



# Violence in Our Schools: From Teasing to Terror

By Suzanne Elston, *STERLON*

This school year has had a terrible and deadly beginning. At exactly 12:41 p.m. ET on September 13, 2006, an armed man walked into Montreal's Dawson College and began a shooting rampage that left one young woman dead and 19 others injured. After being wounded by police, the gunman ended his own life.

South of the border, the toll and the terror have been much worse: the Amish schoolhouse shooting in Pennsylvania; the murder of a school principal by a 15-year-old student; the rape and murder of a 16-year-old girl at the Platte Canyon high school in Colorado; and the aborted attempt by three Wisconsin high school students to attack their school with guns and bombs.

These recent tragedies are all terrible reminders of other school shootings: the Columbine High School massacre of April 20, 1999, that left 15 dead and 24 wounded; the fatal student shooting at Taber, Alberta, only days later; and the horrific events at Montreal's École Polytechnique in 1989.

In every case, these students had gone to school on those fateful days assuming that they would be safe. We - their parents, teachers, and principals - all made the same assumption. The school environment is supposed to be a safe environment. The true terror of each of these events is that they are painful reminders that no matter how hard we try, our children are vulnerable.

From the initial shock of these events come disbelief, grief and rage. We memorialize the victims, we try to analyze the perpetrators and understand what made them do such terrible things. We ask the questions: How could this happen? What could I have done differently? If only...?

Perhaps the hardest part of these tragedies is being able to acknowledge that each of the perpetrators was also once a victim. Like their victims, each had a family, friends and loved ones who mourn their loss and wonder why.

"We are devastated by the final act of violence," wrote parenting expert and author Barbara Coloroso, "but rarely outraged by the events that led to the final act". She cautions that in every case, the perpetrators had what she describes as, "a disposition and a situation". In other words, his or her environment (nurture) can shape a child's inherent tendencies (nature), positively or negatively.

"In the wake of tragedies like these school shootings, the first thing that we have to do is be willing and open not to demonize the perpetrators," said Coloroso. "If we allow ourselves to demonize them, it removes us from having to take any responsibility for what happened." Coloroso uses Eric and Dylan, the Columbine

shooters, as an example. She points out they had been targeted and bullied as younger students. The mother of the Taber shooter said he too had endured incessant bullying and was depressed before the shooting. Fellow students described him as someone who was unpopular and the frequent subject of name-calling and teasing.

"This doesn't justify what they did, but it helps explain some of their rage," said Coloroso. "We've got to get back to taking a critical look at creating a climate that is conducive to kids caring about each other."

In order to protect all of our children, we must learn to be diligent. We need to watch for early warning signs that indicate a child is feeling bullied or isolated. These include:

- children who do not have anything nice to say about other kids, their teachers or school
- children who isolate themselves socially and do not have any close friends
- children who are always plugged in to video games, particularly violent ones
- children who complain, "Kids are being mean to me."
- children who spend a lot of time on the Internet, in chat rooms or using MSN Messenger.

Coloroso says that the antidote to isolation is to teach our children to care deeply, share generously, and help willingly. We also need to teach our kids the difference between "tattling" and "telling". If a child is being bullied, he or she needs to be reassured that it is important to talk about it with a caring adult.

"The message should be sent out to students that our schools are places that promote responsibility, respect and civility, and academic excellence in a safe learning environment," said Eric Roher, National Leader and Partner of the Education Law Group at Borden Ladner Gervais, LLP. "Students need to understand that they have a right to be safe and feel safe in their school community."

"Keep an open dialogue, pay attention, get involved, and never, ever look away," said Coloroso. That is a tall order, but one that must be accomplished if we have any hope of breaking the escalating cycle of violence in our schools.

"None of us can do it all, but we can all do a little," said Coloroso. She added that each time we help a student, prevent someone from being bullied, or provide a warm smile and a sense of security for our students, we are adding a thread to the big tapestry that we create called a safe environment.

“It’s not only the right thing to do from a pedagogical perspective, but principals have a legal obligation to take action. Under the Education Act, the principal has a duty to maintain proper order and discipline in the school. In addition, the principal is required to give assiduous attention to the health and comfort of students under his or her care,” said Roher. “That means having an appropriate policy in place. It also means that our schools provide a respectful, civil and responsible learning environment. If there is a breach of school rules the students need to understand that there will be consequences.”

The following guidelines, courtesy of CPCO’s Bullying Prevention program, Shaping Safer Catholic Schools and Barbara Coloroso’s *The Bully, The Bullied, and The Bystander: Breaking the Cycle of Violence*, can help you to create a safe, supportive environment in your school:

- Establish a Safe Schools Team.
- Know and follow relevant board policy on bullying/harassment and ensure that procedures are followed scrupulously.
- Assess the awareness and scope of the bullying/harassment problem at your school through student and staff surveys.
- Supervise students on school grounds, classrooms, hallways, restrooms, cafeterias and any other area where bullying may occur.
- Conduct school-wide assemblies and in-service training to raise awareness about bullying.
- Post and publicize clear behaviour standards, including rules against bullying and harassment. Consistently and fairly enforce these standards.
- Encourage parent participation.
- Listen to parents who report bullying or harassment.
- Establish a confidential reporting system for victimized students.
- Establish procedures to investigate and resolve such reports that are consistent with board policy.

- Develop systems to reward positive student behaviour.
- Provide school-wide and classroom activities that build student self-esteem by spotlighting special talents, hobbies, interests and abilities.
- Celebrate the differences in others.
- Create a school climate in which all students believe they have worth.
- Create an environment where students are encouraged to resolve conflicts non-violently.
- Create an “esprit de corps” – the spirit of devotion and enthusiasm among members of a group for one another, their group and their purpose.
- Develop an “intruder alert” protocol for your school that can immediately notify students of a potential danger.
- Conduct emergency safety drills.
- Immediately notify the police/emergency services if a student or visitor is acting suspiciously.
- Call your telephone legal advisory service at 1-888-STERLON, if you have any questions regarding the legality of student activities.

For more information:

Barbara Coloroso has provided hand-outs and other resources that are available for educators and parents on her website at [www.kidsareworthit.com](http://www.kidsareworthit.com)

To find out more about CPCO’s Shaping Safer Catholic Schools program, contact Nelly Kelders at 1-888-621-9190, ext. 38.

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Excerpted from:

***The Bully, The Bullied and The Bystander:  
Breaking the Cycle of Violence***

By Barbara Coloroso

Breaking the cycle of violence involves more than merely identifying and stopping the bullying. It requires that we examine the why and the how a child becomes a bully or the target of a bully (and sometimes both) as well as the role that bystanders play in perpetuating the cycle. A deadly combination is a bully who gets what he wants from his target, a bullied child who is afraid to tell, bystanders who either watch, participate in the bullying, or look away, and adults who see bullying as teasing not tormenting, as ‘boys will be boys’, not the predatory aggression that it is.”

If this combination of relationships is not radically transformed, we have enough incidences in our recent past to convince us that it is not only the bully who can terrorize our community. Some bullied children, whose cries went unheard, whose pains were ignored, whose oppression went unabated and unrelieved, have

struck back with a vengeance and sorrow. Others, who reached what they felt was an utterly hopeless and irretrievable point, have killed themselves.

It is easy to point fingers; place blame; fortress our schools; push zero-tolerance plans; mandate a bully awareness week; stiffen penalties for bullying; or simply ignore the problem and hope it will go away. It is more difficult – and necessary – that we as individuals, families, entire communities create safe harbors for all of our children. We must do what is necessary to take the weapons out of the hearts, minds, and hands of our kids. We need to give kids the tools be to able to stand up for their own rights while respecting the rights and legitimate needs of others; to handle conflicts nonviolently; to act with integrity when confronted with difficult situations such as peer pressure to cause harm; and to develop a personal code (inner moral code) that gives them the wherewithal to do what is right in spite of external consequences and never merely because of them. No easy task; no simple answers.

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