

## Preventing Youth Violence *What Parents Can Do*

### WHAT ARE THE FACTS ABOUT YOUTH VIOLENCE?

- No community, rural or urban, rich or poor, is immune from the tragedies of youth violence.
- Violence has become one of the leading causes of death for our youth.
- The U.S. Department of Justice reports that in 1999 there were 104,000 arrests of people under age 18 for a serious violent crime (robbery, forcible rape, aggravated assault, or homicide).
- Arrest reports seriously underestimate the amount of violent crime. According to the 2001 U.S. Surgeon General's report on youth violence, for every youth arrested it is estimated that at least 10 other youth have engaged in some form of violent behavior that could have seriously injured or killed someone.
- Surveys that ask students in confidence about violent acts indicate that 13-15% of high school seniors admit to having committed a serious violent act over recent years.
- About half of high school students, in one survey, thought that it was sometimes necessary to fight with people who are rude or annoying.
- Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control (1998) indicate that in Arkansas, 17.6% of boys and 5.7% of girls report that they have carried a weapon on school property. In addition, 6.1% of girls and 10.5% of boys report that they have been threatened or injured with a weapon on school property.
- Gang activity remains near its highest rate ever.
- While there has been a decline in certain types of violence-related arrests in recent years, youth surveys that have been conducted in confidence suggest that actual levels of most types of violent behavior have not declined.
- Although there are differences in arrest records between racial groups for violent crimes, confidential surveys suggest relatively little differences between racial groups in terms of violent acts.
- In a nationwide survey 4% of students admitted to having missed one or more days of school in the previous month because they had felt unsafe at school or traveling to or from school. In this same survey, approximately 10% of boys and 4% of girls report having been threatened or injured with a weapon at school.

### WHAT ARE SOME CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO YOUTH VIOLENCE?

Unfortunately, there is no single cause or pathway to youth violence. Some adolescents who become violent start becoming aggressive and violent at a very early age, while others don't start their violent behavior until their teenage years. An individual's own unique characteristics both biological and psychological, interact in complex ways with family, peer, community, and societal influences to produce violent behavior.

Some of the factors that *may* contribute to violence include:

- Difficulty controlling anger
- Need to manipulate and control others
- Belief that it is important to be viewed as "tough"
- Need to retaliate or seek revenge
- Exposure to high levels of media violence

- Increased tolerance for violence
- Alcohol and drug use
- Academic problems
- Impulsiveness
- Peer group that encourages violence (including gangs)
- Inappropriate access to, possession of, and use of firearms
- High need for attention or respect from peers
- Intolerance of differences in people
- Feelings of rejection
- Being the victim of violence or bullying

## HOW CAN I PROTECT MY CHILD?

*Parents can do many things to discourage their children from starting down the path to becoming violent or from becoming the victims of violence. Listed below are some suggestions.*

### **Develop a strong and positive relationship with your children**

Children who have a strong and positive relationship with their parents are less likely to become violent. Positive relationships involve affection, warmth, effective communication, spending time together having fun, and appropriate discipline. Try to find activities you and your child enjoy doing together. Be available to hear your child's concerns, answer questions, and talk about issues.

### **Discipline effectively**

Harsh and inconsistent punishment can contribute to behavior problems. Establish clear rules, set limits and be consistent and fair in punishment. Remember that discipline means "to teach" and not just to punish. Encourage and praise your child when they behave well. Let them know you notice it when they behave well not just when they misbehave.

### **Help your child develop empathy**

Help your child develop a sense of caring for others. One of the most effective ways of doing this is for your child to see you caring for other people who are different or less fortunate than yourself.

### **Supervise your child closely**

Insist on always knowing where your child is, who they are with, and when they will return. Encourage after-school activities that are supervised. The first few hours after the end of the school day is when many children and adolescents who are unsupervised do things they shouldn't.

### **Limit media exposure and take a stand**

Studies have shown that when children see a lot of violence on television, in the movies, or on video games it can desensitize them to violence and can make them more aggressive. Limit television viewing from an early age, consider using the new v-chip that allows you to block specific programs. Use the rating system to guide you in what is appropriate for children at different ages. Let your child know why the violence they see is upsetting to you "it is so sad to me to see a mother lose her son like that." Don't be afraid to restrict what your child watches even when she tells you that all her friends are allowed to watch. Don't be afraid to take a stand for what you believe is right.

### **You are your child's teacher**

Your children will learn how to handle the difficulties in their lives by seeing how you handle the difficulties in your life. If you frequently lose your temper and become aggressive, your child will likely do likewise. Your children will also look to you as the example of how to treat other people (both those who are close to you and those who are different from yourself). Lead your child by example.

### **Help your child succeed at school**

Children who do well academically are less likely to become violent. Encourage good study habits. Have high academic standards for your child. If your child is struggling at school, talk to the teachers and school counselors about what can be done. Ask them what you can do to help.

### **Become more involved with your child's school**

Encourage violence prevention efforts in your child's school. You may want to promote the use of the National PTA's free community violence prevention kit: *Kids Need a Future Not Funerals: Take action now to safeguard your children*. This kit provides tools and resources for developing a violence prevention effort that involves parents, schools, and the community. You could also help organize parents to work with school officials in developing effective policies for managing bullying, threats of violence, and acts of violence that may occur at school. Helpful information is available from the National Resource Center for Safe Schools (800) 268-2275. They provide free materials on such topics as: What teachers can do about violence; What school administrators can do about violence; Effective threat management; and Recognizing and preventing bullying.

### **Restrict your child's access to weapons**

If you have guns in your home, make sure they are stored properly (for example, unloaded and locked). Restrict your child's access to weapons. Teach your children about gun safety.

### **Talk about peer pressure and gangs**

Teach your child that it takes more courage to resist peer pressure than to go along with peers who are encouraging use of drugs, alcohol, and violence. Discuss specific examples of what your child could say or do when peers pressure him to do specific things he knows are wrong.

### **Help your child feel successful**

Encourage your child's involvement in activities in which they have demonstrated competencies. This might be a sport, music, art, an extra-curricular school activity, or any activity in which your child shows ability.

### **Teach your child to accept people who are different**

Help your child learn to appreciate the uniqueness of individuals. Do this by exploring diversity, in an effort to understand "why" customs and cultures differ. Show your child that you are accepting of others who are different from you in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, personality, and other factors.

### **Help your child learn how to deal with anger**

Teach your child to control his/her anger by learning how to cool off when he first starts getting angry. Help identify triggers that start the "anger cycle." Teach him how to solve problems more calmly by clearly identifying the problem, brainstorming possible solutions, thinking about the consequences of possible solutions, and making good choices of what solution is best.

### **Teach your child how to handle a crisis**

Talk to your children about what to do if they are in a dangerous situation. Do “preventive teaching” before a crisis occurs. This is describing potential situations and possible responses to those situations. Give your child the opportunity to practice what they would say and do with you before the actual situation arises. Discuss things they can do given different situations (being threatened, approached by a stranger). Make sure your young child knows how to contact help by calling 911.

### **Talk to your child about violence**

Although it is important to talk to your children about violence at various ages it is especially important when they are 8-12 years old. Use “teachable moment” opportunities that arise to start discussions. For example, when your child sees violence occurring on television or hears about a real life incident use the opportunity to discuss violence with your child. Ask your child what he or she thinks about it. Let your child know your thoughts and opinions about the violence.

### **If your children are fearful about violence reassure them**

Young children especially can become scared and anxious after seeing violence in real life, on television, or in a movie. Acknowledge their feelings “I know you’re scared.” Try to reassure them that you are there to protect them by letting them know you will do everything in your power to protect them.

### **Communicate with your child effectively**

Listen to your child. To really listen well you need to have eye contact, eliminate distractions, and listen with your mouth closed. When talking to your child share your thoughts, feelings, and values without becoming too judgmental. Remember that communication is both verbal and non-verbal. In fact, most of what we communicate is non-verbal (tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and body language). Our verbal and non-verbal messages about non-violence must be strong and consistent to be effectively communicated.

## **WHAT ARE SOME OF THE WARNING SIGNS OF VIOLENCE?**

There is no way to predict with certainty which children will become violent. However there are certain warning signs that parents can look for that may help in identifying a child’s potential for violence.

- Very aggressive behavior early in life
- Feelings of rejection
- Social withdrawal and isolation
- Being the victim of violence or bullying
- Problems controlling anger
- Expression of violence in writings or art
- Frequent physical fighting
- Intolerance of differences in people
- Criminal non-violent behavior
- Drug and/or alcohol use (especially when it occurs at young ages, or when use increases)
- Talks about hurting others
- Enjoys hurting animals
- Lack of empathy (pays no attention to the feelings of others)
- Problems at school (falling grades, truancy, social problems)
- Fascination with weapons



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- Association with peers who have a lifestyle that includes drugs, guns, precocious sex and other risky behaviors (such as gangs)
- Unusual desire for privacy and secrecy
- Makes threats of violence

The more warning signs a child has, the greater the risk of violence. However, even one serious warning sign (such as making threats) can indicate a high potential for violence. If you are concerned about your child becoming violent, please seek professional help through your child's school counselor, your child's physician, or a mental health professional.



*AR State PIRC/Center for Effective Parenting  
Little Rock Center: (501) 364-7580  
NW Arkansas Center: (479) 751-6166*

*For additional resources, visit our website:*

**[www.parenting-ed.org](http://www.parenting-ed.org)**

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