

"Ask Ila,"

I have children ages 6 and 10. I am concerned about the events we hear on the news relating to teen against teen violence. Most disturbing is the violence that occurs between teens and their friends. Are there any warning signs or behavior traits or personality characteristics that we, as parents, can look for to try to avoid our children falling victim to a "thrill kill" or act of random violence?

I truly wish I could say that your concerns are groundless. I wish I could say that your children will always be safe, that when you kiss them goodbye in the morning that they will return to you safe and unharmed. I'm neither a pessimist nor a fatalist, but I think it is shortsighted for us to think that our families and we are immune from the variety of violent events that have occurred recently.

Today's children face a myriad of conflicts and anxieties far greater than even twenty years ago. Many television shows, movies, music, computer and video games have all contributed to a sense of empowerment through aggression. They tout excitement through acts of violence and the aggressive overpowering of others. Guns, knives, explosives, and words urging the viewer or listener to kill or harm others are woven throughout. When it is known that other adolescents admire what is being seen, others then strive to become known as actors of the same activities. Couple with that the fact that many children are left alone for long stretches of time to entertain themselves due to the prevalence of single parent and two working parent households, and we have a potential powder keg of dangerous opportunities for children. Often these children cope with their feelings of loss, uncertainty, and frustration by re-enacting scenes of violence that make them feel in control and powerful.

As a possible preventative you could watch for children who seem to be targets of ridicule, act or dress different, or separate themselves from others. These may be children who eat alone, seem ill at ease with their peers, or appear to be unapproachable. They may need special attention to help them integrate with their peers, and they may feel angry over their isolation. Ask your children if there are children in their class or school who congregate in small groups and who are not accepted by others. They may dress similarly to each other, or have a special speech or coded language they share. If there are children such as these that you observe or to which you become aware, you could approach the school, the teachers, even their parents to voice your concerns and perhaps secure some pre-crisis intervention for them.

With regard to specific teen against teen violence, there are a few similar signs to look for. What activities do these children engage in? Are they permitted to view violent movies, video games, or listen to aggression promoting music? Even excessive viewing of flamboyant wrestling shows can lead to aggressive mimicry and acting out what has been viewed. It is sometimes not enough to curtail your children's exposure to these negative influences; it may also be necessary to limit their contact with children whose activities are less supervised. An ideal would be for you to take a child like this under your wing and show him or her how life in a family can look without these types of entertainment.

The bottom line is that the past twenty years of both real and "entertainment" related violence has sent a message to many of our youth that human life is expendable. People have been killed for the change in their pockets, by drive-by shootings, and for their prestige-labeled sneakers. The reality is that some people, children and adults, just don't get to come home at night.

I am a strong advocate for the concept that it takes a community to raise a child. If you become aware of a child being isolated or troubled, offer your assistance or at least try to intervene on their behalf. Try to be proactive and not a post-crisis finger pointer, desperate to allocate blame. We all may not have to look much further than our own complacency.