

Taking the Fight Out of Teenagers

by Carol Jago

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The recent spate of disturbances on high school campuses across the city is just that < disturbing. What are all these teenagers fighting about? Why are they so angry? How is it that teenagers' fuses are so short? From LAUSD's Jefferson High School to Riverside's Norte Vista High School to Santa Monica High School, individual arguments are escalating into melees. Why? And what can adults do to stop it from happening?

It is tempting to blame human nature. Kids have always fought and fights have always drawn a crowd. Running to catch the action, students' pulses race. Their eyes shine, wild with excitement. Pushing and shoving for front row views, bystanders contribute to the mayhem. It's a rush. While it isn't hard to see why teenagers would choose such a show over sitting in a desk doing geometry or reading Julius Caesar, school should be the one place in a child's life where reason and order prevail.

The problem is that schools operate within the larger society, and when that society glorifies violent behavior it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain order in school. One has only to look around to see how teenagers are being lured astray: professional athletes attack their fans, hip hop artists boast of violent crimes, reality shows reward aggression. If we want peace on school campuses, adults must examine our own complicity in providing and promoting entertainment that encourages the cave man within. Children need to be civilized. Socrates not Tony Soprano should be their role model. Parents of 4-year-olds work hard to teach heated offspring to use words rather than hitting or biting to solve playground problems. The work can't stop with taking turns on the slide, though. Teenagers need to see adults in the media and in the news working through disputes without recourse to fisticuffs.

While I applaud efforts of counselors to understand and sort out the conflicts between individuals and groups of students, I also feel that we will never be able to eliminate all the things that make teenagers mad. The hole my son punched in his bedroom wall when he was in high school serves as a reminder of the fury that smolders within many a young man upon receipt of the third speeding ticket or worse. Most grow out of this anger naturally and without doing lasting damage to themselves or others. In many ways 17-year-olds are children in men and women's bodies. We need to help them learn to deal with their anger as well as take responsibility for their mistakes.

At campuses across the nation student scuffles are dealt with severely. Parents are called in. Suspensions are dealt out. Police are often summoned to restore order as well as impress upon students the seriousness of disturbing the peace. Along with these official repercussions, we must also teach teenagers the simple guidelines of getting along with others, even

those we don't particularly like. Just as we taught our kindergarteners to stop, look, and listen before crossing the road, we need to teach our high school age children what to do the next time they feel the urge to raise their fists: stop, think, breathe, and walk away.

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