

EMOTIONAL HEALTH: THE KEY TO REDUCING SCHOOL VIOLENCE, IMPROVING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, AND INDUCING POSITIVE STUDENT BEHAVIOR

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Understanding the term, “emotional health,” is essential in reducing the incidences of violence in our schools, improving academic performance, and inducing positive student behavior.

While the two terms are often used interchangeably, new medical research makes an important distinction between “emotional illness” and “mental illness.” Emotional illness reflects social and emotional health—eg. feeling unwanted and unloved, lack of empathy, inability to control emotions. Mental illness, on the other hand, reflects organic and neurological health—eg. bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, clinical depression. (Nick Haisman-Smith, Director of The Institute for Social and Emotional Learning, 2017). Nowhere is that distinction more important than in addressing the root cause of school violence.

Many experts in the mental health field consider the perceived role of mental illness in mass shootings to be greatly over-stated. In a Columbia University study of 235 mass killers, only 52, or about 22 percent, showed signs of being mentally ill. (Michael Stone, 2015.) In addition, a specific study of 157 school shooting incidents revealed only 17% of school shooters evidence signs of mental illness. (Southern Illinois University School of Medicine, 2014.) Research shows that mental illness is not the root cause of the vast majority of school shootings.

On the other hand, the one common thread that does run through the biographies of virtually all young shooters is a profound emotional illness, typically with origins in their childhood homes. Nikolas Cruz, the 19-year-old shooter who killed 17 of his former classmates and teachers at his high school in Parkland, Florida, said in his confession that his mother “put him down” and called him “crazy, stupid, and worthless.”

While their actions are monstrous, teenage school shooters themselves are not monsters. In almost all instances, shooters are youngsters who suffer from acute emotional illness, that is, deep-seated feelings of being unwanted and unloved. Shooters usually come from dysfunctional (or non-existent) homes of origin, and they are typically shunned and rejected at school. Many of them have been bullied. Tormented by feelings of resentment and revenge, shooters vent their rage by “making the world pay” for their soul-shattering feelings of emotional isolation. As one teenage killer was quoted as saying in Newsweek, “I’d rather be wanted for murder than not wanted at all.”

While the vast majority of kids from abusive or neglectful home backgrounds do not become shooters, virtually all teen killers do come from such homes. Unfortunately, we often have much less of an influence than we would like in lessening the negative experiences that occur in the homes of many young people. However, even for these youngsters we should never underestimate the significant positive impact we can have in our schools. Utilizing a technique called “empathetic teaching,” teachers, coaches, and counselors can provide students with the unconditional love that allows them to feel valued and wanted.

A definition is in order. Unconditional love is not a soft, sentimental emotion. It holds children responsible and accountable for their actions and, at the same time, means disciplining behavior while still valuing students as persons. In educational circles, its application is called “empathetic teaching.”

Some examples of studies/projects that demonstrate the efficacy of empathetic, caring teaching in elevating the social-emotional climate of schools and encouraging positive behavior in students are as follows:

1. Stanford University

Researchers at Stanford University excited the national educational community with a 2016 study that demonstrated the power of empathetic teaching in influencing positive student behavior.

The Stanford researchers contrasted a “punitive mindset” which focuses on punishment with an “empathetic mindset” that seeks to understand and care for students. The results, in terms of changed student behaviors, were startling.

The Stanford research focused on a Los Angeles middle school where teachers were encouraged to practice an empathetic mindset in disciplining their students, and the result was a 50% reduction in student suspensions during the school year compared to the previous year.

2. Aldine Independent School District (Houston)

A significant study on empathetic teaching was conducted by a Sam Houston State University research team at Aldine ISD in Houston, Texas, which not only confirmed the Stanford results, but also looked at a much larger population of students. Titled the “Aldine ISD Middle School Dropout Prevention Project,” this study involved 15 schools and 20,852 students over a six-year period. Its purpose was to test the impact of “empathetic teaching” on student behavior as the District implemented the research-based ARK (Adults Relating to Kids) Program developed by the non-profit ARKGroup. a research-based program featuring empathetic-teaching tools. The project revealed a 49% reduction in 9th grade out-of-school suspensions for students who had been exposed to empathetically-trained teachers during their entire middle school experience compared to those students who had not. In addition, the ninth grade to 10th grade dropout rate was reduced by 25% over a three-year period. The principal of Hambrick Middle School, Dr. Rebecca Sanford, reported that, since the implementation of empathetic teaching techniques at her school, out-of-suspensions have dropped 65% and in-school suspensions by 68%; also, fighting was reduced from 14 per year to 4 per year.

These studies together offer strong evidence that caring teacher-student relationships are a key factor in influencing positive student behavior. Aldine Superintendent Wanda Bamberg says, “The empathetic teaching model has profound implications for the challenges we face in education today. It helped our teachers see beyond a student's behavior to the larger picture of the whole child and his/her need for support and understanding.”

While not the only solution to the plague of school violence that threatens the safety of our children, programs promoting caring teacher-student relationships do address a root cause of the problem.

We believe that all schools should implement on-going programs to help their teachers provide unconditional love and care to all students, enabling them to feel valued and wanted. Emotionally healthy kids--who feel valued and wanted--do not shoot up schools!

The reality is that many, many kids suffer from emotional illness--feeling unwanted and unloved--not just potential school shooters; and all children would benefit from a school program that helps teachers provide unconditional care and respect to every child on the campus. For example, Hurricane Harvey continues to have a deleterious impact on many young people whose lives and families were uprooted by the storm; many of those children suffer from PTSD-like symptoms and would benefit tremendously from the emotional support extended by a cadre of caring teachers. Dr. Sandra Higareda's paper (Texas A&M, 2018) indicates that caring teacher-student relationships even have an impact on improving reading skills. Kids behave better and perform better for teachers they think like them!

The implementation of research-based programs that help teachers create nurturing classroom environments and caring, empathetic relationships with students should receive wide, bipartisan support. We urge our political leaders to move forward with legislation embracing this simple, common-sense approach to rescuing and enriching the lives of our children.

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