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Kids Who Hate: Preventing School Violence

Larry Brendtro, Nicholas Long, and Frank Fecser

The authors cut through the controversy around school shootings to provide a roadmap for creating safe schools that identify and intervene with our most challenging students.

Land where the bullets fly—Land where my brothers die—From every countryside—We run and hide.

A student sings these lyrics corrupting the patriotic hymn My Country 'tis of Thee. Feelings of fear and helplessness are familiar to many American children preoccupied with watching their backs instead of looking to their futures. The authors will leave the debate about gun laws to our young people whose voices are now informing the discussion. Instead, we distill in a few paragraphs what we have learned from the research and practice of preventing conflict and violence in schools and communities.

School shootings spark conflicting narratives. Predictably, a politician proclaims this is an act of evil—which, of course, is blatantly obvious. But horrific labels do not explain what is happening in the mind of this student so filled with hate that he is prepared to sacrifice his life and others. Immediately after the Parkland, Florida, tragedy, a student voiced a more sophisticated understanding: we must treat all students with respect, especially those experiencing fear, anger, and confusion.

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There is widespread public agreement that we need to keep such incidents from continuing to occur—while in fact there are some who are already accomplishing this, and we will explain how. Professionals committed to reclaiming youth at risk are preventing untold numbers of incidents with troubled students. Peaceful schools don't come from installing bullet-proof windows, arming teachers, or kicking out troublemakers. Rather than retreating into a bunker mentality, schools need to become safe communities sheltered by bonds of trust. The science of positive youth development must drive public policy, not political warfare.

Today's educators work with students who carry in more than books in their backpacks. Though

very few may be packing weapons, they sure bring along their emotions, acting these out in the hall and classrooms. Our colleagues in New York City Schools report that 10 percent of their one million students come to school scared, lonely, and furious—all conditions toxic to learning. Thus, New York Schools are working to provide effective school-based mental health programs. But too many schools abdicate responsibility for teaching our most difficult students by trying to shift the responsibility elsewhere—but there is no elsewhere. While harmful behavior must have consequences, the overarching goal is to teach students to treat one another with respect.

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We applaud the call for new resources in mental health. Our focus is on prevention—meeting needs of students so they never become mired in shame, rage, and violence. Providing mental health resources does not require staffing schools with psychotherapists. Research on childhood trauma shows that everyday relationships with teachers, caregivers, and friends often have the most restorative effect. Every student needs a connection with some caring adult in school. Peers also play a role since bullying research shows that having at least one friend to provide encouragement makes a big difference.

The authors were trained in the tradition of Fritz Redl and David Wineman who wrote *Children Who Hate*, the classic study of aggressive children. Hate is a reaction to feeling rejected and unloved. Research by Martin Gold found that successful school programs for students at risk had two essential ingredients:

- Teachers were able to see potential beneath problems and build bonds of trust.
- Teachers were able to help students with histories of failure to experience success.

When problems arise, staff in effective schools are trained to engage students in the immediate life space, help them reflect on their behavior, and develop better ways of coping with challenge. These strategies for talking with children in crisis and preventing escalating conflict cycles are essential tools for all who work with children on the edge.

Today's leaders face critical challenges in making schools and communities safe places that meet the educational needs of all children. It is our belief that a safe school includes a crisis intervention program that turns problems into learning opportunities (see lsci.org). Further, the new frontiers in mental health move beyond deficit and disorder to strength and resilience. Effective schools recognize that students thrive and learn when their basic needs are met. The most succinct statement of these strength-based needs and goals comes from the Circle of Courage model developed by Larry Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg, and Steve Van Bockern (see ReclaimingYouth.org and GrowingEdgeTraining.com). This describes in simple terms how to rear responsible children in a culture of respect:

- **Belonging:** Develop bonds of trust in family, school, peer group, and community.
- **Mastery:** Unleash the hidden strengths and potentials of all young people.
- **Power:** Build self-control, self-confidence, and respect for the rights of others.
- **Generosity:** Through acts of helping, youth gain a sense of purpose and self-worth.

Larry K. Brendtro, PhD, is co-author of *Reclaiming Youth at Risk and Positive Peer Culture*. For information, see www.ReclaimingYouth.org

Nicholas Long, PhD, and **Frank Fecser, PhD**, are co-authors of *Conflict in the Classroom and Life Space Crisis Intervention*. For information, see www.LSCI.org.

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-Wade Puryear, United Methodist Family Services, Richmond, Virginia

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