

WHY TEENAGERS TURN TO EXTREME VIOLENCE

By Bruce Narramore, Ph.D.

"SCHOOL MASSACRE" and "DAY OF TERROR" screamed newspaper headlines reporting the carnage in Littleton, Colorado. It was the day two armed teenagers killed twelve fellow students, a teacher, and themselves, and wounded twenty-three more. That four-hour siege in 1999 at Columbine High School near Denver, Colorado, was the most violent day in the history of the United States education up to that point. It followed six other murderous school shootings in less than two years. In all, these killings took the lives of more than two dozen other students and teachers. In Jonesboro, Arkansas, the shooters were only eleven and thirteen years of age.

These disasters shock and sadden. We are appalled that such carnage can happen in America, let alone in a town like Paducah, Kentucky, or at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. We sorrow for young people whose lives were cruelly ended. We grieve for families who lost a parent, children, friends, and neighbors. And in the middle of the shocking horror of these seemingly senseless tragedies come our questions: *How can this happen? What went wrong? What in the world is the matter with a child who would ruthlessly murder schoolmates, teachers, parents, and others?* The answers are as different as the teens and young adults involved. However, several common characteristics may be found in the lives and emotions of children and young adults who commit these murderous acts.

1. Anger and Resentment

You simply do not commit murder unless you are bitter, angry, and resentful. Children and teenagers who kill live with rage for years. Sometimes it is obvious to those who know them: counterculture lifestyles and dress, hair, music, looks, and friends that convey, *I'm angry and I don't want to be like the rest of you. I don't want to fit in. I don't like the establishment.* Sometimes these kids run in cliques or unofficial clubs; sometimes they are members of tightly organized gangs or neo-Nazi organizations. Their attitudes and actions reveal deep bitterness. The two Colorado youths who destroyed so many of their fellow students' lives purportedly belonged to an informal group called the "Trench Coat Mafia". Members wore ankle length black trench coats, dark sunglasses, and black berets. They spent much of their free time playing war games and boasting of the guns they owned.

Some angry adolescents hide their resentments so well that most observers are shocked when they turn to violence. These teens may feel angry inside for years. Violence may be in their television programs and movies, their video games and books, and their lived fantasies, but their behavior shows few signs of their deep rage. People who know these teens nearly always remark, "I can't believe it. He was such a quiet person." Some even say, "He always seemed like a nice kid who never caused any trouble." But beneath the quiet exterior lies an emotional battle that has long been raging. When old enough and strong enough to carry out their vengeful fantasies, these angry teens do. The Bible's description is pointed: "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9, King James Version).

Nearly all violent teenagers grow up in a home in which there is either violence or there are serious emotional and relational problems, problems that may or may not be apparent to those outside the family. When children see parents fight, argue, and blame everyone else for their problems, they learn to handle their problems in the same way. In other families there are silent battles, emotionally uninvolved parents, or parents who seriously misjudge their teen and his or her inner world. It is not uncommon to read that the parent of a violent teenage says, "He didn't mean to hurt anyone."

Understandably, parents are often horrified and devastated. They may have difficulty accepting what their child has done. But one cannot help but wonder what kind of thinking and relating was going on in a home where, after

a teenager has murdered five people and wounded ten others, the parent says, "He didn't mean to hurt anyone." When parents are this incredibly naive or prone to make excuses for their children, is it any wonder the children feel confused? Can a child learn to be a responsible, mature person in this environment?

2. Alienation

The rage harbored by these violent teenagers reveals a second nearly universal feeling among them: they feel deeply cut off socially and emotionally. Sometimes they feel strange or different compared to others. They feel neither loved nor that they belong. They usually just don't fit in. Even if they appear to others to fit in, they inwardly do not believe they do.

Painful feelings of alienation or rejection lead to intense hatred and anger. These feelings are nearly always rooted in social and/or family dynamics. For example, parents who feel socially or economically out of the mainstream may feel angry and resentful, and may communicate their sense of alienation or anger to their growing children. In such an environment adolescents may develop similarly angry, hate-filled, antisocial worldviews, concluding, *Other people aren't like us. Don't trust them.* They may infer, *We're from the wrong side of the tracks* or *They think they are too good for us.* Worse, they may decide, *They have life too easy. I'll take care of that!* Schoolmates may be judged: *Those jocks (athletes) think they are so great!*

Alienation may exist within the family. One child may grow up feeling different from siblings, unwanted, unloved, or resented. Sometimes one child is physically or psychologically a bit different from infancy or early childhood. This child may seem to be on a wavelength different from other members of the family. He or she may read different books or magazines and listen to unusual music, watch different television programs or bizarre movies, exhibit cruelty to animals, or have a macabre sense of humor and a preoccupation with death. At school these teens seem odd, angry, or on the fringes. Some push the limits by being overly negative. Others are very quiet and creative, but their artistic or literary creations have a very strong component of fantasy or darkness, death, and alienation.

3. Character Disorders

Anyone who is violent or kills is a troubled person. But teenagers who ruthlessly take the lives of fellow students in mass murders are generally even more psychologically disturbed than adults who kill a person in a fit of passion or during a crime. These teens have such distorted emotional lives and thinking processes that they lack some of the most basic characteristics of a normal person. At the core, their character disorder impedes their ability to love or connect emotionally in any meaningful way with another human being. They neither feel loved nor are they able to give love. They are tragic, lost souls seeking to find a place in life. Lacking almost any deep human connectedness, life becomes a game. Killing evokes no more remorse than shooting a target at the county fair. One of the shooters in Colorado, for example, is reported to have been laughing as he murdered his fellow students. Such callous disregard for human life reflects a deep, deep absence of the normal human capacity to respect, love, and care for others.

Some of these emotionally disturbed individuals have psychotic features, that is, they have serious distortions in their thought processes and capacity to judge reality. Others have a long-standing failure to form deep emotional ties, combined with a severe lack of guilt or remorse and a tendency toward impulsive or uncontrolled actions.

Most of these disturbed adolescents have a horrible self-concept. Whether that is because of years of parental neglect, hostility, or abuse, or for other unknown causes, these teenagers fundamentally do not like themselves. They hate others because they hate themselves. They believe others have it better than they do, so they envy them.

4. Seeking Power and Importance

Violent teenagers often have vivid fantasy lives and dream of proving how powerful and potent they can be. Since they feel so alienated, unloved, and different, they try to silence their distressing feelings by turning to illusions of power and importance. The Colorado killers focused much of their rage on athletes, apparently envying athletic

success and stature. Feeling inferior, less privileged, or less gifted, the killers decided the best way to even the score was to strike out at those they envied. And when they targeted minorities, they were saying, *We disdain and despise you. We are better than you!* In both instances they were, in their own distorted thinking, attempting to level the playing field. They wanted to lift themselves up by tearing others down – even to the point of death! They didn't realize, of course, that their presumed strength was actually incredible weakness. Instead of having the strength and courage to face their hurts, admit their needs, and seek help from God or others, they turned to pseudo strength – murder.

A search for power is apparent in many fringe groups – their military-style uniforms, their obsession with guns or their identification with angry music. In a perverse sort of way, violent teenagers also imagine that others will admire them. They believe their plans are incredibly brilliant and that they will demonstrate their exceptional intelligence, superiority, cunning, and power by showing that they can outsmart others and commit horrible crimes. Since they idealize destructive, devious, or malicious people like Hitler, they assume that others will also admire their imagined strength, Ingenuity, or supremacy.

5. Possible Neurological Problems

Research shows neurological differences in the brains of many criminals who impulsively act out in crimes of violence. But physiologically based problems do not excuse hateful, destructive acts. Most people with such difficulties do not commit violence or murder.

To live maturely, each of us needs to feel at least reasonably good about others and ourselves, and we need to learn to control our impulses and our negative emotions. However, knowing the difficulties faced by those with neurological problems can help us understand why they may act the way they do.

Children with neurological difficulties that make it hard for them to learn, to concentrate, or to pay attention can find it hard to feel good about themselves in this competitive world. They may also have trouble controlling their thoughts, feelings, and responses.

When most of us become upset, we try to calm ourselves so that we don't do anything irresponsible. But when hyperactive children and those with attention deficits or neurological issues become upset, they may act without thinking. The combination of feeling negatively about themselves, feeling angry, and being impulsive increases the likelihood that they will engage in various kinds of antisocial activities.

6. Spiritually Confused or Lost

Most violent teens do not have a real relationship with God. In fact, their weird clubs or odd choices of friends typically substitute for relationships, not only with healthy people, but also with God. Lacking any spiritual purpose and direction, they attempt to create meaning in life by building their own view of how the world should be. They decide who the bad people are – the "sinners" or those who are different from them. They decide who the good people are – the underdogs, those who are judged to be inferior, or those who accept being inferior to them. And then they decide to even the score. In essence, they create their own religious worldview. They become their own omnipotent god, deciding who should live and who should die. They may not be psychotic, believing they are Jesus Christ. But they do have grandiose and bizarre fantasies of being superior to everyone else. They have a contemptuous pride in their own devious plans, and they have their own completely distorted way of understanding the world.

Once in a while, these disturbed individuals actually have faith in God and may even consider themselves to be born-again Christians. They may wrench a few verses of Scripture out of context to justify their distorted thinking. However, their Christian experience is extremely distorted by their mental confusion and their emotional pain. Even if they are involved in a church or other religious activities, they are not personally and emotionally connected to God and others in a healthy way.

7. Hopelessness

After years of feeling different and unloved, teenagers who murder others have given up hope. They no longer care about themselves, others, or the consequences of their actions. The only way they know to mask their hidden hurts and longings to be held, known, and loved is to quit caring. So, after hundreds or even thousands of times of being ignored or hurt or misunderstood, they can't stand the pain of trying to connect again. Masking their last vestiges of desire for human love and concern, they put on a tough, uncaring front. They devalue all of life and choose to leave at least one mark on this world, even if it is tragically hurtful to others.

We see this behavior rampant among gang members who will cavalierly shoot other human beings as an initiation rite. Feeling cut off from the larger society, hopeless about ever getting ahead in life, and with nothing much to live for, they see no reason *not* to steal or kill or participate in a drive-by shooting. Many simply do not expect to live beyond their twenties. If you try to dialogue with them, they don't really seem to worry about dying. They have no hope anyway. They have given up the dream of a better life. They have given up hope that their parents and other significant people in their lives will understand. And they have given up hope that they will ever be happy. Some school murderers even plan to kill themselves at the end of their murderous rampage. They have absolutely no desire to go on living.

8. Devaluation of Human Life

Although topics like euthanasia and abortion repeatedly point to a decline in the perceived value of human life, there is a deeper problem. Millions of people scarcely value human life at all. People are increasingly losing the only solid foundation for a sense of dignity, worth, and value – God's view. Instead of seeing every person as created in the image of God, many now see themselves and others as chance beings in a meaningless universe.

When this devaluing of human life is combined with being spiritually lost, the result is despair about the future or an incapacity to give love or feel love from others. You can see why some might turn to violence or murder. They are depressed. They don't value human life. They have no meaning or purpose. They have no hope. They have no deep feelings of love and concern for others. The life of another human being means nothing to them, and neither does their own life. So why not lash out and kill?

9. Media Inoculation to Violence

What can we say when the average child sees thousands of murders on television before graduating from high school? And what can we say when news outlets and social media report one murder after another and thousands of acts of violence daily? Televised murders and violent films, and daily reports of death and violence leave their impact; we become accustomed to violent death. All of us become somewhat inoculated to tragedy until it comes to our own doorstep. But for troubled teenagers who are already prone to violence, this numbed or deadened caring removes one of the last barriers to carrying out angry, vengeful fantasies. In fact, rage music, murderous films, and violent video games may not only give disturbed minds permission to kill, they may even provide ideas and practice in how to do it.

10. Precipitating Factors

Sometimes violence results when a teen simply gains access to a gun, clearing the way to carrying out a malicious plan or fantasy. At other times, acquaintances and family members recall significant alterations in mood, new friends, changes in dress, or the use of alcohol and drugs in the months leading up to a violent outburst. For example, a southern California student who committed suicide had been the top scholar at his school the previous year. Then his grades fell, he changed friends, and he began using and selling drugs. Apparently, he had felt sad and confused for years. When being a straight A student no longer brought him any satisfaction, he turned to drugs, negative peers, and increasing rebellion. The drugs and peers added fuel to the fire of his smoldering anger. When he was caught with drugs on campus, he violently ended his own life.

A foreboding mix – long-standing inner sadness, emotional isolation from friends and family, increasing withdrawal, association with counterculture or fringe friends, actual or perceived ridicule, or alienation from peers

– may become evident. During the year before the Colorado massacre, for example, the potential murderers had adopted the long hair and black clothing of the Gothic look, clearly identifying themselves as being profoundly against their culture. By joining a group of similarly disaffected youth, they found one place to belong. But these friends only fueled their disdain and hatred of others. More and more, they were on the receiving end of ridicule from other students because of their fringe attitudes, dress, and actions. Consequently, they decided to seek revenge.

Violence can also be triggered by the loss of a loved one, most likely a girlfriend or boyfriend. When a teenage boy who feels unlovable deep down finds someone who cares for him, he is like a starving man who has just found food and water. But what if his girlfriend in time tires of his attention or becomes troubled by his possessiveness, moodiness, or other aspects of his personality? When she breaks off the relationship, it may be more than he can handle. He may feel abandoned, depressed, and alone. He may become enraged that his sole support would abandon him.

The combination of depression, rejection, and revenge apparently were the major motives when a seventeen-year-old Mississippi student went on a shooting spree and murdered his mother, his ex-girlfriend, and one of her friends in 1997. After the killings, the student seemed genuinely remorseful; he sobbed and apologized, saying repeatedly, "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." Then he told how devastated he was when his girlfriend broke up with him: "I didn't eat. I didn't sleep. I didn't want to live. It destroyed me."

Notice that he said, "It destroyed me." That telling comment reflects one of the best ways of understanding the mind of teenage killers. They feel they have been destroyed by life. Murder is their way of getting justice. Since they feel psychologically and emotionally destroyed, they want to destroy others.

Murdering a loved one because of that person's rejection seems senseless to most of us. When you love someone, why would you want to hurt or kill that person? But take Reuben as an example of a potential murderer. He thinks and feels on a different level. His *love* is more *need* than love. His focus is on being loved and receiving love, not on being a loving person. His focus is on himself, not on Beth, his girlfriend. Consequently, when Beth broke off their relationship, his true feelings came out. He was in the relationship for what he was receiving, not for what he was giving. He did not understand mutual love. When Beth no longer gave him her love, he was hurt and resentful. He was convinced that he would never have another love, so he decided to act on his rage and strike out. Again, Reuben felt destroyed so he destroyed.

Now let's tie this entire picture together. Violent teenagers are universally unhappy. They feel alienated from others, odd, different, or left out. Emotionally, they feel unloved and they have not developed the capacity to form healthy emotional relationships within their families or elsewhere. Consequently, they do not care for other people. They are often spiritually disinterested, rebellious, or confused; they are extremely resentful and angry. Their anger comes from feeling hurt, wounded, rejected, or abandoned.

These teenagers have lost or failed to develop regard and respect for other people. They tend to live in their own world, either with a few other fringe friends, or in their fantasies, secret thoughts, and plans. Although they occasionally turn to violence without any warning, there are nearly always serious danger signs and symptoms. Those include increasingly bizarre thoughts and feelings, serious drops in grades, preoccupation with thoughts of violence, desires for revenge, feelings of persecution, grandiose thoughts, and identification with fringe groups, guns, and violent historical figures. Given this mixture of painful feelings and confused thoughts, all it takes to trigger an explosion is one serious trauma or rejection, one final bit of ridicule, one song glorifying violence, one horrible movie, or one "friend" to nudge them to action.

Preventing Teenage Violence

In light of the deep mental, emotional, and spiritual confusion of adolescents who turn to serious violence, what can concerned parents, teachers, or other citizens do?

First, be alert to danger signals. Most typically, children who turn to violence have shown signs of maladjustment for many years. Without frightening parents, since we are talking about very extreme situations, we do need to be sensitive to our children's needs and to respond whenever we see signs of persistent, significant distress.

Here are some danger signs:

- Frequent loss of temper (several times a week)
- Vandalism
- Repeated physical fighting (although most siblings do some fighting)
- Trouble controlling anger
- Angry bravado and threats to hurt others
- Plans on how to hurt others, even if they seem unrealistic
- Withdrawal from friends, family, and normal activities
- Resentful feelings of being the underdog or being disrespected
- Feelings of being mistreated or persecuted (although young children may feel persecuted when they do not get everything their older siblings do)
- Increasing use of drugs and alcohol
- Strong interest in guns or fantasies with guns
- Interest in violent magazines, movies, videos, and organizations
- Increased risk-taking behavior
- Association with violent or threatening groups
- Suspicious, hateful attitude toward all authority
- Carrying a weapon

If you have a child who shows any of these symptoms, don't hesitate to seek professional psychological counseling. While most will never turn to physical violence, realize that these symptoms are your child's way of crying out for help. Listen to the messages of how he or she feels badly on the inside. Don't ignore the cries for help. Sometimes these problems will be naturally outgrown, but more often they become even more deeply ingrained with time. Professional therapists can help identify the problems and tune in to your child's hurts and needs.

Second, commit to building the most enjoyable, loving, and spiritually sensitive home and family life possible. Children who feel loved, who enjoy spending time with their parents and siblings, and who have come to love God and know him through Jesus Christ almost never turn to juvenile crime. Violence almost always reflects, among other things, some rupture, lack, conflict, pain, or struggle within the home. Thus, it is important that parents remain involved and connect emotionally with their children on a daily basis.

Third, help your children develop a healthy emotional life and good communication skills. Teenagers who commit extreme violence or murder have not learned to control their emotions. They have either repressed their hurts and angry feelings for years until they burst out unexpectedly, or they have been expressing them in hurtful, but less completely destructive ways. Children need us to be sensitive to both their positive and negative feelings. They need us to model healthy ways of expressing emotions. They need us to hear their hurts, pains, fears, and

resentments. Then they need us to help them find acceptable ways of expressing and managing their strong emotions. This includes learning how to solve conflicts and misunderstandings without turning to violence.

Fourth, know your children, their friends, and their activities. It is far too easy in this day of fulltime daycare or both parents working outside the home for parents to be unaware of the company their children keep, the material on their phones and computers, their social media sites, or their music.

The entertainment field is a billion dollar industry. This powerful, secular, and often violent influence can dominate nearly every aspect of a teen's life. Parents need to recognize and minimize its potentially destructive impact, and equally important, balance it with wholesome activities and positive alternatives.

Fifth, do your part in your local community. While violent tragedies can never be totally prevented, the more we can reach out to needy and hurting children, the less likely these tragedies will occur. Join a Big Brother or Big Sister organization, and offer your time, love, and talents to a fatherless or motherless child for a richly rewarding experience. Take time with a neighborhood child, a child or youth from church, or a friend of your son or daughter, and communicate that you care. Never forget that children and teenagers who murder believe that no one really cares about them.

Sixth, encourage your local schools and churches to take preventative action. Church leaders, teachers, counselors, administrators, and students all need to be alert to teenagers that display the danger signs listed above. Tragic killings have taken place in churches too.

Too often we ignore or dismiss threats, accusations, or fascinations with violence as "just talk." But we need to take these signals seriously. It is better to report a concern to a school or church leader than to ignore it. Many lives might be saved if fellow students and responsible adults would act on their concerns rather than assume that nothing serious will happen.

Seventh, financially support organizations that help needy children and teens and hurting families. There are many fine organizations, both Christian and secular. They could all do much more if they had additional financial resources. You may not have the time or training to become personally involved with needy youth, but you can at least help with your financial resources.

Finally, pray. America is at a crossroads. Millions of citizens are living in economic poverty, and more are suffering from emotional and spiritual poverty. The deterioration of the family and the move from biblical values is real. God calls us to see the needy world around us, abandon the tendency to live out our Christianity in isolation, and intervene to touch lives for good and his glory!

Dr. Bruce Narramore was the founding dean of the Rosemead School of Psychology, and served as President of the Narramore Christian Foundation for 13 years. He has authored and co-authored ten books including the bestsellers *Help! I'm a Parent*, *Adolescence Is Not An Illness*, and *The Integration of Psychology and Theology*.