Columbine Will Happen Again   *April 27, 1999*

Now that the Littleton tragedy has been plumbed to its depth and exploited by the media ad nauseam to satisfy the voyeuristic appetite of the viewing public, pundits, bureaucrats and other so called "experts" generally end up with the same conclusion: we need more and better gun control. We bemoan our "culture of violence" and naively hope to control or reverse it by enacting stricter laws.

Why do we come up with this recommendation again and again at times such as this? Because we ourselves feel anxious, impotent and powerless as we face such horrors. It is very hard to admit that no panacea or easy solutions exist. Pushing to do *something* lessens our anxiety, even if it accomplishes nothing. It is like the man who dropped his key in the snow as he was trying to open the door to his house. Soon thereafter he was seen searching under the corner streetlight and explaining that he was looking for the key in the light, since it was dark at the door. This, in essence, is how useful the usual recommendations are.

The teenage killers at Columbine High School broke existing laws to obtain the weapons they used illegally, and in the future determined "sickies" will also find whatever they seek, no matter what laws exist on the books. Tight controls which seal all possible leaks are impossible in our free society. Since guns and drugs exist, some people will abuse themselves and others with them, though it's illegal to do so. Car accidents will always happen, even after we develop much safer cars. We need better answers to lessen such tragedies.

What motivates kids and grown-ups to murder innocents is not the presence of guns but the absence of built-in values of right and wrong, one of the breeding grounds of blind hate. This urgently needs to be changed, though no immediate solution is possible.

Ours is a permissive society which accepts, and even idealizes, an almost unlimited freedom to do whatever people feel like doing, all in the name of self-realization. Everyone resents restrictions, but we have legitimized any and all forms of behavior in the name of self-expression. The absence of widely accepted norms of ethical behavior is damaging to us all, and especially to the young who are inexperienced in life. We must reestablish some of our old, traditional norms to lessen future horrors like this one.

Many people in our society become furious and even ugly when anyone dares to question their behavior, as if it was an unjustified invasion of their privacy and an infringement on their human rights. When instant gratification is denied, many react as if they have been robbed of their birthright. This is why so many parents no longer impose even the most basic values of civilization on their children, genuinely believing that it is undemocratic and wrong to impose anything. Yet, the fear that normal development and emotional growth might be damaged by limiting our children is not only unfounded but also ludicrous.

The opposite is true. Children need to adhere to clear behavioral guidelines to lessen their anxiety. This is reassuring to young and old alike. Even gang members often respond well to the "tough-love" of a strict but fair authority. In the process of growing up children must, and will, fight the restrictions that limit them, before they learn to value and to accept them.

Such acceptance never results just from reasoning with the child. Fair and firm expectations must first be imposed from the outside. Long before children are able to understand that even an ant is a living creature which should not be tortured, they must be stopped from torturing it, even if they object and protest. They will never *really* learn to value life otherwise, nor will they develop self-control or self-restraint.

Because of our understandable eagerness to separate church and state, many parents and teachers have also separated themselves from such well-tested biblical rules as the Ten Commandments. Is it then surprising that many kids grow up never learning that "thou shalt not kill?" And the confusion is increased by repeatedly being exposed to the fantastic tales of James Bond, "Die Hard" and "Terminator," where people are shot and mutilated without dying, and made worse yet by Nintendo games which give points for extra cruelty. By now many parents and even grandparents are themselves the products of such confused upbringing. They deserve better than to be condemned for living in a moral no-man's-land or for not knowing how to demand adherence to the basic rules of civilization, or even the need for such rules. But they and their offspring must be pressured to change, if killings are to be lessened.

Even the "grief counselors" at Columbine High School are mostly interested in maximizing comfort. They recommended that the survivors of the massacre be allowed to endlessly attend to their feelings about the horror, rather than insisting that classes be resumed, and that everyone return to the tasks of living as soon as the dead have been buried and the families consoled. We in the West typically are involved in morbid mourning rituals such as the one associated with Princess Di's death. Yet, strict adherence to reality offers us the only hope, and it also is the best therapy for such scared and confused youngsters.

It is difficult to accept that tragic events such as the one in Colorado are impossible to avoid altogether in complex, modern societies such as ours. This will happen again. But they can be minimized. This will not happen by preaching gun control but by enrolling ourselves individually and as a society in the ongoing task of lessening our excessive permissiveness. Even in intact families we generally need many more fair, loving but firm *confrontations* with our children from the time the kids are very young, under two. And persistent fathering pressure by mothers and fathers must continue until the youngsters become fully grown adults.

Prepared for *NPR All Things Considered*   **Reuven Bar-Levav, M.D.**