

WHEN

VIOLENCE

GOES TO SCHOOL



by Jan Johnson and Jim Burns

"When my daughter ran into the house and told me about the stabbing at school, I stood in shock," says Karen. "My son showed up soon after that—he was standing in the school office when Dan stumbled in, bleeding from his abdomen. Thirty minutes later, Dan died in the hospital."

Dan had been bullying another boy, Peter, since the beginning of the year. It started when he stole Peter's hat. Their confrontations grew more intense and happened more frequently until the assistant principal stepped in. She thought it was resolved, but when Dan leaned forward to punch Peter that day, Peter thrust a knife into Dan's stomach.

Parents today are uneasy, even scared and angry, about violence. Who doesn't want a "kinder, gentler" world where our children can feel safe and secure? Tongia Johnson, mother of a 15-year-old daughter, says, "The gangs, the shootings keep us on pins and needles. You're scared about your children all the time." A pastor in rural Sheldon, Iowa, says, "We don't have the same amount of violence as New

**It has jumped
off the screen into
everyday life—into
the hallways,
classrooms and
street corners of
our kids' world.
What can
concerned
parents—and
smart teens—do to
make a
difference?**

York, Miami, or Los Angeles, but it's here and we're concerned."

"After the stabbing, I wanted to wrap up my teenagers in brown paper and mail them to their grandparents in Ohio," continues Karen.

"Other parents were afraid, too. Some kept their kids home from school. Others escorted their kids and picked them up. But then I thought, I believe in the One who came to bring peace on Earth—shouldn't I be considering how I could cooperate with His goal?"

What can we do? Obviously it isn't enough to become angry, check out, or move to a deserted island. The answer doesn't come from complaining or closing our eyes to the problems, although we do those things. Larry Acosta, director of the Hispanic Ministry Center in Santa Ana, Calif., says, "In the communities that are changing, it's the parents and churches who stand up and redeem their communities."

PARENTS TAKE A STAND

For some time now, we have seen the ill-effects of raising children who witness an average of 8,000 murders

and 100,000 other acts of violence on television by the time they reach seventh grade. Many parents limit the amount and kinds of television shows their teens watch, as well as monitor the movies they see.

Parents are talking with their teens about weapons, too. The parents in Karen's town agree that Dan would be alive today if Peter's friend had not handed him a knife moments before the altercation. In talking with our kids, we can note how weapons are glorified as problem solvers by their superheroes and in today's shoot 'em up movies. In reality, weapons, combined with anger, create violence. Thankfully, other role models are surfacing, such as the main character in the television show now in reruns, *MacGyver*. MacGyver solves problems by getting around his opponents rather than shooting or stabbing them.

While parents who own guns know to lock up firearms and ammunition, other parents buy an alarm system to protect themselves. Many of us are glad to see curfews, neighborhood watch networks, and programs that offer tickets for sports activities to those who turn in weapons. Besides these things, what else can you do?

Ask your kids some basic questions. In our busy lives, we may forget to ask, "Where are you going? Who will you be with?" As we ask these questions, we keep our antenna up for influences that increase the potential for violence, such as drugs, alcohol, and friends who are able to intimidate our kids. It turns out Dan had been drinking all day when he began punching Peter.

Volunteer as an anonymous reporter. Karen was shocked to hear that at her teens' school, 50 percent of the kids claimed they knew kids who carried weapons. School officials responded by providing ways that kids could report weapons anonymously, one of which was a hot line. Still, kids are afraid to report for fear of retaliation. Karen says, "I told my kids and their friends that if they saw a weapon to quietly find out the kid's name and to tell me. I would report it to the school, and they could honestly say they didn't tell."

Join or start a community group. The national organization MAVIA (Mothers Against Violence in America) starts neighborhood groups to reduce violent behavior in various ways. They develop

conflict resolution and anger-management programs for families, schools and communities, support legislation to reduce gun violence against children, and exert power in shaping media programming. MAVIA members also help start and advise SAVE chapters (Students Against Violence Everywhere). Kids in SAVE have produced newsletters and videos on non-violence, but best of all, they encourage the idea that it's "cool" to be against violence.

Prepare your kids. Jeff Wright, director of ministry development for the Council of Anabaptists in Los Angeles, talks to kids who want to be peacemakers, and he says they all have one thing in common—they expect to face violence. Says Jeff, "One kid said, 'Man, you gotta be prepared. Violence is a part of life.' At first that sounded depressing and defeatist to me, but then I realized how important it is to be aware. If you live in Kansas, you understand how to take shelter for a tornado. This is the same thing."

PREPARING KIDS TO BE PROBLEM SOLVERS

"You prepare teens by going over problem-solving skills ahead of time," says Suzanne Stutman, executive director of the Institute for Mental Health Initiatives. "In a fire, there's no time to teach them to stop, drop and roll. They've got to already know these things and respond immediately. All

kids get into situations in which they have strong emotional reactions. Managing anger means thinking things through before reacting."

Following are some problem-solving skills we can teach our teens. We must encourage them to:

Stay aware of their own feelings. To help your teens be alert to their feelings, hear them out when they go through difficult situations, and then say something like, "You must have been embarrassed. Did that make you angry? Did you feel powerless?" Some kids may shrug and insist they aren't angry, especially if we have communicated that it's not OK for Christians to become angry. Sometimes we forget that Jesus got angry at injustice. When the Pharisees criticized Him for healing a man on the Sabbath, Jesus became angry (Mark 3:5), and the Bible doesn't apologize for it. Let your kids know that it's much better to talk about anger and ventilate it safely, than to keep it pent up and pretend it's not there.

Consider other people's feelings. Kids don't naturally understand that even when they're angry they can try to see the issue from the other person's perspective. So we ask more questions: "How do you think your actions made the other kid feel? Did that kid have some secret reason to be mad at you?" This kind of dialogue teaches empathy, a skill our kids acquire as we teach them to look at life from other people's points of view. Teens develop empathy, says Jeff Wright, by becoming exposed to kids from different backgrounds, in safe situations in which they can fully hear each other. "At a camp where kids of several ethnic backgrounds attended," says Wright, "the Asian kids talked about being graded harder in school; the others didn't believe them. Then African-American kids told about being followed in stores because they were potential shoplifters; the others didn't believe them. But they finally broke through, began believing each other, and saw life through the other kids' eyes. If you go into a crisis as an empathetic person, it's easier to see the other person's side." Sometimes fearful parents unknowingly discourage empathy with an "us versus them" mentality in labeling neighborhoods. In reality, so-called "dangerous" neighborhoods are full of thousands of sensible parents

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who are fearful and want to keep their kids safe, too.

Evaluate their behavior. We can talk to our kids about how they behaved in a violent or near-violent situation, asking, "Did it work?" If your child says he walked away from an angry opponent, you might ask, "Are you still mad?" If so, you can help him find ways to resolve or ventilate his anger because brooding can sharpen the anger and inflame it. Playing a vigorous game of basketball may defuse it for one kid; talking with a friend may do it for another. Kids watch how we cool our anger when we're mad. If we sulk and brood, they may do the same. We can help our kids by explaining what we do to process anger, such as telling them, "Let me talk this over with your mother (or a friend) and then I'll be ready to talk to you," or, "I'm going to work this off in the garden."

We might even offer our perspective about their behavior, because they

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sometimes make better decisions than they give themselves credit. Steve told his son, "Look, this guy who came at you was drunk. You may have felt like a wimp walking away from him, but you avoided hurting a guy who didn't know what he was doing. That's a good thing to do."

Consider alternative solutions. Jeff Wright advises kids to consider how they can take control of the environment in a peaceful way. "A girl told me about how she felt threatened by a group of girls as she walked home one day. Instead of running or looking scared, she began talking to them in a normal tone of voice about nothing in particular. It took the fear out of it for her. After a few minutes, she said, 'This is where I turn off. See you guys later.'"

"IT'S LIKE THIS"

How Teens Handle

Are our teens prepared for violent confrontations? We asked five teens from the semi-affluent Smoky Hill High School in Aurora, Colo.: Have you ever faced a violent situation? How did you handle it?



Mandi Durbin, 17:

My friend died recently in a shooting at a local restaurant. I notice little things at school now, and I pay closer attention

to violence in the newspapers. When I see a violent situation, I want to do something about it. I don't like to see one kid picking on another kid, so I'll try to stop it.

My parents talk with me all the time about violence. I think this helps prepare me for violent confrontations. Talking about it out loud helps me see that it's not something that just happens on television—it's reality.



Tania Abbas, 13:

I haven't been involved in any violent situations, but I've seen fights in the halls at school. For instance, sometimes two girls will

be fighting, and one will slam the other against a locker, and they'll start punching it out. I just know to get out of the way.

Neither my parents nor my school talk a lot about violence. I've just decided to stay out of the way when it happens.

Travis Bitzer, 15:

I've never been in a fight, but I've seen fights in the school halls. Kids bump into each other and start pushing and shoving. I don't get involved, but I just kind of stop and watch.

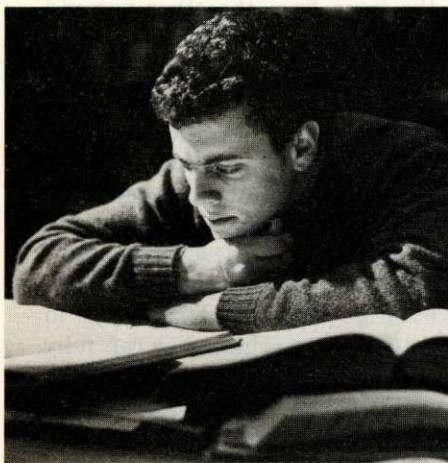
I haven't really talked about violence with my parents, but special speakers come to school and talk to us about it. They tell us to walk away and not get involved.



Jennifer Roberts, 15:

My parents and I have talked a lot about what I should do if I'm ever involved in a violent situation. They've encouraged me to walk

away and not get involved in something really dangerous. They might read something in the newspaper and then ask me what I would do if something similar happened to



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The girls looked at her in amazement." Taking control relieves the sense of powerlessness that fuels fear and anger.

Because as Christians we're called to care about others, the honorable alternative is to ask God, "What can I do, God, to be a peacemaker?" Your kid can stand by and pray for peace and pray for the kids involved, or run to get an adult, rather than fleeing the scene or standing by gossiping.

Jordan, 16, decided to intervene in violent situations a few times. Once when a scuffle started in the hallway at school between a white kid and an African-American kid, he jumped in, saying, "What's the problem?" One kid explained that the other kid bumped into him and made him drop his books.

The other retorted, "It was an accident." Looking at the group of kids that had gathered, Jordan said, "I've got friends on both sides and I don't want anyone to get hurt. Color makes no difference to me. Color makes no difference to God. What's the big deal?" As Jordan bent down to pick up the books, some of the kids echoed his words, saying, "Yeah, what's the big deal?" The crowd dispersed.

Understand the consequences of

their actions. As you and your teen consider solutions, ask: "What could happen if . . . ? What are the consequences of staying angry? Spreading stories? Refusing to talk to someone? Sure, you can beat the tar out of that kid, but will it help you if you get suspended from school, get a police record, or if he comes after you later with 10 of his friends?" Help your teen figure out what to say to someone who's bothering him. "The more we can help a kid

by Carla Williams

Violence

me.

I've seen fights at school and have broken up a few. Kids will start arguing and pushing each other. Sometimes I've even broken up fights when I didn't know what they were about; I don't want anyone to get hurt. One time I held a guy back and told him to walk away from it. When the two guys kept arguing, other people jumped in to help break it up. Talks with my parents help prepare me for situations like this.



Jeff Garbarino,

18: I wasn't prepared for my first confrontation, which happened in the fifth grade. Since then I've stayed out of violent situations, but I've watched fights at school. Once I witnessed a racial conflict where the cops arrested the kids involved.

My father has a store in a part of town where there are a lot of racial conflicts. I've seen lots of fights and shootings there. My Dad and I talk a lot about violence because of this, so I think I'm prepared.

Like Dew Your Youth Growing Up with Your Teenager



Eugene H. Peterson

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VIOLENCE

express feelings and come up with a plan, the more chance there is of averting a tragedy," says Suzanne Stutman.

THE UNKNOWN ELEMENT

God can intervene in a thousand ways. The girl who felt intimidated walking home said, "I started talking because that's what I'm good at." In a tight spot, we do what we know how to do. For some kids, it's making a joke;

for others, it's asking the kid who's threatening them, "Where did you get that cool jacket?" God can create a distraction—a fire drill, a siren, a lunch bell. What God desires are teens who recognize these unexpected occurrences as part of His path to peace, because they've been taught to seek peace at home.



Jan Johnson lives in Simi Valley, Calif. She is a writer and a parent volunteer at her two teenagers' junior-high school.



Jim Burns is president of the National Institute of Youth Ministry and is also our "Expert Advice" columnist. He travels across the country speaking to youth and parents.

A Funny Thing Happened Yesterday.

Patsy Clairmont
Finished Her
New Book.

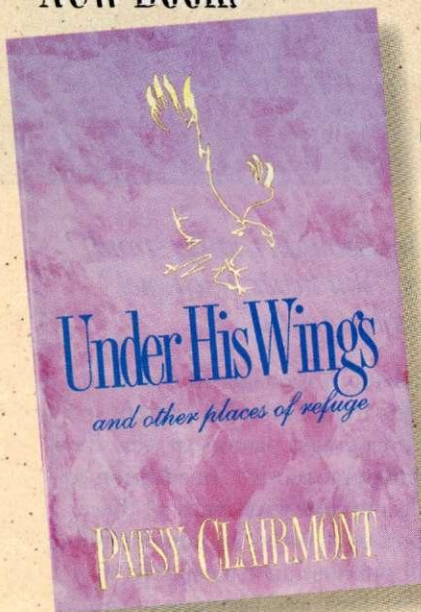


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