

CONSIDER THE MESSAGES WE SEND TO CHILDREN

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Source: LUCIEN X. LOMBARDO

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As a child once again became a killer, we are forced to come to terms with the world we adults have created. We struggle with questions: What's wrong with these children? What's wrong with society? What's wrong with our culture? We look for answers in the usual places: the breakdown of the two-parent family, the desensitization to violence by the media, poor anger-management skills, the ready availability of weapons.

We look for solutions in tougher laws making children more responsible for their behavior (i.e., treating them as adults though we know they are children); we look for answers in gimmicks like metal detectors at the doors of schools; or in legislation or regulations aimed at controlling the media and the family structure; while we continually shy away from doing anything about the tools of death - guns. After studying and teaching about violence for nearly 30 years, I have become increasingly pessimistic about our ability to undercut the processes that lead our children to violence. But I retain some optimism because I sense in the young people I teach a growing sense of restlessness with traditional questions and responses, even a sense of rebelliousness. They are asking not simply about the causes and cures for the symptoms: interpersonal violence, teen pregnancies, drug use, racism, hate violence. They are beginning to question the meaning, value and impact of what they are supposed to do, not simply what they are supposed to do. They are beginning to see connections in an increasingly fragmented environment.

Out of this month's headlines, all from The Virginian-Pilot, young people see the connections. Headlines: "Facing Homelessness: Long a veteran living on the streets, David Gungle works with Norfolk to improve services" (May 19); "Mental Health Treatment: Cause for alarm" (editorial, May 19); "Teen dies near hospital; staff refused to help" (news, May 19); "Dozens offer to adopt newborn abandoned in California mountains" (news, May 20); "Israeli high court to rule on use of torture" (news, May 20); "Texas to execute man despite belief he's innocent" (news, May 8); "Kofi Annan says U.N. failed Rwanda during 1994 genocide" (May 8); "Two teens charged with hanging, torturing 'snitch'" (news, May 22); "High school senior, 18, shoots, kills classmate 3 days before graduation" (news, May 20); "3 killed, 23 wounded in Oregon school shooting: 'There is no sense to it'" (news, May 22).

What connections do some restless young people see? They see governments providing justifications for violence. They see procedures governing decisions and pat responses becoming more important than the human outcomes of decisions. They see the roles people play as more important than what those roles are supposed to accomplish. They see that the environment in which they live is seemingly incapable of valuing and finding meaning in life, though they wish that it did.

Perhaps Tone Riddick, an advocate for the "Hope House 10," summed up both how young people feel in their world and what they wish the world would see when he tried to communicate to those he felt were about to change his living conditions without his participation in the decision: "I'm not a piece of meat to be bid on, to sell. All of us have feelings. . . ." (news, May 21).

We as adults need to pay attention to our young people. We need to listen to the messages they are sending us. Equally as important, we need to pay attention to the messages every one of our decisions and justifications for inhumane treatment of others sends to them. When we start to pay attention to the environment in which symptoms of violence appear, only then can we replace violence with positive, caring children and adults.

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