

## Youth Violence? Let's Call It What It Is

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**T**he headline reads, "School Yard Assassins Gun Down 13 in Littleton, Colorado." And everyone asks, "What turns kids into killers?" This is a compelling question. But it is the wrong question.

Who *are* these kids? A "14-year-old shooter" in Paducah. Two "middle-school youth" in Jonesboro. An "expelled student" in Springfield. An "honor student" in Fayetteville. A "sophomore" in Pearl. These kids all have one thing in common. They are all boys.

Why are they never referred to as boys? Instead, the media use euphemisms—"student," "youth," "killer." Perhaps it is too painful for us as a society to acknowledge that we have allowed so many of our sons to grow up killing and maiming under our watch. But much as we may hate to admit it, the truth is undeniable. Girls and women seldom kill and maim. Boys and men do. They commit 95% of all violent criminal acts in the United States.

School shootings get headlines. Yet the truth is that school shootings account for less than 1% of all homicides among school-age children.<sup>2</sup> Each day, 24 children and young adults aged 5 to 24 years are murdered, and 85% of them are boys or young men.<sup>3</sup> According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, boys account for 94% of all known juvenile killers.<sup>4</sup> In a recent 10-year period, the number of children known to have committed murder has increased 211% among boys and 34% among girls.<sup>4</sup>

The common denominator in teen homicides is boys killing boys with guns.<sup>5</sup> More than half again as many boys as girls in the United States have access to guns.<sup>6</sup> One in 10 high school boys carries guns to school—compared with

only about 1 in 70 girls.<sup>7</sup> Among college students nationally, more than 1 of 10 men carries a gun or other weapon, nearly three times the number of women who do<sup>8</sup>; 6% of college men have a working firearm at school, four times the number of college women.<sup>9</sup> Among 15- to 19-year-olds, nearly 90% of homicides are firearm related and nearly 4 out of 5 victims are boys.<sup>3,10</sup>

As a society, we talk about stricter gun-control laws. We talk about banning assault weapons. But if the problem is simply guns, why is it that girls so seldom carry them? And why do more boys than girls have access to guns?

The truth is, we never ask these questions. We take it for granted that boys, not girls, use guns. As long as we take this fact for granted, we will never stop to ask, "Why *boys*?"

Officially, we tell boys not to fight. And for good reason. Fighting precedes most teenage homicides and is often a necessary, if not a sufficient, cause.<sup>11</sup> Yet on television, boys are 60% more likely than girls to be shown using violence—and to be showing that violence is an effective means for male characters to meet their objectives without consequences.<sup>12</sup> Three out of 4 Americans believe that a boy *should* have a few fist fights while he is growing up.<sup>13</sup> Not surprisingly, half of all boys in high school get into a fight each year,<sup>7</sup> and nearly 1 in 7 college men in California has been in a physical fight in a recent year.<sup>14</sup>

The suicide mission at Columbine High School in Littleton was carried out by boys who were in pain. But in America, we do not teach boys how to talk about their pain. Instead, we teach them to manage their feelings through anger and aggression. It is acceptable for young men to feel angry; it is not acceptable for them to feel sad.

When boys *do* need help, research shows that we actually discourage them from getting it.<sup>15</sup> It is no wonder, then, that when they are depressed, boys and young men are more likely than girls and young women to withdraw from their

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friends and families.<sup>16,17</sup> Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the two Columbine High School assassins, were withdrawn. It was a warning sign that went unnoticed.

We ask ourselves why we fail to see the warning signs. But it is warning signs in boys, specifically, that we do not see. From the day they are born, adults perceive boys as being stronger and less vulnerable than girls.<sup>15,18</sup> When a boy shows signs of sadness, we interpret them, instead, as signs of anger.<sup>15,17,18</sup> The fact is that boys and young men are emotionally fragile. They account for 6 of 7 suicides among children and young adults.<sup>3</sup> However, it is difficult for us to see weakness and vulnerability in our boys.

What, then, is the answer? There is no simple answer. But one thing is clear: We can no longer afford to overlook the violence of young men and boys.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps we can start by recognizing that boys are not *naturally* violent and aggressive. Although male hormones may be associated with violence, boys are also taught to be violent, and causation goes in both directions: the violence and aggression boys learn to demonstrate elevates their testosterone levels.<sup>20</sup>

We need to acknowledge, as a society, that we are giving boys conflicting messages and that these conflicting messages are leaving boys confused, angry, and scared.<sup>17</sup> We also need to rethink how we teach boys to be boys. Fortunately, there are strategies<sup>21</sup> and new research that can help us to do this. Research indicating, for example, that violence is often used to prove or defend one's manliness<sup>15,22</sup> and that beliefs about masculinity can predict whether a man or boy is prone to get angry.<sup>23</sup>

Most important, any answer to the question of violence must begin with a question about gender. Only then will we begin to understand why it is that *boys* kill.

#### NOTE

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