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Special Issue

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Adapted from

"Warning Signs"

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## Youth and violence

Events occur which provide wake-up calls. The tragedy at Columbine High School is clearly one of those events. Many ask, "What can we do to guard against acts of violence?" First we need to know the warning signs.

One of the goals of the Family and Youth Institute is to provide professionals working with families and youth information that will assist in programming efforts. The information provided in this newsletter was co-produced by the American Psychological Association (APA) and MTV: Music Television to help people recognize when someone might be a potential danger to themselves or others. Identifying warning signs of violent behavior and getting help are critical to stopping violence. The original guide for youth "Warning Signs" is available at the APA web site [<http://helping.apa.org/warningsigns/index.html>].

The next issue, which will focus on normal manifestations of grief, together with variables which often increase the risk of a complicated grief reaction, is the work of Kevin Oltjenbruns, Ph.D., recognized expert on grief and loss. She will also discuss traumatic grief (an intersection of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Grief) as would likely be evident in the aftermath of the Columbine High School Shootings.

### Introduction

Violence. It's the act of purposefully hurting someone. And it's a major issue facing today's young adults.

One in 12 high schoolers is threatened or injured with a weapon each year. Youth between the ages of 12 and 24 face the highest risk of being the victim of violence.

At the same time, statistics show that by the early 1990's the incidence of violence caused by young people reached unparalleled levels in American society.

There is no single explanation for the overall rise in violence. Many different factors cause violent behavior. The more these factors are present in a young person's life, the more likely he or she is to commit an act of violence.

### Reasons for violence

What causes someone to punch, kick, stab or fire a gun at someone else or even him/herself?

There is never a simple answer to that question. But people often commit violence because of one or more of the following:

**Expression.** Some people use violence to release feelings of anger or frustration. They think there are no answers to their problems and turn to violence to express their out of control emotions.

**Manipulation.** Violence is used as a way to control others or get something they want.

**Retaliation.** Violence is used to retaliate against those who have hurt them or someone they care about.

Violence is a learned behavior. Like all learned behaviors, it can be changed. This isn't easy, though. Since there is no single cause of violence, there is no one simple solution. Learn to recognize the warning signs of violence, and teach youth to recognize the signs.

Factors that contribute to violent behavior include:

- peer pressure
- need for attention or respect
- feelings of low self-worth
- early childhood abuse or neglect
- witnessing violence at home, in the community or in the media
- easy access to weapons

### Recognizing warning signs

Often people who act violently have trouble controlling their feelings. They may have been hurt by others. Some think that making people fear them through violence or threats of violence will solve their problems or earn them respect.

However, people who behave violently lose respect. They find themselves isolated or disliked, and they still feel angry and frustrated.

**These immediate warning signs indicate that violence is a serious possibility:**

- loss of temper on a daily basis
- frequent physical fighting
- significant vandalism or property damage
- increase in use of drugs or alcohol
- increase in risk-taking behavior
- detailed plans to commit acts of violence
- announcing threats or plans for hurting others
- enjoying hurting animals
- carrying a weapon

**These signs over a period of time indicate the potential for violence:**

- a history of violent or aggressive behavior
- serious drug or alcohol use
- gang membership or strong desire to be in a gang
- access to or fascination with weapons, especially guns
- threatening others regularly

- trouble controlling feelings like anger
- withdrawal from friends and usual activities
- feeling rejected or alone
- having been a victim of bullying
- poor school performance
- history of discipline problems or frequent run-ins with authority
- feeling constantly disrespected
- failing to acknowledge the feelings or rights of others

### When someone shows violence warning signs

Take action if someone shows violence warning signs. Hoping that someone else will deal with the situation is the easy way out.

Above all, take measures to be safe. Do not spend time alone with someone who shows signs of potential violence. Remove the person from the situation that's setting him/her off, if possible without putting others in danger.

Encourage young people to tell someone they trust and respect about their concerns and ask for help. This could be a family member, guidance counselor, teacher, school psychologist, coach, clergy, school resource officer or friend.

If young people are worried about being victims of violence, they need to get someone in authority to protect them. They should be encouraged not to resort to violence or use a weapon to protect themselves.

Remind youth not to try to go it alone if they know someone who shows warning signs of violence.

### Dealing with anger

It's normal for people to feel angry or frustrated when they've been let down or betrayed. But anger and frustration don't justify violent action. Anger is a strong emotion that can be difficult to keep in check, but the right response is always to stay cool.

*The boxes contain information to be used directly with youth.*

### Ways you can deal with anger without resorting to violence:

- Learn to talk about your feelings – if you're afraid to talk or if you can't find the right words to describe what you're going through, find a trusted friend or adult to help you one-on-one.
- Express yourself calmly – express criticism, disappointment, anger or displeasure without losing your temper or fighting. Ask yourself if your response is safe and reasonable.
- Listen to others – listen carefully.
- Respond without getting upset when someone gives you negative feedback. Ask yourself if you can really see the other person's point of view.
- Negotiate – work out your problems with someone else by looking at alternative solutions and compromises.
- Anger is part of life, but you can free yourself from the cycle of violence by learning to talk about your feelings. Be strong. Be safe. Be cool.

### When youth come for help

If youth recognize any of the warning signs for violent behavior in themselves and come to you for help, let them know they don't have to live with the guilt, sadness and frustration that come from hurting others. You can help when you:

- Acknowledge their concern about hurting others as the first step.
- Listen to the person.
- Assess the immediacy of danger.
- Talk about dealing with anger and ways to control the risk for violent behavior (if they are ready).
- Put the youth at risk in touch with a licensed mental health professional who cares and can help.

## Ways you can control risk for violent behavior

Everyone feels anger in his or her own way. Start managing it by recognizing how anger feels to you.

When you are angry, you probably feel:

- muscle tension
- accelerated heartbeat
- a "knot" or "butterflies" in your stomach
- changes in your breathing
- trembling
- goose bumps
- flushed in the face

You can reduce the rush of adrenaline that's responsible for your heart beating faster, your voice sounding louder, and your fists clenching if you:

- Take a few slow, deep breaths and concentrate on your breathing.
- Imagine yourself at the beach, by a lake, or anywhere that makes you feel calm and peaceful.
- Try other thoughts or actions that have helped you relax in the past.

Keep telling yourself:

- "Calm down."
- "I don't need to prove myself."
- "I'm not going to let him/her get to me."

Stop. Consider the consequences. Think before you act. Try to find positive or neutral explanations for what that person did that provoked you. Don't argue in front of other people.



Make your goal to defeat the problem, not the other person. Learn to recognize what sets you off and how anger feels to you. Learn to think through the benefits of controlling your anger and the consequences of losing control. Most of all, stay cool and think. Only you have the power to control your own violent behavior; don't let anger control you.

## Violence against self

Some people who have trouble dealing with their feelings don't react by lashing out at others. Instead, they direct violence toward themselves. The most final and devastating expression of this kind of violence is suicide.

Like people who are violent toward others, potential suicide victims often behave in recognizable ways before they try to end their lives. Suicide, like other forms of violence, is preventable. The two most important steps in prevention are recognizing warning signs and getting help. Warning signs of potential self-violence include:

- previous suicide attempts
- significant alcohol or drug use
- communicating thoughts of suicide, death, dying or the afterlife
- sudden increase in moodiness, withdrawal, or isolation
- major change in eating or sleeping habits
- feelings of hopelessness, guilt or worthlessness
- poor control over behavior
- impulsive, aggressive behavior
- drop in quality of school performance or interest
- lack of interest in usual activity
- getting into trouble with authority figures
- demanding perfectionism in self
- giving away important possessions
- hinting at not being around in the future or saying good-bye

These warning signs are especially noteworthy in the context of:

- a recent death or suicide of a friend or family member

- a recent break-up with a boyfriend girlfriend, or conflict with parents
- news reports of other suicides by young people in the same school or community

Often, suicidal thinking comes from a wish to end deep psychological pain. Death seems like the only way out. But it isn't.

If someone mentions suicide, take it seriously. Listen carefully, then seek help immediately. Never keep someone's talk of suicide a secret, even if he/she asks you to. Remember, you risk losing that person. Forever.

Encourage young people to do something if they recognize the warning signs for suicidal behavior. They need to tell a trusted adult what they have seen or heard. They should seek help from a licensed mental health professional as soon as possible. They can help work out the problems that seem so unsolvable but, in fact, are not.

## Take a stand against violence.

**Disclaimer :** Information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for professional health and mental health care or consultation. Individuals who believe they may need or benefit from care should consult a psychologist, school psychologist, or other licensed health/mental health professional.



*Our thoughts are with the victims of the violence at Columbine High School and with their loved ones.*

*FYI staff*

## Acknowledgements

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*Copies of the original "Warning Signs" guide for youth are available by calling APA at 1-800-268-0078 or on the web at <http://helping.apa.org/warningsigns/index.html>*

## Invitation to Dialogue

What issues and concerns would you like to see addressed?

Contact FYI at:

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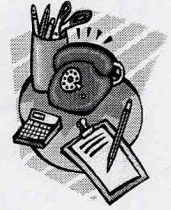
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*Providing research and education to communities,  
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