

Bullies & Classroom Avengers

They don't look like monsters; in fact, they look like normal kids. It's not what they look like it's their behavior that matters. Those small jabs over the last year may build to trigger a Classroom Avenger to "defend his honor".

Why Teens Are An Endangered Species

As with any toxicity, some people are more vulnerable to violence than others. Who are the most vulnerable? The boys who have shocked us to our core by entering our schools and killing our children and teachers. Their faces have paraded across our magazines and in our media. They are described as "super predators", "monsters", and "crazies". We try to distance ourselves from them, but as a mother when I look into their eyes I can't help but wonder what went wrong. They are children who have committed the most atrocious acts but they are "children". They don't look like monsters; in fact, they look like normal kids. If I dare to look closer, they look like the boy next door and even worse, maybe my own son.

Are these unpredictable, random acts? No, they are not, if you know what to look for. At first it seems easier to alienate these boys and their families but that will only leave us vulnerable. These boys are symptoms of an epidemic that started years ago in the inner cities, because that was the most vulnerable segment of the population. Just as teen pregnancy and latchkey kids were once only common in the inner cities, in the poorest communities, now urban violence by teens that seemed so far removed from Middle America has entered our suburban and rural schools. The epidemic has invaded our country (and much more deeply than many of us would like to believe).

When we send our teenagers off to school imagining that they could never encounter lethal youth violence, it leaves them dangerously vulnerable. The fact is that almost every child now goes to school with some troubled child who could commit acts of lethal violence. While this epidemic permeated urban America years ago, its rural and suburban mutated form is the "Classroom Avenger".

One of the most dramatic points in the profile of the Classroom Avenger is that they come from families who give the appearance of being "superficially normal", but underneath are often quite dysfunctional.

These other factors contribute to the development of violent kids:

- **Divorce**

"Divorce, separation and/or frequent episodes of intense friction between parents, and parents and child, is the norm. Explicit or covert anger and hostility are the prevailing emotions in the family, accompanied by parent-child power struggles and battles over control. Discipline, however, is overly harsh and applied inconsistently. One or more of the 'Classroom Avengers' first-degree relatives may be mentally ill, personality disordered or a substance abuser."

The Classroom Avenger by James P. McGee, Ph.D. & R. DeBernardo, Psy.D.

- **Abuse**

“Key to preventing violent behavior is preventing child abuse.”
American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry

- **Neglect**

“Since the late 1960’s the amount of time parents spend with their children has dropped from an average of thirty hours per week to seventeen.”
Lipsky and Abrams, 1994; Galston, Dec. 2, 1991: Kinder-Culture by Shirley R. Steinberg and Joe L. Kincheloe (pg. 34)

- **Violence**

“The average child will witness at least 8000 murders on TV by the time he or she leaves elementary school, along with more than 100,000 assorted acts of violence.”
American Psychological Assoc., Mayhem, Sissela Bok

With such a toxic social environment, the demand for parental involvement increases. But society’s economic demand that both parents work to make ends meet is making us unavailable, either by choice or unintentionally. Some studies show that mothers still do 80% of the household work and rearing of the children.

“Whatever its origins, a parent’s psychological unavailability is a form of child maltreatment, and maltreatment plays a central role in the development of bad behavior and aggression in children.”

James Garbarino, Ph.D. Author of **“Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them”**.

Guide To Protecting Your Child From Violent Kids

The day after the Littleton, Colorado School Massacre I was driving my 13-year-old daughter to school. My daughter was overly quiet and I noticed a worried look on her face. “What’s up?” I asked. Coming out of a deep train of thought she said, “How do I know I’m safe at my school?” I didn’t have the right answer for her. I was able to tell her, as a mom, that I thought she was safe but I know my words did not ring true. Because of the need to protect my own children and because of my background in child safety, I hope the answers I have found will help you protect your own children.

If you ask your children who the bullies are at school, they can rattle off their names with no problem. The National School Safety Center now calls bullying “the most enduring and underrated problem in American schools”. Bullying also leaves its mark on 1 to 4 children. It’s no laughing matter. Twenty years ago it might have meant ending up with a bloody nose. Today it may be a trip to the emergency room or worse. The role bullies have played in triggering a new type of violent child, Classroom Avengers, will have to be addressed.

Recognizing violent kids may save your child’s life, but how do you recognize one? Not all of the kids who fit this profile will go into a school and shoot multiple victims but statistically they will commit acts of violence in their life. In helping parents and children recognize adults who are predators, the first lesson I teach is that it’s their behavior that matters. It’s the same thing with kids who hurt kids-it’s not what they look like, it’s their behavior that matters. With the knowledge in this Special Report,

you will learn how to recognize these potentially violent boys. This knowledge will not only help you help them but, most importantly, help you protect your own child.

Bullies are obvious, but the Classroom Avengers are more difficult to recognize because they don't exhibit overt "bullying" behavior. However, if you know what to look for, they give countless signs to alert those around them to the impending tragedy. What is his behavior? He may spend countless hours on the Internet, or be an expert at video games. He's usually a good student, his behavior is normal, adults like him, and his dress is in keeping with teens of his own age. He has little or no previous history of delinquent behavior and he is not known to have a psychiatric problem.

Over all, he's an OK kid but most kids think he's a bit of a nerd. He may be the quiet kid seated next to your daughter in class. If your daughter is the gentle nurturing type, she has probably told him that the other kids pick on him too much. Her consoling him may actually cause him to fantasize that she is his girlfriend and a small slight on her part may actually risk her life.

Your son may sit in the desk on the other side of him. Being outgoing and one of the most popular kids at school, he may find no harm in teasing this nerdy kid. It's not meant to hurt, but those small jabs over the last year may build to trigger a Classroom Avenger to "defend his honor".

The Sad Reality of What Can Come From Taunting

Luke Woodham of Pearl, Miss., was a short, fat boy who was beaten and ridiculed by his peers. Mitchell Johnson of Jonesboro, Ark., was a pudgy outcast. And Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold of Littleton were disturbed loners who classmates taunted as often as Harris and Klebold taunted them. All four teens took revenge by killing their schoolmates. Bullied, they became bullies themselves.

U.S. News Cover Story 5/3/99, Anna Mulrine

The Classroom Avenger, while superficially passive, is deeply disturbed and can easily be misunderstood. They may have the appearance of normality to adults but their behavior is a response to a hostile environment that has rejected them. Their behavior has become a form of protection. The depression, shame, rage, alienation and bloated self-centeredness are masked by a countenance of apparent normality. Neglect can continue without disturbing the status quo. A parent can appear to be parenting and the child can appear to be "normal".

How can a parent actually be parenting and miss so many signs of distress?

"Is it possible for parents to miss homicidal rage? Where were the Harrises and the Klebolds when their sons were watching Natural Born Killers over and over? Have they ever played Doom and the other blood-soaked computer games that occupied their children? Did these 'educated professionals' take a look at the hate-filled Web site their kids created?"

Were the Harrises aware of the pipe-bomb factory that was in their two-car garage? The kid down the street was aware of it, and he's 10 years old."

Amy Dickinson, "Where Were the Parents?"

Time, May 3, 1999 (pg. 40)

When you know what to look for, there was no mistaking that these boys were in serious trouble. Dylan Klebold's and Eric Harris' families as well as the Littleton Community, the police, their teachers, the parents of their friends and the other children were given countless opportunities to recognize the difficulty these boys were in and act to prevent this tragedy. Only one family tried but no one took them seriously.

The purpose of this Special Report is to help you prevent the reoccurrence of these tragedies in your lives.

The following knowledge and "personal safety tools" will give you the awareness, the knowledge and the assurance to act to protect your children. Recognizing kids who are in trouble does not take a Ph.D. All it takes is knowing the signs of trouble and taking time to listen to our children.

Your Child Knows Best

Ask your children who are the kids in their class or school that are troublemakers, "strange" or the ones everyone picks on. You will be surprised how much information they can give you. Children are much more in touch with their survival instinct and they do not rationalize away behavior. They are great allies in helping you identify whom to check into. From fifth grade up, begin sharing these points with your children so they know what to watch out for. Knowledge empowers children. It does not create fear. In fact, it removes fear. You should have little doubt by now that our children live with a level of fear most of us never experienced growing up.

Because of this patterning, the importance of their personal safety and the safety of their friends goes deeper than peer acceptance. The Safety N.E.T. Kids No Easy Targets and The Safety N.E.T. Kids Bullies Safety Programs build a foundation that reinforces speaking up if kids are in danger. Safety N.E.T. Kids is a nationwide program recognized and endorsed by Code Amber. To learn more about these programs and purchase the videos visit our website (www.caases.org) or contact us by email or phone.

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8 Questions To Help You Evaluate A Safe School

When evaluating a school's "safety net" you should be met with positive support for your concern. The answers for these questions should already be written policy. If not, your inquiry in writing should compel the administration to consider the issues.

The following questions are from "**Protecting the Gift: Keeping Children and Teenagers Safe**" by Gavin de Becker, America's leading expert on predicting violent behavior.

1. Are there policies addressing violence weapons, drug use, sexual abuse, child-on-child sexual abuse, unauthorized visitors?
2. Are background investigations performed on all staff?
3. Does the screening process apply to all employees (teachers, janitors, lunchroom staff, security personnel, part-time employees, volunteers, bus drivers, etc.)?
4. Can my child call me at any time?
5. How does the school address special situations (custody disputes, child kidnapping concerns, etc.)?
6. Are acts of violence or criminality at the school documented? Are statistics maintained?
7. Are teachers formally notified when a child with a history of serious misconduct is enrolled at the school?
8. Will I be informed of teacher misconduct that might have an impact on the safety or well-being of my child?

12 Steps To Protect Your Children

1. **Don't give up or let go of your child too early.** Child safety experts say that most parents take a "mental break" from raising their children between the ages of ten and twelve. It appears as a "breather". The child knows the safety basics and is not yet stepping into the dangers facing teens. But because of the media influence and the size of schools today, the turmoil of the teenage years is starting younger and younger. Be alert to shifts in your child's behavior, sleep pattern, friends or performance in school.
2. **The teen years are a time of identify formation.** Be sure you know your child's role models – who she wants to be like and why.
3. **Teens need more privacy but spending the vast majority of their time behind closed doors is not healthy.**
4. **Know where your children are: physically and mentally.**
5. **Teach your child from a young age not to bully other kids.** Cartoons teach the opposite. When your child has the painful experience of being bullied, remind him that other children feel the same way when he bullies them. Listen to your child when he tells you about a kid who is repeatedly bullying him or if he is bragging about bullying another child. Step in and help him learn appropriate behavior. Seek professional help if the pattern keeps getting stronger.
6. **If there is a child who has an explosive temper, teach your child that responding with aggressive behavior or derogatory comments may be taken as threats.** A kind, gentle but firm response helps to keep children

emotionally connected and reinforces non-aggressive behavior. If your teen is encountering someone like this at school, tell her to be kind but keep away and advise the school counselor of the situation. Parents, school counselors and teachers must respect a student's need to be anonymous if they expect students to speak up.

7. **Help your child realize that actions have consequences. Violence has a price.** On an ongoing basis, share your views and understanding of the effects of the violence and aggression that he sees in video games, movies and possibly encounters in school or the neighborhood.
8. **Apply discipline consistently, without anger. This will help your child learn that there are consequences for misbehavior.** If anger is a key element in your family dynamics, seek professional help.
9. **Encourage your child to share his or her thoughts and feelings.** Your child's first sense of worth is established by how you as the parent respond. This is a life pattern. If you have a problem with your child commonly responding with anger or withdrawing from you, it is a cover for a deeper emotional problem. Seek professional help.
10. **It is a misconception that your teen has to cut all connection to you. In fact the opposite is true.** Teens and parents are made to believe by the media that teens need to be "on their own", and abandon their families. The opposite is actually the truth. They want and need more than ever to know there is a strong family support behind them.
11. **Remember that a child is the reflection of the family, so get to know the families of your child's friends.** Take time to discuss your views and concerns with them. No two families parent exactly the same. Be sure to agree on the big issues, while perhaps yielding on the small ones.
12. **Always check with friends to see if they have guns and if they are securely locked up before your child plays there.**

Red Flags To Recognizing Violent Kids

In the book, **Raising Safe Kids in an Unsafe World**, the "Nine Ways to Identify Tricky People" (child molesters and other victimizers of children). That information has helped many parents and teachers prevent and remove their children from dangerous situations. The following lists of red flags are to help you identify a dangerous child.

My intent is to protect normal children and if possible to help the troubled child. The red flags are not a call to arms. Being able to identify a Classroom Avenger is difficult, at best, but identifying a child who has the potential to do serious harm is not.

As with the Nine Ways, I recommend that you look for several of these red flags to be present. One or two is not generally enough to take action. A child who exhibits multiple signs repeatedly, (and with increasing intensity) is a likely candidate for violence. Some behavior requires immediate attention, such as obsession with fire setting, cruelty to animals or adult sexual behavior even in children as young as 6 years old.

For the child's sake, avoid labeling, isolating or punishing the child who fits this profile. Be sure you are aware of what is "normal" behavior for different age groups so that you do not misinterpret typical behavior. Remember, most of us were not perfect as teens and some of us made some pretty stupid mistakes.

"Surveys show that most boys and many girls exhibit some delinquent behavior during their teenage years, with more than 60% engaging in some combination of aggressive acts, drug abuse, arson and vandalism."

Confer with other adults to see if they have the same view and concerns before acting. If you agree, then approach the school counselors, police and/or the parents of the child as is appropriate.

If you are close to the family, decide if it is beneficial for you to approach them first. Be sure to show your concern for their child and be supportive. Don't attack their parenting. In most cases the parents will not be open to our suggestions because the problem stems from within the family dynamics. Remember, do not try to handle this on your own. Include professionals who are trained to handle potentially difficult and dangerous situations.

Imminent Warning Signs Of Kids Who Kill

- **RECENT STRESSFUL EVENT:** "Breakup" with presumed or real girl friend, victimization (persecution) by peer group, conflict with parent, school personnel, or authority figure.
- **EXCESSIVE FEELINGS OF ISOLATION AND BEING ALONE:** (If associated with behavior that is aggressive or violent, take note.)
- **DRAMATIC DROP IN GRADES OR ATTENDANCE**
- **CONSIDERED WEIRD OR DANGEROUS BY PEERS**
- **DETAILED THREATS OF LETHAL VIOLENCE,** verbal, in writings and/or drawings.
- **PREOCCUPIED WITH WEAPONS,** explosives or other incendiary devices
- **SEVERE RAGE,** "out of control", for seemingly minor reasons
- **OVERT SELF-INJURIOUS BEHAVIORS OR THREATS OF SUICIDE**
- **CRUELY TO ANIMALS AND SMALLER CHILDREN**
- **FASCINATION WITH FIRE** and fire setting

5 Characteristics Common To Healthy Children

1. **PERSONALITY:**
They are friendly and outgoing
2. **RELATIONSHIPS:**
They have good relationships with siblings, parents, other adults and authority figures.
3. **PEER ACCEPTANCE:**
They are popular among their peers and are school spirited.
4. **OUTLOOK:**
They have enthusiasm about the present, the future and often have specific career aspirations.
5. **ACTIVITIES:**
They participate in mainstream activities such as: student government, sports, boy scouts and traditional religious groups.

To get the Safety N.E.T. Kids Video about Bullies call or email. The Bullies video can also be ordered on line at www.caases.org.

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