

A LINE ON LIFE

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Violent Children ¹

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We don't think of our children as potential murderers. In 1998, how could a 14-year-old shoot and kill a teacher and wound others at an eighth-grade dance in Edinboro, Pennsylvania? This is not an isolated event. In recent years, there have been a shocking number of similar events. Teenagers have recently been responsible for shooting and murdering others in several rural, seemingly safe, communities.

After such terrible events, the media parades self-proclaimed "*experts*" with theories to explain what happened. They blame the availability of guns to children in rural areas, the presence of too many unhappy, overlooked or abused children, or our television flooded with violence. While these unsupported conclusions might sound like reasonable explanations, they are often incorrect.

In contrast, psychologists and other researchers try to apply scientific methods of observation that might help to predict and ultimately reduce these horrible occurrences. For example, haven't guns been available to most teens in rural areas throughout our history? Without scientific investigation, we might be limited to these logical-sounding explanations, but not real causes. It is tempting to think that we understand what is happening if we can cite causes for violent behavior. However, understanding is inadequate, if it is not accompanied by effective prediction and control.

There are no simple answers to explain why some children are violent.

For example, how can we know that too many guns is a prime cause of children becoming murderers? Can we find out if more of our children are unhappy? Possibly the unhappy ones have become even more so? Is our culture more violent than others? Perhaps, with better communication, are we just becoming more aware of a level of violence that has always been there? Answering these questions might help us to better understand why some children become killers.

Statistics from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in 1995, indicated that 15% of all offenders for murder and non-negligent manslaughter were under 18 years old. Of them, 29 offenders were 9-13 years, and 1268 were 13-16. Even in 1995, children committing murder was not an isolated occurrence. Children committing murder is not a recent trend.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) found that "*arrest rates for homicide among youth 14-17 years of age increased 41% between 1989 and 1994, compared to an increase of 18% for youth 18-24 years of age.*" During the same period, homicide arrest rates decreased 19% for adults over 25. "*Nearly 20% of all violent crime arrests in 1994 involved a juvenile under 18 years of age.*" To add to this, a *New York Times* survey (April 30, 1998) reported, "*Teenagers are as likely to own guns as to play a musical instrument.*"

Through psychological research, researchers have found ways to identify youngsters who may become violent. The American Psychological Association (APA) in collaboration with the American Academy of Pediatrics has a brochure² that indicates signs of potential violence in children. School-aged children more likely to:

- Have trouble paying attention and concentrating;
- Frequently disrupt classroom activities;

- Do poorly in school;
- Frequently gets into fights with other children;
- Exhibit intense anger, blame or revenge when disappointed, criticized or teased;
- Watch many violent shows or play violent video games;
- Have few friends;
- Be rejected by other children because of their behavior;
- Be friends with other children known to be unruly or aggressive;
- Consistently not listen to adults;
- Be insensitive to the feelings of others;
- Be cruel or violent toward animals;
- Be easily frustrated.

Similar signs exist for teenagers. They are more likely to:

- Consistently ignore authority figures;
- Disregard the feelings or rights of others;
- Mistreat people and rely on physical violence or threats of violence to solve problems;
- Often express the feeling that life has treated them unfairly;
- Do poorly in school and often skip class to the point where they may drop out or be suspended;
- Join a gang, get involved in fighting, stealing, destroying property;
- Use alcohol and/or drugs.

If you see several of these signs in your child, get some professional help! Discuss your concerns with a professional. (Listings for psychologists, psychiatrists or social workers can be found in the "*Yellow Pages*" of the Yuma telephone directory.) They can help you to understand your children and suggest ways to prevent violent behavior.

1 Adapted from "Children Who Murder." This is one of the "*hot topics*" discussed on the **Psychstudy** web page of Wadsworth Publishers (May, 1998).

2 For the complete brochure, write to American Academy, Division of Publications, 141 Northwest Point Blvd., PO Box 927, Elk Grove Village, IL 60009-0927.