Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them

James Garbarino, Ph.D.
Co-Director,
Family Life
Development
Center
Elizabeth Lee
Vincent Professor,
Human
Development
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY

PERSPECTIVES

For the past 25 years, I have been studying the problem of violence in the lives of children, youth, and families in homes, schools, communities, and war zones around the world (Garbarino, et al) Most recently, in my role as a researcher and expert witness in youth homicide trials, I have been interviewing boys incarcerated for committing crimes of lethal violence Boys commit more than 90% of all lethal assaults and are the predominant perpetrators of nonlethal assaults (Loeber and Farrington, 1998) As a result of my investigations, I have drawn five basic conclusions about why boys turn violent and how we can save them These are conclusions that parents and professionals can use in their efforts to make schools and communities safer

1. Violence prevention is everybody's business. No matter how effective, motivated, and attentive any of us is as a parent, our children go to school with boys who are lost and who have access to lethal weapons. There are boys in every school who have developed a pattern of aggressive behavior, who have established an internal state in which they see themselves as victimized by peers and society, and whose emotions and moral judgments have become harnessed to their aggressive rage. These boys can make the transition to murder readily, if weapons are available and they reach a crisis state Knowing how these boys reach this point and what we can do to reclaim them empowers us to reduce the odds that they will commit acts of lethal violence

2. Children whose difficult temperament and experience put them on track for problems with aggressive behavior need help from parents and teachers to learn to manage their behavior. The problem of lethal youth violence usually starts with early difficulties in relationships that are linked to a combination of difficult "temperament" and negative experience Every parent knows that children come equipped with different temperaments. Some children are easy to parent; others are very challenging. Some are so difficult that no "normal, average" parent will be able to succeed without expert professional advice and support. When it comes to developing patterns of aggression, some of the difficulties lie in being impulsive, emotionally insensitive, having a high activity level, being of less than average intelligence, and being relatively fearless

However, these temperamental problems need not spell doom What matters is how well the parenting and educational experiences of these children meet the challenges posed by their difficult temperaments. Of special concern are two patterns: One is a pattern of escalating conflict in the parent-child relationship, in which parent and young child get caught up in mutually coercive and aversive interactions The other is a gradual process of emotional detachment arising when parents and teachers abandon these children by withdrawing from them in the face of their negative behavior These patterns of response increase the odds that these vulnerable children will become increasingly frustrated and out of sync as they confront the challenges in school. In a culture like ours that legitimizes and models violence, this emotional abandonment is particularly dangerous. Once they are "lost" this way, these children tend to form into aggressive and antisocial peer groups that build negative momentum throughout childhood and into adolescence Thus, parental education starting before children are born and continuing through their adolescence is crucial for preventing violence. In addition, teachers need special skills and a high level of motivation to create classroom environments that prevent violence

3. Child abuse prevention is the cornerstone of preventing lethal youth violence. The most common pathway to the pattern of aggression in young boys is for temperamentally vulnerable children to be the victims of abuse and neglect at home and, as a result, to develop a negative pattern of relating to the world in general This maltreatment can be both physical abuse (beatings) and psychological abuse (rejection)

The negative pattern that results has four parts: (1) being hypervigilant to the negatives (such as threatening gestures) in the social environment around them, (2) being oblivious to the positives (such as smiles), (3) developing a tendency to respond aggressively when frustrated, and (4) drawing the conclusion that aggression brings success in the world. According to research by psychologist Kenneth Dodge and his colleagues (Dodge, Pettit, and Bates, 1997), this negative pattern is the most potent link between an abused child and the development of a pattern of chronically bad behavior and aggression (diagnosed by mental health professionals as "conduct disorder"). Being abused produces a sevenfold increase in the odds of developing conduct disorder. About a third of these children with conduct disorder will eventually become violent, delinquent youths [and about 90% will go on to demonstrate some serious problem in adulthood (Loeber and Farrington, 1998)] Thus, early treatment of abused children must include efforts to change social cognitions to reframe these four foundations of aggression.

This Perspective is based on the author's book *Lost Boys. Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them* (New York: The Free Press, 1999)

Perspectives

4. Detoxifying the social environment of children and youth is essential to protect them from the problem of lethal violence. Troubled, lost boys will be as bad as the social environment around them. I have identified this as the issue of "social toxicity," the presence of social and cultural "poisons" in the world of children and youth, to which lost boys are especially susceptible. Just as asthmatic children are most affected by air pollution, so "psychologically asthmatic" children are most affected by social toxicity.

The glorification of violence on television, in the movies, and in video games is part of this social toxicity, and it affects aggressive boys more than others. The same is true for the size of high schools. Academically marginal students are particularly affected in a negative way by being in big schools (grades 9-12, with more than 500 students). The availability of drugs and guns is another example. Mobilizing community leaders, parents, professionals, and the youngsters themselves can provide a rallying point for improving the social environment.

5. At the core of the youth violence problem is a spiritual crisis. Human beings are not simply animals with complicated brains. Rather, we are spiritual beings having a physical experience. This recognition directs our attention to the multiple spiritual crises in the lives of violent boys. They often have a sense of "meaninglessness," in which they are cut off from a feeling that life has a higher purpose. By the same token, they often have difficulty envisioning themselves in the future. This "terminal thinking" undermines their motivation to contribute to their community and to invest their time and energy in schooling and healthy lifestyles. Finally, they often have lost confidence in the ability and motivation of the adults in their world to protect and care for them. This leads them to adopt the orientation of "juvenile vigilantism." A boy says, "If I join a gang I am 50% safe; if I don't join a gang I am 0% safe." Adults don't enter into the equation.

Nonpunitive, love-oriented religion institutionalizes spirituality and functions as a buffer against social pathology, according to research reviewed by psychologist Andrew Weaver (Weaver et al , 2000). On the other hand, the shallow materialist culture in which we live undermines spirituality and exacerbates these problems. One way to deal with these issues is to have schools join with community leaders to embrace the national character education campaign, as developed, for example, by psychologist Thomas Lickona (Lickona, 1991). Character education offers a strategy to mobilize community good will and convert it to pro-social experiences for kids. It provides a framework in which to pursue an agenda that nourishes spirituality (without invoking constitutionally insoluble issues of church and state).

Over the past 25 years, the percentage of children and youth with mental health and developmental adjustment problems severe enough to warrant professional intervention has doubled, according to the research of psychologist Tom Achenbach (Achenbach and Howell, 1993). The spreading problem of youth violence is related to this development. Dealing with it will require a broad-based prevention perspective on community life and a conscious effort to deal humanely and effectively with troubled, aggressive children, while they are still children, and before they proceed down the path to youth violence.

References

Achenbach, T. and Howell, C. (1993). Are American children's problems getting worse? A thirteen-year comparison. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 32* (6). 1145-1154

Dodge, K , Pettit, G and Bates, J (1997). How the experience of early physical abuse leads children to become chronically aggressive. In D Cicchetti and S Toth (Eds), *Developmental perspectives on child maltreatment* (pp 77-93) San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass

Garbarino, J , Dubrow, N , Kostelny, K and Pardo C (1992). *Children in danger Coping with the consequences of community violence* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Lickona, T (1991) *Educating for character.* New York: Bantam.

Loeber, B , and Farrington D P (1998) *Serious and violent juvenile offenders Risk factors and successful interventions* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc

Weaver, A , Sanford, J , Morgan V, Lichton, A , Larson, D , and Garbarino, J (2000) Research on religious variables in five major adolescent research journals, 1992-1996 *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases 188* (1) *36-44*