

PRESS RELEASE
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PUBLIC ISSUES FORUM
ENDING YOUTH VIOLENCE

“An Opportunity to Find Solutions”
by Mark Greenberg and Robert Noel

Bullying at school, domestic violence in our homes, high rates of juvenile crime. Too many children in America are raised in an environment that supports violence as a solution to daily stresses and problems.

We see daily examples of violence and ineffective conflict resolution on television, in our local paper, in our movie theaters, and in too many schools and homes. Our criminal justice budget continues to grow faster than any other budget in the State of Pennsylvania and yet we have not been very successful in curbing violent behavior, preventing its reoccurrence, or addressing its root causes.

The development of violent behavior is the result of numerous interacting causes, including social norms that condone violence, poverty, unsafe neighborhoods, harsh and inconsistent parenting skills and schools and communities that have not prioritized the emotional needs of children and their families. Although crime rates have dropped in the last few years, the rate of juvenile crime and aggression is much higher in America than in other countries. Of particular concern are recent statistics on violence by girls, for whom arrest rates for aggravated assault increased by 57 percent and for simple assault by 93 percent over the past decade.

It is clear that there is no single solution to reducing the number of children who experience or show violent or aggressive behavior. Instead, numerous solutions are necessary that involve legislation, improvements in social and economic conditions, support for better parenting, improved early mental health services for families and young children, and more effective prevention programs in our neighborhoods and schools.

The three essays below present different perspectives on how our community might curb the youth violence problem and improve our youths' well-being.



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Choice 1 discusses our popular culture, violent media and their effect on youth aggression. It also provides recommendations for parents on how to monitor media violence. Choice 2 discusses the importance of building mentally healthy children and the importance of providing effective prevention programs (e.g., parenting skills, social-emotional skills, after-school programming) to reduce risk for violence and build protective factors that empower positive youth development. Choice 3 examines the role of parents, schools, and communities in building a “permissive society” that is failing to build strong character in our children and youth.

What can concerned individuals do? We invite all who are interested in supporting the healthy development of children and families to attend the Public Issues Forum on Violent Kids.

Mark T. Greenberg is the director of Penn State's Prevention Research Center. Robert Noel is State College Area School District resource officer for the State College Police Department.

(1) “Why We Should Care About Television Violence,” by Tracy Vosburgh

Studies show that by the time our children leave elementary school, they will have watched 100,000 acts of violence on television. That's because the typical children's cartoon and commercial kids' programming contains an average of 20 to 25 violent acts per hour.

Imagine having to endure that much violence in any one hour of your day. Yet we allow our children to be subjected

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to it day in and day out. Violent television may not be the only factor that creates today's aggressive society, but it is most certainly a contributor.

Television is a powerful force and it isn't going away. It is in all of our homes and our kids are receiving most of their information from it. The Rev. Jesse Jackson has called television "the third parent," and in many homes kids spend more time with their third parent each day than they do with their own mother or father.

It is your choice whether television will be a positive or negative influence on your family.

While no one has yet established an irrefutable correlation between aggressive behavior and violent television, there is a growing body of research that points to the dangers of allowing our children to be subjected to simulated violence on a regular and sustained basis. Real-life studies show that children who watch many hours of violent television are likely to engage in a higher level of aggressive behavior when they become teenagers. More than 3,000 studies, including 1,000 focused on children, link media violence to violent behavior. The evidence is sobering and it is time to pay attention. We can no longer afford to look away from the rising incidents of violence among our youngest.

There will always be debate about the validity of studies, but as a parent, caregiver, or teacher, how skeptical can you afford to be? Is the evidence compelling enough and are you willing to risk being wrong? As guardians and models for our children we have a tremendous amount of power to positively affect the negative influences of a violent society.

We can't eliminate the negative images and influences, but we can certainly limit the degree to which our children are exposed to them.

What can you do at home?

- Discuss the program choices your children make. Watch with them and see what they see.
- Say no to violent program choices. Take time to discuss aggressive acts. Provide healthy alternatives.
- Set limits on the amount of time your children spend watching commercial television.
- Don't have the television in the center of family activity and don't allow children to have a television in their bedroom.

- Make sure that your children understand the difference between fiction and reality. Violent acts do not hurt people on television but they do in real life.

What can you do in your community?

- Discuss limiting the influence of TV violence with other parents by establishing common guidelines for what and how much children can watch.
- Support regulation of children's television.
- Encourage lawmakers to support legislation that promotes educational, nonviolent TV programming.
- Support the safe environment of public television.
- Choose activities such as sports, hobbies, playing with friends, and community service that can replace time spent in front of the television.

Public broadcasting has been a safe haven parents have trusted for two generations. PBS Kids programming is designed around an educational core which imparts social and literacy skills while it entertains. At WPSX-TV, we are committed to continuing to provide a safe alternative for our children.

Our children deserve a non-violent culture and it is up to all of us to help bring about change. Supporting and selecting appropriate programs for children provides a safe, entertaining and educational alternative for children.

Twenty to 25 violent acts per hour. Who cares if children watch violence on TV? I do, and so should you. "When you are helping children feel safe, you are helping them use their energies for moving forward--toward a more hopeful future for themselves and for our society."--Fred Rogers, Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood.

Tracy Vosburgh is station manager for WPSX-TV.

(2) "Prevention Requires a United Community" by Claudia Hutchinson, Aileen Querry, and Brian Bumbarger

Kids today. What can you do? With the requisite shoulder shrug or wave of the hand, this rhetorical question is where we used to stop in terms of dealing with "problem kids."

As yesterday's problem kids turned into today's violent youth, we increasingly looked to the juvenile justice system for the answers. The problem is, even the most progressive rehabilitation program does nothing to prevent tomorrow's

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children from falling into the same cycle of violence. Since the problem hasn't gone away, it's clear that we need to invest more energy and resources into prevention.

Long before the Columbine tragedy, psychologists and criminologists were aware of some of the warning signs of violent behavior. A wealth of research shows that kids who are neglected and abused, or who witness violence, are predisposed not only to violent behavior, but also to drug use, poor performance in school, teen pregnancy, and emotional and mental health disorders. An estimated 3.3 million children see violence, including 1.8 million incidents of domestic violence, in their homes each year. It is estimated that 2.4 million children in the United States suffer some form of neglect or abuse each year.

If we know that these children are at greater risk of becoming violent, how much longer can we tolerate these innocent victims becoming guilty victimizers?

To some extent, we've become desensitized to these horrific statistics. But the financial burden is just as shocking. One study calculated the direct and eventual costs of the abuse and neglect of children who grow up to become juvenile and adult offenders at \$341 million annually.

However, we all know that a child's well-being and healthy development are priceless. With this knowledge, it follows that we should work to both eliminate the things that place children at greater risk and strengthen existing systems that protect kids from them.

Some people say that the numerous social problems that contribute to youth violence are too complex to be successfully tackled. However, studies show that practical, proactive programs do make a difference. The key is to coordinate and support a diverse selection of research-based programs to address specific problems that have been identified in a particular community.

In Centre County, this coordination and support comes from a prevention planning system called Communities That Care. CTC is currently functioning in more than 400 communities in the United States, including over 120 communities in Pennsylvania. The Communities That Care system uses a governing body, or "prevention board," to oversee all aspects of the system. Members include representatives of the community, schools, law enforcement, and business and religious organizations. The CTC model doesn't relinquish the responsibility for prevention to just the formal justice and social service agencies, but instead relies on community involvement in order to achieve its goals. To that end, much of the

involvement is volunteer-based.

CTC helps communities develop an integrated approach to positive youth development and the prevention of problem behaviors in much the same way that we have addressed public health problems such as heart disease and child car-crash fatalities. It begins by determining which of the many known risk factors are most prevalent in the local community and thus most likely to be putting kids at risk for violence or other problems. The CTC model then uses research-based prevention programs that have been evaluated and proven to work.

Here in Centre County, for instance, data has shown that family conflict, low neighborhood attachment, and poor bonding of children to their schools are prominent factors placing children at risk. Thus, CTC has begun implementing programs to strengthen families, increase neighborhood cohesion and improve children's early school experiences. Through this community-wide collaboration, we can develop an environment of respect, responsibility, and caring.

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(3) "Boundary-Setting Must be Firm and Consistent" by Courtney Grugeon and Lauren Strauss

After reading the National Issues Forum booklet on the subject of violent kids, we were most intrigued by choice three, "Kids need more moral discipline." As current 12th-grade students at State College Area High School, we feel we have first-hand insight that would be beneficial to hear.

Where are kids gathering their morals from today? While parents may be one source, many children gather their moral code and belief system from a variety of sources. Television, music, teachers, coaches, and peers are just a few examples. While some of these may be positive, the problem is each one of these sources gives conflicting messages to kids, some of which are not always positive.

Why are kids turning to so many outside sources to gather their morals and beliefs? We believe it is because we no longer live in a society that promotes the importance of involved parenting. We place a high emphasis on two things: success and self-esteem. We as a society have skewed the importance of both and, as a result, given kids mixed messages as to where each fits in the psychological development of today's youth.

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Americans today place much of their attention on staying busy. Parents are working so hard to raise successful children by placing them in numerous activities and giving an overabundance of “things” that they sometimes forget to provide their children with a moral compass. Parents are no longer talking to their children and really trying to know the personality traits of their kids. Children who act in violent ways often do this because they are frustrated and do not feel heard. A parent’s job is to provide an open ear for their children.

Aside from being busy, the decreased value of family is proven by the number of broken homes across America. Studies show our divorce rate is at an all-time high of nearly 60 percent. Many parents are now forced to take on responsibilities individually that traditionally would be taken on together. With so much extra family stress and confusion about their roles, many parents are unintentionally forcing their children to grow up on their own.

Divorced parents may argue that they both still play an active role in their child’s life. While this is true, many do not represent a united front with their children. Kids realize this and use it to manipulate the situation to their benefit. For example, if a child is angry at his or her mother, he or she may go and stay with their father, or vice-versa. Divorced parents may feel guilty about the situation and, as a result, spoil the children. This permissiveness has been shown to increase the risk of delinquency and possibly violence.

From the ages of 5 to 18 children spend approximately 14,430 hours in school. This vast amount of time spent in a school setting greatly affects their character. Studies show that “warm but restrictive” environments lead to less delinquency in schools. The belief of educators today is often that kids are too fragile and that they can’t handle responsibility. Kids are taught to do whatever “feels good.” Parents, schools, and teachers need to reconsider this idea. Children need to learn the difference between right and wrong. Both parents and educators need to teach the importance of self-discipline, honesty, integrity, and cooperation.

Too often, schools and parents are so worried about hurting children’s self-esteem that they forget to teach them these important lessons. A typical teacher has a much harder time confronting a student about an important issue such as cheating than something superficial such as taking their hat off. What message is this sending?

We live in a society that looks for quick fixes. Sexually transmitted diseases and teen pregnancy are a problem, so the “fix” is to have “safe sex” by slapping on a condom. In Philadelphia, the drug rate is so high that sterile needles are being handed to drug addicts for free.

Moral and ethical values are taught over a long period and they are best learned in a consistent environment. Applying such Band-Aids as warning stickers on CDs and parental control buttons on television sets cannot solve the problem of teen violence. The problem has taken years to germinate and it will only be solved through positive, consistent influences over a long period of time.

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