

## **The Kids are all Right**

### **The Littleton, Colorado, Taber, Alberta shooting**

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Taber-Alberta happened, a fraction of a second in the lives of two young men, one shooter, one shot. In the aftermath, shock, confusion, and predictable clamor for "action." But as we come to grips with the reality of the Taber tragedy in Alberta, and the massacre in Littleton, Colorado, we must not lose sight of what we know about today's youth.

They are creative, positive, and responsible. They are coping better than ever before with their world. And the best we can do for them is impart to them our social values and give them a resiliency with which to make their way in the world.

There is a risk, right now, in rushing to explain the deviant behaviour of the Taber and Littleton youths. We've sought out the experts on youth, youth violence, school safety, anti-bullying, law enforcement and family values. The risks are that we overreact by grasping quick-fix solutions; that we transfer solutions bred in the hysteria of our neighbours to the south; that we create so much anxiety that families become confused and overprotective; that we stifle the free spirit and experiments with identity that characterize adolescence. The risk is that we forget that many of the "experts" derive their opinions from working with seriously disturbed and aggressive adolescents, not with ordinary, mainstream youth.

Governments are feeling the pressure to respond. In BC, the Attorney General has promised an audit of school safety. Beleaguered school districts hustle to examine their security and violence intervention strategies. But young people in BC do not need to attend school under the watchful eye of video surveillance or metal detectors.

Parents in BC can be assured that their children are safe. As a group, our youth are optimistic, responsible members of our community. The assessment is backed up by two decades of research by BC's McCreary Centre Society, an internationally recognized, non-profit group founded in 1977 to improve the health of BC youth. Our work has consistently demonstrated that violence among adolescents and trauma-related deaths among youths are not on the rise; they are in decline. In 1992, and again in 1998, McCreary asked Grade 7 to 12 students in BC to participate in a survey of their health and behaviours. In total, 42,000 young people have told us about their lives, their involvement in violence, and their sense of safety and security. In the year they were surveyed, two-thirds of those surveyed reported never having been in a fight. Of those who were involve in fighting, only a small number said they were involved in fighting that led to injury. A striking finding of our research into fighting is that the proportion of those who admitted to any fighting had not changed over six years; it had not increased at all between 1992 and 1998 - despite society impressions of an increased incidence of youth violence.

We also asked adolescent about their weapon use in this survey, the findings of which have not yet been published. Here again, the results are reassuring. These new data show that some students carry weapons at school (nine per cent in 1998) but few actually use them. Only a minority ever carry a handgun or rifle while at school (1.4 per cent in 1998). Past research suggests gun-carrying habits vary according to region; in northern and rural communities, guns are part of a life influenced by hunting and the wilderness. At first glance, the rates are disturbingly high, but this is not a daily occurrence and usually the weapon is a knife or bat and is carried for the purpose of "defense" or, more specifically, reassurance. In the US, comparable surveys show that 5.9 per cent of youths report carrying guns.

Almost all youth in BC are quite safe. They do not fight or carry weapons, and they avoid potentially violence situations. They have the motivation and skills to take care of each other. Taber images were largely those of teens comforting each other and, even in shock and grief, resolving not to let their school and community down. They were courageous, poised, and fair and resilient. Experience and research tells us to expect that. Adults should recognize their strengths, give them credit for it, and respond appropriately.

We need to put into perspective the fact that weapons are more available, violent media images more prevalent, or that teens seem more vulnerable. The media images that influence their style of interaction are more violent, but our teens are just as capable of distinguishing between reality and fantasy today as they were 40 years ago when faced with gun-slashing cowboy movies. Today's teens experience stress, but no more than that of past Depression, war or Cold War eras. Today's youth are no less resilient than yesterday's. Adolescents have always been vulnerable to the negative effects of rapid social change. As teens, many of us have been teased, bullied and even assaulted. This discrimination was usually based on physical appearance or age but many also have been due to gender or sexual orientation. Few, though, deal with this by picking up a gun and shooting someone. While one in five BC teens reports having experienced some form of discrimination at school or in their community, most still feel safe, understood, and cared for.

So why do some adolescents last out?

Some youth seem more vulnerable to discrimination. Vulnerable students include those with chronic illnesses, disabilities or mental health problems, early or late matures, First Nations youth, youth from disadvantaged homes, youth who have already experienced abuse, and those who are judged by peers as "different." For example, in the survey, about six per cent of students tell us they are not sure of their sexual orientation and feel uncomfortable. Fewer than one per cent say they are homosexual, rates that remain constant. However, life in school can be difficult for homosexual adolescents. One in five adolescents said that they do not feel safe in school, 63 per cent reported having been verbally abused, 34 per cent have been threatened, and 18 per cent were assaulted. Help was there for them, but that did not prevent the occurrences.

The family, the school, and the community may be slow to see the vulnerability of some students, but once difficulties are recognized, there must be competent, caring continuous help and support available.

Joy Dryfoos, a US writer and researcher on risky behaviours in adolescence, writes of the school system as the vehicle for ensuring "Safe Passage" for our vulnerable adolescents. Schools provide the framework for helping adolescent and families integrate and manage life's complexity. She, and others, say empowering processes in schools should take priority over security systems or class sizes.

However, as in the Littleton massacre, some adolescents are not just vulnerable but are seriously impulsive, disturbed, disordered, or just plain deviant. They are few, but often elusive and non-compliant. With automatic weapons in their reach, we have a recipe for mayhem. Most of our helping resources are consumed by this handful of adolescents. And despite early identification, access to multiple treatment regimens and the best of in-care resources that government can provide, these cases often end sadly.

We do know something about how to prevent random, catastrophic violence in adolescents. Research tells us again and again that there are two critical factors in youth development and socialization: societal values and resiliency.

Lisbeth B Schorr, an influential critic of the social fabric in the US, advocates for "early interventions to prevent rotten outcomes." In Canada, we have accepted the principles of early intervention with infants and toddlers but seem to ignore their huge potential later. It is as if we value infants more than adolescents. In her Book *Common Purpose*, Schorr writes that people feel deeply about the disintegration of core values in post-Second World War society and this concern often focuses on adolescents and their behaviours, reflected in headlines like "Kids all rotten now." This sentiment has drifted into the post-Taber media coverage; it is totally unfair and devaluing.

If society does not value youth, and if it incorporates negative messages into its programs, spending priorities and decision-making, then young people will be justified in their alienation and apathy.

Not all adolescents resort to violence to settle issues; their emotional and developmental struggles resolve over time. And not all risky behaviours become lifetime habits. However, that doesn't mean we should just sit back and allow a "they will grow out of it" attitude. What we do to instill values can make a difference. Mainstream adolescents will probably do just fine, but vulnerable and deviant youth won't.

For every child, the essential ingredients for the successful passage through adolescent are: opportunities to build self esteem; a sense of support from peers; a feeling of connection to key adults in the family and school; protection from exploitation, abuse, and discrimination; and finally, the experience of stability in family, school, or community. All of this is required to build that essential quality: resilience. With these

ingredients, all but a few adolescents will do quite nicely and will have no need of weapons.

Taber and Littleton should remind us to have faith in our youth - not to fail them. Each of us can listen better to the youth perspective, respect their rights, and build meaningful participation into their lives. We must not be blinded by style and attitude - their style, our attitudes. The in-your-face, hyperkinetic, body-piercing, aggressive style of some adolescents should neither prejudice us against them nor convince us that all adolescents are like that.

We should not look for someone convenient to blame - "the kid," parents, school, government, the media - but rather, we need to work together to ensure a safer passage through adolescence.

We must be willing to face change, in ourselves, in our families, and in society. We can become more proactive and demand better information on youth in each region. We know that surveys must be matched by provincial and local commitments to do something with the findings. We need our leaderships to spell out national and provincial youth policies.

Collectively, we can address the issues of early intervention in adolescence and reduction of exposure to trauma and violence in the lives of our youth. If we fail, we run the risk that there will be more Tabers and that our youth will become oblivious to the impact of their own actions.

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