Teens and violence

As a parent, one of your primary roles has always been to make sure your child is safe, secure and protected from harm. It can therefore be extremely difficult to be comfortable seeing your son or daughter grow up in a world full of gang warfare, beatings and worse.



In such a society, our best defence as parents is to become informed and alert along with our teens, and to keep the lines of communication about violence open.

Some thoughts about violence

Children with low self-esteem are most at risk of becoming victims of bullying. Teens who continue to suffer from low self-esteem are at increased risk of becoming victims of violence.

- Bullying is the origin of many cycles of violence.
- Bullying can take the form of name-calling, racial or religious slurs, mocking and threats in addition to physical shoving and ultimately fighting.
- Malicious gossip and rumours are a form of violence, and may lead to the victim being ostracized by their peers.
- Schoolyard and neighbourhood violence can escalate in criminal beatings, stabbings, shootings and death.

Recognizing the signs

If your teen was the victim of bullying as a child, you should be particularly alert for the following signs that may suggest violence is occurring:

- Your teen is often “losing” clothes or possessions.
- Your teen’s money seems to disappear with no realistic explanation.
- Clothing is frequently ripped, torn or covered in unexplained dirt.
- Your teen has frequent unexplained bruises or scratches.
- Your teen is withdrawing from school and social activities.
- School grades are slipping.
- He or she is increasingly “too sick” to go to school.
- Your teen is depressed and may seem particularly anxious and fearful; low self-esteem may slip even lower.

What parents can do

- If your child becomes a victim of bullying, respond quickly.
- Make every effort to build a young child’s self-esteem and encourage his or her confidence.
- Continue to praise your child’s efforts and successes as he or she enters the teen years; constantly reaffirm what a terrific person your teen is.
- Encourage your teen to “walk tall” and show confidence.
- Maintain ongoing communication from childhood onwards; make it clear that no topics are “off bounds”.
- If possible, become the “host home” or “host yard” for your teen’s friends to hang out.

- Play an active and visible role in the school's efforts to manage racial and religious discrimination.

When violence is suspected

- **Make every effort to open communication with your teen.** When someone has been a victim of violence, they are often reluctant to discuss the issue and may initially even deny the problem. Understand that your son or daughter may be embarrassed or ashamed and may feel they have in some way brought the violence upon themselves.

- **Impress upon your teen that the problem belongs to the other party or parties.** Make it clear that such behaviour is abnormal and will not continue in your child's life.

- **If at all possible, encourage your teen to take ownership of the solution.** Brainstorm possible solutions with your teen and discuss who would be the best person to involve. The school principle? A teacher? A guidance counsellor? The police?

- **Tell your teen to avoid direct confrontation with the problem teen or teens.** Confrontation can be extremely dangerous when violence is already an issue.

- **If your teen is unwilling or unable to resolve the situation through school authorities, adult intervention is essential.** You MUST speak to the school, ensure that action is taken and, if necessary, involve the police.

- **Continue to reinforce your teen's self-confidence.**

- **Ensure your teen understands that you love and support him or her**, and that you are going to continue to be there with whatever support is necessary.

Violence—whether in the schoolyard, neighbourhood, at work or at home—is intolerable. If you suspect that your child is a perpetrator of violence, or is the victim of violence, discuss it with them now, and take action to put an end to the violence. Make sure that they know that you are there for them, and support them in re-building their self-confidence. Together, you can break free of the cycle of violence, and contribute to the development of a confident, caring young adult and a healthier society.