VIOLENCE
IN SCHOOLS:
WHAT MATTERS MOST

**A Starr Commonwealth Perspective on
What We Must Do to Create Safe Schools**

Martin Mitchell, James Longhurst and Dana Jacob
Updated by Derek Allen and Caelan Soma

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A FIRE BURNS WITHIN

On December 1, 1958, 92 students and three teachers died in a fire set by a student at Our Lady of Angels elementary school in Chicago.[1]

Fast forward years later and the headlines are the same — a young man kills 32 staff and students on the Virginia Tech campus before turning the gun on himself.

The boy responsible for the Chicago fire was born in a home for unwed mothers after his mother was allegedly raped by her own stepfather. She, only 15-years-old, planned to put the boy up for adoption, but couldn't let her child go. Troubles at home were compounded by problems experienced in school. He was mercilessly ridiculed and bullied by peers. His mother was aware of the problems and did all she could to protect him. She and her child moved to Chicago, where the young man's childhood was filled with chaos and uncertainty. He began setting fires at the age of five.

It would take years for the truth to come to light and for authorities to connect the young man to the fire. A Chicago judge, concerned about the boy's safety, placed him in Starr Commonwealth's educational and treatment program in Albion, Michigan. There, he completed the treatment program, and was given a clean slate and a second chance, leading him to enlist in the Marines and later return to civilian life as a productive adult.

Seung-Hui Cho, the man responsible for the Virginia Tech shootings, was never afforded that opportunity. Reports after his death reveal a bright, educated man fraught with internal struggles. Cho was reportedly singled out and made fun of during high school, having been told to "go back to China" and teased for the way he talked.[2] There also are indicators that Cho had untreated and undiagnosed highly functioning Autistic Spectrum Disorder.[3] Imagine what it would be like to grow up as he did, feeling unable to speak and freely express himself.

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1 The authors first became aware of the Our Lady of Angels story when a reporter contacted Starr Commonwealth in 1978. The story can be found in Brendtro, L., Ness, A. and Mitchell, M. (2001). No Disposable Kids, Longmont, CO: Sopris West. Information was derived from: Cowan, D. and K. John (1996). To Sleep With the Angels: The Story of a Fire. Chicago: Ivan R. and McBride, M. (1979) The Fire That Will Not Die. Palm Springs, CA: ETC Publications

2 Fleetwood, B. (2007) The Whole Class Started Laughing and Saying "Go Back to China." Retrieved April 20, 2007 from Huffingtonpost.com.

3 Fleetwood, B. (2007) High-Functioning Autism: Do You Know What it Feels Like to Be Torched Alive? Retrieved April 23, 2007 from Huffingtonpost.com.

BOILING OVER

A history of feeling inferior, dehumanized, and marginalized is apparent while watching the videos the killer made prior to his attacks which were released posthumously. He even references the Columbine incident, which leads one to believe he had grown to become increasingly emotionally insensitive to others and psychologically charged by the thought of hurting others.

We all ask, "What makes these people tick?" "How did they end up this way?" and "What in the world would motivate someone to do something so horrible?"

The answers can be difficult. Despite the explosion of attention and horror that a mass murder creates, this type of crime is very rare. Frequently, the person doing the killing finishes off the event by committing suicide. In these cases, it becomes necessary to conduct a psychological autopsy by interviewing those people with whom the person had contact throughout their life (95% of mass murders and serial killers are male) and trying to piece together factors that may have aggravated or mitigated the likelihood of a traumatic experience.

- **Disabling self-esteem and depression**
  Constant marginalization and dehumanization can cripple one's sense of worth and value and make them feel utterly powerless to change their life. They constantly seek out reinforcement from others, but others' attempts to support or recognize are inevitably viewed to be inadequate and insufficient.

- **Substance abuse**
  Victims of chronic psychological abuse can predictably turn to alcohol and/or drugs in an attempt to self-medicate and relieve the excruciating pain. Abusing substances can also enhance and reinforce an already active fantasy life. Carrying out violence in the mind can serve as preparation for the actual event later.

- **Narcissistic thoughts and behavior**
  As perpetrators come to conclude that others in their life are incapable of meeting their needs, they predictably can become increasingly enraged and profoundly self-absorbed. This may prove to be a critical point because this may mark the shift from a lifelong feeling that those who failed them deserve to be hurt. In short, they believe they deserve to die.

TIMELINE OF HIGH-PROFILE SCHOOL VIOLENCE

MAY 2019

1 killed–STEM Schools in Highlands Ranch, Colorado

Two male students were charged with murder and attempted murder; one of them told police he sought to target classmates who had bullied him.

FEB 2018

17 killed– Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida

A former student unleashes a hail of gunfire, killing at least 17 adults and children. Nikolas Cruz, 19, has been charged with 17 counts of premeditated murder.

OCT 2015

9 killed–Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon

Gunman Christopher Sean Harper-Mercer shoots and kills nine people, injuring another nine. The shooter dies after a gun battle with police at the college. Six weapons were recovered at the school; another seven were recovered at Harper-Mercer's home.

DEC 2012

17 killed–Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut

Adam Lanza, 20, murders 20 children, ages six and seven, and six adults, school staff, and faculty. He then turns the gun on himself. Investigating police later find Nancy Lanza, Adam's mother, dead from a gunshot wound.

APR 2007

32 killed–Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia

A gunman, 23-year-old student Seung-Hui Cho, goes on a shooting spree killing 32 people in two locations and wounding an undetermined number of others on campus. The shooter then commits suicide.

MAR 2005

9 killed–Red Lake High School in Red Lake, Minnesota

Jeffrey Weise killed seven people, including a teacher and a security guard, before taking his own life. He had previously killed his grandfather (a police officer) and his grandfather's girlfriend/partner at home before going to school to commit the massacre. Seven others were wounded. Weise was described as a bullied loner with behavior problems and a troubled family.

SEP 2003

2 killed–Rocori High School in Cold Spring, Minnesota

John Jason McLaughlin, 15, fatally shoots two. At his murder trial, it was claimed that McLaughlin had intended only to wound one of the victims, whom he thought had been teasing him.

MAR 1998

5 killed–Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas

Four middle school girls and a teacher were killed and 11 people were wounded when two heavily armed boys, Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden, in full camouflage garb, opened fire on their classmates and teachers during a false fire alarm. Students said Johnson was a braggart and a bully. He was about to face trial for an alleged sexual assault when the shooting occurred. Golden had a history of cruelty to animals.

APR 1999

13 killed–Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed 12 students and a teacher, as well as wounding 24 others, before committing suicide. The massacre provoked debate regarding gun control laws, the availability of firearms in the United States, and gun violence involving youths.

DEC 1997

3 killed–Heath High School in West Paducah, Kentucky

Michael Carneal, 14, kills three students. The principal said the boy's school essays and short stories revealed that he felt weak and picked on.

AUG 1966

18 killed–University of Texas in Austin, Texas

Joseph Whitman, a former U.S. Marine, kills 16 and wounds at least 30 at the University of Texas while shooting from a tower. Police officers Ramiro Martinez and Houston McCoy shoot and kill Whitman in the tower. Whitman had also killed his mother and wife earlier in the day.

This timeline serves as a display of the tragic consequences resulting from students who became attackers. At the root of each incident is a history of abuse, neglect, bullying, harassment, teasing, or victimization.

The events listed here are just a sampling of some of the most high-profile acts of school violence. These do not account for the daily acts of psychological torture and dehumanization taking place in schools that we've become desensitized to.

BEHIND THE MOST DRAMATIC CASES OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE ALMOST ALWAYS IS A HISTORY **OF PEER VICTIMIZATION.**

By reviewing the details of these tragedies, we do not condone or wish to explain away the causes for such heinous crimes. We only seek to understand the issues of dehumanization and desensitization that lead to such horrible tragedy.

FROM STUDENT TO SHOOTER

In analyzing the Virginia Tech massacre, former U.S. Secret Service agents said that there are 10 key factors in almost every school shooting. Those findings are based on the Secret Service's work in protecting the president and profiling assassins. The traits of those willing to assassinate the president are remarkably similar to those of student shooters and can be found in the "Safe School Initiative"study released in 2002 by the Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education:[4]

- Incidents of targeted violence at school rarely were sudden, impulsive acts.
- Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack.
- Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack.
- There is no accurate or useful "profile" of students who engaged in targeted school violence.
- Most attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.
- Most attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal

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4 U.S. Secret Service and U. S. Department of Education. (2002) Safe School Initiative Final Report. Retrieved May 2, 2007 from www.secretservice.gov.

failures. Moreover, many had considered or attempted suicide.
- Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted or injured by others prior to the attack.
- Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack.
- In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity.
- Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most shooting incidents were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention.

According to Georgeann Rooney, a threat assessment specialist at the Secret Service, Cho's attack fit seven of the 10 criteria.[5] While there is no profile per se of students who become attackers, Rooney said, we do know that patterns of abuse, neglect and victimization often are the triggers that can lead to violence.

VICTIMS OFTEN BECOME PERPETRATORS

Students who commit crimes often are victims themselves. Many times those who hurt and hate are young people who have experienced a great deal of threat, rejection, love deprivation, and mistreatment from adults. In fact, children who are victims of abuse and neglect are 67 times more likely to engage in delinquent acts before their teen years.[6]

If not being taught hostility through poor modeling at home, children often find themselves subjected to bullying, teasing, harassment, and victimization at school. Behind the most dramatic cases of school violence almost always is a history of peer victimization.

Most school bullying doesn't turn into violence, but social ridicule, psychological intimidation, and group rejection can be just as devastating. Today's form of bullying is more insidious, leads to further dehumanization and really should be termed psychological torture.

Ridicule, too, is a form of psychological torture. It includes mocking, insults, and ill-humor designed to make others the butt of jokes. Most children being victimized become angry at the mistreatment but feel helpless to stop it. Instead of understanding that their peers are being cruel, they can instead internalize the ridicule and humiliation by concluding that they indeed are worthless individuals who deserve the shame, humiliation and rejection. The continuous ridicule can result in the inability to cope and have hope, oftentimes leading to self-destructive behaviors, depression and possibly violently lashing out at others.

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5 Pelley, S. 2007. The Mind of an Assasin. 60 Minutes. Aired April 22, 2007.

6 Petit, M. and Brooks, T. R. (1998) Abuse and Delinquency: Two Sides of the Same Coin. Reclaiming Children and Youth, 7(2): 77-79.

COMPETING PRIORITIES

The No Child Left Behind Act certainly was aimed at increasing achievement in our students. However, the emphasis on test scores has decreased, and at times eliminated, attention to creating positive and caring school environments. Value lessons are being lost at school, which for so many children is the only place they may see positive role models. While achievement scores might go up, our young people's ability and desire to empathize with others, show social interest, and contribute to a safe and secure school culture declines or disappears.

Our belief is that putting a concentrated and educated emphasis on building a positive and caring culture can result in significant gains in test scores measuring academic achievement. When the environment focuses so much on achievement, the reverse seems to be in place. The basic human elements of kindness and helping our fellow human beings is lost.

The results of ignoring the environment are dramatic. In a recent Bolt Media survey of more than 4,000 teenagers, nearly half said they believe a classmate could be a killer. This large number indicates that many teens are aware of their peers' inability to cope and empathize.[7]

UNDER THE RADAR

The standards for human civility have dipped dangerously low, and while sensationalized acts of school violence make headlines, a great level of hurt and pain occurs daily under the radar in our schools.

Take, for example, the journal of an Albion, Michigan high school student who logged her experiences – 'the good, the bad, the ugly" – for 30 days. She showed her journal to her father, who in turn made copies for the superintendent and school board members.

Upon reading the journal, the school superintendent saw that a "good" day for the student was one in which she and others were not directly intimidated, put down, or verbally/physically assaulted. The superintendent came to see that both students and educational staff at the high school had over time become desensitized to the almost constant hurtful behaviors that never resulted in a major fight or blowup.

Further examples of school violence that fly under the radar are the

7 Fleetwood, B. (2007) The Whole Class Started Laughing and Saying "Go Back to China." Retrieved April 20, 2007 from Huffington-post.com.

deaths of 32 students in one year from Chicago schools.[8] The violent deaths of these students – whether it took place at school or at home – plagues the schools and the community, a predominantly African-American area of Chicago.

Yet the deaths of these youth, which equates to one young life taken every 10 days that school year, receives little media attention compared to the highly organized suburban attacks mentioned earlier that garnered such a flurry of hype.

A GREAT LEVEL OF HURT AND PAIN OCCURS DAILY UNDER THE RADAR IN OUR SCHOOLS.

ATTEMPTS TO DEAL WITH HURTFUL BEHAVIOR

Most schools have policies in place for dealing with bullying, and students and staff recognize that putting others down through dominance and abuse of power is wrong. However, schools that attempt to deal with these problems through "zero-tolerance" policies rarely get to the core of the hurtful behaviors; they simply "get rid" of the so-called problem youth by ejecting them out of the school and into the communities.

But the biggest cause behind bullying continues to be negative peer climates. Too often, students and staff who witness these acts do not speak up when someone is being hurt. Some just accept these hurtful behaviors as simply "part of the school experience" and may even come to believe that the children who are victimized somehow can benefit from this horrible treatment to help them "get tough."

In such educational settings, antisocial groups form and negative peers become potentially destructive. Youth unwittingly and sometimes knowingly encourage negative and violent behavior from each other.

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8 Banchero S. with Rozas A. and Aguilar, A. (2007, May 16) Year of Violence, Grief: 27 City Students Slain. Chicago Tribune. Retrieved June 19, 2007 from chicagtribune.com.

TOO OFTEN, STUDENTS & STAFF WHO WITNESS (BULLYING) DO NOT SPEAK UP WHEN SOMEONE IS BEING HURT.

NATURE VS. NURTURE

Traditional psychology through the years said that we are born selfish and only through moral education, values lessons, and socialization are we able to grow into true helpful, altruistic tendencies.

But science is demonstrating just the opposite. Studies are now showing that children are innately more altruistic than previously thought. Not only are we born more altruistic, but parents and schools can do more to foster a sense of helping others. The altruism-dulling taking place in today's classrooms creates a culture of competition, not cooperation.

Take, for example, new research by the National Institute of Health that shows being generous to others and placing the interests of others before your own, activates a primitive part of the brain that lights up in response to food or sex. This is evidence that morality has biological roots.

MODEL FOR SOLVING PROBLEMS

Originally developed by Sherlock Graham Haynes and further adapted for work with parents and children by Jim Longhurst and other leaders of Starr Commonwealth, the Five Shifts serve as a model for humans to try solving new problems with old methods. As we address the challenges of dehumanization and desensitization, it is helpful to look at these problems from a new perspective.

THE FIVE SHIFTS

1 The first of The Five Shifts is the **Material to the Spiritual**. As humans, we want to make sense out of what we see in our world, sometimes without much conscious thought. When we see someone, we instantly size them up based on their appearance – faces, skin color, clothes, etc. Subconsciously, we make assumptions about what we see and hear, and we think we know subtle things about them.

These value judgments prevent us from truly connecting with young people. Parents must make the shift to get beyond the material or physical, and try to understand what's underneath.

2 Making the shift from the **Cognitive to the Affective** requires using our hearts over our heads, which is especially important for adults because children use their feelings to express themselves. We must focus on how the child is feeling and resist the urge to try to get them to think more clearly.

3 The third shift is **Certainty to Curiosity**, and one that is especially useful in understanding what might lead our children to act out violently. Too often we are certain we know what is going on in our children's lives and that we know what is best for them. Being reluctant to hear new information or ignoring truth that is hard to swallow creates resentment among children.

4 The fourth shift, **Solution to Transformation**, allows us to get beyond looking for an immediate solution. Sometimes, the change we are looking for in youth really starts with a look at ourselves. We must ask if we are modeling behaviors such as respect and dignity that we expect from our children?

5 The final shift, **Discussion and Debate to Dialogue**, teaches us how to effectively communicate with our children. Parents and children can become frustrated when both sides seem to be emphasizing their points, looking for flaws, or looking only to be right. These interactions can do much harm, putting adults and children in adversarial positions.

Listening, letting the words sink in and resisting the urge to respond too quickly, allows us to develop a shared understanding with children.

Again, the ability to listen to troubled children and understand their behaviors isn't an acceptance of those behaviors, but refusing to understand the problems and refusing to change our perception of what's really happening helps perpetuate the violence.

CREATING SAFE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

In order to inoculate our youth against crimes in their own schools, the students need to feel empowered. Peer helping processes must be in place and students should know how to step up and speak out in helping others.

Produced by the U.S. Dept. of Education in collaboration with the nation's premiere law enforcement agency, the U.S. Secret Service, these are recommendations for creating more positive environments in educational settings:

- **Mutual respect:** In a climate of safety, adults and students respect each other.
- **Connection to an adult:** Each student has a connection to at least one adult.
- **Problem-solving focus:** Problems can be resolved without fear, shame or reprisal.
- **Code of openness:** Students bring serious concerns to the attention of adults.
- **Peer helping:** Students try to help friends and peers who are in distress.

When properly applied, these suggestions create greater opportunities for youth to form respectful alliances with one another and adults who can intervene.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) also is an important movement toward a curriculum that fosters more attentive listening, sensitivity to body language, social interest, teamwork, empathy and interpersonal skills. Interestingly, according to the Department of Labor, these are the same skills desired in new employees.

Children are a rich resource for addressing the serious environmental challenges we face in our nation's schools. They have the ability to help and want the best for each other and the adults who serve them. Cultures of caring are achievable, however, the journey to this starts with us achieving a greater awareness of what the true challenges are.

We are not served well by living in a world of denial and not adequately understanding the tragic results of dehumanization and desensitization. We can and will do better.

CONNECTIONS MATTER

If we can do one thing to help prevent school shootings, it is to make sure every student feels connected to someone at school. There is a difference between having rapport with a student and establishing a relationship with them. Creating connections goes beyond rapport. Relationship building requires intention, curiosity and time taken to really understand a student's private logic. If we assume, as professionals, clinicians and parents, that we know what matters most to a student, we will miss the endless opportunities we have to connect. Instead, we must show consistent interest and a strong desire to really know a student.

Private logic is a complex list of thoughts related to experiences. Experiences shape the way we see ourselves, others and the world around us. For example, the private logic of children who have been abused might be, "I will fight any person that I feel is a threat to me, and any person who tries to control me, because if I do not, I will be hurt again, and again and again." Another might be, "I will do whatever I need to do to control you and your responses to me in order to survive."

Once we understand a student's private logic, we know what kinds of experiences are needed for them to feel connected, safe and of value to others. Attempting to reassure a student with words alone rarely helps. Private logic is created by previous experiences and will only be altered if it is replaced with a different, strength-based logic as a result of new experiences.

For more information on trauma-informed and resilience-focused resources for schools and districts go to **www.starr.org/programs**.

START WITH STARR FOR RESOURCES, TRAINING, AND CERTIFICATION FOR YOUR STAFF.

STARR
COMMONWEALTH

For more than a century, Starr Commonwealth has operated under founder Floyd Starr's belief that "there is no such thing as a bad child." Now in our 106th year of providing strength-based services for children, youth, families, and communities, Starr Commonwealth's mission remains:

To lead with courage to create positive experiences so that all children, families, and communities flourish.

A 501 (c)(3) human service organization, Starr operates a full spectrum of programs including residential treatment, community-based services, and professional training, all of which focus on identifying, treating, and healing trauma and pain-based behavior and building resiliency in children and families.

Starr provides guidance and expertise to "helpers" from around the world in the form of research, publications, e-learning courses, in-person trainings, conferences, and events. Professional certifications and school/agency-wide accreditation are an additional extension of these services, where school staff, as an example, are being trained to identify new ways to see, address, and heal the root-causes of problematic behaviors. Through this new trauma informed mindset, all school staff have the ability and confidence to create new connections with their students, and interaction-by-interaction, build a safe, respectful, and supportive environment for all to learn, grow, and flourish.

Starr Professional Training and Coaching is the primary delivery vehicle for our 100+ years of knowledge and experience, with the Circle of Courage and its four universal growth needs – belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity – forming its core. This profoundly impactful model allows Starr to see greatness and foster healing in ALL children.

DRIVEN TO HEAL

13725 Starr Commonwealth Road, Albion, MI 49224
800.837.5591 | www.starr.org