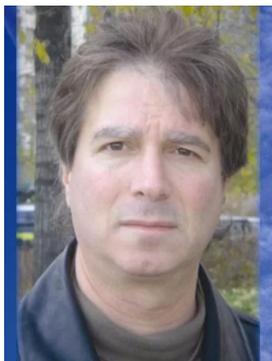


How to think about youth violence

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(Photo: Submitted)

There is an old saying about violence: "People who do violence either don't know better or don't care."

Our organization, a nonprofit called YouthAlert!, has now completely ruled out that kids don't care. The biggest thing our organization has learned in our three years is that no matter what kids say or do, the reality is that they all have feelings. And when you multiply those feelings by 10, you might get close to a youth's reality.

Having just completed three straight years of doing our in-school violence and bullying prevention program in middle schools and high schools throughout the United States, reaching 9,436 youth, we adults associated with the program learned quite a bit about youth and violence.

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.

We think a person's internal identity is who they really are. That's why we tell youth that all mirrors are liars. Mirrors are not special X-ray machines that can see the real you inside of you.

We think violence, bullying and abuse are the head of the snake. That they are the root cause of all human problems, including substance abuse, mental health issues, and yes, even human survival. I dare say we have not made great strides in all these other areas because we have not hit the nail on the head when it comes to fighting and dramatically reducing violence, bullying and abuse.

Homicide is the leading cause of death for African-Americans ages 10-24 years old. America has no greater asset than its black youth. That is because America 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 America and around the world. This is true in the areas of sexual violence, terrorism and especially conventional war.

We have also learned about a stereotype adults have about youth that appears to be true. Youth don't always see consequences coming. Some youth say "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 a 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 they don't really understand adults on the issue of violence and peace. They don't realize the heightened importance these issues are to us. We might not be able to stop someone from doing violence the first time, but we sure can stop them from doing it a second time.

We think it's true when youth know better they do better, but we also believe that when adults know better we do better. There are so many proven ways to reduce violence, such as family involvement, mentoring, education, increased access to health services, hospital interventions, mediation, even meditation and pets.

Adults should not take it for granted when kids tell us what they think or feel. Many kids will not share their feelings, thoughts, opinions, beliefs or dreams, nor do they have to. That is why I feel so honored when any youth tells me anything. I now always take everything a youth says to me – good, bad, or indifferent – very, very seriously.

Our organization thinks teamwork, adults and youth working together equally, is the solution to youth and adult 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. For as another old saying goes, "if you are not at the table, you are on the menu."

Douglas A. Wain is CEO and executive director of YouthAlert!, a nonprofit 501 (C) (3) organization and public charity.

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