

BOYS IN CRISIS: INTERVENTION STRATEGIES WITH YOUNG MALES WHO ARE AT THE GREATEST RISK FOR EXTREME VIOLENCE

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On Friday, February 29, 2008, I delivered the opening pre-conference workshop for the National Student Assistance Association Annual Conference in sunny Newport Beach, California. During the conference, I had lunch with several Student Assistance professionals. One stated, "I received a call today during the break from one of my schools, telling me that a male student suffers from PTSD and was having flashbacks and had started threatening other students." Another stated that she was paged during the workshop and told that a male student had brought a gun to school that day. A third stated that there had been a shooting at her school recently and that she had been asked to intervene. These comments made me realize that Student Assistance professionals were in an ideal position to provide intervention strategies for young males who are at great risk for extreme violence.

Boys seem to be in a greater crisis than at anytime in our nation's history. Boys are responding to this crisis in myriad violent ways (Mayeda, S. and Sanders.M., 2007), including shootings, stabbings, bombings, fire starting, bullying, intimidating, gang violence, hate group violence, suicide, and homicide.

This article will identify eighteen risk factors and fifteen intervention strategies for adolescent male violence and describe ten strategies schools can use to prevent violence.

Risk Factors for Adolescent Male Violence

Risk factors for extreme violence among adolescent males includes the following:

- Male depression – Depression among adolescent females is diagnosed much more frequently than it is in adolescent males (Evans, D. et al, 2005). There is a body of evidence that supports a greater prevalence of depression among adolescent males than clinicians are aware of and that this depression often goes undiagnosed because of the “many masks” of male depression, including:
 - ❖ Anger
 - ❖ Rage
 - ❖ Violence
 - ❖ Suicide that looks like homicide (Real, T., 1999)

The three unique features of adolescent male depression include:

- ❖ Loss of the capacity to feel – Studies reveal that male socialization often involves loss of a “feeling vocabulary,” as adult caretakers are more likely to discourage male children from discussing their feelings.
- ❖ Externalization of pain, i.e., “I feel as though you’re causing me pain and I therefore have a right to strike out against you”
- ❖ Feeling of inadequacy without hope – Because girls are overall academically more prepared for school than are boys in the early years, i.e., girls generally potty-train quicker, have greater verbal skills, and learn to read, on average, quicker than boys. Many males will enter school and quickly develop feelings of inadequacy. Minus a

feeling vocabulary to express these feelings, some will act them out in disruptive, and sometimes violent, ways, increasing the risk of special education, alternative schools, getting expelled, etc. (Real, T., 1999).

- Rejections – In a 100-country study, boys who were rejected by their parents were at the greatest risk of violence, delinquency, and substance abuse (Garbarino, J., 1999, and Brown, R. and Verhaagen, D., 2006).
- Abuse
- The absence of love (Borum, R. and Verhaagen, D., 2006)
- Childhood abandonment (Borum, R. and Verhaagen, D., 2006)
- Father-son pain – This includes the absence of a caring father or the presence of an abusive father. Abusive fathers teach their sons that you should handle disagreements with physical violence (Mayeda, S. and Sanders, M., 2007).
- Hurting animals – This is often a precursor to violence toward people (Evans, D. et al, 2005).
- The absence of empathy, sympathy, and caring – Having been rejected, abandoned, neglected, or abused for long periods of time, many adolescent males who commit acts of extreme violence are so blocked from their own emotions that they struggle to empathize with the pain they cause others. They often appear to lack remorse when they are brought before the courts or victim panels (Black, D., 1999).
- Conduct disorder – Forty percent of young males with conduct disorder go on to develop antisocial personality disorder (Black, D., 1999). Eighty

percent of adolescent males who murder have been diagnosed with conduct disorder (Garbarino, J., 1999, and Borum, R. and Verhaagen, D., 2006).

- Genetic influences – Being born with a difficult temperament, which increases the risk of parental rejection (Garbarino, J. 1999). Research reveals that a tendency toward antisocial personality disorder (preceded by conduct disorder) has genetic influences (Black, D., 1999).
- Lack of community support (Garbarino, J., 1999, and Borum, R. and Verhaagen, D., 2006)
- Possession of a dangerous weapon – It takes a gun to shoot a gun (Sanders, M. 2004).
- Lack of future orientation – Many young males who murder lack hope for the future (Garbarino, J., 1999).
- Witnessing violence – The great majority of adolescent males incarcerated for murder witnessed firsthand the domestic abuse of their mothers (Garbarino, J., 1999).
- Fed up with being bullied – One out of seven children in schools throughout the United States is involved in bully-victim violence, which often goes on for years without adult observation or intervention. One of the most potentially violent youths in any school is one who has been bullied for long periods of time—years perhaps—and who feels that he can't tolerate it any longer. He may confiscate the family gun and go on a shooting rampage at school (Sanders, M., 2004).

- Fractured morality – Young males who murder are often seeking justice. They have a distorted view of what the justice should be (Garbarino, J., 1999, and Black, D., 1999).
- Substance abuse (Mayeda, S. and Sanders, M., 2007)
- Gang or hate group affiliation (Mayeda, S., and Sanders, M., 2007; Spergel, I., 1995).
- Copycat – Fifteen percent of murders among adolescent males are copycat murders. They have witnessed similar events in movies and on television (Garbarino, J., 1999).

One can view these risk factors like juggling. Most people are capable of juggling one ball; fewer are capable of successfully juggling two balls. Even more lack the training and dexterity to juggle three balls. Similarly, a youth may be able to thrive possessing a few of these risk factors. However, the more risk factors they possess, the greater their risk for violence (Mayeda, S., Sanders, M.; 2007, Black, D., 1999). What strategies can be used to decrease the risk of violence among males who are laden with numerous risk factors?

Below is a list of intervention strategies that have been proven successful:

- 1) One good relationship – A positive relationship with one relative has been found to be a protective factor against male violence (Sanders, 2004).
- 2) Help with the development of future orientation – Goal setting and the development of a personal mission statement can be helpful, as many young males in this category lack future orientation (Sanders, 2004).

- 3) Stress management – Many of these young men have a hard time settling down when confronted with a crisis or conflict and tend to resort to violence quickly; teaching stress management can be helpful (Mayeda, S. and Sanders, M., 2007).
- 4) Mentoring – Mentoring has proven to be helpful for young males at risk for extreme violence (Mayeda, S. and Sanders, M., 2007).
- 5) Cognitive behavioral therapy – One of the most effective methods of working with adolescent males with conduct disorder and acting out behavior (Borum, R. and Verhaagen, D., 2006; Bloomquist and Schnell, 2005).
- 6) Constant and predictable routines – Many of these young males have a history of neglect and rejection. Counselors can recommend to adult caretakers the importance of consistency in their lives, i.e., dinner at the same time each evening, a Friday night movie, etc., can be helpful (Mayeda, S. and Sanders, M., 2007).
- 7) Therapy to address issues of abandonment and rejection
- 8) Engagement in activities that build resilience, hope, confidence, endurance, and discipline (Bell, C., M.D., 2001).
- 9) Classes that develop critical thinking skills – This could help give males tools to use when they face situations that could escalate into violence (Sanders, M., 2004).
- 10) Provide intensive therapeutic help – Multisystems therapy has been proven to be an effective approach with youth at risk for delinquency,

violence, and substance abuse. More intensive than traditional therapy, this approach helps protect society and the youth from further violence. Multisystems therapy is an evidence-based practice with delinquent youth (Henggeler, S., 1998).

- 11) Assess and treat PTSD (Borum, R. and Verhaagen, D., 2006).
- 12) Exposure to spirituality in the form of non-punitive religion – Studies reveal that this is a protective factor (Garbarino, 1999).
- 13) Provide family therapy – Many of the males come from families with inconsistent parenting practices, parental discord, neglect, violence, etc. (Mayeda, S. and Sanders, M., 2007).
- 14) Help them leave destructive peer groups – These groups help foster violence (Dodge, K., Dishion, T., and Lansford, J., 2006).
- 15) Provide intervention strategies in school.

School-based Intervention Strategies

- 1) Set up a violence prevention committee consisting of a cross-section of the entire school for the purpose of identifying strategies to create a safer school environment.
- 2) Define school violence. This could be the first task of the violence prevention committee. One of the easiest ways for violence to flourish in a school is to have multiple definitions and viewpoints about what violence is. Establishing one working definition of violence can be a first step in curbing the problem (Zimman, 1996).

- 3) Conduct a confidential survey of students to ascertain the nature of violence occurring in the school. Students are often the first to know what is going on.
- 4) Have a systemic approach to violence prevention. Some schools put only one adult in charge of violence prevention activities. It is impossible for one person to be every place where violence may occur. A systemic approach empowers all the adults connected to the school to intervene.
- 5) Monitor hallways. Fifty percent of violent episodes in schools occur in the hallways (Sanders, 2004)
- 6) Set up a confidential phone line. When young males make plans to do a shooting at their schools they often leave clues. Other students may be aware of such clues and can let the information be known via a phone call. This phone line can also be helpful for children who are passive victims of bullying to report their victimization.
- 7) Provide mentorship. In addition to consequences, young males who engage in violence toward others can benefit from mentorship (Mayeda, S. and Sanders, M., 2007).
- 8) Provide counseling. Student Assistance counselors can provide necessary counseling and referrals for young males who engage in violence.
- 9) Examine enabling. It is difficult to eliminate violence in schools without looking at enabling, i.e., adults, students, parents, and the community looking the other way and pretending not to see violence. As enabling is dismantled in schools, threats of violence will be taken more seriously. As

stated earlier, many young males engaged in school shootings generally leave clues first. Ignoring these clues is another form of enabling.

- 10) Have progressive and consistent consequences for all acts of violence.

Student Assistance professionals are in an excellent position to help decrease violence in schools. Their clinical knowledge, crisis management preparation, relationships with students, faculty, parents, and the community neatly positions them to make a systemic difference.

The strategies outlined above can go far in curbing violence among youth who are at the highest risk, thereby helping society, unknown victims, and the young men themselves.

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