

Thriving During the Teenage Years - The Fear of School Violence

By Jan Hittelman

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Q: How can parents help children live well in the face of frightening events like graffiti threats at school or violence involving young people that are widely reported in the media?

-Alison Boggs, Principal Casey Middle School

A: Over the last 15 years, concerns regarding school violence have dramatically increased. Interestingly enough according to the Centers for Disease Control, there has been an overall drop in school violence during that time. Despite this there has been an increase in student threats, which has led to a significant number of students skipping school due to safety concerns. We have seen this play out locally in response to threatening messages written on school grounds, resulting in a significant numbers of students not attending school. It is also clear that children often take their lead from their parents in terms of fears of school violence. Experts agree that the media's focus on school shootings has created a false belief that we are at a much higher level of risk than the facts would suggest.

There are several things that parents can do to help their children (and themselves) deal more effectively with school violence fears:

- **Create opportunities for healthy discussion:** Give your child an opportunity to share their feelings and concerns. Provide reassurance by letting them know that there are many procedures in place to keep them safe at school and encourage them to report any concerns to school officials.
- **Know the facts:** Let your children know that incidents like school shootings are extremely rare. In his recently published book, "School Violence: Fear versus Facts" (2006), Dr. Dewey Cornell estimates that statistically the average school can expect an extreme violent act at school every 12,000 years.
- **Monitor their exposure to violent images:** Repeated violent images on television of school violence create a false assumption that the behavior is common and prevalent.
- **Focus on reducing bullying behavior:** Often an underlying factor to school shootings, bullying has begun to get wider attention and most schools have anti-bullying programs in place. Educate your child about the inappropriateness of peer teasing and bullying and try to determine if your child is a victim of bullying. If so, contact school staff immediately and develop a game plan to address this issue.
- **Assess for mental health issues:** Whether a child is the perpetrator or victim of bullying or teasing, there are often underlying mental health issues that need to be addressed. The most common is some level of depression. In children and adolescents, there is a strong relationship between depression and anger. Addressing these issues early on is of critical importance.
- **Reduce the availability of handguns:** Statistically while all other weapons have remained fairly flat, the use of firearms has continued to increase dramatically in juvenile homicides in the United States. You are also five times more likely to have a suicide in your home if guns are present.

For more ideas on discussing this and other important issues with your child, go to:

www.talkingwithkids.org.

Upcoming PEN Event:

January 17th **How to Stay Connected With Your Kids**
Jim Thomas, L.M.F.T., Presenter

8:30am – 11am BVSD Ed Center
(6500 Arapahoe Road, Boulder)

Learn more about PEN by visiting their website at: www.parentengagementnetwork.com or by contacting Betsy Fox with the Boulder County Healthy Youth Alliance at 303-441-3981.

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