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James Garbarino, Ph.D
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The Konopka Institute
Division of General Pediatrics & Adolescent Health
University of Minnesota
The Gisela Konopka Lectureship was established with the support of Dr. Konopka’s friends and colleagues to honor her and her achievements on the occasion of her retirement after 30 years of contribution to the University of Minnesota. It carries on the important, unique tradition of integrating theory and practice and humanizing services for children and youth.

Dr. Konopka has been the moving force behind numerous innovative methods in practice and research in social work and youth services. She is a pioneer in the area of making scholarly knowledge about youth available to those who need it most—the practitioners. It has been her unerring devotion to making human services humane that has characterized her outstanding career.

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Pathways From Childhood Aggression to Youth Violence

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Editors Note: In his remarks, Dr. Garbarino references several events pertaining to youth violence that occurred prior to the May 11th Konopka Lecture. We have added the following to set the context for Dr. Garbarino’s remarks.

In January of 1999, the Konopka Institute for Best Practices in Adolescent Health and the Division of General Pediatrics and Adolescent Health extended an invitation to Dr. James Garbarino to be our 21st Konopka lecturer. We selected Dr. Garbarino primarily because of his tremendous contributions to the field of child and youth development, and his ability to translate that knowledge into solutions. He had also just completed and published a book, “Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Become Violent and How We Can Save Them”. Already this country had experienced young men shooting fellow classmates or family members in Springfield, Oregon; Paducah, Kentucky; and Jonesboro, Arkansas.

But no one could have predicted what would happen later that spring, three weeks before the Konopka Lecture. On April 20th, 1999, two teenagers entered Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado and began shooting, killing several youth, a teacher, and themselves. A country was in shock. Dr. Garbarino was pressed into service by policy makers, practitioners, and the media to help us understand what might have happened. The day before the Konopka Lectureship, Dr. Garbarino attended a White House session on the problem of youth violence. It is in this context that Dr. Garbarino gave his lecture.
INTRODUCTION

We come together at a unique time in history. It is a time of great crises and therefore great opportunity. On May 10th, the President of the United States, Bill Clinton convened an extraordinary three-hour session addressing the problem of youth violence. In addition to Cabinet members, the First Lady, Vice-President Gore, and Tipper Gore participated actively in the discussion. Only the opening statement was televised. After it had been given, the press was asked to leave in order to provide a kind of closed-door, private opportunity that would allow people to speak more freely. Much to the President’s credit, the first people he asked to speak were the three kids who were in the group of participants — a middle school child and a couple of high school age kids. This was both symbolically and substantially a very good way to begin. The other thing the President did was to ask all of the Cabinet members present, the Attorney General, Health and Human Services Secretary Shalala, and Secretary of Education Riley, to only listen for three hours and not to speak. This too was a wise and positive thing to do.

I hope we approach the topic of youth violence now with new humility. There has been in our culture and our society a kind of arrogance about the topic. This arrogance has existed as long as those of us who are white, middle class, and privileged could feel that this was something that only happened to those who were non-white, lower class, and underprivileged. I saw this attitude in my own children. Five years ago, my son, who is now graduating from college, was a seventeen-year old. At that time we lived on the south side of Chicago, an objectively dangerous place to live. As an adult I felt afraid to go out. But my son, a white, blond teenage boy, felt a sense of immunity, a sense of privilege. One day as he prepared to go out I offered my usual warning: “Be careful out there.” He dismissed it as teenage boys are likely to do, but that day he had a particular kind of empirical basis for his dismissal and his feeling of immunity. He picked up a copy of the Chicago Tribune and showed
it to me. That year the Tribune had been doing an in-depth story on youth violence. Every time a kid was killed in Chicago, a front-page story probed behind the facts of the case. At the end of the year, the Tribune published in one issue, on the front page, the pictures of every child, every youth, who had been killed in the Chicago area for the entire year. It was quite a grim spectacle. This was the issue of the paper my son picked up for me, and he said, “Dad, don’t worry about me. Look at the faces in the newspaper. How many white, blond faces do you see?” Of course I was humbled to think that he was right.

What he said reminded me of an experience I had three weeks earlier. I was on a community forum on the south side of Chicago with three other professional colleagues: a psychologist, a psychiatrist, and a lawyer. During the break we all got to talking and it turned out that we all had sons, teenage sons living in the city with us. As they talked about how they felt about their sons I realized a difference among us. It was that as a parent of a white, blond son, I felt worried when my son went out at night; but they, being African-American parents, felt a kind of dread when their sons went out at night. Their anxiety was very different from the anxiety I felt. A recognition of greater danger to nonwhite youths was bolstering my son’s sense of immunity as a blond, white teenager. Well, that was five years ago.

In the spring of 1998, my daughter was living in Ithaca, an idyllic small city in upstate New York. It’s a place where the big headlines are likely to be “Noble Prize Awarded to Faculty Mem- ber” or “Moosewood Cookbook Goes into Fifth Edition.” That May, the morning after the shootings at a high school in Springfield, Oregon, my daughter, now sixteen, looked up from the newspaper and said, “I wonder who it’s going to be at our school.” In the space of four or five years the immunity that my kids felt as white middle class children had evaporated, and a sense of vulnerability had replaced it.

This is a very important change, not just in my family and in my kids over the last four years, but in lots of families and lots of kids. Last year, the string of school shootings shook our confidence. We began to feel that our white, middle class privilege might in fact
be evaporating. For many people, when the new school year began and there were no shootings in September, October, November and December, a sense of relief spread across the country — at least to those of us who are white and of the middle class. That’s why the shootings in Colorado this spring were particularly devastating. Perhaps finally, once and for all, that event ended the white, middle class sense of immunity. Virtually every parent in the country recognized that every kid in our country goes to school with other children angry enough, frazzled enough, rageful and righteous enough, and with access to weapons and scenarios about how to use them to become the next school shooter.

That realization is sinking in. And it is why there was a White House summit on youth violence yesterday. We have to be humble in remembering that the one-day massacre that occurred in Colorado three weeks ago pales in comparison to the long slow massacre that has been going on for more than a generation in inner-city minority neighborhoods. In any week in these neighborhoods two or three times as many kids are killed as were killed in Colorado. And their deaths occurred with much of the same righteousness, anger, impulsive behavior and use of weapons that caused the deaths in one day in Colorado.

INTERVIEWING AGGRESSIVE BOYS

I became humble about white, middle class immunity a little earlier than most — only because I was being asked to help explain why kids kill. After twenty years of work on issues of youth and violence and childhood trauma, I began to be asked to serve as an expert witness in youth homicide trials. It was then that the superficiality and the inadequacy of what I had been doing became apparent to me. So my partner, Claire Bedard, and I launched a project to engage in very long term multiple interviews with kids who kill. The interviews would run two to three hours at a time, five to six times over a period of months.

We began with a message to them that we weren’t interested in their crime, at least not initially; we were interested in their life story. And we were not there to evaluate them, assess them, judge them or diagnose them, but rather to hear their story and help tell it
with them. So we began our project and the virtual product of it was the book “Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them.”

I would like to share some of the insights we learned from undertaking that project. First, we learned that the long slow massacre that is going on in the inner city is not simply a matter of social conditions. There has been a tendency to treat inner city minority kids who kill in a one-dimensional, superficial way — as if it is simply enough to say that they are the victims of racism, the victims of class, or the victims of abuse. But, in fact, what we began to see was that they have a complicated inner life, an inner life that in many ways is not fundamentally different from the inner life of their privileged counterparts who killed in Littleton, Colorado or Jonesboro, Arkansas. What matters is not simply the objective conditions of a boy’s life, but the subjective reality inside his head. What matters are the social maps that he has drawn of the world, the way he renders the world and his position in it. Understanding this gives rise to whole new avenues both for analysis and for intervention and prevention.

The project also made it clear to me that the hopelessness many people have expressed in dealing with this issue must be replaced with a sense of hope and determination. We can find hope in the fact that we have a system for intervening at the last moment, and this system works pretty well. It doesn’t make the national news often. But as best as I can estimate, about once a week somewhere in our country one of these school shootings is prevented — often literally at the last moment. This became clear to me a couple of months ago. I was on an airplane flying to Florida, and sitting next to me was a man from Butler, Pennsylvania, a small town in the northwest part of the state. He was reading his local newspaper, a weekly from that small town. The lead story was about a non-event, about how on Monday of that week, a fifteen year-old boy had been making threatening statements to kids in school. It related how that evening three of the kids had talked to the principal about the threats. These kids had called the principal at home, perhaps after talking it over with their parents or with their peers, but they had made that outreach to the principal. Tuesday morning when the boy showed up at school, the principal intercepted him and interviewed him,
and it turned out, sure enough, he had a rifle hidden in the bushes near the school. Interventions like this must happen at least once a week somewhere in our country. The dramatic massacres that slip through clearly are slipping through our last line of defense. We need to understand that.

We also need to understand that most of the data we rely upon to figure out if the trend is going up or down are often mushy and complicated. These data are not clear for a number of reasons. In recent decades, improvements in medical trauma technology have weakened the connection between serious assault and dead bodies. Today, even when shot or stabbed, many who would have died even thirty years ago, today survive. Consequently, the homicide rate may be a less perfect measure of lethal violence than it once was. We also need to recognize that many times kids do things that ought to result in bodies but don’t. One of the boys we interviewed at age fifteen, shot six times into a crowded gymnasium and hit no one. Of course legally the fact that no one died is important. But because we want to understand aggressive behavior, we must consider such behavior lethally aggressive, regardless of whether it produces a dead body.

Another thing that is complicating our task of understanding whether the numbers are going up or going down, is the high rate at which we are incarcerating high-risk boys. We are putting them away so they are not committing lethal violence on the street, but we should never for a minute think we are decreasing lethal violence or the potential for lethal violence by doing that. Imagine if those boys we have incarcerated in astoundingly increasing numbers had the same access to guns in prison that they have access to in the neighborhood. We would see even higher rates of lethal homicidal violence by kids. It would just be pushed over to another setting. Indeed, the level of non-lethal violence in those environments is often extraordinarily high. While I don’t think we should be alarmist, we also shouldn’t assume that because we have seen a short-term downturn in the youth homicide rates, we can assume that means the problem is solved. The solution is only beginning in many, many, many ways.
CONCEPTUAL TOOLS

To really delve into this issue, we need to have a series of conceptual tools. Every professional carries around a toolbox. If the electrician comes to my house, he’s got all those boxes in his truck and he has a tool for each job he has to do. If the plumber comes over, he’s got tools too. He may not use some of them for a long time and some he may use every trip, but he has a set of tools in his toolbox. We need to have a set of tools in our conceptual toolbox to really begin to address these issues. One of these tools, I call the Parable of the Lamppost. This is a tool because it helps us make sense of the policy environment in which we are always immersed. The policy environment always says, “do this and it will all be better tomorrow.”

The Parable of the Lamppost goes like this. A friend of ours, let’s call him Joe, is on his way home one night from a meeting. As he walks down the street he finds his friend George on his hands and knees under a lamppost on the street. Joe says, “George, what’s the matter?” And George says, “Oh Joe, I have lost my car keys and I live 35 miles away. I can’t go home until I find them.” “Well,” says Joe, “let me help you.” So he gets down on his hands and knees, and the two friends search. Some time passes, and they haven’t found the car keys. So Joe says, “Well, George, maybe we need to do this more systematically. Maybe we need a public health approach to this.” So from his pocket he pulls out a piece of chalk and draws a grid on the street under the lamppost. He labels the boxes A to Z and 1 to 26 and says, “Now we can search systematically.” They begin searching, box A-1, box A-2 box A-3, box A-4 — all the way to Z-26. But they haven’t found the car keys. “Well,” says Joe, “no, George, no, no. Forget that. What we need is a more behaviorist approach to this.” So from his other pocket he pulls a bag of M&M’s. He says, “Now George, I’m going to feed you these M&M’s to get your behavior under control.” And he starts. Pretty soon the M&M’s are flying out and George’s behavior is under control. He’s going right and left and back and forth and is a real kind of tour-de-force of behavioral technology. But they haven’t found the car keys. “Well,” says Joe, “maybe we need a more psychoanalytic approach.” And he asks George about early experiences of loss in his life because it could shed light on losing the keys. George talks about when his mother went into the hospital for two weeks, and when a
teddy bear disappeared. Soon he’s granting great insights into his early childhood experiences. But they haven’t found the car keys. Joe says, “No. No. Maybe we need a campaign to find the keys.” So from his bag he pulls out a banner that says “Find the Keys,” tee shirts that say “Find the Keys,” and key-shaped ribbons. The two friends link arms, and they swing back and forth, and they chant, “Find the Keys. Find the Keys.” They even get pictures taken to put up on their office walls. Years later they think back: “Remember the ‘Find the Keys’ campaign? Boy, that was one of the high points of our times.” They are so wrapped up in congratulating themselves on their campaign that for a minute they forget they never found the keys. So finally George says, “All right, maybe we need a really radical approach. Now, where exactly were you when you dropped the keys?” George says, “Oh, I think I was about 150 yards up the road when I dropped the keys.” Of course, Joe says, “Well George, why are we looking here?” George says, “Well, the light is much better here.”

The point is that we are always being drawn or forced or seduced or paid to look where the light is good. But no matter how well we do there, if the issues really lie up the road in the dark, we won’t solve the problem. We have a history of looking where the light is good with many, many issues. The most recent example of a Lamppost program is the DARE program. It’s a classic Lamppost program. More than $250 million dollars a year go into DARE. Who could be against the DARE program? It has corporate sponsors and local sponsors. Everybody loves it. There is one problem though: research seems to show that DARE doesn’t do any good. It doesn’t prevent drug abuse. In fact, a couple of studies suggest that in some situations it may increase drug abuse. But DARE sure has nice banners and tee shirts.

We have to be very careful of the lure of funding and the lure of not rocking the boat. They lead us to the lamppost, where the lighting is good, rather than up the road, where the keys may be. We have a long, long history of going to where the lighting is good.

A second concept to put in our toolbox is the concept of ecological perspective on human development. Most importantly, the ecological perspective tells us that context is always important
in understanding the developmental process. It tells us that rarely, if ever, is there a simple cause-effect relationship in human development that exists apart from context, apart from time, culture, and place. It tells us that a cause-effect relationship doesn’t work universally. It tells us that if the question in human development is “does X cause Y?” the best answer, the scientific answer, is almost always, “It depends.” Once after a talk somebody asked me if people who were sexually abused are better or worse as therapists for sexually abused children. Are they better or worse? My answer was “Yes.” They are better or they are worse; it depends on what has happened to them since the abuse. The research is full of examples. Are children born with a physical anomaly, which usually means some neurological damage during pregnancy, more likely than physically normal children to end up as violent teenagers? Well, now you know the answer: it depends. Many studies report that if those psychologically damaged children were in healthy well-functioning families they would be no more likely than physically normal children to develop into violent teenagers. But when those damaged children are in an abusive, neglecting, negative community they are three times more likely to end up as violent delinquents.

It depends. It depends. It depends.

The same applies to programming. There are so many mentoring programs available, it’s hard not to stumble over them. Everywhere it seems everyone wants a mentoring program. But research coming out of Colorado tends to show that when we ask the question “does mentoring help” the answer is “it depends.” Mentors who are involved with a kid’s life for less than two and one-half years make things worse than no mentor at all. It’s only helpful when a mentor is in the kid’s life for two and one-half years or more. This makes sense.

The ecological perspective is also important in understanding “resilience,” a term used in the field of human development. Minnesota, by the way, is the birthplace of the resilience concept. But resilience, like all development phenomena, must be understood in context. For example, in World War II, General Marshall did a study of American soldiers going into combat in Europe. He asked “if men go into combat and stay in combat for 60 days, what per-
centage of them become psychiatric casualties?” In this study, a “psychiatric casualty” was a man who broke down in combat and had to withdraw from the front lines. Many “casualties” would recover with short-term rest and treatment, but some of them never did. The central question of the study was “are men resilient enough to stay in combat for 60 days and not break down?” The data revealed that 98 percent of men became psychiatric casualties after 60 days in combat. Those examining the data asked Marshall who the 2 percent were that didn’t become casualties. They assumed this 2 percent must be the most robust and resilient among us. But the records showed they were all psychopaths. The only men who didn’t go crazy, already were. So the Marshall study gives us a little perspective on resilience.

There is a domestic study by Patrick Tolan that is, in many ways, the equivalent of the Marshall study. This study deals with the third major concept in our toolbox — the accumulation of risk factors. Tolan asked the question, “what percent of kids are resilient?” In the study, to be resilient a child would need to do two things: (1) avoid mental health problems that require professional intervention, and (2) avoid academic devastation that would require remedial, special education. To be resilient in the study, then, a child must avoid both problems. Tolan asked, “what percent are resilient if we look at the following accumulation of risk factors?” Tolan first considered kids living in negative and abusive families. We know that kids who have been abused and neglected physically, psychologically, or sexually suffer a primal wound. Tolan next considered the abused and neglected children living in the most violent neighborhoods in Chicago (where he conducted the study). These neighborhoods are urban war zones. By the time kids are fifteen, virtually all of them have gone to the funeral of someone they know who was killed. By the time kids are fifteen, a third of them will witness a homicide. These were the neighborhoods in Chicago where by the age of six every child had encountered a shooting. It was in these neighborhoods that Tolan wanted to see how neglected and abused children do. And Tolan further decided to focus the study on boys in those neighborhoods because they tend to be more vulnerable than girls for a variety of reasons — some of them biological, some genetic, some temperamental, some experiential, and some cultural. So Tolan’s study started with those three risk factors.
Tolan decided to focus the study on kids between the ages of thirteen and fifteen. Those are the years that childhood experience and development precipitate escalations in behavior. It is important to remember, though, that most of the research shows that adolescence is not a time of dramatic, sudden change; behavioral changes in adolescence typically follow a pattern of continuity. Depressed teenagers were sad children. Violent teenagers were aggressive children. The continuity is extraordinary. Unfortunately we have a culture that portrays adolescents as being in a state of total transformation. Tolan recognized that in children ages thirteen to fifteen adolescent behaviors express feelings that have been building up since birth.

Tolan further narrowed his study to an examination of African-American boys because they are subject to an added risk factor—racism. We know that racism is a risk factor in its own right. (Just this year a study came out in which whites and blacks were asked the same question: “how often does race come into your mind as something that’s going to affect what will happen to you today?” About two percent of whites said “often” but 65 percent of African-Americans said “everyday.”) Tolan wanted to see what happens when racism is added to the other risk factors. Considering those who were subject to all the risk factors, Tolan asked what percent of the kids are resilient in the sense that they avoid having a professionally sanctioned mental health problem and avoid having such a devastating academic development that they need remedial special education? When he asked the question that way the data showed that the percent was zero. Not one kid could withstand those risk factors without showing damage or harm. This is not to say these kids would not recover somewhere down the line, but they are between the ages of thirteen and fifteen and taking a big hit. So, in such an environment, with these risk factors, resilience is virtually impossible to find and has little meaning. This is why we need to have a kind of humility about resilience.

I was in a courtroom not long ago testifying about a kid who had the same buildup of risk factors that Tolan studied. I was trying to give the jury an understanding of the context in which a kid commits a murder. In the cross-examination, the prosecutor said, “but Dr. Garbarino, what about resilience?” His exact words were “what’s
wrong with this boy that he was not resilient?” and I realized that rather than having a kind of humility about resilience, the prosecutor had a sense of arrogance about it. Resilience is now becoming a moral judgment.

Another concept that needs to be in our toolbox for understanding youth violence is what we call ‘social toxicity’. It refers to the idea that the social environment can become poisoned just like the physical environment. This concept really began to grow in my mind a few years ago when I still lived in Chicago. For people living in Chicago, every night presents a dilemma of whether or not to watch the local news. Inevitably, the lead story on the news is about a killing. To watch these broadcasts night after night only adds to the weight of “bad karma” people carry around with them. One night I was watching the news, and sure enough, it was about a kid being killed, but the circumstances reminded me of my own adolescence as a teenager growing up in New York City. As an adolescent, I used to write a column for my high school newspaper. One week I wrote a column in which I made fun of the fraternities at my high school. In retrospect this column was a bad idea because I had succeeded in eliciting the anger of my adolescent peers. For a teenager, this is never a good idea. Two nights later some boys showed up at my house and dumped garbage on my lawn as an act of intimidation. In today’s language you might say I was the victim of a drive-by littering. The news program I watched in Chicago a few years ago was about a boy who had done much the same thing that I had done as an adolescent in New York. But what resulted for him was a drive-by shooting in which he was killed. Watching that newscast, remembering my own experience, I realized that in thirty-five years teenagers had not changed much. Today, they still have the same needs teenagers had years ago. Earlier today, Gisela Konopka stated the idea more eloquently than anyone has. She says that what teenagers really need is respect and tenderness. That hasn’t changed and never will change. But how the social environment provides respect and tenderness, or what it provides as consequences when respect and tenderness are absent has changed.

Another thing has changed since thirty-five years ago when those boys littered my yard as an act of intimidation. The morning after the littering, when my father woke up and saw the garbage, he
went up the street to the house of one of the boys whom he suspected was involved and quite literally dragged him down and made him clean up the mess. Today, how many fathers would be brave enough to go up the street and confront some teenage boys on a matter like that? Today’s changed attitudes and perspectives are part of the social toxicity in our environment. The consequences for teenagers have changed in two ways. On the one hand, adolescents who make their peers angry can feel severe consequences; they get killed. But on the other hand, if they break the rules and attack somebody, they may get no consequences at all because the adults are intimidated.

A socially toxic environment is a poisoned culture. It might be poisoned by the availability of weapons. Or it might be poisoned by a breakdown of the structures supporting adult authority. Whatever kind of poison it is, it is important to understand that with social toxicity, like physical toxicity, some groups or individuals are more vulnerable than others. From epidemiology, we recognize that diseases usually first take hold of the vulnerable populations and later spread to the less vulnerable. In the Middle Ages, for example, the bubonic plague first took hold in the slums of European cities. It later spread outward. The epidemic of out-of-wedlock births in teenage girls first took hold among the inner-city minority population thirty years ago, but now the rate for girls in general is what it was for inner-city minority girls when the epidemic began. In part this same kind of pattern can be seen in the youth violence epidemic. Youth violence first took hold in the most vulnerable population — among minorities in the inner-city. It then spread out more broadly. But we must also consider differences of vulnerability in terms of the individual. For instance, in an air pollution alert in Los Angeles, we would worry about all children, of course, but we would particularly worry about children with asthma. These children would have a special vulnerability to the poison in the air as individuals.

When we speak about social toxicity, an equivalence can be seen between physical vulnerability to disease and vulnerability to the epidemic of youth violence. A few years ago, I was visiting a day treatment school for emotionally disturbed kids at the invitation of the director. He told me he had started that program twenty-four years earlier, in 1970. And he had run the program for a quarter of a
century. He told me, “I can guarantee you that it is the same pro-
gram now as it was when I first started. We have the same training,
the same staff recruitment, the same program model, the same diag-
nostic criteria to get kids into the program, and the kids come from
the same neighborhood today that kids came from when we started.
Only one thing has changed. The program used to work; now it
doesn’t. Today, the kids bring with them into the school a level of
violence and aggression and nastiness that just blows the program
away.” What has happened, I believe, is that these vulnerable chil-
dren, these emotionally disturbed children, have been coming from
more and more socially toxic environments. It is as if there are psy-
chologically asthmatic children living in more and more polluted
environments. And these are the kids that show the effects first,
and the effects are worse for them. It is horrifying to think that the
kids who kill are simply showing us what is bad in our culture. We
know that the number of physically asthmatic children have risen.
Is it any surprise that the numbers of psychologically asthmatic kids
have risen too? The Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist, a com-
monly used assessment instrument, shows that in 1975, 10 percent
of the kids crossed over the line into the clinical range where they
needed professional mental health services. In 1989, a similar sur-
vey, using the same instrument and with a similar representation of
kids, showed the number had risen to over 18 percent. This is al-
most double in fourteen years. It shows a trend, that there are more
and more psychologically asthmatic children in more and more toxic
environments.

It is very clear to me that the kids I interviewed in prison
were psychologically asthmatic in the sense that they have had at-
tachment difficulties. They have had temperamental difficulties.
They have had relationship difficulties in their families. They have
often confessed to being neglected. They have been psychologically
beaten down in many ways. And so when they are exposed to a
socially toxic environment, they suck the poisons right up.

In a course I taught, I used to use a film called Growing Up
Amish. In this film a young man talks about being an Amish teen-
ager. As you know, the Amish are a group that has kind of opted
out of the twentieth century. Their society has no cars, no telephones,
no electricity. They don’t even go to high school. They have a sepa-
rate language. They dress in a different way. In this film, the young man says to the interviewer, “you know we were teenagers just like everybody else. Times were wild and crazy.” The camera cuts to the interviewer’s face, and it is obvious that the interviewer is trying to imagine what a wild and crazy Amish teenager could possibly be like. But then the young man continues, “we used to do some wild and crazy things, like put white ivory rings on the reins of our buggies or put a colored handkerchief in a white shirt pocket.” Then he volunteers, “yes, we also had juvenile delinquents.” “Oh tell me about those,” says the interviewer. And the young Amish man says, “some of the boys did very bad things like ride in an automobile. And when you ride in an automobile, it is so delinquent that when you are twenty-one you have to go through a special ceremony to be accepted into the adult church.”

Could that young man have been in a better environment to act out? I am quite convinced that if the boys I interviewed in prison were Amish, they would have been the first to put those white rings on the reins of a buggy. Or they would have been the first to put the colored handkerchief in someone’s pocket. Or they would have taken a ride in an automobile. But no one would have been saying to them at age twelve: “Hey kid, you want to earn $100.00? Stand on the corner.” Or at age thirteen: “You want $200.00? Take this white powder over there.” Or at age fourteen: “You want to earn $400.00? Take this baseball bat and get that guy out of my nerves.” Or as one kid described to me, at fifteen he was told, “If you want to earn $3,000.00 take this gun, go up the street, and execute so-and-so for me.” The point is this: for a psychologically asthmatic child, the appeal of whatever is bad in the social environment is strong, and our collective responsibility for making the world safer for kids — particularly for psychologically asthmatic kids — is something we do not recognize very well. We fail in our responsibility partly because our individual culture teaches us to believe — “As long as my kid can tolerate the situation, I have met my responsibility.”

Addressing our collective responsibility is an important cultural, philosophical and ethical point for many issues being debated today. Take for instance, the issue of video games — specifically point-and-shoot video games. These are video games in which the player has the viewpoint of a shooter, firing a video gun at attackers
that pop up on the video monitor. Recently, the television news program *60 Minutes* ran a segment examining point-and-shoot games. A friend and colleague, David Grossman, appeared in that segment. He is really tough on the issue. Having been a military psychologist for twenty years, Grossman said he retired to find a safe place and a teaching job and to put all of the killing behind him. Unfortunately, he chose Jonesboro, Arkansas as the place to become a college teacher. As you know, he ended up with carnage at his doorstep. On the *60 Minutes* segment, Grossman says that the point-and-shoot video games exactly mimic the military training techniques that he and his colleagues developed to prepare young men to kill. Most people have an inhibition against killing, which is why in World War II, when training camps trained soldiers using a bulls-eye, only about 20 percent of soldiers being sent into combat could point at the enemy and shoot. Most trainees could not point their weapons at the enemy and shoot because their inhibitions took over. Similarly, if someone walked in and threatened us, most of us, even if we had a gun in our pocket, wouldn’t be able to shoot it at the attacker. Apparently, though, the military concluded that point-and-shoot games are a very efficient way to train recruits to overcome their inhibitions.

With point-and-shoot games in mind, consider the case of Michael Carneal in Paducah, Kentucky. Here is a fifteen year-old boy who apparently had never fired a real gun before — ever. Yet he was able to walk into a school and fire 21 times and hit 19 kids in the head or upper chest, a remarkable feat of marksmanship. Compare this story to another news report of an incident in New York City a couple of months ago. Four police officers opened up on one unarmed guy. They fired 41 times, hit the guy 19 times at close range — in the finger, in the ear, in the foot, and in the thigh. Yet this kid in Kentucky who had never fired a real gun before walks into a school and systematically shoots 19 people, only missing twice. How did he get ready? He had spent 3,000 hours at a point-and-shoot video game that the military uses to train its soldiers to be efficient killers. In a socially toxic environment a psychologically asthmatic kid will go down and maybe take other people with him. That is a measure of social toxicity.

There are other measures as well. The availability of guns in this country is certainly one of them. When people from other coun-
tries look at our debate on guns, they must feel like they are reading Alice in Wonderland, that they are at the Mad Hatter’s tea party. One of the advantages of international travel is that people have the opportunity to see what their culture looks like from somewhere else. People must be able to see that the availability of guns in the U.S. is a problem. It is not just their physical availability, but it is also their psychological availability. Kids have access to guns and are willing to use guns in adolescence conflicts. The real changes come only when we begin to see that physical and psychological availability of guns is a problem. But we are very slow at dealing with that. At yesterday’s White House session on violence, four people representing the gun industry offered their solution to the problem. It was to provide more training in the use of firearms for kids. They reasoned that kids should learn to use guns early because kids have guns around anyway, and they might as well be trained in how to use them. That was about it for the gun industry’s solutions. This is another symptom of social toxicity. And social toxicity is one of the ideas we need to recognize now.

With these conceptual tools in mind — the Parable of the Lamppost, an ecological perspective on human development, and the idea of social toxicity — let’s look more specifically at the pathways from childhood aggression to youth violence.

PATHWAYS TO YOUTH VIOLENCE

If you were to chart this pathway, it would begin with child maltreatment. Child maltreatment is the most efficient way to produce aggressive children. It has long been known that a strong connection exists between child maltreatment and the development of what is called conduct disorder. This disorder is obvious in children by the age of ten. Conduct disorder is an official psychiatric diagnosis, but it is a kind of bizarre term in a way too. To diagnose a child with early onset conduct disorder the diagnostician has to prove or observe that the child demonstrates a chronic pattern of aggression, bad behavior, acting out and violating the rights of others. Once a child has been diagnosed with having a case of conduct disorder, what do we know about the child? We know we have a child who demonstrates a chronic pattern of aggression, bad behavior, acting out and violating the rights of others. This doesn’t tell us much that we don’t already know. What we don’t know, though, is
'why'. We have known that statistically an abused and neglected child has an increased risk for developing conduct disorder. It is only recently that Kenneth Dodge has illuminated how the connection works.

In his work, Dodge shows abused kids videotapes of social interactions, and asks them what they see in that situation. He focuses on four things they might see. It turns out these are the four pathways by which a child moves from being an abused child to becoming a kid who is aggressive and chronically acts out.

1. Abused children develop a hypersensitivity to negative social queues. The tapes of the social interactions reveal that they see every negative gesture and hear every negative tone of voice. They are hypersensitive to the negative.

2. They become oblivious to the positive. The same tapes reveal that these children don’t see the welcoming gesture. They don’t hear a positive tone of voice. It’s as if they are wearing dark sunglasses that screen out the positive and only let in the negative.

3. Abused children interacting with other abused children develop a repertoire of readily accessible aggressive behaviors. Suppose someone bumps into a child in the lunch line, spilling his milk. What would be the response? Typically, if the child were abused, he would respond by hitting the person who bumped him. If the abused child was then asked what other action he might have taken, the child would most likely reply, “hit him again.” So these kids develop a kind of behavioral map of the world that only allows them to see the negative, that doesn’t allow them to see the positive, and when they do see the negative, they attack it.

4. Dodge finds that abused kids develop a conclusion about the way the world works — that aggression is successful. We must remember that children are fundamentally anthropologists. They figure out the culture; they are mentally taking notes. They might note that when their mom nags their dad, he punches her in the face, and she stops nagging. Or they might see that when their little brother whines, their mother slaps him in the face and he cries, but he doesn’t whine any more.
Dodge finds that if abused kids develop all four social maps in their heads, they are seven times more likely to develop chronic aggression, bad behavior and acting out. If kids are abused and don’t develop those four maps they are no more likely than non-abused kids to develop chronic aggression, bad behavior, and acting out. The question remains, though, “does abuse produce conduct disorder?” And the answer is: “it depends.” We don’t exactly know why some abused kids get those four social maps and others don’t. There are many plausible answers. Some researchers have posited hypotheses that some kids are temperamentally prone to aggression or some kids are born impulsive. These kids jump to conclusions: they think, if I see something negative, then it’s positive to hit. They’ve seen that aggression works. Other kids are more reflective. Some kids have low instinctual emotional sensitivity to others; they don’t pick up on the same things others do.

Some kids who are not abused nonetheless develop chronic aggression and acting out. How does that happen? We are not sure. It might be that some difficult children have parents who would have been adequate with an easy child but can’t effectively manage a difficult child. A colleague of mine has been studying extremely difficult children, children so difficult that any normal parent would fail with them. What he finds is that these children combine a very demanding attention-getting style with an extreme vulnerability to being overwhelmed and aroused. For such children, even though they demand attention, receiving attention overwhelms them and they break down. It is possible to rear these children successfully, but it takes an incredible level of sophistication, sensitivity, and supportive training to do it. So often people don’t have those skills, so they move into a coercive cycle with the child and/or they withdraw from the child. They often tell the child to go watch television. Now, television is a great example of how modern environment may increase the risk to the child. In the very first studies of television made in 1950 by Eleanor Maccoby, parents overwhelming said television made it easier to be a parent. They could put the child in a dead zone where the child wouldn’t bother them. By sending the difficult children to watch television, they move the kids away and put them in a holding pattern. To make it worse, while the kids are in the holding pattern the television is throwing aggressive images at them. These circumstances develop a pool of kids who are ready to move into conduct disorder.
Early childhood education programs are central for effectively rehabilitating kids just developing conduct disorder. On this topic, the work of Shephard Kellam with first-graders is startling. Kellam finds that if aggressive boys come into first grade and encounter a strong teacher who creates a well-structured and orderly but caring classroom, their aggression is reduced on into seventh grade. If, however, those boys encounter a weak teacher and a chaotic classroom, they form into aggressive peer groups, which can be observed into the seventh grade. I call this the “Mrs. Carey Effect.” Mrs. Carey was a teacher in my elementary school. She was an enormous woman and was she something. When we walked into her classroom, she would say, “Welcome to my classroom, children. You’re here to be cared for and to be civilized.” We didn’t mess with Mrs. Carey. She successfully took aggressive boys and brought them back to the fold. In contrast to Mrs. Carey was Miss Madeline, who was not a particularly strong figure. As an adult, I was once visiting a classroom like that of Miss Madeline. In the classroom, a little boy picked up a brick and was about to throw it through the window. The teacher said, “Bobbie, we don’t do that in our class.” And he said, “the hell we don’t.” And I took the brick away from him. Kellam’s work is very clear that first grade offers a pivotal moment in the development of aggressive little boys. He was able to develop an intervention program called the good behavior game, which replicates the experience of being in a classroom with Mrs. Carey. This program is able to decrease aggression into the seventh grade.

If by age ten boys are not reined in, and they do develop a pattern of chronic aggression, bad behavior, and acting out, they become a very high risk group for all of us. Studies by Rolf Loeber, David Farrington, and others show that about a third of those boys on average will become serious, violent, chronic delinquents. More than 90 percent of them will end up costing plenty to society and to themselves. They will most likely be institutionalized, incarcerated, or end up in hospitals or on welfare.

Whether or not these kids become lethally violent has an awful lot to do with social context. In fact, the likelihood that kids with early onset conduct disorder will become serious violent delinquents is dramatically influenced by the neighborhood context in which they grow up. Eighty-percent of them can end up being
serious violent delinquents in some neighborhoods, while in other neighborhoods it is only 10 percent. This difference is another example of functional social toxicity. It reveals that what the social environment offers, what it tolerates, and what it promotes is what it gives to kids. Does it provide something like multi-systemic therapy, which is both cost-effective and efficient in retraining boys with conduct disorder? Does the environment bring these boys back into the fold by positively ganging up on them, by not just treating the boy but by treating the boy’s parents, teachers and peers? If his relatives and everybody in the environment gang up in a positive way, the outcome is very promising. But by the time the boy gets to be involved in lethal violence, he has become a serious chronic delinquent; he has killed somebody or is going to kill somebody. If the boy has reached this stage, it will take something even more powerful to retrain him.

FROM BOOT CAMP TO MONASTERY

In a youth prison, we have been piloting a program we call “From Boot Camp to Monastery.” Recognizing what we know about the effects of traumatizing aggressive, out-of-control boys, I would say we must establish security and safety for these boys. To simply rely on power assertions to change them is probably a losing proposition. What they need is a profound transformation. My belief in the need for such a transformation derives from one of the observations about kids who kill — that they characteristically exhibit a kind of spiritual emptiness. This spiritual issue is less about the boys’ relation to religion in the formal sense — although certain kinds of religious experiences do contribute — than about whether or not they have a spiritual foundation that conveys in their hearts and in their cognitive maps a sense of reverence about life. It is a sense that there is a higher purpose and power. It is a sense that there are limits to their behavior. It is a sense that they are loved in the universe and a sense that they have a firm, positive place in it.

Research shows that if kids are involved in non-punitive religion, the kind of religion with an inner voice that emphasizes love, humility and reverence, it is a buffer against social pathology. Spirituality is about that “other voice” in religion, and it supports children by giving them something to fall back on. With a spiritual
foundation, these kids can become sad, but they don’t go into an emotional free fall. Most aggressive boys are ultimately sad, depressed boys, particularly when they engage in flamboyant disruptive acts. Spirituality gives these boys a positive core of meaning so the dark side of our culture has no place to take hold. Every boy wants to have a sense of meaning. If he can’t have a positive sense of meaning, he will have a negative sense of meaning. A prisoner once told a colleague of mine, “I would rather be wanted for murder than not be wanted at all.” That is a basic truth of human existence.

The other thing a spiritual core provides a kid is a sense that there are things you can’t do — there is a kind of moral order you shouldn’t transgress. So that no matter how angry you get, no matter how much people deserve to be killed because they humiliate you or degrade you or disrespect you, there are limits to what you can do.

The boot-camp to monastery program focuses, in part, on involving kids in transformative spiritual experiences of meditation and reflection. We seek to recreate what men sometimes do individually in prison. Because of my involvement with the retrial of death penalty cases, I’ve sat with men who have been on death row for as many as ten years. There are some of them who wouldn’t even recognize the 19-year-old killer they were ten years ago in the 29-year-old-man they’d become because they’ve gone through this process of transformation. It’s miraculous to observe and powerful enough to stand up against their experience of social toxicity and psychological asthma earlier in their lives.

There are a lot of things that we can do. We can implement some of these practices through character education or through programs that focus every element of the community around core values. We can do some of this by involving kids in processes of meditation, which I think can happen even in public institutions without violating church and state constitutional issues.

I think this is a period of great opportunity for us — a period of great hope — if we approach it with humility. And we also need to find a way to walk between two poles that are pulling at us right now — the poles of denial and hysteria. The country has come out
of a period of denial in which most people said "this doesn’t happen in my white middle class suburb, it only happens to those people." We’ve come out of that denial because of Littleton, Colorado; unfortunately it has served to push people all the way over into hysteria. We’re rounding up kids because they wear black coats; kids all over the country are saying they’re being treated as if they were in some Gestapo state and being sent to the police because they sound troubled. If we can find a middle path between denial and hysteria, I think we’ll come out of this a much stronger country, a much safer country, and a much better place. A place in which what Gisela Konopka said kids need, will happen: to be treated with respect and tenderness.
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