

American Children under Assault: A Look at Mass Killings and School Shootings



Introduction

Columbine High School, Littleton, Colo. April 20, 1999, Virginia Tech University, Blacksburg, VA April 16, 2007, Tucson, Arizona January 8, 2011, Century 16 Movie Theaters complex Aurora, Colorado July 19, 2012, Sandy Hook Elementary Newtown, Connecticut December 14, 2012.

Just the mere mention of these names and dates bring to mind horrid memories of mass killings and school shootings that have occurred across our country devastating the lives of millions. Families of innocent victims as well as our nation were left to grapple with such Headlines as "A Lone Gunman Kills 32 People at Virginia Tech University", "12 Students and One teacher Dead, 23 Wounded by Two Teen Gunmen at Columbine High School"; "27 Killed Including 18 Children by a Single Gunman at Sandy Hook Elementary School". All too frequently such headlines occur making the nightmare of mass killings and school shootings a harsh reality for the state of our union and for the families devastated by these senseless acts of violence. As educators, parents and citizens we may ask what can we do to prevent such violent killings from taking place in the future? WE wonder if there are warning signs that may help us as parents or as educators detect a potential mass or violent killer and thus perhaps thwart plans of a potential mass killing. Are there preventative measures that can be put in place at home, at school and nationally to help minimized such tragedies from taking place in the future? While addressing these questions is the focus of this article let's first take a moment to examine the scope of the problem with respect to violent and mass killings in our country.

The Scope of the Problem

Did you know that America remains an unparalleled leader in gun deaths of children and teens? And that gun homicide rate for teens and young adults, ages 15 to 24 in the United States is 42.7 times higher than the combined gun homicide rate for that same age group in the other countries? (Children Defense Fund, 2012).

Data analysis from 23 high income countries revealed that of children under the age of 15 killed by guns that 87% of them lived in the United States. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report revealed that 2,827 children and teens died as a result of gun violence in 2003 which **was more** than the number of American fighting men and women killed in hostile action in Iraq from 2003 to April 2006. The report also revealed that 56 preschoolers were killed by

firearms in 2003 compared to 52 law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty (Children Defense Fund, 2012).

Regarding mass shootings, did you know that fifteen of the 25 worst mass shootings in the last 50 years took place in the United States with Finland in second place with two entries? And since 1982, there have been at least 61 mass killings carried out with firearms across the country, with these killings unfolding in 30 states from Massachusetts to Hawaii? And that in most of these cases, the killers had obtained their weapons legally? Twenty-five of these 61 mass shootings have occurred since 2006, and seven of them took place in 2012 not counting the Sandy Hooks mass killings (Klein, 2012).

While research demonstrates that the presence of a gun intensifies a violent event and increases the likely hood that someone will die, it is quite alarming to learn that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that nearly two million children live in homes with loaded, unlocked guns. (Children's Defense Fund Protect Children Not Guns 2012 Report) and that the US has an estimated 283 million guns in civilian hands, which is the equivalent of nine guns for every 10 people in America (L. Hepburn, M. Miller, D. Arzael, and D. Hemeway, 2007)- the highest of gun ownership in the world (Wikipedia, 2007).

And finally, statistics show that more Americans have been killed by gunfire since 1968 than all the wars in our nation's history from the Revolutionary through the Civil War, World War I and World War II up to the war in Iraq (Shields, Mark, 2012).

Having a little more understanding of the magnitude of the problem surrounding violent and mass killings in our county, we seek now to address those questions posed at the beginning of the article: What can we do as parents or educators to help prevent mass shootings and killings from taking place in the future? Are there warning signs that may help parents and/or educators detect a potential mass or violent killer and maybe thwart plans of a potential mass killing or shooting? What preventative measures, if any, can and should be put in place at home, at school and on the national level to help minimized violent killings and mass shootings from taking place in the future?

Detecting Warning Signs

The first thing that parents and educators can do to help prevent violent acts of mass shootings and killings from taking place in the future is to become aware of early warning signs of a potential mass murderer or shooter. Secondly, they can educate their children/ students of these various warning signs and let them know what they should do if they detect any of these warning signs.

According to Capt. James Fryhoff who helped establish the threat-assessment program for the Conejo Valley Unified School District a mass shooter in most cases will show warning signs before committing violence. He noted further that in 75 percent of all active shooter scenarios,

someone else knew it was going to happen before it happened. The father of one of the two Columbine shooters called 911 during the shootings to say he thought his son was the perpetrator (Leung, 2013). In many instances before a mass shooting, people close to the killer noticed that there may be trouble ahead. So what are the warning signs?

According to Dr. Jack Levin, a leading authority on serial killers and violence the first warning sign for a potential mass murderer is chronic depression over a long period of time. The second is social isolation- having no place to turn when you get into trouble. As a person becomes more isolated and withdrawn, they begin to fall away from their previous level of functioning, usually evidenced by dropping out of school and their appearance may change becoming stranger and more disturbing. The third is blaming everyone else for their problems. Fourth there is almost always a catastrophic loss -- the loss of a job, relationship, money in the stock market, being deeply in debt (Doheny, 2012). Other early warning signs for a potential mass murderer include:

Social withdrawal; (Lanza, the shooter at Sandy Hook, was noted for being painfully shy and antisocial (Margolin, Calabrese and MacLeod, 2012). He spent hours on end in his windowless basement playing video games such as "Call of Duty" (Palmeri, Macleod and Italiano, 2012). Cho, the Virginia Tech murderer was said to be "a quiet" person who "would not respond if someone greeted him." He would also whisper his response after taking 20 seconds to answer questions (Wikipedia, 2013). A College student reported that Holmes, the Aurora slayer kept to himself and wouldn't acknowledge people when they passed in the hall and said hello. A faculty member described him as a "very quiet, strangely quiet in class," and seemed "socially off." (Williams, Dedman & NBC News 2012).

Uncontrolled anger: (Klebold and Harris, the Columbine shooters were reported to be angry teenagers. They were angry not only at athletes that made fun of them, but basically hated everyone except for a handful of people. On the front page of his journal, Harris wrote: "I hate the f__ing world." He also wrote that he hates martial arts experts, and people who brag about their cars. He stated he hated Star Wars fans, people who mispronounce words, like 'pacific' for 'specific,' and 'expresso' instead of 'espresso' (Rosenberg 1999).

Discipline problems: (Klebold was known to swear at teachers; fight with his boss at Blackjack Pizza. Both he and Harris got into trouble with the law for breaking into a locked van and stealing computers (Wikipedia, 2013). Cho was involved in at least three stalking incidents, two of which resulted in verbal warnings by the Virginia Tech campus police. He also intimidated female students by photographing their legs under their desks and by writing obscene, violent poetry (Wikipedia, 2013).

Being a victim of violence or bullying Harris and Klebold were very unpopular students and were said to be frequent targets of bullying at their high school. Harris was pushed into lockers and ridiculed because they thought he had a "big head with skinny body". Nathan Vanderau a friend of Klebold noted that a "cup of fecal matter" was thrown at Klebold and Harris. People also surrounded them in the commons and squirted ketchup packets all over them, laughing at them, calling them faggots. They wore the ketchup all day and went home covered with it. Due to such treatments, Harris lamented, "Whatever I do people make fun of me, and sometimes directly to my face. I'll get revenge soon enough. F___ shouldn't have ripped on me so much,

huh! HA (Wikipedia, 2013). Cho's sister knew that when he walked down school hallways a few students sometimes would yell taunts at him (Mental Health Part 1).

Expression of violence, verbally, in writings and drawings: As early as spring 1998, the Columbine shooters wrote about killing and retaliation in each other's yearbooks, including an image of a man standing with a gun, surrounded by dead bodies, with the caption, "The only reason your [sic] still alive is because someone has decided to let you live." Additionally, students heard their essays and poems about suicide and murder. The two made a video for a school project that showed them pretending to shoot fake guns and "snuffing" students in the hallway of their school as *Hitmen for Hire*; (Wikipedia, 2013) Cho, the Virginia Tech shooter, wrote in a school assignment about wanting to "repeat" Columbine. Other writings he submitted for school assignments made references to violence that caused concern among teachers and classmates including two very graphic violent plays entitled Richard McBeef, and " Mr. Brownstone," (Wikipedia, 2013) .

Spoken threats of violence, or indications that a person is preparing for violence should always be taken with utmost seriousness. Students had heard Harris, one of Columbine mass murderer talk during lunch about blowing up the school (Anton & Ryckman, 1999). Lanza reportedly often talked about "aliens" and about "blowing things up" (Martin, 2013). A month prior to the shooting, psychiatrist, Lynne Fenton reported to the campus police that Holmes, the Aurora mass murder, had made homicidal statements which indicated he was a threat to the public (Washington Post 2013).

Extreme prejudice or intolerance for differences. Again, one of the Columbine shooters wrote that he hated Star Wars fans, people who mispronounce words, like 'pacific' for 'specific,' and 'expresso' instead of 'espresso; Harris also described himself as "racist" in his diary and made no secret about his admiration of the Nazis (Columbine 2013). During the investigation, the police found a note in Cho's room in which he criticized "rich kids", (as) "debauchery" and "deceitful charlatans" which he wrote "cause me to do this" (Wikipedia, 2013).

Obsession with weapons, war and death: Klebold and Harris used the Internet to find recipes for pipe bombs and other explosives. They amassed an arsenal, which eventually included guns, knives, and 99 explosive devices (Rosenberg, 1999). Videotapes and journals containing plans for a large-scale massacre at their high school were found in their rooms (Wikipedia, 2013). During three days of searching Lanza's home, investigators discovered 1,400 rounds of ammunition in his bedroom, assorted rifles and shotguns, three large samurai swords, eight knives, a bayonet and a powerful rifle scope (Cummings, Dixon and Pirro. 2013). The basement walls were also decorated with posters of militia and guns (Hutch, 2012).

Endless rounds of bloody computer games. Harris and Klebold were passionate players of *Doom*, a bloody, shoot-'em-up video game licensed by the U.S. military to train soldiers to effectively kill. Klebold wrote that "Doom is so burned into my head my thoughts usually have something to do with the game. Whether it be a level or environment or whatever. In fact a dream I had yesterday was about a "Deathmatch" level that I have never even been to." (ibid: 272) For a class project, Harris and Klebold made a videotape that was similar to their customized version of *Doom*. In the video, Harris and Klebold dress in trench coats, carry guns, and kill school

athletes. They acted out their videotaped performance in real life less than a year later. The importance of Doom for Klebold became clear in a videotape he made on March 15th, 1999, as well. He described the forthcoming assault on Columbine High School with the words: "It's going to be like f----- Doom. Tick, tick, tick, tick... Haa! That f_____ shotgun is straight out of Doom!" (Wikipedia, 2013).

Police found thousands of dollars' worth of violent video games as well as news articles about Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik in Lanza's bedroom. He reportedly spent hours on end in his basement where he studied images of guns and obliterated virtual victims in his video games (Palmeri, Macleod and Italiano, 2012). Aurora killer was said to be obsessed with the World of Warcraft Video game (Brinkmann, 2012). "Several Korean youths who knew Cho from his high school days said he was a fan of violent video games, particularly a game called "Counterstrike," an online game in which players join terrorism or counterterrorism groups and try to shoot each other using all types of guns (Watson, 2007).

Vicious ranting on the Internet. Harris had made a website with hateful epithets. He posted a log of his bomb making experiments, and wrote about his desire to kill people, even naming a particular student he wanted to murder. His website included explicit homicidal rants. For example, Harris wrote, "God I can't wait till I can kill you people. ...I don't care if I live or die in the shootout, all I want to do is kill and injure as many of you pricks as I can" (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, p. 10,415).

Other risk factors for violent or mass shooters include a history of violence, exposure of violence at home, a history of self-harm, childhood mistreatment, poor school achievement, and school suspensions.

Specific warning signs in childhood

According to Dr. Levin, one of the early warning signs in childhood is animal abuse. Not just any animal abuse, such as shooting birds with BB guns. There is one kind of abuse according to Levin that is very rare and seems to be a warning sign: inflicting pain and suffering on a dog or a cat, with personal contact -- stabbing, mutilation, suffocating. "When this type of sadistic cruelty is inflicted on a dog or a cat, especially repeatedly, it should be taken very seriously. It's a rehearsal. Often the killer will use the same method on a human being later on that he used on animals as a child. Thus, there is a link between animal abuse and human violence. Parents need to see it as a red flag, call someone and do something about it"(Doheny, 2012).

While there is no fool-proof method of identifying potential threats we must be on guard, observant, attuned to those around us who may be sending warning signals of potential violence. Even then, we cannot predict how any one person may act on their emotions. And while it may be important to emphasize that most people who demonstrates one or more of these warning signs do not go on to commit violent acts, it is still true that these signs and/or changes are a fingerprint of risk for mass murder. Given this, we would do well to take them more seriously, as individuals, families and as a society (Health College, 2012). Additionally experts advise students who are concerned about their peer's behavior to discuss the issue with someone they

trust such as a teacher, parent or school counselor. Parents and educators alike should encourage their children and/or students to heed this advice.

What can parents/educators do?

To start, they can do a better job of spotting the warning signs of violent offenders, especially at an early age. They can safe guard their children against mass murderers and try to be sure their child is not developing into one. If we hear or see signs of danger, it is of utmost importance that we act. In most states people can still be hospitalized against their will when there is clear evidence either from their words or deeds that they intend to commit violence (Raison, 2012).

We also need to look at how we spend our time and make conscious choices giving interpersonal connection a higher priority on the list of options. We live in an increasingly globalized world yet the evidence suggests we are rapidly becoming more isolated. Instead of talking face-to-face, we communicate via emails, texts, Facebook status updates, and tweets. Without utilizing essential interpersonal communication skills, people become dehumanized. One of the first lessons of terrorism is to dehumanize the victim (Jensen, 2013).

Queen Margrethe of Denmark gave a national address on this topic on New Year's Eve, warning that "the modern forms of communication, with the internet and Facebook, have tremendous opportunities, but there are also dangers associated with it. The very young can be so engrossed in it, as if they live in cyberspace while reality is lived in a kind of display window, where it is more about appearances than being one's self." (Jensen, 2013)

As parents, teachers, friends, co-workers, and citizens of this world, we must recognize these technological pitfalls. Smartphones and tablets give us the ability to be connected to the internet at all times; it doesn't mean we should be. We must not lose sight of this reality. We must not sacrifice human connection in exchange for the false reality of a purely digital life. (Jansen, 2013).

Children are exposed to television programming that glamorizes guns, violence and brutality. Additionally, our culture frequently glamorizes guns and violence in movies, music and on the internet. Many shows targeted at children have violent themes and language (Wikipedia 2013). Parents may want to choose to turn off violent programming and read or play with your children instead. Talk to them about the importance of rejecting violence as a cultural and personal value. Also consider not buying products that glamorize or make violence socially acceptable. (Jansen 2013).

Family violence in our society is an epidemic. Child abuse and neglect are widespread. Conflict resolution skills are essential in this environment but not typically taught in school or at home. Concerned parents can partner with schools and community groups to organize nonviolent conflict resolution support groups and request that schools consider a conflict resolution curriculum. According to Dr. Kathy Seifert, author of **How Children Become Violent** we should teach emotional intelligence in school. Topics such as conflict resolution, self-awareness,

effective communication, and cross-cultural understanding are vitally important for interpersonal effectiveness and self-actualization (Jansen 2013).

Again, let your child know that spoken threats of violence or indications that a person is preparing for violence, should always be taken with utmost seriousness and advise students who are concerned about their peer's behavior to discuss the issue with someone they trust such as a teacher, parent or school counselor. Students need to be taught not only to report direct Threats, but also report invitations to join the attack and warnings to stay away because of the attack (Langman, 2012).

Pay special attention to the teen and young adult years, 18 to 25, Levin says. Those are often the times when serious mental health issues emerge. "We don't spend enough time to think about how difficult it is for teenagers to make the transition into adulthood," he says. "But that is the period of time when symptoms of schizophrenia develop, when the rate of suicide is much higher" (Doheny, 2012).

Parents should overcome any denial or reluctance to get involved if it's someone else's child. "We should intervene when our children are troubled long before they become troublesome," Levin says. "We should intervene when we see someone, a child or an adult, who is in trouble, who feels powerless and who is crying out for our help. We should do it not because we think he is going to murder someone but because it is the right thing to do." (Doheny, 2012).

A very heated and controversial topic today is "Gun Control". However in light of some of the following facts, parents and educators may want to consider engaging in some serious legislative conversation regarding gun control- The Virginia Tech gunman was armed with a 9-mm pistol and a .22-caliber handgun, he purchased legally via the internet (Wikipedia 2013). Movie theatre killer Holmes was armed with two .40-caliber Glock handguns, a Remington 870 single-barrel pump shotgun, a Smith & Wesson AR-15 assault-style rifle and as many as 6,000 rounds of ammunition at the time of his killing spree (Mahoney, 2012). Sandy Hook's shooter grabbed three guns from the house -- a semi-automatic AR-15 assault rifle made by Bushmaster and pistols made by Glock and SIG SAUER P226 9mm handgun (CNN, 2012).

Six additional 30-round large capacity ammunition magazines were recovered at the scene. A loaded unknown make and model 12-gauge shotgun was found in the passenger compartment of the car (later moved to the trunk by police) (Mahoney, 2012) Authorities now know the gunman used "an assault weapon" to "literally shoot an entrance into the building (CNN, 2012). All of the guns used in the shooting were purchased by Lanza's mother (Mahoney, 2012). Between the two of them, the Columbine shooters fired 188 rounds of ammunition (67 by Klebold and 121 by Harris). Thirty out of the 76 bombs that Klebold and Harris threw during their 47-minute siege on Columbine exploded, while 46 did not (Rosenberg, 1999).

A ban on assault weapons and requiring universal background checks on persons attempting to purchase a gun are two gun control issues currently being discussed. As pointed out earlier, research demonstrates that the presence of a gun intensifies a violent event and increases the likely hood that someone will die yet one-third of all households with children have at least one gun in the home. And, it is estimated that nearly two million children live in homes with an

unlocked and loaded gun. These are all reasons that should encourage parents and educators to actively participate in the legislative gun control conversation.

Final thought of reflection

“If roads were collapsing all across the United States, killing dozens of drivers, we would surely see that as a moment to talk about what we could do to keep roads from collapsing. If terrorists were detonating bombs in port after port, you can be sure Congress would be working to upgrade the nation’s security measures. If a plague was ripping through communities, public-health officials would be working feverishly to contain it. Only with gun violence do we respond to repeated tragedies by saying that mourning is acceptable but discussing how to prevent more tragedies is not... talking about how to stop mass shootings in the aftermath of a string of mass shootings isn’t ‘too soon’. **It’s much too late**” (Klein, Ezra, 2012)....



Especially when our most precious resource is at stake.



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