

## ■ Leap of Faith

In the wake of all the incidents in all the places that school violence has left its bloody trail, we've learned that deadly outbursts of violence usually don't just happen. More often, they're twisted exclamation points on lives made up of thousands of little hurts and big disappointments, real and imagined, moments in a kid's life when a single person—any one of us, really—could have made a difference, and didn't.

That isn't meant to excuse their actions or absolve them of responsibility. But since we asked earlier who's responsible for the surge of violence in our culture and the wave of shootings in our schools, we feel obligated to point out that the truest answer is simply this: We all are.



*Who's responsible? If we don't care enough to help each other, we all are.*

It takes a leap of faith to admit that, and imagination to see that it really *is* true. Because like it or not, we really *are* our brother's and our sister's (and each other's) keepers, and we don't always do a good job of keeping each other out of trouble.

Still, if we have the wisdom and imagination to see our responsibility for the culture of violence we've allowed to flourish and shape all our lives, we also have the imagination and power to stop it, to declare a permanent ceasefire.

It won't be quick, and it won't always be easy, but we owe it to ourselves and each other to do what we can, as soon as we can, to build a better, safer, world.

Wars start with a single action. So can peace. ■



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# STOP CLEARSE

▶ What we can do to stop violence in our schools



## ■ Nightmare on Main Street

The images are seared forever into all our brains. Because even if you've only seen coverage of one school shooting on the news, you can close your eyes and see it all again: Scenes of traumatized kids and terrified parents, bullet-riddled glass and body bags, SWAT teams in combat gear and, in the end, investigators sifting the aftermath, looking for clues to help them understand the unthinkable.

The images might seem more at home in a teen-scream slasher flick than an American high school, but they're real, and shaking your head won't make them go away. If life was a movie, they could call it **Nightmare on Main Street**, and the lines would probably stretch around the block.



*National nightmare. In a violent culture, violence is the one sure-fire way to get noticed.*

The acts that etch the real images are byproducts of a culture of violence reduced to its most irrational extreme, replayed so relentlessly on television that viewers end up familiar with details of the minutes leading up to the first shots but still fuzzy about the same fundamental questions:

▶ **Who are these killers?** Raised in a culture of booming material prosperity that still lets its kids learn ethics from "Mortal Kombat," they seem indistinguishable from any of 31 million other American teens.

In fact, experts say that's one of the common themes in the recent wave of school shootings: All too often, the shooters *blend*—so well, in fact, that talk shows are often filled for days with classmates saying, "He was just like me."

▶ **Why do the shootings happen at school?** Because that's the place where kids live—and hurt each other. And that's where the shooters decide it has to end.

▶ **Who's to blame?** Nobody's sure, but the media points the finger, anyway:

☞ At parents, who are reminded to spend more "quality time" (as if there's any other kind) with their kids.

☞ At teachers who let so-called "throwaway" kids fall through cracks of a too-impersonal education system.

☞ At gun manufacturers and film makers, gansta rappers and Marilyn Manson, at video games and the Internet.

School violence now seems as near as today's evening news or the headlines in tomorrow's papers.



In the aftermath, guards are hired and "zero-tolerance" policies on violence adopted. Mesh book bags become mandatory. But violence doesn't go away. It seems as near now as today's evening news or tomorrow's headlines.

That's why we've put together this pamphlet.

In it, we'll look at the roots of violence, both at home and school. We'll see how issues that trigger violence—identity, belonging, and self-control—are the same ones we all have to resolve during adolescence. And we'll discuss some things that we can do to help each other through the rough spots.

Because the fact is, there *are* things that each of us can do to make the world a safer, less-toxic place. And we owe it to ourselves—and each other—to get busy.

Because when we check our feelings as we check out reports of school violence, we've all shared a thought that's still the truest one of all: *It isn't supposed to be this way.*

It isn't. And it doesn't have to stay this way.

## ■ Are schools more violent today?

That depends on what you're comparing them against, but for the most part, the answer to that question is "yes."

It's not that violence at school is new—far from it. Schoolyard bullies have been dispensing a violent version of juvenile "justice" for as long as there have been schoolyards.

Still, the intensity's rocketed in recent years, mirroring trends in other sectors of society.

Here, it's important to point out that violence comes in many forms—including verbal threats, psychological intimidation, and racial slurs—and some types are a lot more common than any of us like to admit.

**Death imitating art.** Some high school shooters were obsessed with violent films, including *Basketball Diaries* and *Natural Born Killers*.



Still, small, “everyday” forms of violence are destructive, too, and can lead to big, ugly, explosive outbursts.

Examples of everyday violence can be seen in the faces of seniors taunting freshmen or in fights sparked by a glance at another guy’s girlfriend. It’s gang machismo and the whispered menace of “See you after class.”

It’s so common, according to the U.S. Department of Education, that every day, 150,000 students miss school because of intimidation and harassment in the classroom.

## ■ So why are kids more violent today?

A lot of factors come into play, including such obvious candidates as exposure to violence in the media and the breakdown of traditional families. Other, less-visible factors play a role, too, including the trend towards bigger, more-depersonalized high schools and even early-afternoon dismissal from school.

What these factors have in common is that they add to the stress of growing up, as kids attempt to establish an identity and navigate an already rushed, blink-and-you’ll-miss-it period of childhood and adolescence.

## ▶ Home Alone: Risky Business

Even in *great* families, adolescence can be tough, as kids try on different identities, cope with peers, and bump up against the bounds of new freedoms.

Then factor in school pressures, parental expectations, a constant case of raging hormones, and set it all against a nonstop backdrop of pop culture, and you may just conclude that growing up is tougher today than ever before.

Now add one more problem, loneliness. In fact, in families where both parents work, teens spend an average of 3.5 hours alone every day. And when everybody’s home, it doesn’t get much better: A recent survey reports that most kids spend only 7 minutes talking to mom and 5 minutes talking with dad each day.

So, mom and dad, if you’re listening, remember that finding the time to be a real part of your kids’ lives only **seems** tougher than levitation or time-travel.

But when you stop to consider what **really** matters, and what it means to be a teen in today’s over-amped, hyper-charged world, you may be surprised to find that they’ve been waiting for you to catch up all along. ■



Still, in trying to untangle the knot of factors that contribute to violence and other problems, investigators often find a common thread: the increasing amount of time that kids spend by themselves, and with other kids.

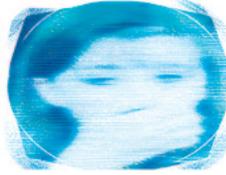
The hours from 3 to 7 p.m. aren’t just prime time for hanging with friends or surfing the web and cable channels undisturbed, they’re also the time that juvenile crime jumps 300 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

That’s one reason that, even though violent crime has declined *overall* during the past decade, violence among children and teens has gone up.

The result: The United States has the highest rate of youth homicide and suicide among the world’s 26 richest nations.

But teens aren’t just *committing* more acts of violence.

They’re also more likely to be *victims* of violent crime than any other age group, except those 18-24. Groups most at risk include minorities, immigrants, and gays or lesbians.



*Flashbacks. Acts of school violence leave a wake of victims, including the survivors.*

## ■ Isn’t violence mostly just a ‘guy thing’?

It used to be, at least, if you’re talking about aggressive, violent behavior aimed at others.

But even this ancient fact of life is starting to change.

According to a 1999 report from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 27 percent of all youth crime is now committed by adolescent girls.

And nearly one of every five violent crimes involving teens is committed by a girl.

## ■ Does violence run in families?

Often, it seems to. But that doesn’t mean it’s genetic. Because, as much as anything, violence is learned, and the first people most of us ever learn anything from is our parents and other members of our immediate family.

That’s why kids who witness or experience abuse in the family are more likely to be abusive when they grow up.

Still, abuse doesn’t have to be physical to be toxic.

In today’s world, emotional neglect may be more common. And like physical forms of abuse, emotional neglect happens everywhere, in every socioeconomic class.

**V**iolence comes in a variety of forms — including verbal threats, psychological intimidation, and racial slurs — and some types are a lot more common than any of us like to admit.



The psychological toll that kids pay for an unstable home life can be massive.

For others, it’s worse, as they adopt traits that form the core of the so-called “antisocial” personality: impulsiveness, isolation, hostility and a lack of empathy for others.

The results in childhood are bad enough.

But in adolescence, as the arbitrary, unofficial (but ruthlessly-enforced) rules of high school social status emerge—who’s cool and who’s a fool, who’s a leader and who’s a loser—the outcome can be devastating. The effects show up in the form of failing grades, social isolation, and (for kids who learned to do it this way) an inclination to prove one’s worth by destroying the competition.

And kids who don’t fit into one of today’s predefined, set-in-stone high school cliques (preps, stoners, jocks, goths, gangbangers) are easy targets for anyone who’s got something to prove and needs someone to prove it on.

## ■ Is there a solution?

Sure—several. They’re just not always easy or popular.

The most obvious way to reduce gun violence is to reduce the number of guns (*dub!*) and make it tougher for the crazy or criminal to get one. Still, obvious solutions can be a tough sell in Congress, so don’t hold your breath. But don’t hold back from letting elected officials know how you feel.

For violent, antisocial kids, early intervention is vital, since learning more-effective ways of managing anger and resolving conflict is almost always easier outside of prison than in. Programs for helping high-risk kids *may* cost money, but not helping sooner can cost a lot more later.

As for the rest of us, there are plenty of low-cost, high-impact ways to make a difference. If you check out “**Increasing the Peace: It’s Up to Us**” (below), you may even find one or two that will make you a better person, in the process.

## ■ Increasing the Peace: It’s Up to Us

**S**topping violence in our schools won’t happen because we wish it away. It will only happen when we finally find the will (and the heart and soul) to do something about the problems that trigger violence, and which cause it to persist.

Luckily, though, if you’re looking for places to start, you don’t have to look far. Consider some of these:

■ **Entertainment.** No matter how hard Hollywood tries to deny its complicity by arguing that it only *reflects* the real world, the fact is that exposure to violence in TV and movies desensitizes viewers to acts of violence, and increases copycat behavior. Want to get Hollywood’s attention? Stop watching. They’ll see the light.

■ **Gun Control.** It’s a hot-button issue on both sides, but the simple *availability* of guns increases the risk of gun violence. That’s the reason we have the highest homicide rates in the world. As for the argument, “Guns don’t kill people; people kill people,” we say: People with guns kill **way** more people than people without guns. And people with assault weapons *really* kill people—sometimes, in the school cafeteria. Write your local representatives if you want a safer, less gun-crazy country.

■ **Discrimination.** We’re so used to thinking in terms of race that it’s easy to forget that racial discrimination is only one, highly visible, ugly form of a problem that injures us all. Because whether we admit it or not (or even recognize it when we do it), we’re all guilty of discriminating against others. It’s not always—or even usually—overt. We do it subtly when we purposely exclude someone from a conversation or play the “**I’m cooler/smarter/richer/better-looking than you are**” game. I’m pretty good at that one, myself. In fact, probably even better than you. (Hurts a little, even when it’s a joke—doesn’t it?)

So, if you really want to do something meaningful to increase the peace in your life and your school, start by working on yourself. That’ll keep you busy for the rest of your life.

And we hope you have a long, happy one. ■

