

Troubled Youth: The Psychology of Anger in Teens

On the morning of April 20th 1999 two young men opened fire upon their fellow classmates in an attempt to get revenge on everyone that had picked on them and made them to be losers. These kids were verbally and physically abused by their peers making them seem to be sub-human. They couldn't take the abuse any longer and decided to take action. Out of their absolute rage they managed to kill 13 people and injure 21 others before taking their own lives.

What could inspire these high school students to murder this many people? How could they in the end kill themselves? The list of questions, that I had, surrounding this event was quite numerous. There are many speculations, as to why Columbine had happened, ranging from music, film and internet influence upon teens, but I wanted to find the true reason how something like this can happen; what can cause a teen to want to commit these kinds of acts.

Children with psychological or anger problems are a bit close to me because I tend to be very angry a lot of the time and was wondering what tends to happen to people that have anger issues. This is becoming more realistic and important as I get older and start to look at what I am going to with my life and how my actions reactionary or intentional will affect my career and personal life. I want to get out of the type of lifestyle that my family has because quite frankly not being able to do many things because you don't have the money such as go to a summer camp in the summer, go on a real vacation or just have nice stuff in your house, sucks. I want to go beyond what has been established by what my family has achieved thus far so that any family that I do have will

end up having a better start to life. Additionally I wanted to know what kind of limitations or possible roadblocks that I may encounter in my life because of my attitude.

My other burning question was to know if what happened to the two young men is a result of the upbringing and experiences that they had or if it was an aspect of human kind that is always there ready to happen. Whether or not this is an inevitability of mankind, I wanted to know what can be done to make sure that something like this never happens again. If I couldn't do anything to prevent future tragedies like this from happening then who can; how can we help and educate those people that can help these troubled kids?

I didn't know much about teens that rebel and cause trouble and act as a detriment to society, or are excessively angry. What I did know is limited to what my mother tells me about her job. She works as a teacher in the 'transition' Program and this program is used to get children who aren't able to be in mainstream education like the 'normal' kids into mainstream education at Greenfield Middle School. Any information that I did get was only limited to the horrible things that they do like carving a shank out of a cafeteria knife or the students acting out and calling her messed up names such as "a stalker bitch", "a motherfucker", and "a Nazi". This had troubled me because these kids are only nine to twelve and they already are being this disrespectful to their teachers. I shudder to think what they may do if they can't get back into mainstream education, the goal of my mother's job, and just get worse from their current attitudes.

I needed to have several questions answered, but I knew that on, at least, the main question that I will not get a definitive answer because it is so highly debated. My first question was; is it natural or is it the parent's fault for not raising their children better?

Would another school shooting or something similar have happened anyway or again? Next I wondered, Can these kids be helped, once whatever it is in them that makes them do what they do, or is it inevitable? Finally I wanted to know what I and the community at large can do to prevent this from happening again.

Story of the Search:

In the modern world that we live in there have been recent acts of crime that are increasingly being committed by young adolescent teens. The majority of teens only do this as a phase and grow out of it within a six month period and when they are fourteen to seventeen years old; however some of the teens are starting to develop a outlook on life that this behavior is good and will be good to them in their lives (Moeller 84-85).

Tragically, until quite recently no one even knew about this kind of manipulation and dependence that these “delinquent” teens engage in (Rutter 106). Who will care for the trouble makers of society? Why should we even want them? Could they change? Do we want them to change? Numerous acts of delinquency that adolescents commit are mainly caused by the family environment they grew up in.

Studies show that most people that suffer from “delinquent behavior” are adolescents that are the offspring of an anti-social male and a delinquent woman, which have been observed that they are attracted to each other by their behavior. Then seeing as the father is usually just as much if not more of a delinquent as the mother he usually either leaves the woman to raise the child herself or stays with the woman but does not change his delinquent ways. This gives birth to two different but equally damaging aspects of parenting that lead the child to be just like their parents. One of those is caused by the single mother that has to still go to school or to a job. This leads to the mother

either being very negligent in taking care of her child so that she can provide for herself and her child (Moeller 98-99).

Other studies have shown that “harsh physical punishment” contributes to anti-social and delinquent behavior. In a study conducted by Farrington found harsh physical discipline measured at age 8 and authoritarian discipline style at age 10 predicted violent criminal offending at age 32,” (Moeller 108). Another study has shown that physically abused children showed higher rates of aggression, as determined by a control group of ‘normal’ children, than sexual, emotional, or mental abuse (Moeller 112). This supports the previous studies because the parents of these children would have “lack of impulse control, destruction of property, [and] aggression towards others” (Moeller 102-103) which would suggest leads to a high rate of abuse, physical, mental and even sexual. These types of abuse were shown in yet another study to be characteristic of youths that kill. In these situations the children build up a response over time to the abuse that increases in intensity as the child grows up (Moeller 251).

The reactions, mental and physical, that the children who undergo these circumstances can be broken up into several categories that are clinically recognized as Conduct Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, and one that is not officially recognized called Attachment Disorder. Conduct Disorder, or CD, is at its base a lack of empathy, as, shown in a study involving a group of 15 year olds with CD and a control group without that showed that the CD group showed less empathy overall than the control. In addition the group that had CD showed higher levels of personal distress (Moeller 195). ‘Symptoms’, if they can be called such, for it are: aggressive behavior that

creates an unsafe space for others, destruction or theft of property, truancy, and tobacco, alcohol, and substance abuse (Conduct Disorder).

Oppositional Defiant Disorder, or ODD, is disrespect for authority completely and utterly. Indicators of ODD are: frequent temper tantrums, arguing with adults, not complying with rules and requests, deliberate annoyance and disruption of others, as well as frequent outbursts of anger and resentment (Haines: Oppositional Defiant Disorder).

Attachment Disorder is not officially a disorder but some have lumped people with symptoms similar to ODD and CD into it and described the reason for the behavior as a lack of attachment. The thinking behind this is that seeing as the child has nothing that they care about other than themselves they act with nothing to lose, meaning that they do what they want and when (Moeller 102) The problem with this is that many children have ODD but are never diagnosed because the children aren't brought in for a diagnosis until the child has already reached developed point of ODD. Out of all the children there are an estimated 2-16% of all children with ODD (Haines: Oppositional Defiant Disorder). Now with a rate like that it seems quite possible that there are undiagnosed children with CD and Attachment Disorder.

Now there is very little in ways to treat any of these issues apart from being talked through the issues and learning self control techniques (Haines: Oppositional Defiant Disorder). The future looks grim for these children as well as anyone else who is trapped by the shackles of these disorders and thought processes. There have been multiple instances of unstable youths in America that have committed atrocities in the form of school shootings, Columbine, CO and at Virginia Tech. These people were also downtrodden in their communities and never received help or care when the seeds of

their destruction were being sown. A famous musician, Marilyn Manson, who was blamed for the tragedy at Columbine has said, when asked what he would say to the perpetrators of Columbine, "I would not say anything at all. I would listen because that's what no one else did." (Bowling for Columbine). Listen to those around you. Hell, if Marilyn Manson would listen I am sure that you could.

Interviews:

Interview with Brenda Harvey:

On Monday May 4, I walked into GMS through a side door and walked down the dimly lit hallways with walls covered by hundreds of green lockers during the school day, mind you. As I reached the ground floor I saw fewer kids walking the halls. I turned the corner to room 110 and as I opened the door to the room I saw Mrs. Brenda Harvey at her desk working on some papers. As I walked inside the room she smiled and greeted me warmly. As we began the interview I established that she has been working with behavior students earlier in her career, starting with 'retarded adults'. She was trying to get them to be able to live in mainstream society by being able to communicate with people and being able to have and hold a simple job like working at McDonald's or being a bagger at a grocery store. After that she moved on to working with children with behavioral problems that kept them from mainstream education.

Mrs. Harvey believes in positive reinforcement as a method of changing the behavior of people. She never believes in restricting their abilities to do anything. For example, in her classroom, she never takes away privileges like free reading time or computer use time but she does believe in granting privileges based on good behavior in the way of tokens which can be exchanged a token per minute of free time. This is a great

way to help with changing behavior, in my opinion, because it isn't going to make the child feel bad when they do something wrong. Instead this method will make the child feel good when they do something good. This will help improve their psyche and get them into the mainstream thought processing; that is I will be rewarded if I do well, which is contrary to how some of the students that she has inherently think. They currently think they should get whatever they want, when they want it. Some of the students that she has had have been under the impression that they can just get married and then just stay at home and have their spouse work and pay the bills when they just stay home and do nothing.

The way that these children are taught to be mainstream is called their IEP that, before I knew what it meant, in my thoughts, I jokingly called it an 'Improvised Education Plan' while it is really an Individualized Education Plan. These I have learned are more than just how the teachers help the student's get back into mainstream education; these are also how the parents help their child with support. At times I have wanted support from my parents when I am going through a particularly stressful period of work or just tough time dealing with people. I know that had I received help and support from my parents that I would have done much better and would be much more open to help than I currently am. This would help many people regardless of whether or not they are or are not in a behavior transition program. The support that they get will make them stay in the mindset to succeed because their parents would be proud of their achievements.

The biggest problem with helping to achieve full mainstream adaptation with any student in a transition program is being consistent with the rewarding and in extreme

cases that Mrs. Harvey admitted to giving punishment. Not rewarding the students when they do a good job or punishing the students because they don't see the event unfolding. She has had students act out because she didn't reward them after they did what they deemed was deserving of a reward like staying completely focused for the entire time that they were in her class. I can relate to the feeling where you have done something well and you deserve a reward or even just recognition, be it for doing extra well in one class, covering for someone at work, doing extra work so other people don't need to, or even just putting extra effort into doing whatever it may be, can really make you not want to try doing anything else extra. Not wanting to try undermines everything that the teachers are trying to teach the children because wanting to do something well and with as much effort as can means that the student has self esteem which will prevent another Columbine. The rewarding process is also confusing because they need to occasionally up the bar so that the student makes progress with their IEP.

I learned that the majority of students in the program have had some sort of disorder or clinical problem with them. In it most people suffer from severe ADHD at least and the others have an eclectic mix of depression, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, autism, and post traumatic stress disorder. These kids need to get at least a handle on their various issues, so that they can be productive. I know that feeling of pressure, when someone keeps pressuring you to do something and the thread that is holding everything in check. It is a hard and difficult process that even when you have achieved a certain amount of restraint every so often you can't hold back the emotion. Either you start to get ridiculously angry or you can start to cry or shake

from not being able to hold in whatever is inside. I know more often than not they are more of a victim of their condition than the people around them are.

Interview with Christine Kowacki:

Before I went to my interview with Mrs. Harvey I had an appointment with Christine Kowacki a former transition program teacher that has worked with my mother for four years prior. I walked confidently through the quiet school hallways of GMS that make you feel as if you're in the Twilight Zone all the way around the building until I realized that you don't keep going around until the numbers go up by one hundred. I abashedly went up to the third floor and went to room 312. As I stepped onto the third floor I noticed that very few rooms had lights on in them and that room 312 was one of those with the lights out. Slightly panicked I stepped in and immediately saw my interview subject eating a bowl of Ramen noodle soup and relaxing at her desk. We quickly went about 'introductions' even though we had already met before the actual interview.

She was quite pessimistic about her views on her own line of work because she had been in that type of work for so long and has been disappointed by the students that she has had that she thought were making progress that she had by the time that my mother met her come to the point where she didn't really get invested in her work with the kids. She has been crushed too many times by people not meeting what are self-deemed as simple expectations. I feel horrible and guilty about this because I have been the main cause of frustration and disappointment for many people as I was growing up and was struggling with my own self-anger and feelings. I can't go back and change what I did to damage the teacher's, my parents', and my friends expectations and that I can't

be there for the friends and family and can't be on a very open level so they understand me because of it. She knew that she shouldn't have these pessimistic thoughts and even wished that she didn't but time and experience have molded her to know that there are some people that she just cannot help.

The kids usually just reject her or whoever the person is trying to help them because they don't have the social skills that are required to be able to communicate and allow themselves to be helped through their problems. Many of the students had problems like ADHD and one former child that claim to hear voices and was possibly schizophrenic. No one cares enough to try and help these kids that really need help. It is the worst to see a student who obviously has no idea what is going on and struggling to try and meet what they think the expectations are and not being able to explain it to them. It makes you feel just as bad as they do because your inability is preventing them from working at their best.

To add on to the trouble that the teachers have they are limited in what they can do to help the student progress with their problems to the point where they have to go and see the student actually commit whatever it is before they can even intervene by telling the proper authorities. This makes the teachers helpless in protecting the students from crime which these kids tend to get into because of their parents and their tendencies. I hate the feeling that comes with knowing I could have done something to change the outcome for the better be it running harder in Frisbee, working harder on a school project, or, as I would imagine, being more courageous when someone was in danger. Mrs. Kowacki had a student who was what could be defined as poor that qualified for free lunch at school and he was best friends with a boy that could be called rich and got lots of

pocket money and lunch money. Now apparently they both just shared the lunch of the boy that got it for free and took the money that the rich boy had saved and went and bought marijuana with it and got high after school. Chris knew what was going on and had even overheard the students talking about it one day but unless she saw the marijuana in the boy's hand she was legally powerless to stop the boy from doing it. She knew that he went and smoked with his friend instead of doing his homework and that was making his schooling suffer.

The most disturbing of all of the things that she told me was the outlook that some of the girls that had gone through her program before have had. These girls, around twelve to thirteen years old, would say, 'All I have to do is get pregnant and collect the welfare checks from it,' because that is exactly what their parents had done when they were younger. I am appalled and also sympathetic towards them. I am appalled because these young women don't realize that they are part of a society that needs all sorts of people with different talents. There is a paper over one of the windows in the back of the classroom that has what these children are interested in. It surprised me what I saw. These young people, so ready to just sit and collect welfare checks, were showing interests in being a veterinarian, being a social worker, and being a teacher, although not in those words. This is why I felt so sympathetic. They were resigned to a life of being a drag on society because that is all that they were taught by their parents. I hope that some of these young people do succeed at transferring out of the transition program back into mainstream education and pursue the interests that I saw.

Significance and Conclusion:

Significance:

This search made me realize that although I have problems with my own anger if I take the correct steps and gain support from people who I know that I can trust and care about me. Knowing that I can overcome these setbacks with determination and a strong attempt on my side coupled with support. Now I can go out and know that this will no longer be a problem once I start working on it myself and learn to accept it. I won't be held back by other people telling me that because I was angry before doesn't mean that I have to be angry all the time or even in the future. Once that I have reached that point I am confident that anything that I try to do will never again have to keep looking back at the past with a disapproving look. I also recognize that as a member of any community I need to be responsible enough to take care of the other members of my community by helping them in their hour of need. This is now my obligation because of what I hope to get out of the community for myself and any who need the help.

I have learned that while researching a topic by reading a book or watching a documentary on it is a cornerstone to developing a solid piece of finished research an appropriately placed interview can help turn your research from just knowing facts to having realized and became aware of the facts on a level that is difficult to describe. It feels as if I would know what to expect in a situation like it but still am aware that I need to truly experience something to know it. I also learned that I like to put off all of the necessary work until the last possible moment that I can assemble it and still have done a relatively good job on it. I did invest my full energy into it when I did start to do the work though so I have done at least in depth work on the pieces that are required if not good work.

Conclusion:

I learned a few of the main things that I set out to learn but still have doubts about the results that I have found because I only got one side of the argument and still need to find the other side of the story and hear that out so that I can rest with this topic, or at the very least put it off of my priority list. Apparently there are some people that you just can't help in the world that are beyond anyone's ability to teach. The children that have emotional or psychological problems are going to be held back by the rest of the world. The rest of the world doesn't want people that are potentially unstable or difficult to work with messing everything they have worked so hard for. As for my main question, is it natural or is it the parent's fault, I have come to the conclusion that it is indeed the family's fault and that the family and the community can in the majority of the cases can help the child after the damage has been done with the proper support and motivation from both sides. Although it wasn't a main question I have started to wonder about the pop-culture influence on children and how it affects them and their psychology as well as their morals.

Another thing I learned about this type of children was that most of them have some sort of clinical problem with them and are trying to be treated, taught, and raised as if they didn't have the special needs. The parents may or may not know that there is something wrong with their child but if they don't do as they are supposed to they get shipped off to special programs where they are isolated. If anything this is the worst possible way to go about this. You are taking someone out of the 'normal' group and putting them into a special group for people that are 'different' which makes them feel as if they aren't as good as the other 'normal' children. This is what leads to self-esteem issues that cause tragedies like Columbine to happen. They are normal. They deserve to

be treated the same way as everyone else, which means that they get the help that they need. If you label someone as different then they and everyone else starts to realize that they are different.

The final thing about these children is that they don't get the support that they desperately need either from their family or friends. You can't get anywhere without help when you are on a lower field than another. Someone has to give you that hand up. Thankfully anyone can give that hand up to someone even if you think they don't have a clinical problem, if you help them through it they will be better off. Your local shop keeper can help. Your local preacher can help. Your best friend can help. Your parents can help. I can help and if I can, so can you.

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