

TROUBLED YOUTH OVERVIEW

Around the world young people are at unusual risk because of war, terrorism, racism or ethnic tension, poverty, crime and drugs, negative peer pressure, and insidious seductions of media toward consumerism and sexual promiscuity. The world is just not a safe place for youth.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Children's Defense Fund, every day in America six children commit suicide, more commit homicide, thirteen children are victims of homicide, and 280 children are arrested for violent crimes. One expert, Joy G. Dryfoos, (*Adolescents at Risk*, 1990) estimates more than "seven million youngsters—one in four adolescents" as having "only limited potential for becoming productive adults."

If you read a daily newspaper, you have in the past few days noticed some article about the consequences of youth at risk in our society. This morning's paper announced a community's demand for better police protection against unruly teens. Police officials were forced to transfer cops not aggressive enough in patrolling South Boston and controlling its street kids. Yesterday's *Boston Globe* carried the final article in an extensive analysis of the school shootings of 1998, "Killing in the Classroom." From February 2nd to May 21st, the U.S. witnessed seven violent incidents in its schools, which left 23 dead, 48 wounded, and so many grieving and emotionally traumatized friends, families, and teachers.

Behind these chilling headlines are young people with fears and hopes like any other human being. Evan Ramsey's dad, Don, was a "loving and caring" father before he went on a rampage (shooting up the newspaper office) in Anchorage. That sent Evan's mother, Carol, into a spiral of alcoholism. When Evan was seven, he was found huddled with his brothers in an unheated apartment with an outside temperature at 22 degrees below zero. Carol was not only drinking, she was being physically abused by a series of boyfriends. Finally, the boys themselves were punched, and DFYS intervened. This foster kid (of ten different homes) was polite to adults and hung around with some of his school's brightest students. But he was cruelly teased and bullied by older and more popular kids. Miserable, he finally decided to kill himself publicly, but his closest friends (James Randall and Matthew Charles) over the course of several days persuaded him to kill others rather than himself. "Don't kill yourself. You got to live the fame and fortune." So on a cold February 19, 1997, Evan brought a shotgun to school in his oversized pants and for no good reason shot and killed a bright and sunny sophomore, Josh Palacios, and a wonderful principal, Ron Edwards. Hurt and rage once more reeked havoc on the innocent.

A school in Salem, Oregon suspended an 8-year-old boy for singing a parody on PBS' "Barney and Friends": "I love you, you love me..." He began singing: "I hate you, you hate me...Let's kill...(and he names of various class mates were inserted). A girl mentioned complained and a school counselor talked to the boy. After singing the song again, he was suspended (*The Boston Globe*, 25 October 1998, p. A29). Is this a troubled child? Besides determining what may be going on immediately around, and in this boy, we need also to look at role played by the media and society. Children fall in love with Barney at a young age. Then in the early grades, the program becomes nauseating to some; a reaction sets in, and parodies result. After looking at the media and society, we can consider the roles played by the family, the community and the school. Responsibility for such tragedies must be considered holistically.

About 10 percent of most of our communities are teenagers. Our experience leads us to assume that 20 percent of these teenagers are unusually mature and well adjusted...perhaps leaders among their peers and in the community. About 60 percent of these young people may be considered average young people experiencing the ups and downs of teenager life; they live threatened by what we might consider a normal amount of risk factors. But around 20 percent are experiencing problems with which they need help. Of these, some 5 percent of all young people are in danger of doing serious damage to themselves or others if there is no special intervention.

Researcher Joy Dryfoos puts it this way:

Many children are growing up in the United States today without hope of enjoying the benefits that come with adulthood...A new class of 'untouchables' is emerging in our inner cities, on the social fringes of suburbia, and in some rural areas: young people who are functionally illiterate, disconnected from school, depressed, prone to drug abuse and early criminal activity, and eventually parents of unplanned and unwanted babies. These are the children who are at high risk of never becoming responsible adults. (Dryfoos, 1990, p. 3)

This author (Dryfoos, 1990, p. 25) names the tasks necessary for responsible adulthood in the following generally approved list:

- The search for self-definition.
- The search for a personal set of values.
- The acquisition of competencies necessary for adult roles, such as problem solving, and decision making.
- The acquisition of competencies necessary for social interaction with parents, peers, and others.

- The achievement of emotional independence from parents.
- The ability to negotiate between the pressure to achieve and the acceptance of peers.
- Experimentation with a wide array of behaviors, attitudes, and activities.

If the paragraphs above are on some kind of reality track, many young people need special older friends who can intervene in their lives. It is not the intention of this article to label kids as problems, troubled youth, or at-risk teens. Nor is it helpful to give the impression that things happen according to set patterns. "Good kids" can kill; and extremely "troubled youth" can make it through seemingly impossible difficulties. Such is the complexity of human life and the resilience of the human spirit.

Young people today find themselves in many difficult situations. And each young person in these circumstances is unique and like no other. Youth work (and working with at-risk youth) will never be a science. We take the best of social science and use it trusting in our gut reactions and past experience. Youth work is an art.

This article is not trying to give the impression that untrained youth workers cannot meet the challenge while those with this or that kind of training will save those most in need. We are only trying to help you do a better job because you have a better idea about what's going on when kids "go off the deep end."

This Encyclopedia considers both personal, internal or subjective factors as well as external or outside factors in troubled young people. The social systems most affecting a teenager are family, school, community, media, and peers. For some teenagers, anything from sports (an extension of school life) to a part-time job, a music group, drama, church, a youth group, or a gang may be an important or crucial. Some quiet 16-year-old girl may be having an affair with a much older man, who may be manipulative or even abusive, and no one considers that huge factor in her life. Very few experts balance these influences realistically in their research.

James Garbarino and associates are highly respected in the field of troubled youth. They see themselves among those who became dissatisfied with explaining child abuse strictly in terms of parental characteristics. The broader approach has been called

social interactional (Burgess, 1979), social situational (Parke & Collmer, 1975), or the ecological model (Garbarino, 1977; Belsky, 1978, 1980). The basic tenet of this framework is that maltreatment is multiply determined by forces at work in the individual (ontogenetic development), in the family (microsystem),

in the community (exosystem), and in the culture in which the family lives (macrosystem). (Garbarino, et al., *Troubled Youth, Troubled Families*, 1986, p. 83)

The book concludes:

In sum, the prognosis for troubled youth in troubled families, like the origins of high risk itself, is a matter of human ecology...Who an individual adolescent is and how that adolescent's family works combine with what the school, the peer group, the community, and the culture do to shape the experience of adolescence. (ibid., p. 308)

Peter Benson, president of Search Institute of Minneapolis, is active in stressing the responsibility of the entire community and developing a positive asset approach to healthy communities and healthy youth. Here is what concerns him:

During the first eighteen years of life, it is common for a young person not to know well any adults outside of her own family; to be a stranger in the neighborhood; to be ignored or unwelcome in public places (especially in the company of other youth); to be the object of well-intentioned programs without say in their focus or design; to lack safe places to spend time; to be excluded from the community's deliberations; to spend considerable time each day without an adult presence; and rarely, if ever to join with peers or adults in serving others.

These concerns cannot be dismissed as urban issues alone. Part of the American dilemma that these issues affect all sizes of communities...A story from a Midwestern agricultural town of three thousand illustrates the pervasiveness of the problem. I asked what issues concerned the local citizens there. The response gave me pause: 'We have packs of twelve- and thirteen-year-olds who destroy or vandalize property. And nobody knows their names.' What is notable is not just the destruction of property but the perpetrators' anonymity. (Benson, *All Kids Are Our Kids: What Communities Must Do to Raise Caring and Responsible Children and Adolescents*, 1997. p. 3)

The crisis of troubled youth is therefore not just a concern of youth workers but of the whole of our society. The youth crisis is a symptom and evidence of our social crisis. The matters of healthy young people, healthy communities, healthy families, and a healthy society are all bound together. It would be wise for many communities and societies to realize they actually need the help of young people

they consider problems to work out solutions to larger problems. Troubled youth may be more than a problem; they may be a critical part of the solution.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. With what troubled young person are you concerned? What behaviors have worried you? How do you understand his or her issues? What kind of intervention might be helpful?
2. With what were you most struck in reading this article? How would you like to discuss it? What questions would you like to raise? Did you take exception to anything written here?
3. Do you agree we have to look at both inner and outer conflicts or tensions in the life of a troubled young person? Are the five social systems mentioned (along with other secondary systems or influences) helpful in considering the external factors in the lives of troubled young people?
4. Do you sometimes feel that the problem (and all its ramifications) is too overwhelming for you? Do such feelings encourage us to tackle these problems in community rather than by ourselves? How can young people themselves help you.

IMPLICATIONS

1. In whatever society we live, we need to ask: "What are we doing to our young people?"
2. How children are cared for and what opportunities are offered to youth are indications of the health of a society.
3. Teenage problems are not just the responsibility of parents, but of an entire community.
4. The dynamics of anti-social behavior ought to be understood by all youth workers and teachers.

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