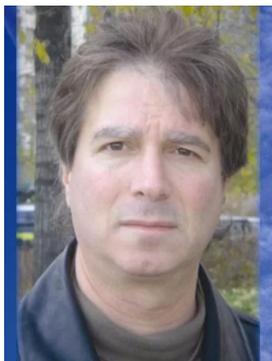


Opinion: 3 things will reduce violence

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(Photo: Douglas A. Wain)

There is an old saying about violence: "People who do violence either don't know better or don't care."

Having just completed three straight years of doing our in-school violence and bullying prevention program in middle schools and high schools, reaching 9,436 youths, we can now safely rule out that kids don't care. We learned much about youths through our program, and the most important thing we learned that no matter what kids say, or do, the fact is that they all have feelings. We can't deny it, and they can't deny it.

And when a youth's feelings take a turn for the worst due to victimization or loneliness, two common maladies, a staggering amount of them suffer in silence. And this "suffering in silence" takes a huge toll on them in every possible way. That is why I now always take everything a youth says to me — good, bad, or indifferent — very seriously. You cannot take it for granted that they will share their thoughts, feelings, beliefs with you or anyone.

We have also learned that youths are just as smart as adults. We adults just have more information through experience and education. When youths gain this education and these experiences through discussion and live role playing, we found that they instinctively learn to recognize true choices and almost always make the right choices.

Also, many young people don't see consequences coming. Some falsely believe that "everyone gets away with everything," or "jail is not that bad." Having done our presentation in youth detention facilities, I can say that prison is the unhappiest place in the world for a youth. All incarcerated youths say the same thing: "I want to go home." And most are shocked to be in prison.

We think that's because some youths don't really understand adults on the issues of violence and peace. They don't realize the heightened importance these issues are to us. We might not be able to stop someone from doing violence the first time, but we sure can, and will, stop them from doing it a second time.

Violence, bullying and abuse are the head of the snake. They are the No. 1 root causes of all human problems, including substance abuse, mental health issues and even human survival. We have not made great strides in these other areas because we have not yet hit the nail on the head, which is fighting and dramatically reducing violence, bullying and abuse.

There are so many promising and proven ways to reduce violence in youths, such as family involvement, mentoring, education, increased access to health services, hospital interventions, faith counseling, mediation, meditation, pets and gainful employment.

Our experience is that most all violence prevention programs work if you are there, you care and you try. Solutions cannot be "mailed in" and you cannot just bring them into your world, you need to meet them half-way in "their world." What kids will learn the most is not the contents of the program but the kindness and equality an adult gave them in person. Otherwise, even the finest programs won't trickle down to their world.

Teamwork, adults and youths working together, equally, in person, side-by-side, is a powerful solution to end youth violence, bullying and abuse. But we need to recognize equality and practice equity to get there. Yes, it takes a village, but it must be a fair and just village that excludes no one. For as another old saying goes, if you are not at the table, you are on the menu.

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