



A developmental look at Columbine

By Patricia Marks Greenfield, PhD, and Jaana Juvonen, PhD

Why did the horror of Columbine High School happen? What can we learn to prevent future Columbines? How can we help the teen-age survivors at Columbine High? Developmental psychology research suggests that we must look to multiple factors in order to begin to answer these questions.

We start with the effects of bullying. Research indicates that chronic targets of peer harassment become increasingly withdrawn and depressed. The other, much less common reaction to bullying is hostility and aggression. Why did Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold have this more extreme reaction? It seems that bullying and victimization were not just individual phenomena, they were part of the school culture at Columbine High.

One former student reported "a lot of tension between groups...almost continuous conflict, anything from verbal abuse to physical attacks and violence." Indeed, recent research suggests that peer harassment is highly prevalent in secondary schools in the United States. In line with this finding, Columbine students said teachers and staff did not seem to notice the bullying and aggression; apparently such behaviors were culturally normative.

Developmental studies show that, in elementary school bullies and their victims are disliked by other children. Juvonen's research indicates that by middle school, however, victims are still disliked, but bullies have achieved social status. Indeed, Harris and Klebold noted with anger that some of the high-status jock bullies, convicted of burglary, received an especially lenient sentence.

Parents are another important factor in the total equation. What can we say about parents who have bombs being manufactured in their home by their son? Research has shown a strong link between high-risk behavior in teens and parents who basically do not know what their children are doing. In other words, nosier, more intrusive parenting seems to be a protective factor against risky, dangerous teen behavior. It appears from all accounts that this protective factor was lacking in the parenting environment of Harris and Klebold.

Elements for tragedy

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were also apprentices acquiring knowledge from the broader culture beyond home and school. Any apprentice needs four things to learn his trade: role models, tools, social validation and opportunities to practice. The broader culture provided each of the four elements to help "teach" Harris and Klebold what they needed to commit their senseless and tragic mayhem:

1. Role models. Violent media (including the news) constantly show heroes engaged in war and killing.
2. Tools. Guns and assault weapons are widely available for sale; instructions for constructing bombs are easily found on the Internet.
3. Internet bomb-making sites also provided validation and legitimization from a broader community of online Internet users. (Indeed, it is ironic that, via his Internet site, Harris communicated his deadly interests to everyone in the world except his parents.)
4. Opportunities to practice were "virtually" omnipresent to two friends described as "obsessed with violent video games."

None of these individual factors "caused" the overwhelming tragedy that occurred at Columbine High School. But given the motivation developed by years of peer victimization and in the absence of parental oversight, the culture provided all the elements of an effective apprenticeship in the practice of war.

Prevention and coping

How to prevent future Columbines? The school culture--not just individual behavior--must be changed. To transform this type of school culture, researchers have developed school-wide antibullying programs. When introduced and supported by school authorities, these programs have proven to be very effective preventive measures. Schools must moderate their obsession with academic standards and achievement and be given resources to adopt preventive programs.

Our final point pertains to the mental health and well-being of the survivors. After World War II, Anna Freud showed that refugee children who had lost their parents in the war survived in relatively good psychological shape when they were allowed to remain with a constant group of peers over a period of years. The presence of a stable peer group that had shared a common traumatic experience was psychologically protective. What happened at Columbine High is similar to war.

In such a situation, it is vital that survivors have an opportunity to stay together. Fortunately, this happened in Colorado. The survivors of

Columbine High were given the most important element of a healing environment the mutual sharing and support of a stable group of peers who had undergone a common, albeit traumatic, experience.

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