

After Littleton: Overcoming The Conspiracy of Silence

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In the wake of the shootings at Columbine High, we read almost daily of bomb scares in schools across the nation. Threatening messages on bathroom walls result in school closings, and in some schools, the threats are so routine that students no longer become alarmed by them. Anxious parents must readjust their work schedules to accommodate school closings due to bomb threats. One can only guess what goes on in the minds of the threateners who, because of their young age, remain anonymous in the media. To what extent are their actions fueled by the media attention given to school killings, and like the killers, do they feel empowered or are they acting in counterphobic manner?

Inevitably, the questions arise. Who else knew about the threats or plans, and why didn't they speak up? We know that Dylan Klebold's girlfriend, who was of age, legally purchased guns for him. According to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, this is not an unusual situation, and one third to one half of the guns obtained by juveniles to use in crimes are obtained by someone acting as a straw intermediary. In 1996-97, over 6,000 students were expelled for bringing firearms to school, and many more went undetected by authorities. Students will often show their weapons to others to impress or intimidate them, yet peers have been loathe to speak up and inform authorities. In West Paducah, Michael Carneal brought a gun to school and showed it to his peers a month before he killed three students and injured five. No one notified authorities about the gun incident.

This conspiracy of silence is not limited to acts of violence. We hear of suicidal teens confiding their intent to friends and making them promise not to



tell. Teens who are not used to dealing with life and death situations may react with denial. Another factor at play is intense loyalty to one another which often overrides common sense, the need for truth, and concerns about future consequences. Some, who have not experienced death before, have difficulty conceptualizing the wake a death of a teenager leaves in a community. A minority of teens may fall in the category of alienated, nihilistic, or predatory youths who lack empathy and truly don't care about the outcome.

The conspiracy of silence is an ethical dilemma which many teenagers may not recognize or even have the language to articulate. It pits loyalty, fear of squealing, and the need for approval of friends against what is for the greater good and safety of the community. The dilemma exists in other less lethal arenas in the lives of teenagers, including shoplifting and cheating on exams, where loyalty is pitted against truth and breaking the law. Three fourths of high school students admit to having cheated on exams, and in one survey, 48% agreed that one has to lie and cheat to succeed in society. Cheating and shoplifting may be accepted by some because they see them as victimless crimes, out of their need to fit in with a delinquent peer group, or because of difficulty standing up for their beliefs. Probably the most common example of the conspiracy of silence occurs in the face of witnessing harassment of other students. Not speaking up amounts to condoning bullying and disrespect which breeds intolerance and adversely affects school morale and the learning environment.

How can we help? At the risk of adding more parenting duties to already overburdened teachers, there is a need to include ethics in the curriculums of children and

adolescents. This needn't be done as a separate course, rather, it can be woven into discussions of history and literature. With younger children, values of respect, fairness, and honesty can be taught and discussed in the context of the school's code of behavior. Hands on learning can be done using skits or debates which involve students of all ages. The teaching of ethics is most likely to succeed if enforced in word and in action at home. Therefore, we need to consider how to reach and involve parents. Child and adolescent psychiatrists who consult with schools or work in residential treatment facilities can have some input into programs. Therapists can stimulate dialogues about ethical issues. It is never too late. For instance, the Institute for Global Ethics, which sponsors many teaching forums, has become involved with projects teaching ethical decision making to inner city youths in Los Angeles and to inmates in North Carolina prisons¹.

Programs are most likely to succeed when students are involved in setting them up. Such an example in my own community is the involvement of local high school students in creating 30-second public service television announcements² which promote peer respect and diversity tolerance among students. Students are participating in both filming and commentary which will accompany messages dealing with peer harassment. A similar format could be used to deal with ethical conflicts confronted by teens.

REFERENCES

1. Visit the Institute for Global Ethics at <http://www.globalethics.org>.
2. For those wishing to replicate this idea, the producer, Shannon Hart, can be reached at Salemhart@aol.com.

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