’s style of relating to others. He did not want others to know that he was vulnerable in any way and denied feelings that indicated that he could be hurt, sad or lonely. These pent-up feelings, along with particular circumstances, can lead to depression and rage, as we will see in the next example of a teenager who became a “psychopath” as a defense against feeling vulnerable at school.

Devin

If anyone ever told you violence begets violence, they are so right. I realized that we all finally become what we pretend to be. I always pretended to be a psycho and now I was.

—Devin, a teenager who decided the only way to keep from being harassed at school was to act, and finally to become, “crazy.”

Devin is an eighteen-year-old now in college and, by his own admission, he should have been spending his life in jail. He identifies with Eric Harris, one of the Columbine killers, as they both were treated for Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). In addition, Devin believes they both had a similar thinking process. As you will see in Devin’s description of his symptoms, he has obsessions, which are persistent or recurring thoughts that the victim experiences as outside of his or her control. Some people with this disorder also suffer from compulsions to engage in repetitive behaviors, or rituals that are performed in response to the obsessions and help the person relieve tension or avoid anxiety. The symptoms of OCD usually appear in early adolescence and its sufferers typically are of a higher economic class and higher intelligence.¹ This was true of Eric Harris who appeared intelligent (although warped) and was economically well off. His parents had the money to send him for psychiatric treatment and he was taking Luvox, a

medication for OCD. Many people with this disorder typically have a depressed mood, which certainly seemed to be the case of both Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the other young Columbine killer. In video tapes, Klebold looked at the camera and told his parents, "I didn't like life very much. Just know I'm going to a better place than here."² Devin's story is one that can give us a great deal of insight into the mind of a kid who could have been a killer like Harris and Klebold but escaped by a narrow margin. I believe his story is an important one and will help in understanding the thinking processes and circumstances that some school shooters may go through on the way to committing their crimes. Here is Devin's story in his own words (although I edited his story for clarity and changed the names of those involved):

I didn't like public school at all. All the cliques there drove me up a wall. In elementary school, I was an awkward kid, the one everybody picked on and made fun of all day. I was bullied, pushed around, humiliated, the usual misfit treatment. It was always a select group of tough guy badasses that delivered the worst. Plus the fact that I had OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder) and didn't know it yet. I had the rumination part of OCD which meant everything bad about it was in my head. There were no visible symptoms at all. It tends to make the sufferer blow things out of proportion. For example, if a normal child was to get scolded by a teacher in front of the class and the other kids chuckled about it, the child might be upset or offended but he would get over it in about ten minutes. If a child with my disorder was scolded and people laughed, he would be deeply hurt. When I was young and something happened to me, I would dwell on it for a long time. I would take the offensive event and run it through my head like a movie over and over changing the scenario over little by little. I would spend my "braintime" trying to predict what it would be like if I had said something different or done something different. Usually, I would end up with a scenario of me with a rocket launcher firing it at all my classmates saying, "who's laughing now?"

Eventually junior high came around and I was excited about starting at a new school without all the people from elementary. It started out normal, I guess, but I realized that there were always gonna be a handful of tough guys at EVERY school that were gonna pick on me. I decided it was time for me to change my attitude before I got my ass kicked at school. I figured that if I acted like a tough guy, I would fit in. So I tried it. Whenever someone picked on me, it would usually blow up into a swearing match or I would threaten their life. I told people I had lots of big friends and an arsenal of weapons at home. I tried hard to perfect the tough guy image by walking like them and talking like them. I was happy to at least be tolerated at this new school. My friends at the time noticed the change but that's it. I did lie to my mom and told her I was popular and everything was fine. I made the scariest threats I could think up at school. I said I would blow up their house or shoot them. I told some of them (his classmates) that I would hunt them down for a while before they died. Everyone thought I was a psychopath instead of a tough guy which was good. I may not have been popular but instead of beating me up, they stayed away, thinking I might be able to do what I said. Psychopath was now the label I wanted. When people called me that, no one messed with me. But I was all talk, I had never been in a physical fight before. Everything was tolerable, until one day.

Me and three of my friends went to a local high school to smoke a cigarette. I was always afraid of seeing someone who wanted to kick my ass so I carried around a big metal pole. Well, that day at the high school, someone called my bluff. Five tough guys ran towards us and to make matters worse, they were the same five tough guys who hated me in elementary school. They were actually semi-nice until they took me by surprise. They took my pole and threw it on top of the school. I thought, "Good one dude, from now on a giant pole is not your weapon of choice." We were peaceful young kids about 14 or 15 and we were not fighters at all—just four wimpy kids against five built tough guys. They grabbed my youngest friend, Jay, and started punching and kicking him. He hit his head on a cement block but they

kept going. He cried, begged submitted and humiliated himself in front of them but they didn't let up. Then it was my turn. They hit me in the chest over and over. I kept bouncing off a chain link fence behind me and right back into the line of fire. When it was over, I sat down trying not to snap knowing I would end up hitting one of them and then really getting it. My friend, Sam, stepped up and said he would take a beating for our friend, Jonathan who was holding onto the bushes screaming while the tough guys laughed at him. The tough guys agreed and hit him once and he went down. He was curled up in a ball and I got to watch in complete shock and horror as my best friend was kicked like a soccer ball 26 feet. For a moment, I thought he was dead. Then I heard him wheeze. His clothes were all ripped and his back looked like a road map with red lines and scratches. He had an imprint of the word "Nike" written backwards on his neck where they had kicked him. The tough guys came back with a can of grape soda. "Sorry Sam, didn't mean to fuck you up so bad. Here ya go. Take this drink, it will make you feel better." He took one dip and spit it out. The tough guys erupted into laughter announcing, "we pissed in it and you drank it!" Then the tough guys left and it was over.

Two months after the incident, I got me a handgun—a 9mm semi auto. I didn't even tell my friends I had it until later. I roamed the neighborhood of the tough guys and sat on the sidewalk in front of their houses but they never came out. I didn't want anyone to know I had a gun because I wanted it to be a surprise for the tough guys who thought they could pick one me and I wouldn't do anything because I was a pussy. Then I got a computer. It didn't take me long before I was hacking the planet. Then I found something—the "Anarchist Cookbook" but to me it read like the "big book of sweet revenge."

I looked at all the destructive tutorials on how to make bombs. The bomb formulas took too much time and effort so I decided it would be better to buy gun powder. I talked to an older friend of mine in high school and asked him if he knew anything about it but he said he didn't. I did all my own explosives research. I called the local hunting store

and asked about gun powder for a deer hunting rifle although I didn't really have one. All the while, they thought I was of legal age. They said you had to be 21 to buy gun powder and they run a check to make sure you don't have any warrants against you—then they sell it to you. I got a friend of mine over 21 to buy it. At first, he didn't want to but I gave him money for a six-pack of beer so he would. I went home and cooked up some small explosives. We had a dead end road we used to hang out at where we tested them. No one could get there, not even the police so we knew we were safe. We blew up this and we blew up that. I found a steel bucket that was like 10 gallons. I lined the inside with glass and threw one in there. I made a glass cannon capable of blowing razor sharp glass clear through 3/4 inch ply wood. By this time, I forgot about getting beat up and didn't really have any enemies. Until an old friend of mine stabbed me in the back. He thought I was a pussy and that I would not do anything even though he really pissed me off. I knew it was time to slow down when I opened my eyes and noticed that "hey, it isn't a dream, it's real." I was in my ex-friend's yard at night strapping a pipe bomb to his car. I planned for it to go off when he wasn't in the car but I woke up. I cut the bomb down from his gas tank and left it on his hood with a note saying, "you don't know how close you came."

My last and most dangerous flare-up was a close call. My friend pissed off a gang at school and they came by his house to kick his ass. It was like being jumped all over again and I wasn't going to let it happen. I still had my gun for self-defense and me and my friend would take it shooting. They banged on his door cussing and trying to get him to come out but he wouldn't and I was left alone with them outside because I was out there smoking when they walked up. I grabbed my gun from under the seat of my car and had a strange icky feeling. I got out of the car and they said "send your friend out or we will kick your ass." The moment I had feared for years came. I snapped. All of the anger since kindergarten came to the surface. I pulled the gun and put it to one of the guys' nose before he had time to see it. Everyone froze. His friend that came with him

*started to cry. It made me feel good to see that. I cussed at him for a minute and then I was thinking, either pull the trigger and kill him or don't. He said something and I snapped again. I pushed the barrel in his face and kept pulling the trigger. I was in a rage. **Click-Click.** He screamed like a little child not realizing that it was not going off. I realized that it wasn't loaded at that time and thanked god that I had not put bullets in the gun. I freaked out, dropped the gun and collapsed on the ground and told them to run which they gladly did. I never put the gun back.*

When I first read the story about the incident in Colorado, I saw myself doing those things and not the two that did. When I read the stories and the profiles of the killers, I almost got sick. Harris was exactly what I used to be. I saw my face when I looked at his picture. What he did and the way they planned it like a military mission was identical to the way I operated when I planned to bomb that guy's car. In and out in 3 minutes. Hiding in the shadows being covert. His friend, Dylan, was an exact copy of my friend, Sam. An awkward kid who wasn't popular and was picked on and a follower. Harris and Klebold did what I could only dream about doing when I was bad. Harris stopped taking his antidepressant five days before the shooting. I get really grumpy after one day. This kid was in his own world when it happened.

How do we understand violent boys like Tim or Devin? Both boys seem to have a predisposition toward using violence as a means to solving their problems. But many kids feel aggressive and do not act out in destructive ways. Some kids sublimate their aggressive tendencies into more positive outlets such as sports, art, music, intellectual pursuits, or at least pursue nonviolent acts such as computer hacking or petty theft. What are the other components in their personality and environment that may cause potentially violent kids to act on their aggressive feelings? It is not just one factor alone that can account for a kid becoming violent, but rather a series of thoughts and events that come together in such a way that striking out seems to be the only solution. In the sections that fol-

low, we will explore the personal characteristics and environmental factors that may contribute to exacerbating the aggressive tendencies of kids who become violent. Remember, any one of these factors alone usually will not cause a kid to harm others; it is typically their combination with no intervention that leads to disaster.

Distorted Thinking –The First Ingredient Of Violence

I have learned in my work that there are as many different reasons kids kill as there are killers, yet there are similarities in the thinking patterns of violent kids. While Tim and Devin came to violence from different paths, they both came to view aggression as a means of solving their problems. Tim appears to have had problems almost from the start, perhaps for biological reasons—an injury at the age of three. But his mother also says he suffered from Bipolar Disorder and sexual abuse at the hands of his father. Devin was not born aggressive but became so over time in response to a mental disorder (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder) and to being harassed and picked on at school. Many people have mental disorders but do not become violent. Clinical psychologist Stanton Samenow explains how those kids who display violent or antisocial behavior often do so in response to distortions in thinking—not because of their Bipolar Disorder or OCD. “As his mind works, just thinking something makes it so. Because he makes an assumption, others are expected to validate it.” He gives an example of a boy who is living with his mother. He is extremely pleasant and agreeable as long as she provides everything for him such as washing his clothes and cooking his meals. However, once he turns her home into a flophouse for himself and his friends and she tries to kick him out, he screams, curses and puts a hole through the wall. This extreme change in attitude is not a manifestation of a mood disorder but rather is caused by the

teenager's shifting attitude toward other people.³ Notice that when Tim's mother became pregnant with a child of the "wrong color," he saw nothing wrong with punching her in the stomach. After all, she did not conform to his belief of how a mother is supposed to behave, and this might reflect poorly on him; therefore he had the right to get revenge on her. Why would Tim think that he could retaliate physically against others and feel justified?

Aaron Beck, the father of cognitive therapy, believes that as a result of the interaction between an individual and his or her personality and environment, a person may develop a cluster of antisocial concepts and beliefs similar to the ones described by Tim and Devin. In his book, *Prisoners of Hate*, he points out that juvenile offenders have a set of beliefs about the world that are quite rigid. These beliefs can be something like the following: authorities are controlling, disparaging, and punitive; outsiders are treacherous, self-serving and hostile; and nobody can be trusted. Because of these beliefs and shaky self-esteem, the potential offender may misinterpret the behavior of other people as antagonistic. The violence-prone individual regards his entire life as a battle and is on constant guard against others he believes are insulting him or trying to dominate him. (Others, of course, pick up on this attitude and tend to respond negatively, reinforcing these expectations). Beck breaks down offenders into two different types: the reactive offender (or sociopath) and the psychopath (or hardened antisocial characters). The reactive offender is one who feels that nobody recognizes his rights; he reacts with anger and sometimes with violence when someone rejects him or disrespects him. Reactive offenders are capable of feeling the usual human emotions such as shame, guilt and empathy but they lack the ability to inhibit, control and reflect on what they are feeling before striking out. They feel weak and inadequate and are poor at problem solving and assertive social skills. Like the psychopath, they have a low tolerance for frustration and want to punish their frustrator. However, the "reactor" will feel guilty or shameful afterwards. In contrast, psychopaths are totally

self-serving, feel that they are superior to others and, above all, feel that they have innate rights that are more important than the needs of other people. They use deceit, intimidation and force to get what they want. These manipulations are rewarded with feelings of pleasure when they work and do not produce shame when the psychopath is confronted with what he has done.⁴

Although most kids are not a "pure" type of either the reactive offender or psychopath, Tim and Devin seem to fall into the category of psychopath and reactive offender, respectively. Tim is similar in character to the psychopath in that he "lies just to lie" which pleases him rather than makes him feel guilt or shame. He has no empathy for the plight of others (he even laughs at car wreck victims) and thinks he should not be held accountable for making bomb threats. He has no understanding of why his threats should be seen as a problem for the staff and students at his school. After all, in his mind, his superior rights (to make a joke) should take precedence over other people's feelings. Devin, on the other hand, appears to be reacting to other people not respecting him or actively seeking to physically harm him and he retaliates as a result of feeling weak and vulnerable. He does not see himself as superior like Tim but rather as a weak and vulnerable person who must constantly be on guard. He is visibly shaken and upset by his aggressive impulses whereas for Tim, those feelings are pleasurable.

Some experts feel that the school killers in recent years would fit into the category of the psychopath or (antisocial personality) since they feel little in the way of empathy or guilt. But remember, psychopaths are typically chronic troublemakers with no empathy or guilt for what they do. In an article in *Time* magazine, Donald Black, a psychiatrist and author, states that "empathy is what stops you and me from doing horrible things."⁵ I disagree with this statement. In fact, true cruelty almost requires a measure of empathy. From my experience, a kid can have empathy and guilt and do destructive things anyway. The reactive offender as described by Beck has empathy and guilt but will behave aggressively anyway because of feel-

ing vulnerable and weak. Violence is his only way to restore his self-esteem. When they are not upset, the reactive offenders are capable of positive feelings of caring and concern, and experience shame and guilt for past transgressions. I believe that many of the school killers that we have seen in recent years fit more into the category of reactive offender as opposed to the psychopath. They typically have very little in the way of a criminal record and are not always chronic troublemakers. They almost always say that they are responding to being harassed and picked on at school. They do not strike out randomly but in defense against others who psychologically or physically torture them. Rather than being an extreme antisocial personality or psychopath, these kids tend to have narcissistic features that crop up only in certain situations where they feel threatened. In the next section, I will explore how this narcissistic thinking can play a part in violence.

Traits Of Narcissism

–The Common Thread Of Violent Suburban Boys

What both Tim and Devin have in common are narcissistic traits—they both have inflated but fragile self-esteem. They expect to be showered with excessive admiration, to be catered to and to be given what they desire.⁶ (In the next section on public schools, I will explain how schools have actually played into this distorted thinking process through programs designed to increase self-esteem). They both have an intense desire to seek revenge on those they perceive to have done them wrong but they do so for different reasons. Tim strikes out if others do not allow him to do anything that he desires. Devin, on the other hand, strikes out mainly in self-defense, but a key element is that he has been threatened and he feels humiliated or degraded by others. Narcissistic persons are not convinced of their superiority, but they very much want to believe in it. They tend to need constant reassurance and are unable to tolerate

criticism. Because of this, they constantly encounter threats to their inflated opinion of themselves. But what does having high (but fragile) self-esteem that is unstable have to do with aggression and hostility? A lot, according to researchers who study the link between narcissism, self-esteem and aggression.

In a study cited in the *Harvard Mental Health Letter*, researchers came up with two psychological experiments to determine whether or not narcissistic people act more aggressively. In the first, the self-esteem of 266 undergraduates was measured to see if they had narcissistic characteristics (high but unstable self-esteem) or not. Each student was then asked to write a brief essay on a controversial subject. The essays were randomly returned to their owners, half with favorable comments and half with unfavorable comments. Afterward the students played a game that involved an invisible opponent whom they imagined had given them the good or bad marks. Whichever one was the slowest to press a button received a blast of noise through their headphones. The students could decide how much noise to inflict on their supposed competitors. Their choices were used as a measure of aggression. The results of the study showed that men were more aggressive than women, and people whose writing had been insulted usually gave longer and louder blasts to their opponent. However, narcissistic persons were more aggressive and those narcissists who received poor marks were more than doubly aggressive. What is interesting is that the narcissists would blast even the competitors who had supposedly praised their essays, as if just being judged or evaluated itself was enough to provoke a response of aggression. In the second experiment, an imaginary competitor was used who was a third person and not the supposed grader of the essay. This time, the narcissistic students acted much like everyone else; they did not displace their aggression or show less regard for other people in general. The authors concluded from this that narcissistic aggression is a specific response to specific threats and not a general inclination that may break out anywhere at any time.⁷

These studies show why suburban kids who kill often do not seem angry toward everyone in general. They are not monsters who act out against everyone or anyone. Instead, they only act out against those they perceive to be judging or evaluating them. Maybe this is why people say things like, “he seemed like the nice boy next door.” Most of the time, he may have been the nice boy next door. These kids are only dangerous to those who threaten their sense of self, so it is unlikely they would go after a neighbor unless that neighbor was in a position to judge or evaluate them. Remember, narcissists tend to treat people in general with the same amount of regard that normal people show others. Therefore, the general populace would have little to fear from them. It is not like the school killers are out stalking anyone they can find. They only harm people they believe have judged them, evaluated them or done them wrong. A narcissistic person would have a great deal of difficulty at school because everyone there is constantly evaluating student performance and behavior. In the examples of Tim and Devin, they only acted violently toward people whom they thought had done them wrong—the teacher who harassed Tim or the friend who “pissed” Devin off. In the case of the Columbine killers or school killers in general, it is the whole school that stands for the perceived threat and is seen as “the enemy.”

Is School Killing Environmental Or Genetic?

What roles do genetics and environment play in whether or not kids go over the edge? What part do they play in causing Tim or Devin (or others who go even further such as Luke Woodham, the sixteen-year-old in Pearl, Mississippi who blew away two classmates and killed his mother, or the Columbine killers) to want to harm others? Dave Grossman, a military psychologist, explains the traits required to produce a killer in his book, *On Killing*. He states that there are perhaps 2% of the population of males in the military who are sociopaths while 3% of the

general population have these traits. “There is strong evidence that there exists a genetic predisposition for aggression.” Along with this genetic factor, there are also environmental factors that influence aggression. Grossman states that when you combine this genetic predisposition with environmental development, you get a killer. However, the mediating factor seems to be the presence or absence of empathy for other people. Grossman says there may be biological or environmental causes for this empathic process but whatever its origins, there exists a division between those who feel and understand the pain and suffering of others, and those who cannot. It is those individuals who have a predisposition to aggression combined with the absence of empathy who become sociopaths.⁸ (One need not be a sociopath to kill, of course—if so, the military would be short of manpower. But sociopaths are far more likely to kill for reasons that seem trivial to the rest of us). This lack of empathy and aggression may be biological, according to some researchers. In the January, 2000 issue of the *Archives of General Psychiatry*, a study reports that extreme antisocial behavior in boys ages seven to twelve appears to be related to low levels of cortisol. Cortisol is a hormone that is typically released in response to fear, such as fear of punishment for misbehaving. A boy with a low cortisol level would not fear the possible consequences of his actions. More than a third of the boys with low cortisol in the study were labeled by peers as the meanest in their class. “Low cortisol would make you bold,” says one researcher, Dr. James M. Dabbs. “In youngsters with low levels of the hormone, it doesn’t bother them when you do things to them. It’s hard to make them behave.”⁹

Looking at the research that might explain biological reasons for school violence (low cortisol levels, brain injury etc.) or environmental ones (lack of empathy because of some problem in development) it would seem that kids with these traits would be the only ones that we have to worry about becoming our next school shooters. But this is not the case; just because a kid lacks empathy for others and has low cortisol levels does not necessarily mean he will turn out to be a killer. There are

plenty of kids out there who have these conditions and never harm anyone. And, by the same token, there are kids who are capable of empathy for certain people (like school shooters who tell particular classmates to stay out of school the day before they go on a rampage so they will not get hurt) who do kill. In video tapes made by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold before their massacre at Columbine, Harris quietly tried to exonerate their parents from guilt, remorse or responsibility by quoting Shakespeare: “Good wombs have borne bad sons.”¹⁰ And if low cortisol levels were involved in the making of a school killer, why are school killers so sensitive to criticism? The low cortisol level is supposed to make the kid *not* care about what you do to them. But as we saw in the section on narcissism, kids who are violent at school (especially the school killers) do care; they have all been overly sensitive to criticism and being judged. This is often why they strike out. If kids kill only for reasons of biology, then there is no point in trying to change their behavior but rather we should just try to control it. But if kids are acting out in response to distorted thinking processes and environmental factors, as this book proposes, then we can intervene in ways that may stop kids from their final acts of revenge.

Perhaps for kids who kill at school, the reason for the killing has as much to do with their environment and the cultural milieu in which they live as it does with the inherent traits and distorted thinking patterns they possess. If it was just genetic, the entire 3% of sociopaths would kill. This would mean that three kids out of every one hundred would be destined to be killers. But very few kids are killers. In fact, there were only forty school-related deaths in 1998 despite the millions of kids who attended school that year.

For the kids who do kill at school, what are the deciding factors that sent them over the boiling point? Of course, for each kid, the reason is somewhat different, but there are some generalizations that can be made based on the responses I have received from kids around the country who answered my sur-

vey on their views of what makes kids violent. (For more information on the different categories of violent kids and non-violent kids, see chapter six on profiling dangerous kids.). One of the major factors they point to is school itself. “It feels like a jail sentence,” say over 15% of the kids filling out my survey. More than 22% percent of the kids say “school could be better.” This means that over one third (38.08 percent) of kids are unhappy at school. (For a comparison of how violent kids and nonviolent kids feel about school, see chapter six). For this reason, the next section will look at how our public school systems may be contributing to the creation of killers. If going to school could make a normal kid’s life miserable, what is it doing to those (like Devin or the Columbine killers) who have emotional problems? Sure, some of these kids may be self-serving or simply complainers, but that isn’t the point. Remember, the information in the next section is how kids (and former kids) around the country feel and why it is they believe that many of their peers are losing it. What is important is that we hear what they believe to be the difficulties they are having within the school, not whether or not we agree with their analysis.

What Is Happening In Our Public Schools?

I feel bad that children are losing their lives, but I have to be honest and say that I also feel bad for those that did the killing. I believe they were driven to it. . . . When you go to school and know what your day will be like. . . . It causes stress and a temporary mental condition. The law says you have to go to school! But children should not have to suffer every single day until they graduate. Teachers seem to take the side of the popular kids and DO nothing. So I ask, Who is to blame?

—Donna, a thirty-four-year-old former outcast who wrote me about why she believes kids today kill at school.

Is public school really like a jail sentence? Isn't that just the imagination of thousands of spoiled kids across the country who want special favors? Perhaps in some cases, but in comparing the milieu of many public schools across the country to the prison milieu, I have found many similarities between the responses of the students and those of inmates in prison. Although it is somewhat of a stretch to compare public school to a prison sentence, understanding why prisoners riot may shed some light as to why kids in our country are violent at school. Research on prison populations shows that riots occur for one of two reasons. The first is that the prisoners believe they are overly-controlled by unfair practices in general and that the authorities are unfair to some inmates while favoring others. The second reason inmates riot is that they went through the proper bureaucratic channels to get help for their grievances but got nowhere.¹¹ In my interviews with children and adolescents who have murdered or are violent, I have found a common theme. Just like the inmates, most of them perceive themselves to be victims of an unfair system (look at the case of the Columbine killers, who felt unable to go through the normal channels to get back at the kids who were "torturing them"). These violent kids believe (with some basis) that schools have one set of standards for the popular kids and athletes and another for the unpopular and rejected (like themselves). Almost without fail, these angry kids tell me that prior to their violent act, they were punished severely for acts that brought no punishment to others who were let off for with a slap to the hand (or not punished at all), especially if those kids were popular with the teachers or administration. These kids feel that even though they are being tortured, they are the ones who are seen as the problem and they receive little or no sympathy from teachers and school staff.

Just days after the tragedy at Columbine High School, letters poured into a website for computer professionals and self-described "geeks" called Slashdot in response to a column by Jon Katz. The letters were from kids around the country who expressed their outrage at being alienated and tortured for be-

ing geeks, nerds and outcasts. Although none of them advocated violence, many could understand the torture that contributed to the Columbine massacre. Rory, from Chicago, summed up the feelings of many of the Slashdot readers about the unfairness of the school system toward those who are different:

Would you bring a kid abused by his family to counseling and call him the problem? If that kid expressed rage and anger toward the world, we would call it a product of his abuse and try to help him with his rage, treating him as the victim. However, when it is other kids abusing each other, we treat the abusees as the problem and ignore the abusers altogether. Hunting down and persecuting the abusees is only going to alienate them further—not only will their peers be persecuting them but so will their parents and teachers.¹²

I know from personal experience in working with school systems that there is a great deal of truth to Rory's letter. Kids who are threatened or abused at school often have a hard time getting help from school authorities. Here is a typical story. A now thirty-one-year-old woman wrote to tell me about a tragedy that happened to her in fifth grade. She contracted rheumatic fever at the age of ten and was very ill for quite some time. When her doctor finally allowed her to go back to school, she was weak and emaciated. The first day she went back, she was accosted by several bigger kids as she got off the school bus and beaten and bloodied. When she went to the principal's office to give her a note from her doctor with his OK for her to be back in school, the principal did not even recognize her. Once the girl told her who she was, the principal threatened to call the authorities on her parents, until she told them, "no, no, it happened to me right in front of the school." Once she heard that the violence came from kids at school, the principal blanched and apologized but did nothing. This "blame the abusee or do nothing" strategy is still going on in many of our schools. In chapter three, I described a girl who was being tortured at school by a gang of girls. Instead of doing anything

about the girl's plight and going after the gang of girls, the administration took the path of least resistance and sent the abused girl to an alternative school to finish out her high school years. Many other kids I have interviewed have had similar experiences: they had gone to school authorities for help and been turned down. One girl who had been threatened by another girl with a baseball bat went to her principal and told him what was happening. The principal said he would "look into it" but did nothing. Later, the girl took a razor blade to school to protect herself but when it was found out by the principal that she had it, she was sent to juvenile detention for carrying a weapon. The other girl who had been making threats got off scot-free. Natasha Cornett, who was involved in the killing of an entire family (see chapter five for her story) told me that she had gone to school authorities in high school because she had been threatened by a group of girls. Instead of getting help, she reports she was told by the authorities that it was her fault because she was "a freak." Her reaction to her sense of betrayal may have led her even years later to round up a posse of teens and go on a spree that left three people dead and one child injured. Many of the school killers over the past few years have also felt that they could not tolerate the injustices they felt at school. While it is not common for most young people to go on a killing rampage, it is common for young people searching for ideals to be provoked to anger by a sense of injustice. Nowadays, having learned from past outcasts that nothing will be done to correct their miserable situations, those who are mentally unstable to begin with may go over the edge.

The Columbine killers felt very strongly that there was one set of rules for the jocks and popular teens at school and another for them. Even though both Klebold and Harris were mentally unstable and suffered from distortions of thought (everyone is out to get us, the world is a hostile place) even their classmates agreed that they were treated unfairly and received little or no support from the school administration. Some experts might say that they were violent because they watched a lot of television or movies that planted these ideas in their heads

(and maybe to some degree this is partially true). But what the experts neglect to mention is that not one of *them* would be able to stand the humiliation and torture that these kids went through at school for even one day and do nothing. If adults today were treated like this at work, it would be an outrage, but at least they could change jobs. Most kids have no such option. The government forces them to stay in school. In years past, they could have easily dropped out and there were more alternatives open to kids who could not or did not want to attend school (such as joining the army early, joining the Merchant Marine, working on a farm, etc.). Now there are no such options. With compulsory school attendance, kids have to endure the torture whether they want to or not. In video tapes made before the Columbine killers went on their rampage, they admitted to having been unhappy and teased since kindergarten. They took turns talking to the camera, recalling all the people who slighted, taunted or mistreated them. The list included elementary school classmates, relatives and many of the teenagers who attended Columbine. They acknowledged a pent-up rage to "get paybacks" against their perceived enemies, which they said they had been denied by rules that govern everyday life, and go on to describe how they expect their crime to "kick-start a revolution."¹³

Even Harris's and Klebold's classmates were not surprised at what they did, given the hell they went through at school. They were called freaks, nerds and the ultimate insult to teenage boys—gay. Just like Devin in the story earlier in this chapter, they were treated like scum: teased, ridiculed and ostracized. Athletes would push them against lockers and call them dirt bags or dirt balls. "It just makes you not want to go to school," said Thad Martin, a fifteen year old skater at Columbine. Many students at Columbine admitted that the kids who wore trench coats felt alienated. Some of them had written phrases on their backpacks such as "Die Jock Die" and "I hate everyone." Stephanie Plank, a sixteen-year-old junior stated that Harris and Klebold (as well as others in the "Trench Coat Mafia") carried around satanic bibles and the anarchist cook-

books showing how to make pipe bombs. “I couldn’t believe the faculty couldn’t figure it out. It was so obvious there was something wrong.” Eric Veik, a friend of Harris and Klebold says that the two would often joke about getting revenge, and say things like, “It’s time to get back at this school.” Veik saw the anger building up in them over time. “They were tired of those who were insulting them, harassing them. They weren’t going to take this anymore, and they wanted to stop it. Unfortunately, that is what they did.”¹⁴

It may seem contradictory, but the more schools try to keep kids restrained with one hypocritical rule after another, the more likely it is that they will display a higher level of violence when they do explode. Teens are at an age where they are looking for a sense of justice and, when it is not to be found, they often lash out in anger. If the administration has one set of rules for jocks and athletes and another for nerds and dorks, many kids will have trouble dealing with the inequality. While I do not advocate violence as a way to solve problems, we should examine how some of the rules and regulations in the public schools—and the often unfair enforcement or nonenforcement of those rules—may be impacting negatively on kids who are already on the edge. Many schools have a lot of ineffective rules that leave students feeling powerless and angry—much like inmates in a badly run prison. The kids who are well-adjusted and have good coping skills try to find other outlets to relieve their anger. Some of them might even become depressed. But for the kids on the edge, the sense of powerlessness and anger with no intervention can lead to disaster. Klebold and Harris spoke of there being no way for them to get back at the kids who treated them so poorly. Rules and regulations at most schools today make it impossible for kids to fight back in a way that was not the case in the 1970’s. I remember in junior high and high school that kids settled arguments with their fists more often. If a fight started, we would all yell, “fight!” and the two or perhaps three students would duke it out until someone either broke up the fight or it was finished. Usually, no one was suspended. Fighting was seen as normal and not the hor-

rible aberration that it is treated as today. After the fight, everyone went about their business. Contrast this with what kids do now. Devin states in his story that up until he was fifteen, he had never been involved in a physical fight. Even many of today’s gang members say that they don’t know how to fight with their hands. They only know how to kill with a gun or a knife. Nowadays, some schools have rules such as “one strike and you’re out.” If you get involved in a fight, you are then suspended or even expelled (though somehow this never applies to jocks who engage in bullying; I guess it doesn’t count as a fight if all the violence is one-sided). In some schools, it does not even matter who started the fight. In one school I know of a boy who was expelled simply for defending himself when another boy came up and hit him for no apparent reason. The administration did not want to take the responsibility of trying to find out what the fight was about. All they cared about was avoiding responsibility. They simply followed the rule—all those involved in fights are expelled. These hard and fast rules are hypocritical and ineffective. Kids know it and they respond by becoming even more rebellious.

Why Now? How Well-Intentioned Laws And Pop Psychology Are Ruining Our Kids

Many times when I have been interviewed, reporters will ask, “why are kids violent at school in ways they never were in the past?” There are a number of reasons. Some have to do with the reams of rules and regulations in the public schools and others have to do with school programs and a societal milieu that encourages narcissistic traits. There is a contradiction in the way that many schools are run today. Hostile rules that don’t make any sense have produced an atmosphere that is both chaotic and a police state—yet not one that maintains order. The “politically correct” laws and practices that have swept across the schools and communities of our nation that may actually be causing a boomerang effect: they may increase rather

than decrease violent or oppositional behavior in kids. These policies include “zero tolerance” rules, curfews, uniforms, IDEA (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) and the abolition of corporal punishment.

Zero tolerance is the ultimate hypocrisy to many kids, as revealed in my national survey on violence (for more information on how kids feel about zero tolerance and curfews, see chapter six). Zero tolerance is the promise of punishment for any student who brings violence, weapons or drugs into the schools. One strike and the student is out of school for a year. Many kids feel that zero tolerance is unfair, “zero tolerance is like putting kids in jail. The kids who do bring weapons in don’t care if they are expelled. Then there are the kids that get expelled for bringing a plastic knife to school to cut a bagel with.” Many kids have told me that zero tolerance encourages bad behavior because they will get the same punishment no matter they do. This makes sense. Bringing nail clippers to school carries the same punishment as bringing a gun, so why not bring a weapon?

What is this teaching kids about adults’ ability to think rationally? Grown-ups can’t tell a bagel cutter from a machine gun? It becomes clear to kids that decisions are made based on emotion (or refusal to take responsibility) and they follow suit. Curfews also add to an atmosphere of a police state in which many kids feel like they have lost all constitutional rights. Many good kids feel that curfews only hurt the law abiding students since they would try to obey the law. “The kids who are violent or harmful are going to do what they want and may even act worse just to be rebellious and break the rules,” is the attitude of many of the kids I interviewed. School uniforms were a neutral area to some kids but to many others, uniforms contribute to an atmosphere of being in a prison and/or being punished for the violence caused by a small percentage of their peers.

Well-intentioned federal laws have also undermined school discipline and have produced a lawless and frightening atmosphere in many schools around the nation. Instead of “Fast

Times at Ridgemont High,” a better model for some schools these days might be “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.” The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) brought mayhem to the classrooms by giving special education students special privileges under the law. The IDEA made it difficult for school staff to discipline those children who were defined as having a handicapping condition such as Attention Deficit–Hyperactivity Disorder or a learning disability. If the child’s misbehavior could have been caused by his or her handicapping condition, then no disciplinary action could be taken. But it gets worse. Deviant or violent behavior has itself now been re-labeled as a “handicapping condition.” For example, at a local elementary school, a ten-year-old girl blackened a teaching assistant’s eye as the teacher was leading her down the hall to the office. School officials said that because she was in special education, the girl simply could not be removed from school like a regular student. The girl has special rights under the law. Unfortunately, IDEA protects this girl and others like her from suffering the consequences of their actions.

Though often viewed as benefitting students, this approach is actually harmful—especially for emotionally disturbed students, both in and out of special education. The emotionally disturbed kids start to see themselves as victims with little incentive to control their behavior. And the lack of consequences sets a precedent for disturbed kids in regular classes as it encourages them to try and get away with violent behavior. I had one client—an eleven-year-old boy—who would strike out at teachers or his principal and then yell that if they laid a hand on him that he would have them arrested for child abuse. Unfortunately, this statement is not far from the truth. The principal certainly did not dare paddle the boy for his behavior. Our culture now is so phobic about “child abuse” that adults are afraid to look at a child the wrong way for fear of becoming the target of an investigation by the child protective services.

Schools don’t dare use corporal punishment anymore, mainly because of changing societal standards that place corporal punishment in the same category as child abuse. It’s okay

to take away the rights of kids to walk the streets freely or to charge children as young as eight as adults in a criminal trial or even to dope a kid up on strong medications to control his or her behavior. But according to most mental health experts, it is never acceptable to use corporal punishment. According to Murray A Straus, author of *Beating the Devil Out of Them: Corporal Punishment in American Families*, “Hitting a child is wrong and a child never, ever, under any circumstances, except literal physical self-defense, should be hit.”¹⁵ Many teachers and principals I have spoken to over the years have felt that their authority has been undermined since the abolition of corporal punishment (in some states, corporal punishment has not been banned but many principals report it is not used in their school because of the social stigma). One study looking at principals’ beliefs about corporal punishment in private and public schools in middle Tennessee found that while more public schools in the study (90%) were allowed to use corporal punishment, only 43% of them chose to use it. Conversely, only 43% of the private schools were permitted to use corporal punishment but 67% of these chose to use it. The study found that many principals who did not use corporal punishment or believe in using it still make use of the threat of its existence.¹⁶ Corporal punishment may or may not have any bearing on kids decision to harm others but it is interesting that almost all of the school killings in the past few years have taken place in public schools. It could be that private schools are able to make good on their threats of punishment while public school students know the threats carry little weight. Kids know the difference. Even kids themselves believe corporal punishment to be effective in changing their behavior. One study investigating the attitude of elementary students in Mississippi public schools found that 83% of the students surveyed perceived paddling as appropriate and 65% viewed it as effective. Seventy-eight percent of the students agreed that they would be angry at the person who paddled them. However, of 69 students who had been paddled, 73% believed corporal punishment changed their behavior.¹⁷ Another negative by-product

of banning corporal punishment has been that, according to one study, the juvenile crime rate is higher in the communities that do *not* use corporal punishment than in the communities that do use corporal punishment.¹⁸ Of course, there are also negative aspects to using corporal punishment. There is a higher drop-out rate in schools (although this might not necessarily be bad if the problem kids are leaving school) that use corporal punishment and some researchers have claimed to a link between aggression and corporal punishment. What we can take learn from these studies on corporal punishment is that it is not a black or white issue. Sometimes it can be helpful and sometimes harmful (especially if it is harshly administered) depending on the circumstances. But it should make us wary that the mass hysteria about protecting our children from all “child abuse” may not be so much for the good of the children as for making the so-called crusaders feel good.

The Self-Esteem Movement

Another “feel good” crusade of the 1970’s and 80’s has also played a part in increasing the narcissistic traits of our young people, making them more likely to become violent. The self-esteem movement that started around the late 1970’s and has continued until today has played a role in increasing the distorted thoughts of kids (like Tim or Devin) already on the edge. The pop psychology of the late 1970’s and 1980’s placed special emphasis on high self-esteem as the hallmark of good mental health. For example, one platitude that was popular in the late 1970’s was “you can’t love anyone else until you learn to love yourself first.” An onslaught of “self-esteem” programs were set up in schools to help kids learn to love themselves. States such as California (under political pressure) approved bills to fund task forces on self-esteem. Findings from the California task force were published in 1989 in a book that was entitled *The Social Importance of Self-Esteem*. Despite the negative findings in the book (self-esteem was not associ-

ated strongly with socially valuable behavior) the authors concluded that low self-esteem was a strong cause of major social problems. Robyn Dawes, a professor of psychology, refutes this theory in *The Harvard Mental Health Letter*. She states:

...there is nothing wrong with feeling good, particularly about oneself, and achieving that state can be one feature of a desirable life. But there are other features as well. It is not useful when therapists anxious to bolster the self-esteem of troubled or troublesome people tell them that their problems are caused by distant childhood events that they may not even remember. It is not useful for schools to devote themselves to raising children's self-esteem instead of teaching them. It is not good for professors to avoid the critical evaluation of student work because saying anything unpleasant might lower the student's self-esteem. Such victim-creating therapies and dubious educational practices deny people the self-knowledge they need to function effectively and act generously. The false belief in self-esteem as a major force for good can be not potentially but actually harmful.¹⁹

Kids Who Love Themselves Too Much

Many of the “feel good about yourself” programs that have been set up in schools in recent years have backfired when it comes to kids with distorted thinking processes. Rather than seeing their irrational thoughts as a problem, kids who already loved themselves too much were rewarded for their irrational beliefs. If a kid is already narcissistic and feels that he or she is entitled to special rights, what good is it going to do to tell him or her that “yes, you should feel good about yourself?” In the world of psychotherapy, clients change their behavior when they are plagued by feelings of anxiety (and sometimes guilt); it stirs them to action. They know that something is not right. But the self-esteem gurus want us to tell kids that they are “fine the way they are.” Some kids are not fine the way they are:

they are mean and vindictive and need to change their beliefs and their behavior. Instead, they are pummeled with slogans about how to accept themselves. Here is an example of how helping a child to see that his thinking is *not okay* can help a kid change his or her behavior. I saw an oppositional ten-year-old boy for therapy: he was stealing from his mother and others at school. He was angry that his mother did not trust him to be in the house by himself or to go outside on his own without supervision. During one of our sessions, he spent the time grumbling angrily about how his mom did not trust him. I pointed out that “Of course she doesn’t trust you, you’re a thief! If you want your mother to trust you, you will have to earn back her trust.” He thought about what I said for a moment and said, “yeah, I guess I am [a thief].” Slowly, his stealing decreased as he learned that the reputation of being a thief had a downside as he was limited as to what he could do at home and in his neighborhood. If I had spent our sessions trying to help the boy “improve his self-esteem,” he would probably still be stealing today or worse (but feeling good about himself as he did).

The “feel good about yourself” approach has also been incorporated into classroom teaching. Many times, rather than teaching critical thinking skills (the ability to problem solve and think rationally) kids are taught that emotions and feelings are the way to cope with problems. Constantly harping on how a kid feels rather than what he thinks in an already over-emotional child can spell disaster. Unfortunately, many of today’s schools are increasing children’s misbehavior by teaching them that it is more important to feel good about yourself than it is to excel or try your best at something.

Take for example a new Teacher’s Guide that came out last year from the Department of Education called “Quit It! A Teacher’s Guide on Teasing and Bullying for Use with Students in Grades K-3.” In this manual, it is recommended that children not play regular games of tag because it is too aggressive and competitive (there should be no winner or loser). Before going outside to play a gentler form of tag where no

one is ever “out,” the manual says that the teacher needs to get in touch with the students’ feelings. The teacher explores how the kids *feel* when they are chased, how does it *feel* to be tagged out? Then they are told they will play a different kind of tag—one where nobody is ever “out.” Christina Hoff Sommers, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, ridicules the guide’s suggestion that tag is too aggressive and psychologically damaging to children. She stated in a recent speech that “Quit It!” is prime evidence that the United States has become the “republic of feelings” in which people are encouraged to feel victimized and entitled to redress, and where values like competitiveness, stoicism and the quest for excellence are shunned.²⁰ What is this type of teaching doing to kids who already feel victimized (who feel that other people are out to get me, and the world is a hostile place) or who feel that they are entitled to special rights? It is affirming the distorted beliefs of kids who are reactive offenders or psychopaths (as described by Aaron Beck in an earlier section) and telling them their beliefs are accurate. It is likely that as their distorted thinking processes are reinforced, the more sick kids among us will be even more likely to strike out angrily.

By contrast, critical thinking prevents violence. There has been research showing that youthful impulsiveness may be linked to younger teenagers’ frenetic brain activity in the amygdala, which is primarily linked with emotions and instinctual reactions. Older teens and adults show more activity in the frontal lobe—the brain tissue involved in planning, insight and organization. Teachers can encourage young teenagers (and younger) to develop the frontal lobe by teaching them to think more rationally.²¹ This may translate into integrating more critical thinking skills into school curriculums to teach kids more logical ways to solve problems. Paradoxically, school curricula such as “Quit It!” aimed at helping teens get in touch with their emotions may actually make things worse—given the emotional makeup of many troubled teens—while programs that substitute rational thought for emotion may help them deal with their problems constructively.

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In the next chapter, we will turn to the case of violent girls who strike out in anger in a different manner than the boys such as Devin and Tim described in this chapter. As you will see in the next chapter, many girls are not as direct as the boys are about their anger but nonetheless, they can be just as dangerous.

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