

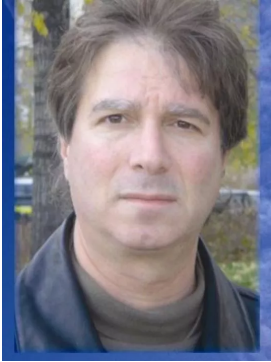
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What we learned about youth violence: Youth suffer in silence

San Angelo Published 8:45 a.m. CT Sept. 6, 2017



(Photo: Contributed photo)

There is an old saying about violence: "People who do violence either don't know better or don't care." Having just completed three consecutive years of doing an in-school violence and bullying prevention program in middle schools and high schools reaching 9,436 youth, we can now safely rule out that kids don't care.

We learned much about youth through our program, and the most important thing we learned is that no matter what kids say or do, the fact is that they all have feelings. We can't deny it, and they can't deny it.

When a youth's feelings take a turn for the worse, a staggering number of them suffer in silence. And this "suffering in silence" takes a huge toll on them. It's true that a wound neglected is a wound infected. That is why I now always take everything a youth says to me – good, bad or indifferent – very seriously. You cannot take it for granted youth will share their thoughts, feelings and beliefs with you — or anyone.

We have also learned that youth are just as smart as adults. We adults just have more information through experience and education. When youth gain this education and these experiences through discussion and live role playing, we found that they instinctively learn to recognize true choices and that they almost always make the right choices.

Also, many young people don't see consequences coming. Some falsely believe that "everyone gets away with everything" or "jail is not that bad." Having done our presentation in youth detention facilities, I can say that prison is the unhappiest place in the world for youth. All incarcerated youth say the same thing: "I want to go home." And most are shocked to be in prison.

We think that's because some youth don't really understand adults on the issues of violence and peace. They don't realize the heightened importance these issues have. We might not be able to stop someone from doing violence the first time, but we sure can, and will, stop them from doing it a second time.

Violence, bullying and abuse are the head of the snake. They are the root causes of all human problems, including substance abuse, mental health issues and even human survival. We have not made great strides in these other areas because we have not yet hit the nail on the head, which is fighting and dramatically reducing violence, bullying and abuse.

Homicide is the leading cause of death for African-Americans ages 10-24. America has no greater problem because it has no greater asset than its youth. As adults, we must get more involved in what often looks like a youth-versus-youth war here in the U.S. and around the world. This is evident in the areas of sexual violence, terrorism and especially conventional warfare.

There are so many promising and proven ways to reduce violence in youth, such as family involvement, mentoring, education, increased access to health services, hospital/community interventions, faith counseling, mediation, meditation, pets, fun youth activities and gainful employment.

Our experience is that most violence prevention programs work if you are there, you care and you try. Solutions cannot be "mailed in" and you cannot just bring them into your world; you need to meet them halfway in "their world."

What kids will learn the most is not the contents of the program but the kindness and equality an adult gave them in-person. Otherwise, even the finest programs won't trickle down to their world. Teamwork, adults and youth working together, equally, in person, side-by-side, is a powerful solution to end youth violence, bullying and abuse. But we need to recognize equality and practice equity to get there.

Yes, it takes a village, but it must be a fair and just village that excludes no one. For as another old saying goes, if you are not at the table, you are on the menu.

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