

# Opinion

## Children at Risk

*Hon. Justice Marvin A. Zuker, Ontario Court of Justice, Canada*

### Introduction

Every year, more than 600 children under age 9 become murder victims in the USA. They are too young to provoke violence. According to statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an average of 160 children ages 5 to 9 are murdered every year. Overall, 643 children under the age of 9 were killed in 1997, the most recent year for which FBI statistics are available. About 90% were victims of domestic abuse. Children die violently in three ways: they take the brunt of someone's misdirected anger; they're in the house when parents start fighting; or they're caught in cross fire in the streets. In any case, they are innocent victims. That's what makes their victimisation infuriating. There's no rhyme or reason to it.

'They'll bury me in Evergreen Cemetery', says the boy sitting knee to knee with me. Sixteen years old- imagining his death. Twenty years ago – even 10 – I might have gently touched his arm and said: 'No child, no. It's just a nightmare'. But I look across the room. Hanging skewed on the wall is a pencil drawing by a teenage boy, Jason, who is dead. Shot to death at 17. On another wall hangs art drawn by another boy, Norman, who is now dead; a charcoal copy of Michelangelo's hand of man reaching for that of God. Not long after giving me this drawing, Norman shot himself. So I listen while this boy talks, 'I keep thinkin' how my funeral gonna be,' he says. 'My friends, my mom, my uncles, my aunts, my gramom crying by my casket. My mom saying I told him ... I told him'. 'I got a feeling it'll be in St. Joseph's,' he continues. 'stained glass windows' carpets on the floor. The bulletin with my picture will say "In Remembrance of ...". And it'll say: "Why did he have to leave us? He was a nice child. Very respectful. Smart. He can't be gone".

### What Makes a Boy Imagine His Own Death?

In the last 15 years more than 50,000 children have been killed by guns, roughly equivalent to the number of Americans killed in the Vietnam War. But no marble marks the death of these children. 'A little kid shouldn't be watchin' a dad beat up his mom,' a 15 year-old boy tells me. 'Shouldn't have to be runnin' to hide under the bed. Shouldn't have to be runnin' to call the cops. Shouldn't be afraid to go home, scared of his dad. Shouldn't be watchin' his mom cry. Not like I did'.

I look at kids' report cards at school while in detention, and I am amazed by the leaps many make. They often show a year's progress in reading, maybe two years in math, achieved in just a few months. I used to wonder why, but now I understand. The first thing we give a boy or a

girl is the gift of feeling safe. No bullets ripping by their door, no need for drop-down drills. A child in terror cannot learn; terror freezes the brain. A child released from terror is liberated to learn, to play, to be a child. Children who live in terror rarely play. A teenager without the necessary protections of childhood – feeling safe, the nurturing of love, ever present role models – creates his own: the posse, the fits, the guns, the boom-box music, the deep-away swagger that shouts, ‘Don’t Mess With Me’.

You touch the bullet hole in his leg, metal lodging tight against bone, He talks about a night of playing chicken, the latest fad: driving the wrong way down one-way streets at 50 miles an hour. Defying and tempting death. Why put off sex or drugs or dangerous fun for a future that will never come? Billy, age 17, a healthy, strapping boy – writes his story for the center’s student newspaper:

If I could have a dream come true, I would be an astronaut – and stay out in space  
– the moon, the sky.

Away from guns and ride-bys and everyday fights.

Away from gangs and drugs and burned out houses and speeding cars that run  
down little kids. Close to God, An’ peace.

### **What to do after Burying your 10-Year-Old**

It’s the ninth conversation you’ve had with your child this week. Today, you tell her about the flowers you bought, and the movie you saw last night. You tell her all the people who miss her – her brothers, her aunt. Tears stream down as you tell her you miss her too. You hope she knows. You walk away from her grave feeling emptier still. For the fifteenth night in a row, you are awakened by your child’s voice. You wish none of this was happening. You wish you hadn’t let her go to school that day. It’s been three weeks since the funeral. You are comforted by the sight of her things, her hairbrush, still on the bathroom counter. Her bike, still leaning against the garage door. The piano that she played, now silent. Sometimes, you even catch yourself smelling the sweater she wanted you to wash that morning. Her room is still the way she left it when she went to school that morning.

Back in the living room, you sit at the piano, and begin playing her favourite song. It’s been five months since the funeral. Some days, you’re able to forget for a moment. You’re doing a crossword puzzle – what’s another word for ‘spiral’ that begins with a ‘H’? – when the phone rings. It’s an old friend. ‘How are you?’ she asks. ‘And how are the kids?’ You thought you wouldn’t have to break the news anymore. A long silence. A deep breath. She’s dead, you say. You hang up the phone. Then throw it across the room.

### **Could this be your Child? Charles, Nathaniel, Jamie, Kip**

Hopefully, not. Potentially, yes. Until there are more parents who know about their children, there will be more parents who wish they did.

Charles Starkweather was 19 in 1958 when he led Carole Fugate, 14, on a weekend killing spree across Nebraska and Wyoming in which 11 people were shot, stabbed and strangled to death.

Hours before his death in the electric chair, he was asked if he would donate his eyes for medical use. 'Hell no', he said 'No one ever did anything for me. Why should I do anything for anyone else?'

To look at a photograph of Nathaniel Abraham is to search for the face of a child. Nathaniel, 13, convicted for planting himself on a hillside in a Detroit suburb, shot a stranger walking out of a convenience store, and killing him, a crime he committed at the age of 11.

The problem we're facing is that boys are not being nurtured and cared for toward adulthood. They're not being taught to control their emotions, they're not being taught to be men. The cases of Kip Kinkel and Nathaniel Abraham raise troubling questions because defence psychologists testified that these boys had emotional difficulties. Kip was said to have told doctors during his sentencing hearing that since the age of 12 he had heard voices ordering him to kill. Psychologists said Nathaniel had below-average intelligence and significant difficulties in controlling his emotions – particularly anger. Counselling and other intervention should begin early enough to prevent violent crimes.

We need our children hearing adults say clearly and promptly, 'You can't do this'. Instead, they get the message that adults are indifferent and that's the worst message you can send.

In rural Giles County, Tenn., on Nov 15, 1995, before school shootings regularly made headlines – a slight 17-year-old strode down the hall of Richland School with his black .22 Remington Viper. His name was Jamie Rouse, and as always, he was dressed in black. He walked up to two female teachers who were chatting in the hall, and without a word shot each of them in the head. One teacher was gravely wounded, the other died. Then Jamie Rouse smiled and aimed for the school's football coach. But a student named Diane Collins happened to cross his path. A bullet tore through her throat. She was 16 when she died that day.

As his senior year began, he submitted his entry for the yearbook: 'I, Satan, James Rouse, leave my bad memories here to my two brothers'. By that time, according to testimony at his trial, Jamie Rouse was working nights, taking Max Alert to stay awake and Sominex to get to sleep, and listening to heavy metal music cranked very loud because it drowned out the voices in his head that he later told psychiatrists he had been hearing at the time. Many of the rampage killers we know of suffer from severe psychosis, are known by people in their circles as being noticeably ill and needing help, yet receive insufficient or inconsistent treatment from a mental health system that seemed incapable of helping these especially intractable patients.

One spring day, Kipland P. Kinkel, a freckle-faced boy with a history of behavior problems in school, disrupted his ninth-grade literature class by abruptly yelling out loud, 'God damn this voice inside my head!' His teacher took immediate action. He wrote up a disciplinary note. 'In the future,' it asked, 'what could you do different to prevent this problem?' Kip dutifully filled out the answer: 'Not to say 'Damn'. The note was signed by the teacher. Kip took it home to his mother, and she signed it too. Nobody paid attention to the part about the voice inside Kip's head. One month later, on May 20, 1998, Kip was suspended from school for buying a stolen gun and stashing it in his locker. That afternoon, back at home in a wooded neighborhood called Shangri La, Kip Kinkel, 15, shot his father and then his mother. The next morning he drove to his school in Springfield, Ore., and shot 24 people in the cafeteria, killing two students.

His mother took him to a therapist. Kip showed symptoms, the therapist noted, of ‘major depressive disorder,’ and was prescribed Prozac. But William Kinkel, Kip’s father, did not approve of therapy, and never attended the sessions. After nine therapy sessions and three months of summer vacation on Prozac, Kip’s behavior improved, so his parents discontinued the therapy and the medication. Kip’s father bought the Glock semiautomatic pistol that his son had been pestering him for.

‘I don’t care if you’re sick, if you’re insane, if you’re crazy,’ said Jacob Tyker, one of the students who finally tackled Kip, despite gunshot wounds in his own chest and arm. ‘I don’t care. I think prison, a lifetime in prison is too good for you. If a dog was to go insane and if a dog got rabid and it bit someone, you destroy it. So I stand here and I ask, ‘why haven’t you been destroyed? I question myself for not pulling the trigger’.

We should of course, as much as we can, celebrate the living, when the spirit of survivors triumph over the intent of a murderous rampage. The kids of Columbine high have that spirit. They were real people with futures: Casie Bernall, 17; Steve Curnow, 14; Corey DePooter, 17; Kelly Fleming, 16; Matthew Kechter, 16; Daniel Mauser, 15; Daniel Rohrbouogh, 15; Rachel Scott, 17; Isaiah Shoels, 18; John Tomlin, 16; Lauren Townsend, 18; and Kyle Velasquez, 16.

Then there was Dave Sanders. Sanders, 47 was a dedicated, caring teacher, coach of the girls’ basketball team and father of three. He also was one very courageous man, standing in a hallway directing terrified students towards safety even as one of the murderers dressed in a black trench coat gunned him down dead. The calculated murder-suicide pact of two troubled teens never will be buried in anyone’s mind, nor should it. The worst slaughter in U.S high school history never was about Jocks vs. Nerds, the dark music of Marilyn Manson, the rise of neo-Nazism or anything else with which we can alleviate our guilt. It’s simple. We’ve failed our children. Now we know how horrific the consequences can be.

Freud may have been right. Children are complete egotists. They have intense needs and will strive ruthlessly to satisfy them. They know when they’re being shortchanged by adults, and they don’t much care why. They don’t want our money or our BMWs, not really. They want one thing: us.

They are Hollywood words, describing fantasies of revenge that flicker, in some form, through the minds of thousands of hurt and raging adolescents boys, yet are almost never acted on. ‘You all better hide in your houses because I’m coming for everyone, and I will shoot to kill and I will kill everything’. But Eric Harris, who is believed to have written these phrases last year in an Internet message, did not stop at words, but crossed into the world of action. And as experts in child psychology struggle to extract some kind of meaning or lesson from the terrifying events at Columbine High School, in Littleton, Colo., it is this passage, and the environment that nourished it, that they seek to understand.

No one can predict which troubled child will express rage, alienation and impotence in small ways, which in extreme and violent actions. Money for research on school violence – and for mental health services for vulnerable children – lags far behind public concerns. We don’t think as much about our children and their future as we do about how to clean up streams.

## **The Adults' Role**

Adults play a crucial role in offering children reality testing and balance as they absorb images in the media and on the Internet. The play between fantasy and reality is part of life for everybody. But historically, excursions into fantasy occurred in the context of relationships in which the fantasies could be grounded. The child heard the fairy tales read to him by an adult, and the kids sitting around the campfire were in a group with a leader. The Littleton gunmen did not seem to have a counterbalancing force. In normal development, the process of learning to distinguish fantasy from reality begins at an early age. The boundaries are defined in a thousand small moments, a thousand interchanges between adult and child. At 17 and 18, the Littleton gunmen were clearly old enough to have a firm grasp of death's permanence. These were big kids. Yet the two students, obviously had fundamental failures in the development of their sense of reality and fantasy. In such a case, achieving autonomy, building a capacity for intimate relationships, and learning to regulate emotions and impulses – becomes derailed. And if the adolescent finds a kindred spirit who identifies with his rage and isolation, what conscience and self-control is left may erode, fantasy and reality merge. The result, as we saw in Littleton, was disaster.

The United States has witnessed a string of terrible episodes of violence. They seem almost inexplicable; the product of some shapeless, nameless, cultural force. Still, these mad moments cannot go unexamined. The horrors have ignited discussions about school safety, crime prevention, law enforcement and the 'culture of violence' that seems to saturate much of modern life.

You can argue about where this discussion should go, but not about its timeliness. Nor about the need to focus also on issues that cannot be so easily regulated. Chief among them: the need for a form of collective attentiveness. In most instances, the warning signs have been evident, at least in retrospect. Sometimes the shooters were victims of ferocious bullying. Sometimes they made plain statements about their intentions. Those who stayed silent sent out alarms by the conditions of their lives: declining grades, increasing isolation, morbid or violent attractions. No such telltale sign was ever enough to predict murder, but each was enough to diagnose dangerous misery.

Perhaps we may not remember exactly how bad school can be for the alienated. However, teachers are overloaded, and administrators too easily isolated. School districts that have enacted strict rules against bullying have taken an important step toward imposing the discipline of civility on their students. But more is required. Even in high school, people must be each other's keepers. If the responsibilities it implies are not crucial to success in school they are increasingly critical to survival.

We have developed a new myth: that social class no longer matters in education and that all children, regardless of background, can achieve to the same high standards if only schools demand it. We term schools, regardless of who attends them 'successful' if average test scores are above the median (typically termed 'grade level' performance), and 'failing' if below. Can we seriously believe this.

Consider how typical middle-class families raise children? 'Infants' first toys are 'touch and feel' books. Toddlers soon 'read' stories from memory. Magnetic letters decorate refrigerator

doors. Sitting on parents' laps, children 'help' compose on computers before they can talk. These children then attend preschool with equally verbal toddlers. They adopt family assumptions that someday they too will become professionals. Expected to attend college, the only question is how selective it will be.

Other children's homes are without books, magnet letters or computers. These children have day care, if they are lucky not preschool. Some enter kindergarten not knowing how to hold pencils. Their poorly paid parents never attended college. Television, not newspapers, dominates their homes. In economically and racially segregated neighbourhoods, their play and schoolmates have similar experiences. Do we really expect typical children in poor communities, even in good schools, to achieve just like typical children in schools where most had a middle-class 'head start'?

On average, with equal school quality, children with more academic support at home have higher achievement. The power of social class will not disappear if we pretend it does not exist. Can we avoid the defeatist myth, that schools make no difference, without bouncing to the other extreme, the they make all the difference? From taking too little responsibility, must schools now take too much? As a Family Court Judge, I see too often a large number of women on public assistance who were sexually abused as children. Women raped or molested as children are more likely to become addicted to alcohol or drugs, to suffer disabling battles with anxiety or depression and become victims of domestic violence. And the cycle never ends. All you have to do is read *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou's autobiographical account of being raped as a child.

Childhood sexual abuse is not confined to the poor, of course, But welfare and sexual abuse are entwined in at least two ways. Children who grow up poor, especially those with single mothers, face an increased risk of being abused. They are more likely to live in dangerous neighbourhoods or with adults impaired by alcohol or drugs. In single-parent families, they are also more likely to be around unrelated men, increasing the pool of potential abusers. And they have one fewer parent to protect them from risks of any sort.

Abused children, in turn, are more likely to have problems that could lead them to welfare as adults. Sexually abused girls are more likely to become teenage mothers. Teenage mothers are more likely to drop out of school. Dropouts, in turn, face reduced job prospects. And once on welfare, those who abuse has caused other problems that researchers call common – like addiction, depression or relationships with violent men – have a harder time leaving the roles through stable jobs or marriages. Many victims of abuse avoid this downward spiral, recovering to lead productive and fulfilling lives. But abused children who are also poor face compounded risks, because they often have other, unrelated problems and fewer people to help. A child from a deprived background is more likely to experience a lasting impact.

Our schools represent one of the safest places a child can be. Yet every day, 13 students on average are suspended, expelled or arrested for bringing a firearm to school. Since the tragedy at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999, more than 5,000 bomb threats have been made at schools. More than 1 million acts of violence, from fistfights to murders to suicides, occur every year.

## Ending It All

To classmates and teachers, Chris Joyner wasn't much different from any of the seventh-graders at Zebulon Middle School in central North Carolina. He was picked on occasionally, students said. They recalled once when some boys shoved him in a school locker. But no one considered the teasing more than an adolescent rite of passage, and no one sensed any serious distress in this quiet 12-year-old. On March 24, 2000, Chris excused himself from his afternoon gym class to use the bathroom. He walked into the boys' room, tied a rope around his neck and hanged himself. Chris became at least the fifth child to commit suicide in school this year, leaving his parents, teachers and classmates posing the same questions that accompany any violent school death. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, at least 15% of all violent deaths in America's schools are child suicides.

It is hard to imagine what gets into a child's head to convince him that life is not worth living anymore. Thousands of children make that decision. More than 2,000 school-age children-10 and younger- take their own lives each year, federal statistics show. Although older teens commit the bulk of deaths, at least 300 children ages 10-14 kill themselves each year. Suicide is the third leading cause of death, behind accidents and homicide.

Some children choose school as the place to die because of the symbolism. If a child thinks his problems stem from bullying, or teachers, or something school related, he may choose suicide there as a way of getting back at the school.

In a chapter titled, *Child Abuse and the Concentration Camp*, Shengold<sup>1</sup> draws risky but persuasive parallels. Taking his cue from Randall Jarrell's observation that abused children grow up in 'one of God's concentration camps', he looks at the underlying mechanisms of extreme victimhood: like camp inmates, the mistreated child begins to identify with the persecutors and take on the guilt of their deeds; and, like those who often become brutal through suffering brutality, the abused child is likely to grow up into an abusive adult. From his contemporary Freudian perspective, Shengold is not optimistic about an end to intimate violence, which he sees as rooted in intrinsic human instincts of murderousness and even cannibalism.

Because of our extreme discomfort with those caught in what we assume is inevitably a special transition time between childhood and adulthood, we have condemned adolescents to a lengthy and unwarranted, ever-expanding period of youthful irrelevance, offering them an unheard-of and unjustified moratorium from the real business of life. Perhaps our mistreatment and misunderstanding of teenagers are a result of our own envy of youth, our hypocritical obsession with sexuality and our failure to really grow up ourselves (as well as our failure to spend enough time with our children).

Teenagers must be treated and educated as the young adults they are and encouraged to participate fully in our social, economic and political life. And if this happens, we might find ourselves free of the vulgar antics and the exploitative style of youth we have lived with in our recent past.

Our childhoods make us what we are. Our hurts and our happiness. Our loves and our hates. Our successes and our failures. All of our childhood experiences are woven into the fabric of our adult characters. If hate gets out of hand for kids at home, it often is fueled later by hate

groups, or sometimes fanned by their anti-hate counterparts. No matter when the hatred gets out of control, it generally is traceable to childhood. Kids learn bigotry from their parents. Bigotry and hate. Love and tolerance. If parents can teach their kids the importance of the difference, they can make a bigger difference than all of our laws. The best solution against hatred is parents speaking openly about the issue with their children. Just as we must talk to our kids about drugs and sex, we need to discuss with them the poison of racism.

On January 20, 1942, 14 men sat around a table at Wannensee, Germany, to decide the best way to do away with world Jewry. Eight of the 14 present held the equivalent of a PhD from some of Germany's finest universities. Young people need more than just an education to combat hate. They need values, and good values must be taught by example at home.

### **The Better The Start, The Stronger The Finish**

For most of our youngest pupils, their start is strong. Nearly all can count to 10 and pick out shapes when they start kindergarten. And 2 in 3 know the alphabet. More than 80% make friends, cooperate and otherwise avoid bad behaviour. All but 3% are in good health. But the news is not as good for children in poverty, single-parent homes and non-English speaking families, and those whose parents did not finish high school. These children are less likely to count to 10 or recite the alphabet or to be in good health. The importance of family background is increasingly more evident as a factor in a child's academic success.

Studies<sup>2</sup> show four main family situations that put pupils at risk for failing tests, repeating grades or dropping out of school. These factors are a single-parent home, parents who did not finish high school, welfare dependency or a family that speaks a language other than English. All need closer attention from policy makers and parents who tend to blame schools for the failure. These difficulties cannot be attributed solely to so-called bad schools, because these children are already behind when they reach the classroom door. In fact, waiting until kindergarten may be too late to intervene in the educational trajectory for many children.

Children who are expelled or suspended are more likely to turn to crime or require welfare, studies show<sup>3</sup>. According to the American Federation of Teachers, society will pay about \$18,000 a year more for each expelled student than the school district would have paid to educate the child<sup>4</sup>. Some jurisdictions recognising the cost, have decided that something more than a zero-tolerance mantra is needed. In Ohio, schools are cutting physical aggression in half through training that teaches problem kids how to cope with their anger. Schools-within-school programs in Virginia and North Carolina separate problem students from classmates, but keep them in school. Texas mandates alternative education for suspended and expelled youngsters, preparing them to return to traditional classes.

Students have a right to expect that their lives will not be endangered in a school building and that the climate is free of threats and violence. Zero-tolerance policies, clearly stated and fairly administered, meet parental and societal expectations and protect the physical well-being of students and faculty. In a recent poll conducted by Who's Who Among American Teachers, teachers observed a toxic trend in their schools over the past 10 years: 81% reported less respect

for authority, 73% noted a decline in ethics and morals, 65% observed less responsible attitudes, and 60% of kids were more self centered.

We must change the climate of our schools by instilling students with basic moral values: respect for others, self-discipline, honesty, compassion, hard work and good citizenship. Teachers involved with character education programs enjoy the orderly climate it fosters and the chance to get the job of teaching done. Having kids abide by certain standards is not something we're doing to the child but something we're doing with the child. Those who stray from, or never practice, public or private morality are made, not born. Character development never stops. The obligations to instill a moral compass in our children is not about moral platitudes, but about a serious commitment to do right by intimates. It is about our ability to love, to care, to restrain our impulses. And we can do it better. Morality has always been the living human community's code of compassion. Discipline is the human being's ability to devote his own physical, mental and emotional drives toward compassion.

Our schools must help parents develop a child's 'ten universally accepted moral competencies: decency, fairness, empathy, self-sacrifice, respect, loyalty, service, responsibility, honesty and honor'. These are the 'bedrock of compassion'. The inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighbourhood and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school.

Money does not buy educational equality. Although the premise of many a crusading volume, including Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*,<sup>5</sup> is that ghetto schools have been allowed to rot, many of the most catastrophically failing school districts, spend far more money per student than do middle-class communities nearby. School spending is not however correlated with school achievement.

The success of Russian, Italian and Irish immigrants three-quarters of a century ago, and many Asian and Hispanic immigrants today, makes it plain that the issue has less to do with poverty as such than with culture, with conscious values as well as unconscious behaviour.

Kenneth Clark first popularised the phrase 'the pathology of the ghetto', in *Dark Ghetto*, published in 1965. Clark wrote bluntly about how 'the stigma of racial inferiority' leads to self-destructive behaviour, including violence, alcohol and drug abuse, family breakdown – every social pathology save suicide. But Clark understood this damage as emotional and psychological, not cognitive. Clark did not reckon with the cognitive harm done to children who grow up in a world without books or even stimulating games, whose natural curiosity is regularly squashed, who are isolated from the world beyond their neighbourhood. Social scientists use the expression 'human capital' and 'social capital' to describe and quantify these effects. 'Human capital' was invented by the economist Theodore Schultz in 1960 to refer to all those human capacities, developed by education, that can be used productively – the capacity to deal in abstractions, to recognise and adhere to rules, to use language at a high level. Human capital, like other forms of capital, accumulates over generations; it is a thing that parents 'give' to their children then successfully deploy in school, allowing them to bequeath more human capital to their own children. 'Social capital' refers to the benefits of strong social bonds.

A long-term study of the Abecedarian Project in North Carolina<sup>6</sup>, a preschool program financed largely by the federal government, shows that children who received just such early preparation were more likely than a control group to graduate from high school, attend college and get higher grades and better scores on cognitive tests.

We must be in the business of trying to break cycles. Take the teen mother. She probably dropped out. Her child may have had a low birth weight. No nutrition, prenatal care and no education. Who takes care of her baby, and makes sure that any developmental lags are diagnosed and treated? Will these mothers go on to high school? The difference in language and number competence between lower, and middle-class children maybe substantial by first grade. The critical task is thus to change the ecology of the lower-class child in order to increase the probability that he will be more successful in attaining normative skills.

There are two ways of improving 3- and 4-year olds' cognitive skills: we can change their preschool experiences and we can change their home experiences. Changing preschool is less important but easier than changing homes.

Ghetto children need an enveloping environment that is secure and nourishing, as the streets and often the home itself are not. And school is not enveloping enough. You can't take children away from their mothers, but you can place them in an alternative environment for much of the day (which the end of welfare, in any case, had now made indispensable). There's a strong argument for universally available after-school activities. The French have created, in the form of the *ecole maternelle*, an extraordinarily effective and widely admired form of preschool that reaches 85% of 3- to 5-year-olds. For the French, universal public education effectively starts at 3.

The breakdown of families means that we have to ask more of social institutions – and not just schools – than we used to. As Lawrence Katz<sup>7</sup>, a Harvard economist, puts it, 'You can't change the parents, but you can change the neighbourhood'. Katz points to the famous Gautreaux experiment in Chicago, in which families were given subsidies to move from high-poverty neighbourhoods to the suburb; studies have found that children in these families were far more successful academically than would have otherwise been predicted.

Has the memory of the Depression, with its 'there but for the grace of God' reflex, passed out of politics and culture? Once it was the rich who seemed to live on an island of their own; now it is the poor. Their isolation makes them gratifyingly invisible. The drop in crime even makes the poor seem like less of a threat to the prosperous? It frees us to contemplate, the spiritual hollowness of plenty. Maybe our prosperity will continue to seem hollow as long as so many 3-year-old face such grim prospects.

Research<sup>8</sup> suggests that by exposing children to certain risk factors, communities create an environment conducive to violence, regardless of whether they are urban or rural, black or white, rich or poor. Among the 19 identified risk factors are exposure to violence in the media, access to firearms, easy availability of drugs and alcohol, community attitude favourable to deviant behaviour, family conflict management problems. While exposure to any or all of the factors does not mean a child will necessarily turn to violence, their presence increases the likelihood.

Today's families are less stable. Fewer extended family supports are available to stressed parents. Divorce rates are still high. The result is dramatic, a decline in family structure and less

parental supervision. Alienation in teenagers is nothing new, but it is more apparent than ever in young people today. The result is a generation of children who are all at risk. They are at risk for becoming overwhelmed by the complexity of social and emotional issues that confront our kids on a daily basis. Without strong family support, they become even more susceptible to making the wrong choices and buying into unhealthy alternatives such as drugs, alcohol, teen pregnancy, eating disorders and our greatest fears, murder and teen suicide. The message from so many teachers is: Kids today come with more emotional baggage than earlier generations, and we do not have the preparation, training or time to deal with such issues. Teaching and shaping the minds of young people has always been a demanding and exhausting job. It can be exhilarating, but when children with more complex needs are put into larger schools with larger class sizes, teachers can feel overworked, stressed and burnt out. Some students react by being apathetic, unmotivated and unsuccessful. It is disheartening to see that the national student-to-counselor ratios average 513 to 1 when the American School Counselors Association recommends average ratios of 175 to 1 at all levels and ratios of under 125 to 1 for comprehensive counseling programs at the high-school level<sup>9</sup>. Some states, such as California, do not even mandate counselors in schools; decisions are left up to the discretion of individual district boards.

If our children do not receive preventive services integrated into the brick and mortar of the school mission and agenda, beginning with kindergarten, the price will be crisis and serious intervention efforts as we struggle to pick up the pieces and deal with tragedies in the lives of our young.

How can we create a non-violent and nurturing environment in our schools? The solution seems simple, but it is difficult to achieve. We simply must do a better job of reaching out and establishing connections with our youngsters, and this is a job for all of us: school personnel, families and the community at large. The concept of collaboration and shared responsibility is not new. Research has demonstrated repeatedly that schools, families and communities together can do a great deal to prevent violence.

Connecting with students requires a systematic framework that invites students to give input, and in turn feel like respected members of their school community. A Student Assistance Program Model, which is mandated in many states, is a place to start. But real prevention is difficult. It means addressing the underlying causes of violence in a proactive way. Prevention means accepting the fact that an investment in, and a commitment to, preventive programming in all grades is a must. How can we ignore the fact that children as young as 10 have been reported committing assorted acts of violence ranging from assault to murder? What other meaning can we take from the fact that, according to the FBI, the arrest rate for children ages 14 to 17 for violent crimes rose 46.3% between 1989 and 1994 to become the most violent age group in the United States?

It does take a village to raise a child, especially in today's society. But schools must take the lead, and sooner rather than later. By building stronger bridges – partnerships between schools, students, families and communities – we can reclaim our youth and return our schools to halls of learning and not killing fields.

There was a man wandering in the deep jungle, not knowing where he was. Suddenly he saw an older man walking toward him so he cried out: Help me, I am lost'. The older fellow shook his head and said he was lost too but he did have one piece of advice. He looked back over his shoulder. 'Don't go that way. I've tried it already'. It is all about four words – 'the future of hope'. If our world and our politicians take the old path they will wander in the forest forever. The unspoken question mark at the end of the four words would be removed and 'finished' could be put instead.

The little boy behind the bars was weeping copiously, his tears hot with despair. The bars were spaced so that an adult head could not easily pass through them to touch the desolate child they held captive. It will be all right. Everything will be all right. The child in this caged hospital bed had been momentarily engulfed by a sharp understanding of his true situation, that he saw its overwhelming sadness, its irreversibility, his powerlessness. What could he do but rage? He is an AIDS baby, now past his fourth birthday. He cannot speak words, only make noises, because the disease has attacked his brain, causing aphasia. He cannot walk and has little control over his body from the waist down. He may not have words, but knows what is happening to him. He is almost asleep, holding the suddenly enormous book to his fragile body. In all of this, there comes to us the sentence from John's Gospel: 'now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene'. Sometimes, all we can do for someone who is suffering is to stand by his cross. Sometimes, it is enough.

It has been said that we, the '60s generation, the lost sheep, finally are returning to the fold, and that the business of religion and God is making a big comeback. However, our search for faith is not about returning to the safe sanctuary of our childhood. Our adult search is more complex. It is informed by the totality of our experiences and knowledge. We are no longer innocent. Faith is the ability to look at the world we have created and see possibility, even as we acknowledge our capacity for destruction. It is the glue that holds our fractured pieces together and allows us to continue beyond all reason. The faith we seek is not the comfort of having all the answers. Rather, it is the will to keep asking the questions. Faith is the voice in the night that says we will go on.

We must all go on.

## Endnotes

- 1 Leonard Shengold. *Soul Murder Revisited. Thoughts about Therapy, Hate, Love and Memory*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.
- 2 Kindergarten study released by the U.S. Department of Education, February 2000. Web address <http://nces.ed.gov/ecls/kindergarten/studybrief.htm>
- 3 Editorial, USA Today, November 22, 1999.
- 4 Editorial, USA Today, November 22, 1999.
- 5 *Jonathan Kozol, Savage Inequalities*, Crown Publishers, Inc.
- 6 Abecedarian Project, web site: <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/-abc/embargoed/executivesummary.htm>

- 7 Lawrence Katz, quoted in 'What no School Can Do' by James Traub, New York Times Magazine, May 18, 2000. Found on the internet at <http://www.cceeb.org/cpr/auto-news2000116noschool.html>. In 1969, an U.S. federal court ruled that Chicago's public housing purposely built in the ghetto to further segregation. The housing authority was ordered to subsidise apartment rentals, in the suburbs, for low-income families. A few decades later, the children of the families who moved to the suburbs have achieved substantially better school results than those who remained in the ghetto. See *Gautreaux v. Kemp*, 132 F.R.D. 193 (1990), *Gautreaux v. Pierce* 548, F. Supp. 1284 (1982), 690 F. 2d 616 (1982), 707 F. 2d 265 (1983).
- 8 ABA Journal, American Bar Association, Debra Baker, September 1999 at p. 51.
- 9 Ann Marie Lenhardt and Michael Haselswendt, *School Violence*, The Buffalo News, page H1 at page H5, June 13, 1999.