

Preventing Violence: What Parents Can Do



What to Do

If young people show the early warning signs of potential violence, parents should address the behavior with them, finding out the motivation behind it and then working with them to solve the problems that are causing their troubles. Professional assistance, either from a psychologist, social worker or psychiatrist, may be necessary.

If the imminent warning signs of violence are shown, it is crucial to take action, but in a way that ensures the safety of yourself, your teenager and those around you. Contact a mental health professional and your local law enforcement agency immediately.

When children have positive connections to adults at home, in school or in the community at large, the potential for violence is reduced significantly. Therefore, an important means of preventing violence is becoming involved in teenagers' lives, finding out what is on their minds and helping them during the difficult time of adolescence. This does not mean trying to be their best friends, but keeping lines of communication open and showing them you care.

Although it is important for parents to respect teenagers' privacy, they also should be aware of what they have in their rooms, where they are going, and with whom they are associating. This knowledge is an important part of caring, effective parenting, as is communicating with school personnel and otherwise showing an interest in the young person's life and education.

Here are some tips for successful, open communication with teenagers:

- ✓ Be available to them when they want to talk.
- ✓ Actively listen to what they have to say.
- ✓ Show them that you are interested in them and value their opinion by asking them what they think.
- ✓ Do not be judgmental or overreact to what they say.
- ✓ Keep all discussions on a calm, rational level.
- ✓ Work together to solve any problems.
- ✓ Do not nag them about unimportant things.
- ✓ Make sure they understand that you trust them to make the right decisions and take care of their own issues, and they are allowed to make mistakes.
- ✓ Ask for their help with your own problems.

Violent behavior by young people rarely comes out of nowhere.

In the majority of cases, youth exhibit definite warning signs of potential violence. It is crucial for parents to be able to recognize those warning signs and know what to do when those signs are displayed. By responding appropriately and by communicating effectively with their teenagers, parents can do much to head off episodes of violence.

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How to Spot a Potentially Violent Teen and What to Do About It

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Although rates of youth violence are actually dropping, recent high-profile violent acts by American teenagers have put parents, schools and young people on the alert. Forty percent of youth say they are concerned about a potentially violent classmate, according to a 1999 poll by the American Psychological Association, and 71 percent say they would be interested in learning the warning signs of violent behavior. It is also important for parents to be aware of the warning signs of violence in teenagers, and what to do in case their sons and daughters display those signs. Knowing what to do can help prevent violence and keep teens, parents and others safe.

Early Warning Signs

According to the U.S. Department of Education and the Justice Department, it is not always possible to predict behavior that leads to violence, but there are early warning signs that may show violent tendencies. No single warning sign should be considered a danger signal by itself. When several of these warning signs are presented in combination, though, parents should be aware of greater risk for violent behavior:



✗ Depression and social withdrawal –
Some research indicates that depressed young people who isolate themselves from social contacts because of feelings of inadequacy or rejection by others can become violent. Without proper support, these young people may be at risk of expressing their emotional distress in negative ways, including violence. Some aggressive children who are rejected by non-aggressive peers seek out aggressive friends who in turn reinforce their violent tendencies.

✗ Poor academic performance –
Poor school achievement can be the result of many factors. It is important to consider whether there is a drastic change in performance or poor performance becomes a chronic condition that limits the child's capacity to learn, or both. In some situations, the low achiever may begin acting out because of frustration and display aggression.

✗ Victim of persecution or physical violence –
Youths who feel constantly picked on, teased, bullied, singled out for ridicule, and humiliated at home or at school may vent their anger in inappropriate ways, such as physical violence. Also, children who are victims of violence – including physical or sexual abuse – in the community, at school or at home are sometimes at risk themselves of becoming violent toward themselves or others.

✗ History of discipline problems –
Chronic behavior and disciplinary problems both in school and at home may suggest that underlying emotional needs are not being met. These problems may set the stage for the child to violate norms and rules, defy authority, disengage from school, and engage in aggressive behaviors with other children and adults.

✗ Drug or alcohol abuse –
Apart from being unhealthy behaviors, drug use and alcohol use reduce self-control and expose children and youth to violence, either as perpetrators, victims or both.

✗ Prominence of violence in writings and drawings –
A consistent overrepresentation of violence in writings and drawings directed at specific individuals (family members, peers or others) may signal emotional problems and the potential for violence.

✗ Uncontrolled anger or intolerance –
Frequently expressed intense anger in response to minor irritants may signal potential violent behavior toward self or others. Also, intense prejudice toward others based on racial, ethnic, religious, language, gender, sexual orientation, ability and physical appearance may lead

to physical violence against those people. Affiliation with gangs or other groups that promote prejudiced attitudes is also an early warning sign.

✗ Bullying, cruelty or aggression –
Youths who bully others, are cruel to people and animals, and are generally aggressive and defiant are at risk of becoming violent. Other antisocial behaviors such as stealing, vandalism, lying, cheating and firesetting are also warning signs of potential violence.

✗ Threats of violence –
Recent incidents across the country clearly indicate that threats to commit violence against oneself or others should be taken very seriously. If threats like these are made, it is important to talk to your teenager about why he or she is making them and help find ways of solving the problem without using violence.

Imminent Warning Signs

Unlike early warning signs, imminent warning signs clearly indicate a young person is very close to behaving in a way that is dangerous to self or to others. A sequence of imminent warning signs require an immediate response. Those signs are:

- Serious physical fighting with peers or family members
- Severe destruction of property, either by arson or other means
- Severe rage for seemingly minor reasons
- Detailed threats of lethal violence
- Inappropriate possession or use of firearms, explosives and other weapons
- Injury to self or threats of suicide