

ParentsCare in the year 2007

VIOLENCE IN OUR SOCIETY

By Jim R. Rogers

Recently I received a statement and a set of questions for my response from a local newspaper reporter. Since only a small piece of what I sent back was used, I wanted to share the rest with Parent News (and now still learning, inc.) readers since I feel the subject is important and critical to these times.

Parents are barraged with news of school shootings, Internet predators, children snatched from their beds while they sleep, politicians preying on young people, etc. With all of that, we are asking the questions:

1. Are parents raising their children differently today than the way they were parented because of increased violence against children or are today's parents just more aware of the violence because of more thorough media coverage?

Most parents I would venture to say are definitely raising their children differently today, but not because of the violence, since we have always had isolated occurrences of violence, shocking and scary to the public. It's the other way around...the epidemic of violence is being caused by the way we parent and raise our children and the weakness of homes and families. We are now a larger population, there is more of everything including unhealthy people, mental illness, reactions to being a member of the "have nots" population, and the seemingly uncaring power wielding of those in the "haves" population...(a gap that seems to be getting wider and wider), and all of these incidents can be reported almost instantaneously to the entire world especially the "news worthy" ones. We are such a reactionary society that even after a violent episode hits our neighborhood it doesn't take a long time for a return to normalcy and being close to complacent again. We hurry to "fix" the symptoms of deeper problems, ignoring the root causes. The media definitely needs to be more responsible and accountable—entertainment and news media. There are so many media outlets today, all competing for audiences to increase their profits and staying power. Not only do they simply report a news event, but they also banter it all day and night long making it much more important than it truly needs to be...and some media actually create news from the news. Look at what the media was doing to two young women who battled (and are battling) internal demons of some kind that create for them sad and confused lives, and the media uses them to sell themselves, calling it news. And I also believe that media exposure can and has created violent events by unhealthy persons wanting the notoriety the coverage provides. Media fuels terrorism. The perpetrators live and die for the publicity they get. Media also fuels social violence...from the images of "professional" wrestling to "in your face" athletics, juvenile sports, players, coaches and fans, to Spike TV fist fighting and macho stereotypes. Is it any wonder that our children and our adults accept and practice violent behavior as "the way it is"?

We have changed the way we parent for lots of reasons. Mostly it's due to corporate control and money/survival driven lives. We live in a "365-24/7" world. It is always open for business and we all find ourselves running to just keep up. Parents spend less time in the home, less time with children, less time developing vital relationships with their spouses and sons and daughters and community; less time for self reflection, personal growth and learning. Family members all drag themselves home at the end of the day, and it's sometimes all they can do to be civil to each other. The duties are endless and the times for just being together in good and healthy ways have greatly diminished. Too much parenting today is done on the run, hurling snatches of guidance and direction at their confused and needy offspring with few interactions that are often not well thought out. Parents too often "react" to their children's needs, with what I call "response-disability", rather than being effectively responsive to their needs, which is "response-ability." We are often too harsh, too insensitive, too rigid, too inconsistent, too impatient and not willing to stop, listen and attempt to understand and guide. We don't even try to develop true relationships with each other; we just order, dictate, command, criticize, complain and talk...all the traits that undermine the purpose of effective parenting, which is to prepare a child for adulthood. How do we think we get to be adults? We adults teach our children how and who to be. Who do you want your children to be? What kind of lives do you want for them? What kind of memories do you want them to have? We are creating childhood memories for adults now.

2. Has this increased awareness bred paranoid parents at risk for creating a generation of paranoid youngsters? Or are parents justified in their vigilance?

Paranoia is running wild...and I believe the television, motion picture, cell phones and internet media help create it and fuel it. I say television, *et. al.* because it is always there and available and attacks most of our senses; sight, sound, emotions. It can dramatically tap into our imaginations and fears in an instant and the image can remain, maybe forever. The print media is also guilty, but we can put it down, read it in small doses, or not read it at all and there is very little visual and no auditory impact. And, the emotion has to be created by the reader. You don't find many teenagers sneaking around to buy a newspaper. Mass media gives us something new to fear and worry about almost daily...hourly. If we allow ourselves to be a "regular" habitual user, there is no way that we cannot feel anxious, stressed, frustrated, worried and downright depressed and fearful when we try to close our eyes at night. It is all too much, and too constant, and too negative. We are not only raising a new generation of paranoid children, but anxious, hopeless, aimless and depressed ones as well. We can not possibly be our most effective selves if we are always looking over our shoulder or feeling like the sky is going to fall any minute. And if we aren't our most effective selves, then we are not giving our best as a parent, a spouse, a child, a worker, a citizen.

3. We have parents equipping their young children with cell phones as a way to have immediate communication. Is this a good parenting tactic or are parents using today's electronics to baby sit their kids and avoid having to spend time with them?

Just like television, computers, video games, air rifles, and other potentially harmful popular commodities the cell phone is not bad in and of itself, but rather it can have good and bad characteristics or potential; it all depends on how it is used. Too much of anything is too much. Proper use, informed use, useful use, purposeful uses are all good. Cell phones are incredible tools for good, but can be misused and can be tools for illegal, inconsiderate and obnoxious behaviors. Used as a contact for children, it's good. Used as a controlling and spying tool, it causes problems.

Many parents use many commodities, and schedules, and lack of time, and other distractions to avoid spending time with their children. Too many of them would rather be someplace else. Being with our children in positive helpful ways can be time consuming, hard, frustrating and boring. So can going to the dentist, but they are both necessary parts of our healthful lives. Nothing can replace the genuine "unhurried" time that we give our children. Nothing.

4. How should parents handle the bad news of the world (school shootings, Internet predators) when discussing this with their children? What's your advice for how to have that discussion?

We cannot raise our children in a vacuum. We cannot pretend that bad things don't exist. If we don't inform them, someone else will. Of course they will be informed by others as well as parents anyway, but parents have to manage the information and relate it to how that family believes, what it values and how it feels about any given subject in the neighborhood and world. Parents have to design, manage, modify, and execute rules, and behavior expectations, discipline and structure and routines and how their family adapts to and lives in and with the world. There are many positive examples of living in this wonderful world and they need to be pointed out and emphasized as to what life can be. Help them understand that life is not what they see on television or in the movies. Help them sort out the difference between reality and make believe...in what happens there and what happens here.

Depending on the age of the children, be open and honest with them. Tell them what you think they need to know based on their age and maturity to handle and understand. Answer their questions, but don't elaborate unnecessarily. Talk about events minimally. Try not to make it fill the day or time. Try to maintain normal schedules and routines. Above all, maintain your own cool and maturity about the events. Don't go around all day hand-wringing and bemoaning the state of the world. Check your judgments, your reactions, your criticisms, your conclusions. Remember that you are role modeling and teaching your observing and absorbing children how to handle emotions, to think, to consider, to wonder and to grow in self assurance and confidence. The more strength and courage you show and teach the better the children will grow into those healthy places and then they will be able to handle the inevitable events that will greet and bash them in their present and future everyday living of life.

I hope you will take the time to read all of this column again, and give it to others to read as well. We have to stop, and think, and be. It's all very worrisome...so be aware, work at it, try to bring in some joy and Don't lose heart!