

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

By James Garbarino, Ph.D.

Editor's Note: This paper is based upon James Garbarino's book Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them (New York: The Free Press, 1999), and is used with the author's permission.

When my son was 17 we lived on the South Side of Chicago. Our neighborhood bordered some of the city's worst "war zones," the neighborhoods where community and family violence was endemic. Nonetheless, my son felt rather safe by virtue of his middle-class and Anglo position. The daily newspapers and television news affirmed his privileged status: rarely was a white face and an Anglo name to be found among the victims of lethal violence. That was 1993.

Fast forward to 1998. We now lived in Ithaca, New York, a lovely university town in the Finger Lakes Region. People come here to avoid the dangers of big city life. The morning after the school shootings in Jonesboro, Arkansas, in 1998, my 16-year-old daughter sat at the breakfast table reading the newspaper. After she finished the detailed account of the attack by 13-year-old Mitchell Johnson and 11-year-old Andrew Golden on their school mates, in which four people were killed, she looked up and said, "I wonder who it will be in our school?" Her new-found sense of vulnerability is shared by children and youth everywhere, by parents, teachers, and administrators throughout the country.

For the past 25 years I have been studying the problem of violence in the lives of children, youth, and families, in homes, in schools, in communities, and in war zones around the world (c.f. Garbarino, Kostelny, & Dubrow, 1991; Garbarino, Dubrow,

Kostelny, & Pardo, 1992). Most recently I have been interviewing boys incarcerated for committing crimes of lethal violence, both as a researcher and as expert witness in youth homicide trials. My work focuses on boys, who commit more than 90% of all lethal assaults and who are the predominant perpetrators of non-lethal assault as well. As a result of my investigations I have drawn five basic conclusions about why boys turn violent and how we can save them, conclusions that parents and professionals can use in their efforts to make schools and communities safer.

The first of these conclusions is that 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 judgements 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. Thus, **violence prevention is everybody's business.**

My second conclusion is that the problem of lethal youth violence usually starts from a combination of early difficulties in relationships that are linked to a combination of difficult "temperament" and negative experience. Every parent who knows children knows that children come equipped with different temperaments. Some are sunny and easy; others are stormy and difficult. 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.

These temperamental problems do not spell doom, however. 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. The first 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 second 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 meet up with the challenges of paying attention in school. In a culture like ours, in which there is such intense cultural imagery that legitimizes and models violence, this emotional abandonment is particularly dangerous. **Parent education starting before children are born and continuing through until adolescence is crucial for preventing violence.**

Once they are "lost" this way they tend to form into aggressive and anti-social peer groups that build negative momentum throughout childhood and into adolescence. This can be avoided. For example, research by Sheppard Kellam and his colleagues demonstrates that if the first grade classroom is well organized and provides clear messages about behavior, aggressive boys are reclaimed and their aggressive behavior tamed. If the classroom is chaotic these boys form negative peer groups and their problems with aggression intensify. Our own "Let's Talk About Living in a World With Violence" has demonstrated its ability to reduce aggression among third graders when used by a teacher who is comfortable dealing with issues of aggression and who integrates these concerns (and the program materials) into the general classroom curriculum.

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.

Teachers need special skills and a high level of motivation to create classroom environments that prevent violence.

Research shows that patterns of aggression start to become stable and predictable by the time a child is eight years old: unless we do something to intervene, children identified as aggressive at this age will tend to be aggressive 30 years later (becoming adults who are violent in their families, get involved in fights in the community, and drive their cars aggressively).

My third conclusion is that the most common pathway to this pattern of aggression at age eight 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 is successful in the world. According to research by psychologist Kenneth Dodge and his colleagues, this negative pattern is the most potent link between a child being the victim of maltreatment and developing a pattern of chronic bad behavior and aggression (what will be 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 youth (and about 90% will go on to demonstrate some serious problem in adulthood). In juvenile prisons, typically about 80% will have shown this negative pattern. **Child abuse prevention is the cornerstone of preventing lethal youth violence.**

My fourth conclusion is that 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 (with more than 500 students grades 9-12). The availability of drugs and guns is another example. Mobilizing community leaders, parents, professionals, and youth themselves can provide a rallying point for improving the social environment. **Detoxifying the social environment of children and youth is essential to protect children and youth from the problem of lethal violence.**

My fifth conclusion is that 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 sense of life having 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.” The point is that adults don’t enter into the equation.

Non-punitive, love-oriented religion institutionalizes spirituality and functions as a buffer against social pathology, according to research

reviewed by psychologist Andrew Weaver. 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. Character education offers all positive elements within a community a focal point for their actions. 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 there has been a doubling of the percentage of children and youth who have mental health and developmental adjustment problems severe and chronic enough to warrant professional intervention, according to the research of psychologist Tom Achenbach. The spreading problem of youth violence is related to this larger development. Dealing with it will require both a broadly-based prevention perspective on community life, and a conscious focusing of attention of dealing humanely and effectively with troubled, aggressive children in childhood lest they fall in line to proceed down the pathway to youth violence.

James Garbarino, Ph.D. is Co-Director of the Family Life Development Center and Professor, Human Development, at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

