

# S E V E N

## **Suggestions For Schools, Teachers And Parents: What Can Help? What Can Hurt?**

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*When I worked as a counselor in the 1970's, we rarely had parents coming in to ask for advice on their children's behavior. Parents took charge back then.*

–Michael Bundy, a counselor with fifteen years experience with high school students and their families.

**W**hat happened between the 1970's and the 1990's that left parents scrambling for advice on how to control their children's behavior? As I discussed in previous chapters, the many federal laws and self-esteem movements of recent decades have not added to the emotional well-being of our children and may even have resulted in problems and tragedies. What many of us have noticed is not just that some bad kids

are engaging in more criminal behavior but that even the normal kids are angry and belligerent; far more so than can be accounted for by normal teenage malaise and rebelliousness.

In the last chapter, we looked at some of the reasons kids are so angry. Many kids feel confusion because of the dichotomy between their home life and school life: it is as if they live in two different worlds. In one world, they receive too little discipline and supervision. In another they are subject to a level of regulation and surveillance comparable to that of a penitentiary. At home, they may be ignored by two working parents who have little time or energy to devote to discipline. Some kids in the survey mentioned feeling resentful that their parents were not available to them. One violent fifteen-year-old boy stated, *“I don’t get along with my family because they’re never there—they’re out working, they say to make my life better... who cares that they are never around or when they are, they are too tired and watch TV?”* It seems that the majority of kids in the violence survey interpreted this “neglect” as fairness because of the lack of discipline. To some kids, discipline is inherently unfair. One violent girl stated she was treated *unfairly* at home because there were “TOO MANY DAMN RULES.”

These kids mistakenly believe that getting their own way makes up for what they perceive to be a lack of love. Most parents desperately love their children and want to make them happy, but between feeling exhausted at work and “hassled” by their kids at home, they give in to their children’s demands to buy themselves a few minutes of peace and quiet. Add to this mixture a lot of guilt and endless money or materialistic things being thrown their way and it is no wonder kids think the world owes them big time. A recent study found that the average teenager gets up to seventy-five dollars a week for an allowance! Even the lower-income kids have come to expect goodies. One of my patients who lived near the projects in a less than affluent part of town summarized the overabundance of goods in the United States: *“Poor? Who’s poor anymore?”*

*I see people in my neighborhood who drive Mercedes and BMW’s. They all have at least a car and two TV’s.”*

Kids live with too much freedom at home, and not enough at school. On top of this, they expect—reasonably, based on their experience—to have goodies handed to them on a silver platter. I believe that this mismatch in expectations is at the core of why so many suburban kids are angry. The solution isn’t zero tolerance, or new rules. It’s adult self-discipline and responsibility.

The stakes are high, and I don’t just mean in terms of preventing school shootings, which are comparatively rare events. If communities learn how to understand and address this teenage anger, it could prevent the next disturbed kid from going over the edge. But just as important, it could also improve the life of the nonviolent kid who has no intention of harming others. School shooters are rare; miserable teens who are scarred for life are, unfortunately, quite common. Helping them is important, too. In the words of one former picked-on nerd, *“Sure, it’s important to deal with the kids who kill, but I think we REALLY should look at the walking wounded that make it through as well, and consider some of the implications in terms of the human cost of those who don’t blow.”* In the next sections, I will provide suggestions for schools, teachers and parents on how to prevent kids becoming enraged at a system that they feel has treated them unfairly. Sure, there will always be kids too disturbed or pathological to benefit from these interventions. However, the fact that many of the school killers reached out (unsuccessfully) for help before their rampages suggests that if help had been available, it might have saved a number of lives.

### Suggestions For Schools

*“I was punished for wearing a shirt that by their standards had ‘inappropriate’ writing on it.”*

*“What discipline? My dad said that they spanked him when he was bad at school, me they just send home, too good to be true.”*

*“They are completely stuck up in their own rules.”*

*“They treat you like crap.”*

*“They treat you unfairly depending on your age and sex. Some rules that are supposed to apply to everyone don’t always seem to be used.”*

*“At school, disciplinary action is done on a whim, there is no basis for these things.”*

*“Our dress code bans trenchcoats. If someone is deranged, they are not going to be like—I just want to kill everyone but first I need a trenchcoat.”*

*“School is a totalitarian dictatorship by the book, always by the book, even if the book is wrong mentally.”*

*“I get penalized for other kids’ stupidity. For example, if someone else is talking, I don’t get to go to the bathroom after lunch and they never let you go during the day.”*

*“They have rules that violate our rights and don’t protect our safety in any way.”*

*“They treat us like babies!”*

These are quotes from kids who filled out my violence survey, discussing why they feel treated unfairly at school. In this section, I will discuss what school administrators can do to reduce the likelihood that their students will feel the need to

retaliate against their school. I will not be dealing with the security issues *per se*, for those are best left to experts in that field. Rather, I will be addressing the psychological factors at school that can exacerbate violent tendencies in some kids. These factors will be based on the expressed concerns of the kids filling out the violence survey as well as on my own clinical experience. There are a number of problems at school that kids mentioned on the violence survey; I have narrowed these down to three main areas for discussion: bullying and alienation, a sense of unfairness and injustice, and being treated like babies by adults.

The first area, bullying and alienation, has been a topic of discussion for some time. However, despite all of the talk, if the violence survey is any indication little is being done to alleviate the name-calling and derogatory remarks that many kids live with day in and day out. In the past, many administrators have buried their heads in the sand and figured that “kids will be kids, let them work it out.” But this way of coping does not work. Here is a typical response to bullying that I received from an educator at an all-boys school. *“These kids haven’t been gang-raped in prison. They haven’t been forced to endure Chinese Water-Torture or experienced the horrors of warfare or solitary confinement. They’ve only had to endure the same kind of psychologically damaging bullying that has existed in schools since... there were schools.”* Tell this to April Michelle Himes, the thirteen-year-old in Chapter Three who chose to hang herself with a belt because she could not bear one more day of being tortured by the girls at her school. Bullying is sometimes more than verbal abuse: there is often physical abuse and intimidation by the other kids, but somehow this is dismissed by adults as “kids being kids.” Our society has its own definition of who the victims are and sways little from that script. Take for example, a woman who is belittled and physically threatened by her husband. Sure, she may be smaller than he is and not as physically strong as her husband, but no one says she has no right to fight back. People encourage her to leave the abuser and to fight for her rights.

But what about the rights of a young person to attend school without being humiliated and intimidated? Why is that different? Does a grown adult have more of a right to protection than a young child or teenager? It is up to the adults who have the children in their care to protect children from harm. How can schools do that?

I spoke with several educators and administrators at schools that have been successful in keeping violent incidents to a minimum. Here are some of the common steps they take to alleviate some of the bullying and alienation for their students:

#### **STEP NUMBER ONE:**

**“We do not allow kids in our school to feel intimidated.”**

Successful schools intervene on a student’s behalf when they see bullying or ostracism taking place. Immediate action is taken by an adult in charge to put a stop to the incident while in progress. Turning a blind eye or even (as often happens, especially in phys. ed classes) actually *encouraging* bullying is a recipe for disaster.

#### **STEP NUMBER TWO:**

**“We interview all of the kids who were involved in the bullying incident.”**

Act immediately. Go directly to the kids involved in the incident and interview each of them separately to find out what happened. An experienced counselor who is consistently in charge of the interviewing would be best; this is because with the experience of interviewing comes a “knack” for knowing when a situation is just a “set-up” or is truly worth pursuing. Give each of the kids a chance to tell his or her side of the story; this alone gives them a feeling that their opinion is worth something. One of the reasons kids strike out is that they feel they are in a miserable situation with nowhere to turn and no one to listen to them.

#### **STEP NUMBER THREE:**

**“We encourage parents to come in and talk if their child is being bullied or even just to talk about their child’s school experience.”**

Frequently, parents are reluctant to come in and talk to the school staff about what is happening to their child. Of course, at the other end of the spectrum is the angry parent who is at the school telling the staff that little Johnny is never to blame for anything. The school should do its best to gain the trust of the parents. Talking to the parents in a calm voice that expresses concern despite their style is one key to gaining that trust. Many parents (especially those in lower socioeconomic brackets) may have had a bad school experience themselves and may feel intimidated by the school in general. Perhaps they dropped out or were bullied themselves and don’t want to deal with their kid’s issues. Encouragement from staff and a nonthreatening atmosphere can help parents to become more involved in their kids’ school experience and indirectly show the child that the parent is concerned. Tell parents what you will do about the incident (whether positive or negative).

#### **Step Number Four:**

**“We follow up with the parents and kids about what steps will be taken to correct the situation.”**

Always follow up with the parent and the kids involved in the incident and tell them what you will be doing to correct the situation or why you are letting it go. Leaving those involved hanging without closure can add to bitter feelings about the school. It also sacrifices the parental cooperation necessary to make discipline work.

**STEP NUMBER FIVE:**

**“We create a climate of consistency and reliability for parents and kids.”**

By following steps one through four in a consistent and fair manner, kids and their parents will come to view the school not as the enemy, but as an ally. This can happen even if the outcome is not what the kid or parents hoped for. What is important to people is that their view is heard and acknowledged. What causes anger and a feeling of desperation is the thought that one is not being heard. People can handle not getting their way. What they can't handle is feeling like they're getting the shaft, or the brush-off.

### **What Not To Do**

And, in fact, the second source of violent feelings for many of the kids is that they feel treated unfairly by the school administration or that the rules that are supposed to apply to all are administered unfairly. As discussed in Chapter Four, prisoners in jails and penitentiaries riot for two reasons: the first is that they feel treated overly-controlled by unfair practices in general and that the authorities are unfair to some inmates while favoring others. The second is that they went through the proper bureaucratic channels to get help for their grievances but got nowhere. A similar situation exists in the public schools: it is also the inconsistency of the discipline that can often add to an atmosphere of unfairness. One of the main ways that school administrators can maintain order and avoid mayhem in their school is to use fair and consistent punishment. Because of state and federal laws such as those mandating special treatment for students with disabilities, this is not always possible. However, individual school systems often have some say in the process of determining which rules their school will fol-

low. Following are some ways that schools further isolate their students and may unknowingly cause a boomerang effect: their students get more unruly rather than more cooperative. Schools that promote the following may be fostering a harmful atmosphere:

1. *They treat the students like inmates*, running the school like a prison with guards, searches and crackdowns and treating all students as potential criminals.
2. *They do not take the time to know their students*, and use superficial solutions to address complex problems.
3. *They ignore kids who come to them for help* or promise they will get around to investigating a complaint but never follow through.
4. *They let some students off the hook* such as athletes or socially popular ones while punishing those who are less “privileged.”
5. *They decide that a particular student is a troublemaker* and assume that whenever someone points the finger at that student, it must always be true.
6. *They use emotion rather than logic* to decide which rules they will implement.
7. *They are intimidated by kids* and at the same time disrespectful to them.
8. *They treat teens and older kids like babies.*

### **What To Do**

On the other hand, successful school administrators have several traits that translate into good leadership skills. These traits can bring out the best in their students and provide the school with an atmosphere of trust and concern. Following are some ways that administrators can win the trust of their students and at the same time maintain calm and order.

*Successful administrators do not treat kids and teens like babies.* They assume their students will behave responsibly unless they show themselves to behave otherwise. A majority of the violent kids feel treated unfairly by adults, mainly because they feel adults treat them like babies. This includes school staff and teachers. Give kids a chance to act responsibly and do not punish those who have done no wrong.

*Successful administrators treat their students with respect.* They do not belittle, intimidate or devalue the opinions of their students, even if they are wrong. They listen with authority and provide feedback and explanations for their decisions.

*Successful administrators are brave.* They are not intimidated by children or other adults. They stand up for what they think is right.

*Successful administrators do not let “ritual” stand in for judgment.* A successful administrator knows that just because other schools have adopted a set of draconian laws and regulations does not mean they will be right for their school. Expelling kids for bringing over-the-counter medications or nail clippers to school is posturing behavior, it is not good leadership. It teaches kids that adults have no judgment, makes them angry and—worst of all—shows them that the world of appearances is more important than substance. This is not the lesson one wants students to learn.

*Successful administrators hold themselves accountable for their decisions.* They admit if they make a mistake and do not try to pass the buck onto other staff or students if wrong.

*Successful administrators dole out swift fair punishment.* They try their best to make the punishment fit the crime. They do so on an individual basis, taking into account the facts of each case but do not use a student’s popularity or athletic standing in the school to influence their decision.

Perhaps most important of all, *successful administrators know the difference between problems that require discipline as a solution and those that require mental health interventions.* They do not confuse the two. School administrators should have some training in mental health issues, at least

enough to identify some of the warning signs of emotionally disturbed behavior. Often, schools treat symptoms of mental illness as a disciplinary problem rather than as a warning sign that something is wrong. Kip Kinkel, the Springfield, Oregon school killer, disrupted his ninth grade literature class by abruptly yelling, “God damn these voices in my head!” His teacher took immediate action and wrote up a disciplinary note. “In the future,” it asked, “what could you do differently to prevent this problem?” Kip dutifully wrote out the answer: “Not to say Damn.” Nobody paid attention to the part about the voices in his head.<sup>1</sup>

I remember a similar situation when I was in graduate school. I had an internship class where the psychology interns would present their cases to the class and get feedback from the other students and professor. One day, a woman presented a case of a junior high school boy who built a shrine to Jeffrey Dahmer, the serial killer who chopped up young boys and hid their body parts around his apartment. The boy kept this “shrine” (consisting of cut up plastic body parts and pictures of the killer) in his desk and pulled it out during free time. The intern was at a loss for how to deal with this sign of serious disturbance. My professor, a school psychologist who specialized in behavioral therapy, stated in a serious tone to the intern, “You need to write up a behavior plan to get rid of that kooky behavior!” This “plan” consisted of rewarding the boy on the days that he did not pull the “shrine” from his desk. I nearly fell out of my chair laughing when I heard this “solution.” (Just as a note to other students: never laugh openly at your professor in class, it is not a smart thing to do). The problem with this solution was that it did not address the underlying cause of the boy’s behavior. His behavior was a warning sign that warranted a trip to a psychiatrist or psychologist’s office to determine the underlying reason for his behavior. He may have been doing it in response to being bullied by other kids, with this his way of acting “crazy” so they would leave him alone—or he may have been doing it because he *was* crazy. In either case, mental health intervention is necessary, not just some sort

of disciplinary response.

One last note for school administrators—it is important to realize that there are some children who are too emotionally disturbed or who display such aggressive behaviors that it is impossible to teach them. These kids often ruin the education of other students, but schools are forced to teach them anyway. These kids belong in alternative settings, either at an alternative school for behaviorally disordered kids or in a mental health facility that can handle their problems. Despite opinions to the contrary, not all children can benefit from a public school education. It is unfair to ask teachers, staff and other students to risk their lives and/or their emotional well-being just so one child can act out his or her violent behavior at school.

### Additional School-Based Interventions

Other interventions that can benefit schools are “full service schools” in which mental health and social service professionals are housed in the school itself.<sup>2</sup> The full service school is developed with community input. The emphasis is on prevention. On-site psychotherapy and mental health services are certainly important, given that so many kids in the violence survey show themselves to be angry. Although the different types of psychotherapy are beyond the scope of this book, there are several types of treatment that would benefit boys and girls, individually and in groups. Given the high percentage of violent girls (and nonviolent ones) who are angry enough to harm others, psychoeducational interventions such as arousal management would be of help. This type of therapy uses deep breathing, relaxation and imagery to reduce the physical symptoms of anger that so many of the violent girls exhibited. (This is no new-agey silliness—it really works). Girls could learn to accurately monitor their somatic indicators of anger arousal. Cognitive restructuring could assist boys and girls who are fueled to anger by all-or-none thinking or distorted perceptions of social cues. The goal of violence prevention should not be

to eradicate this anger, which has some beneficial, self-protective functions, but to reduce the likelihood of actions that harm oneself or others.

### Suggestions For Teachers

*“Some teachers here are always on the rag about something. Then they take it out on us by making us go to the office for just little things like talking in class. You can be sent on a first offense sometimes!”*

*“My English teacher didn’t like me and gave me bad marks when my work was as good as any others. I think it is because I am Chinese.”*

*“I am treated unfairly by teachers because of my race and the color of my skin.”*

*“I was falsely accused of a certain action and my constitutional rights were violated. The most painful part of this experience was the fact that I was accused by a teacher that I trusted and considered a friend.”*

*“The teachers are terribly mean to me.”*

*“Teachers just don’t understand that you are not the only one doing the infraction. You are just the one they make an example of.”*

*“Teachers treat kids like animals, they cannot believe that one or two of us might actually have something intelligent to say.”*

*“My teachers hate me.”*

*“The teachers are dicks.”*

These are complaints about their teachers from students in the violence survey. Many of their perceptions of how teachers respond to them had to do with feeling that they were punished

unfairly by teachers. There were also a number of kids who felt teachers treated them unfairly due to race. Frequently, the kids mentioned a lack of understanding about what they had done to warrant punishment or stated that punishment was dealt out unfairly. I spoke to Richard Jones, a school psychologist who works with teachers on a daily basis in rural and suburban schools in East Tennessee, about why so many students feel treated unfairly by their teachers. Mr. Jones suggested that it may be because kids don't know what is expected of them in the classroom. Many of the rules in schools these days do not make sense or seem contradictory to the students. Many teachers are not direct about what they want students to do. Teachers may also unknowingly categorize students as "troublemakers." Studies have shown that teachers' expectations of their students and classroom management style can actually effect how well students do academically in school.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the same is true for a child's emotional health. Sometimes it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy—a teacher who is convinced that a child is a chronic troublemaker and who punishes him or her unfairly may unknowingly be contributing to the child's angry outbursts. Following are some suggestions for how teachers can reduce the likelihood of violence erupting in their classroom.

*Successful teachers are clear and consistent about their expectations.* They are not ambiguous, leaving students to guess how they are to behave. For example, they do not make blanket statements such as "Johnny, you have a bad attitude" or "Johnny, you are not following the rules." Instead, they describe the specific behavior they wish Johnny to change. "Johnny, please wait your turn before speaking. Next time, raise your hand. Wait until I call on you."

*Successful teachers do their best to treat all students with respect.*

*Successful teachers use fair and consistent discipline.* They do not punish all kids in the class for the infractions of one or two children. They provide students in their classroom with consequences that are commensurate with the behavior displayed.

*Successful teachers evaluate whether or not a teaching method is constructive or destructive to children's emotional health.* Methods that constantly harp on raising self-esteem and do little to teach academic skills and/or logic skills may actually encourage children to act impulsively rather than thinking before they act.

*Successful teachers teach critical thinking skills.* They encourage young teenagers (and younger) to develop the frontal lobe (the brain tissue involved in planning, insight and organization) by teaching them to think more rationally. They integrate more critical thinking skills into the school curriculum to teach kids more logical ways to solve problems. There are several good games on the market that can promote these logic skills: one is called *The Propaganda Game by wff n proof* and was used by gifted programs in the 1970's. It is a game that teaches children how to tell the difference between what is real and what is propaganda. Kids can learn to recognize faulty analogies, emotional appeals and other techniques used to convince and persuade. Unfortunately, logic and thinking games are difficult to come by these days. I searched several game stores for this game and instead found games such as *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* and *How to Host the Perfect Murder*. I even checked eToys on the Internet and found a popular game, *Pass the Bomb*. The description of this game is "Fast-paced, challenging, and tons of fun, *Pass the Bomb* comes with a really cool bomb that ticks mysteriously from 10-60 seconds, then detonates with a nerve-racking boom." This says it all.

Any teacher who has studied the cognitive stages research of Jean Piaget or the moral stages research of Lawrence Kohlberg knows that analytical reasoning and formal operations begin for children around the age of twelve. Unfortunately, just at the time when kids need to be learning logic and analytical skills the most, they are being pummeled with messages that belie those skills' importance. Our current American games, along with the media, tell kids that the way to get ahead in our society is to get rich without working or to amuse oneself with bomb making materials instead of physics. Just as



parents must help their children distinguish between reality and fantasy on TV, teachers must use the classroom to combat the negative messages that our society sends to its most vulnerable citizens.

*Successful teachers provide an atmosphere that is conducive to creative ideas.* Research shows that what is needed to teach critical thinking skills are teachers who can create an atmosphere in which students are encouraged to read deeply, to question, to engage in divergent thinking, to look for relationships among ideas, and to grapple with real-life issues.<sup>4</sup>

*Successful teachers are not alarmists or hypocrites.* They do not do things such as encourage their students to express their ideas only to turn them over to the school authorities when they comply. For example, there have been recent instances of kids expressing their opinions on school violence in literature classes who have been expelled or treated like the next school killer because they dared write down some negative feelings. Of course, some essays and written material may be cause for concern but successful teachers handle these in ways that show caring and concern for the student. Remember: even an essay that shows signs of severe emotional disturbance isn't a discipline problem. It's a sign of a student who needs help. Treating it as a discipline problem—the way Kip Kinkel's "voices" were treated—is a recipe for disaster.

### Suggestions For Parents

*"I think that the only reason kids use violence is because they feel that they have no other way to get rid of anger and because their parents are stupid and don't realize that they treat their kids like they were 2."*

*"My parents have an unrealistic idea of the mental age of children and have NO IDEA of the real substance of my daily life."*

*"My parents overreact."*

*"My family cares more about my station in life than they do about my happiness."*

*"My parents are too strict. They need to give me a chance to live my life the way I want to."*

*"Adults stop treating kids fairly when they are scared."*

*"Some parents don't discipline their kids enough."*

*"I was treated unfairly at home when I cheated on an English test and got caught so my mom took everything away from me and kicked me off the soccer team and I was grounded for five weeks."*

*"Adults don't treat us fairly because they do not let us do what we want all the time."*

*"A lot of parents forget what it was like to be a kid."*

*"As kids, we don't get enough respect from adults and we don't get a chance to prove ourselves because of it."*

*"I did not get enough discipline at home, mainly because my parents were divorced and they were scared to discipline me too much for fear I would go live with the other one."*

*"Parents treat kids like babies."*

### Parents Who Love Too Much

The public identifies parents—not peer pressure or violence in the media—as the primary cause of school shootings.<sup>5</sup> But even though the media and mental health experts are constantly harping on "lack of love" as the reason kids are turning to violent crime, there is little evidence in the violence survey to support this view for middle-class suburban kids. Rather, many of the violent survey boys and girls report feeling "sheltered too much" by "overly-strict parents" while at the other extreme are the juvenile delinquents who say they have too little discipline. The latter's plight is a different one and will be discussed

in the next section.

So what does it mean to be “too sheltered?” The data only tell us what the kids’ perceptions are, not whether or not they are accurate. Thus, I can only hypothesize about why violent kids feel they are too sheltered or feel they have overly-strict parents. There are a couple of possibilities. It could be that these kids are sheltered too much by parents who feel the world is a scary place; these parents feel they must do everything in their power to protect their progeny. Their teens are not allowed to go out at night or go places alone because they might be molested, accosted by a stranger or worst. Cable TV has many of us convinced that tragedy lies in wait for our children around every corner; this naturally leaves parents afraid. This parental fear and resulting loss of freedom leaves kids feeling trapped and treated like babies. The next question that follows is: what does it mean to be treated like a baby? It means kids are sheltered from the outside world because their parents believe that kids cannot control their own actions. They are not allowed to decide for themselves, even as to such simple matters as what to wear to school. Babies have no freedom, but they also face few consequences for their actions. This, too, seems to be the situation for many teens—at least where their parents are concerned. Parents do not want to hold their kids accountable.

I frequently hear adults incorrectly saying, “Kids today grow up too fast.” Do they really? We don’t trust even good kids to do traditional things like babysitting or playing unsupervised. The result is that kids all too often try to find other ways of convincing themselves that they are near-adults. Kids used to show their maturity by living up to responsibilities for work, chores around the house, farm, or family business, or child care. Few kids are given this opportunity today. Kids today are trying to show that they are grown up by doing things that are irresponsible and rebellious, because we do not allow them to show their maturity in more constructive ways. I recently saw a rather immature fourteen-year-old boy in juvenile detention who had never been in trouble before. Somehow, he had

gotten it into his head that if he put a butterfly knife up to a boy’s throat and threatened him, he would look like a big shot. Well, he did for all of two seconds. Once the victim got home and told his parents what had happened, they became upset and called the police. The fourteen-year-old was charged with aggravated assault. Perhaps a kid with less to prove would have found a more constructive way to prove to himself, and others, that he was a man.

### **Parents Who Don’t Love Enough**

Of course, at the other end of the spectrum are parents who “don’t love enough.” The parents of the juvenile delinquents in the survey typically do not provide adequate supervision for their child. This kid is left to fend for himself. It is telling that not one of the juvenile delinquents in the survey felt that adults treated kids like babies. They feel treated fairly by adults (because they get little or no discipline) and rarely need to prove themselves to their peers because they are already tough guys. Their parents rarely care what they do or if they go to school or not or even if they come home at night. Many of these kids are given more responsibility than a kid their age could possibly deal with. For example, Xavier, the twelve-year-old inner-city killer in Chapter Two, was staying out all night at the age of eight. Many of these kids are left alone for extended periods of time to care for younger siblings, starting at a very young age. These are the kids who don’t follow the rules, either at home or at school, because for them there are few consequences and little or no motivation to do so.

Just as giving a kid too little responsibility is a bad thing, so is giving him or her too much too soon. A negligent parent like this can often benefit from educational classes held at the school or in mental health centers that focus on behavioral techniques. Of course, there are some circumstances (although it would have to be extreme) where kids do need alternative living arrangements. It is best if the child can stay with a caring

relative or friend. The last resort should be to place the child in state custody. It is not like state custody is a panacea for children with negligent parents. Often, they end up “wherever there is a bed” and treatment is not always much better than what the child was receiving in the neglectful home. My husband, a lawyer, once served on a Juvenile Justice Board that was drafting laws for juveniles for the state of Tennessee. He proposed that the state be held at the same level of accountability with regard to children in state care as parents are held to with regard to children in their own care. The committee balked at this idea because they knew the state would be sued constantly for negligence: it couldn’t possibly live up to the standards it routinely imposed on parents. What they knew, but did not want to say, was that kids are not always protected and secure when they are in the custody of the state. While there are many committed and caring people in state child-welfare programs, those programs are still government bureaucracies in which accountability is poor, politics is unavoidable, and children all too likely to fall through the cracks.

### Combating Loneliness In kids

*I don’t think that Hitler learned to be a freak by watching it on TV.*

—sixteen-year-old boy in the violence study.

One of the obvious variables contributing to violent behavior according to the violence survey results is loneliness. Remember that 91% of the violent girls admitted to feeling lonely as did 72% of the violent boys. Parents can make a difference when it comes to loneliness but they first have to become aware of when a kid is lonely. Many kids spend much of their time in front of the television or playing computer games. We often think that TV, movies, the Internet or computer games make kids violent but what comes first: the chicken or the egg? There is little evidence that video games, movies or TV cause people

to become angry enough to kill. In an article in *The New York Times* examining one hundred cases of homicidal rage, it was found that in only six of the cases did the killers have any interest in video games and only seven other killers showed any interest in violent movies.<sup>6</sup> (To see more information on the link between television and movie violence and aggression, see Chapter Nine on Frequently Asked Questions). It may be that kids who are lonely (and therefore angrier—or perhaps their anger produces loneliness since no one wants to be near them) engage in more of some of these activities. For example, 32% of violent girls watch three or more hours of TV per day—that is most of their free time after school. This gives them more exposure to hostile images or aggressive tactics by TV characters. It is possible that since these kids have little actual human interaction in their own life, they have few realistic ways to “test the waters.” A kid with a decent social life may know from experience that certain ways of interacting do not win over any friends. The lonely, violent girl on the other hand, may see that aggressive, violent characters on TV get what they want. Since such children have little in the way of feedback from peers and adults in their life, they come to see the TV as representing reality rather than as a distortion of it or simply fantasy. Parents mistakenly think that restricting TV watching with V-chips and taking away Internet privileges will decrease the probability that their child will become violent. But the real question is, why is the kid watching so much TV? The real problem may be that the child is lonely or having a hard time with peers or at school or home. If a child is glued to the set alone it could be beneficial for a parent to sit with him or her and talk about the show. Ask your child his or her opinion about a particular show, which in turn, will tell you how he or she interprets social relationships and give you more insight into their general understanding of the world. If the child does not want to talk, if nothing else you can provide company. Giving your child the gift of your time shows you care. Asking for his or her opinion and respecting it shows it even more. Kids want their opinions to matter, they want to be heard and

treated like they are worth listening to. Even if your child is wrong, let him or her voice an opinion before you offer yours. A teen who had filled out my violence survey emailed me with some more information about his life. I wrote him back and asked him to give me his opinions on a couple of topics on school violence. I was surprised when he wrote back and said “*Thank you for treating me like an adult.*” It is amazing how little it can take to give kids a sense that you care about them and will listen to what they have to say. It can make all the difference.

Before I give some suggestions on what successful parents can do to provide their child with discipline, I would like to clarify that I am not trying to be overly critical of the state. It is just that in my experience with case workers, court workers and others who work with kids in state custody, I have heard these same criticisms over and over. Often, in fact, I have heard these criticisms from staffers, juvenile judges, and others who work within the system. Though sometimes reluctant to talk about problems with outsiders, they know as well as anyone that the system is failing juveniles.

*Successful parents use fair and consistent punishment.* One of the biggest mistakes that parents can make is to discipline their child when they themselves are angry. This can cause you to lose control and deal with a child too harshly, only to regret it later. Dr. Sandra Thomas, author of *Use Your Anger* gives the following advice for angry parents:

**STEP 1:**

Talk to your youngster about the behavior before you reach the boiling point. If your teen is trashing the rec room, put a stop to it immediately.

**STEP 2:**

Explain exactly what you want your child to do (clean up the rec room).

**STEP 3:**

State the consequences of what will happen if they don't comply with your request.

**STEP 4:**

Consistently apply those consequences without giving in to pleading, whining etc.

**STEP 5:**

Connect the consequences to the offense (a child who breaks something must earn the money to pay for it).

**STEP 6:**

If all else fails, tell your child to go to his or her room so you can calm down. Say “I'm really angry with you right now. I need you to go to your room until I calm down, then we will talk about this.”<sup>7</sup>

*Successful parents do not rely on the state or other “experts” to tell them how to raise their children.* They may seek advice or recommendations but they incorporate these into what they know about their individual child. Kids are all different. Some kids have good self-control and need only verbal reprimands, while others may need a firmer hand. One size does not fit all when it comes to child-rearing. Parents should understand this and use a firmer hand if the child needs it or lighten up on a child who does not. Parents should reward good behavior and allow a good child more privileges; they should punish behavior that is bad and tell the child why they are doing so.

*Successful parents do not discipline based on fear.* Many parents are scared these days that they will be turned in to the Child Protective Services (CPS) for disciplining their child. Of course, they have reason to fear this. Though such cases are relatively rare, they do happen. In some areas, schools and communities are encouraged to turn parents in for such “harsh interventions” as spanking a child or verbal abuse. Kids are even

told by school authorities to report instances of corporal punishment as child abuse. As noted in previous chapters, savvy kids know that they can get away with mayhem by threatening to turn in school authorities and/or their parents to the state Department of Human Services (DHS). And some of them do so just out of anger. There are even cases now where parents are hauled before the court for slapping a child who blatantly disobeyed them. When the state gives parents fewer and fewer legal rights in raising their children and then turns around and blames them for not instilling discipline in their children, the state is being hypocritical. And worse, when the state undermines parental authority, what can result is tyrannical children running the country. Even Fred Flintstone knows this. On one show from the early 1960's he turns to Barney and says, "*Who's running this country—the teenagers or us?*" "*Looks like they are, Fred,*" Barney shoots back. Then it was a joke. Now it's not.

What should you do if the worst happens? If abuse charges are brought against you by DHS or CPS, examine the reason. If you have truly been abusive (you have injured your child, been seriously neglectful or harmful) then it would be wise to let them seek help for you through counseling or other programs. But if the charges are unfair or even bogus, do not let them intimidate you. You have the right to talk with an attorney and even to sue the caseworkers or others who have falsely accused you. Let them know this.

*Successful parents are not driven by guilt.* Many parents today feel so guilty that they are not home for their children or that they are divorced that they bend over backwards to give their child whatever he or she asks for. This is a mistake. Do not give in to guilt—get over it. You are not doing your kids any favors—kids know guilt when they see it and will use it to manipulate you for money, leniency and favors. At school and with their peers, these manipulative tactics do not typically work. Kids who are mentally healthy may just be spoiled, but for kids who are mentally disturbed, the belief that they can get what they want, when they want it can end in disaster. Many

disturbed kids who act up at school frequently get bent out of shape when a girl (or guy) they want is not interested in them or when they are not treated in a manner that they feel they deserve. Teach them to tolerate not getting what they want.

*Successful parents do not live vicariously through their children.* I have seen many middle and upper middle-class children whose parents are dissatisfied with their own life and want to give their child everything—which turns out to include a lack of ability to cope with the ups and downs of lives. They pay for anything their child wants and put few, if any limits on their child so as to give their child "the life they never had." But it is your job as a parent to help your child to grow up to be an independent adult who can cope with the inevitable problems that life will bring his or her way. Mommy or Daddy will not always be there with a checkbook (or a lawyer) to make things right.

*Successful parents teach their children to cope with frustration.* Recently a thirteen-year-old boy in Texas killed his parents for not allowing him to go on a church retreat. There is probably more to this story than was described in the press accounts. However, it does bring up a point: kids who cannot deal with being frustrated often act out in ways that can be tragic. If your children are used to getting what they want when they want it, they will never learn to tolerate situations where they do not get their way. The world can be a difficult and hostile place at times. Give your child the tools to cope with this. Let your child be frustrated at times. Let him or her do the science fair project and risk getting a poor grade; let them save up to buy the toys or things that they want through extra chores around the house no matter how much they complain. Real life never gives people what they want all the time. Kids have to learn this lesson early in life.

### Notes

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