

**THE SCARRED  
HEART**

UNDERSTANDING AND  
IDENTIFYING KIDS WHO KILL

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IDENTIFYING KIDS WHO KILL

Helen Smith, Ph.D.



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*To Glenn and Julia*  
*and to my Uncle Chuck, who despite hardship, knew how to enjoy life*

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## **Preface and Acknowledgments**

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“Your testimony sounds just like what we heard from middle and high school students in our hearings yesterday,” said the Speaker Pro Tem for the State of Tennessee legislature. The setting was Nashville, Tennessee in August of 1998. I was there giving testimony on school killings before a special School Violence Committee formed after the Jonesboro, Arkansas and Springfield Oregon school shootings. It was at that moment that I realized that I was probably the only one in that room who had actually listened to kids and come up with some understanding of why kids were killing at school. Mostly, adults have done a lot of talking about juvenile violence in the hopes that stricter laws and crackdowns on today’s youth will solve the problem, but what they don’t realize is that they may be adding fuel to the fire when it comes to adolescent rage. Getting to the root of this rage and giving young people a voice in understanding youth violence is the purpose of this book.

I never knew how hard it would be to write a book. I especially did not realize how hard it would be to write one on such a grim topic. My husband, who has written several books, warned me over and over. Of course, I did not listen. After one year turned to two and then three, I began to doubt whether

this book would ever come to completion. But like a kid who feels that the burning pain in his or her heart will never heal without striking out in anger, my thirst for understanding what it is that makes kids kill would never be quenched without this book. Unfortunately, the second year into writing this book, I did know what it was like to feel severe physical pain in one's heart. I suffered a heart attack even though I am only in my thirties. Doctors told me I was "just having panic attacks," which I had never felt before. But they were wrong. I had suffered a heart attack that left a scar on the bottom of my heart. The creative process of finishing this book gave me hope that I could still be productive despite having been damaged physically. Perhaps the same can be said for kids who feel they have been scarred emotionally. They must find some way to make things right in their own mind. Unfortunately, some kids take a path of destruction and end up causing not only pain to themselves but to their victims and their families. Why do some kids lose their way and take out their frustrations on others while other kids learn to cope with adversity?

The answer to this question lies mainly in the heart and soul of the kids who kill and sometimes they themselves don't know the answer. Neither do the media understand why certain kids murder: if you watch news programs like *Dateline* or *20/20*, you would think that there is no logical reason that kids kill. These shows often attempt to separate the killer from his deed and act as if the kid had no motive for killing. Typically, the conclusion is that a lesion on the brain or a mental disorder sent them over the edge. But not every kid with a mental or physical abnormality kills; in fact, the vast majority of them never hurt anyone. The interaction of the child with his environment and the way he perceives his environment is the key to understanding homicidal children. Even the most illogical murder makes sense to the killer at the time of the crime. School killers feel perfectly justified in taking the lives of their classmates; it makes complete sense to them in that climactic moment. It is only after they have been caught that the whole incident becomes "a mystery." How many times have killers

been interviewed, shaking their heads and saying "I don't know why I did it. I snapped." But did they? Sometimes my patients say they are afraid they will "snap" and harm others. But my clinical experience has taught me that it is the cumulation of many distorted thoughts in combination with particular stressors that send a person over the edge. It's not just that one day, they "snapped." Gavin DeBecker, a leading expert on predicting violence, makes an important point about our denial of the warning signs of violence in his book, *Gift of Fear*: "We want to believe that human violence is somehow beyond our understanding, because as long as it remains a mystery, we have no duty to avoid it, explore it, or anticipate it. We can tell ourselves that human violence is something that just happens without warning...."

This book is my attempt to understand the violence that comes as a result of the distorted thought processes and circumstances of violent kids and to share this understanding with you, the reader. Through my years of studying violent kids, I have come to understand more about the motivations and psychological make-up of kids who commit heinous crimes. My personal journey, hopefully, will give readers the same insight into what makes these kids tick and what we can do to prevent the next tragedy like Columbine or Jonesboro. Despite the way neighbors interviewed after the crime typically talk about how "nice and normal" past killer kids have been, violent kids are different. But what does the average person look for and how do you know how to profile a killer kid? This book will show you. In the chapters that follow, you will come to understand both normal teens and violent ones and learn how to tell the difference.

There is a long list of people and organizations I would like to thank who have assisted me with this project. First, of course, are the teens and kids who took part in my research and let me into their inner world. This includes all the young people from around the country who took the time to fill out my Internet survey on kids and violence. Many of them were very brave to do this as it meant exposing much of the pain and anguish that

had led them to become violent in the first place. I met many of the kids I personally interviewed at various facilities such as the Knox County Juvenile Court, the Davidson Juvenile Detention Center and the Tennessee Prison for Women. The staff and administrators at these centers were of tremendous assistance in helping me get access to violent juveniles for my study. I am also indebted to Dr. Sandra Thomas who helped me compile and run the data used to profile both violent kids and normal ones. Cristie Coffey was indispensable as my research assistant and provided the energy and enthusiasm necessary to keep this project going even on days when all I wanted to do was go home and go to sleep. She also helped me through my “medical crisis” by being ever cheerful and giving great advice. Dr. Leonard Handler at the University of Tennessee gave me his expertise on the figure drawings of violent kids for which I am very grateful. Special thanks to Victoria Uti, the computer wizard who assisted with the charts, graphs and typography and to Rey Pineda who illustrated the cover and designed the book jacket. My family was invaluable to this project, especially Janet, Julius, Kathy, Anne, Joe, and Walter: they talked with me endlessly about violent kids and allowed me to share my passion with them without complaining. Drs. David Snow and Worley Fain gave me the hope that my book would someday come to fruition. Finally, my husband Glenn, and daughter Julia, gave me the time and space I needed to finish this project; I am their biggest fan.

*Helen Smith*

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