

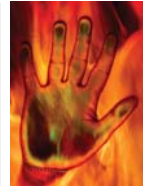
A hand is shown reaching out from the bottom left towards the center, set against a background of intense, glowing orange and red flames. The hand is the central focus, with fingers spread. The overall mood is one of urgency and danger.

FIFTY YEARS BEFORE VIRGINIA TECH:

**A STARR COMMONWEALTH PERSPECTIVE
ON VIOLENCE IN OUR SCHOOLS**

Martin Mitchell, James Longhurst and Dana Jacob

A FIRE BURNS WITHIN



On December 1, 1958, ninety-two students and three teachers died in a fire set by a student at Our Lady of Angels elementary school in Chicago.¹

Fast forward 50 years and the headlines are the same —
A young man kills 32 staff and students on the Virginia Tech campus before turning the gun on himself.

The boy responsible for the Chicago fire was born in a home for unwed mothers after his mother allegedly was raped by her own stepfather. She, only 15-years-old, planned to put the boy up for adoption but couldn't let her child go. Troubles at home were compounded by problems experienced in school. He was mercilessly ridiculed and bullied by peers. His mother was aware of the problems and did all she could to protect him. She and her child moved to Chicago where the young man's childhood was filled with chaos and uncertainty. He began setting fires at the age of five.

It would take years for the truth to come to light and for authorities to connect the young man to the fire. A Chicago judge, concerned about the boy's safety, placed him in Starr Commonwealth's educational and treatment program in Albion, Michigan. There he completed the treatment program, was given a clean slate and a second chance, leading him to enlist in the Marines and later return to civilian life as a productive adult.

Seung-Hui Cho, the man responsible for the Virginia Tech shootings, was never afforded that opportunity. Reports after his death reveal a bright, educated man fraught with internal struggles. Cho was reportedly singled out and made fun of during high school, having been told to "go back to China" and teased for the way he talked.² There also are indicators that Cho had untreated and undiagnosed highly functioning Autistic Spectrum Disorder.³ Imagine what it would be like to grow up as he did, feeling unable to speak and freely express himself?

¹ The authors first became aware of the Our Lady of Angels story when a reporter contacted Starr Commonwealth in 1978. The story can be found in Brendtro, L., Ness, A. and Mitchell, M. (2001). *No Disposable Kids*, Longmont, CO: Sopris West. Information was derived from: Cowan, D. and K. John (1996). *To Sleep With the Angels: The Story of a Fire*. Chicago: Ivan R. and McBride, M. (1979) *The Fire That Will Not Die*. Palm Springs, CA: ETC Publications.

BOILING OVER

A history of feeling inferior, dehumanized and marginalized is apparent while watching the videos the killer made prior to his attacks but released posthumously. He even references the Columbine incident, which leads one to believe he had grown to become increasingly emotionally insensitive to others and psychologically charged by the thought of hurting others.

We all ask, "What makes these people tick?" "How did they end up this way?" and "What in the world would motivate someone to do something so horrible?"

The answers can be difficult. Despite the explosion of attention and horror that a mass murder creates, this type of crime is very rare. Very frequently, the person doing the killing finishes off the event by committing suicide. In these cases, it becomes necessary to conduct a psychological autopsy by interviewing those people with whom the person had contact throughout his/her life (95% of mass murders and serial killers are male) and trying to piece together factors that may have aggravated or mitigated the likelihood of a terrible event.

- **Disabling self esteem and depression** – Constant marginalization and dehumanization can cripple one's sense of worth and value. These people can feel utterly powerless to change their life situation. They constantly seek out reinforcement from others, but others' attempts to support or recognize are inevitably viewed to be inadequate and insufficient.
- **Substance abuse** – Victims of chronic psychological abuse can predictably turn to alcohol and/or drugs in an attempt to self-medicate and relieve the excruciating pain. Abusing substances can also enhance and reinforce an already active fantasy life. Carrying out violence in the mind can serve as preparation for the actual event later.



² Fleetwood, B. (2007) *The Whole Class Started Laughing and Saying "Go Back to China."* Retrieved April 20, 2007 from Huffingtonpost.com.

³ Fleetwood, B. (2007) *High-Functioning Autism: Do You Know What it Feels Like to Be Torched Alive?* Retrieved April 23, 2007 from Huffingtonpost.com.

- **Narcissistic thoughts and behavior** – As the person comes to conclude that others in his life are incapable of meeting his needs, he predictably can become increasingly enraged and profoundly self absorbed. This may prove to be a most critical point because this may mark the shift from a lifelong feeling of “powerlessness” to becoming “powerful” and striking back on all those who deserved to be hurt for failing him. In short, he believes they deserve to die.

TIMELINE OF HIGH-PROFILE SCHOOL VIOLENCE

The following timeline serves as a display of the tragic consequences resulting from students who became attackers. At the root of each incident is a history of abuse, neglect, bullying, harassment, teasing or victimization.

The events listed here are just a sampling of some of the most high-profile acts of school violence. These do not account for the daily acts of psychological torture and dehumanization taking place in schools that we’ve become desensitized to.

- **November 15, 1995, Lynville, Tenn.:** Jamie Rouse, 17, killed one student and one teacher, while wounding another teacher. He said he felt empty and helpless and had been picked on for being small and too quiet.
- **December 1, 1997, West Paducah, Ky.:** Michael Carneal, 14, kills three students at Heath High School. The principal said the boy’s school essays and short stories revealed that he felt weak and picked on.
- **March 24, 1998, Jonesboro, Ark.:** Four middle school girls and a teacher were killed and 11 people were wounded Tuesday when two heavily armed boys, Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden, in full camouflage garb opened fire on their classmates and teachers during a false fire alarm. Students said Johnson was a braggart and a bully. He was about to face trial for an alleged sexual assault when the shooting occurred. Golden had a history of cruelty to animals.
- **May 19, 1998, Fayetteville, Tenn.:** Jacob Davis, 18, opens fire at a high school, killing the boy with whom his girlfriend was having an affair. He was depressed and possibly suicidal due to the break up.
- **April 20, 1999, Littleton, Colo.:** Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed 12 students and a teacher, as well as wounding 24 others, before

committing suicide. The massacre provoked debate regarding gun control laws, the availability of firearms in the United States, and gun violence involving youths. Much discussion also centered on the nature of high school cliques, subcultures and bullying, as well as the role of violent movies and video games in American society. The shooting also resulted in an increased emphasis on school security, and a moral panic aimed at goth culture, social pariahs, the right to bear arms, the use of pharmaceutical anti-depressants by teenagers, violent films, teen internet use, and violent video games.

- **November 19, 1999, Deming, N.M.:** Victor Cordova Jr., 12, shoots a 13-year-old girl in a Deming, N.M., middle school. The teen was apparently suicidal and had told classmates about his plan to "blast the school" while showing off bullets. He had displayed a violent temper and depression, especially since the death of his mother that same year.
- **March 7, 2001, Williamsport, Pa.:** Elizabeth Catherine Bush, 14, wounded student Kimberly Marchese in the cafeteria of Bishop Neumann High School. She was depressed and frequently teased, bullied and harassed.
- **September 24, 2003, Cold Spring, Minn.:** John Jason McLaughlin, 15, fatally shoots two at Rocori High School. At his murder trial, it was claimed that McLaughlin had intended only to wound one of the victims, whom he thought had been teasing him.
- **March 21, 2005, Red Lake, Minn.:** Jeffrey Weise killed seven people including a teacher and a security guard before taking his own life. He had previously killed his grandfather (a police officer) and his grandfather's girlfriend/partner at home before going to school to commit the massacre. Seven others were wounded. Weise was described as a bullied loner with behavior problems and a troubled family.
- **April 16, 2007, Blacksburg, Va.:** A 23-year-old Virginia Tech student, Cho Seung-Hui, killed two in a dorm, then killed 30 more two hours later in a classroom building. His suicide brought the death toll to 33, making the shooting rampage the most deadly in U.S. history. Fifteen others were wounded. Cho had a history of mental illness and former roommates said he was an extreme loner. A video released after the attack showed him rallying against status-hungry students and others he appeared to feel disrespected by.

By reviewing the details of these tragedies, we do not condone or wish to explain away the causes for such heinous crimes. We only seek to understand the issues of dehumanization and desensitization that lead to such horrible tragedy.

FROM STUDENT TO SHOOTER

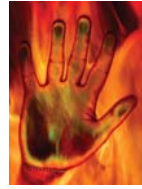
In analyzing the Virginia Tech massacre, former U.S. Secret Service agents said that there are 10 key factors in almost every school shooting. Those findings are based on the Secret Service's work in protecting the president and profiling assassins. The traits of those willing to assassinate the president are remarkably similar to those of student shooters and can be found in the "Safe School Initiative" study released in 2002 by the Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education:⁴

- Incidents of targeted violence at school rarely were sudden, impulsive acts.
- Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack.
- Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack.
- There is no accurate or useful "profile" of students who engaged in targeted school violence.
- Most attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.
- Most attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Moreover, many had considered or attempted suicide.
- Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted or injured by others prior to the attack.
- Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack.
- In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity.
- Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most shooting incidents were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention.



⁴ U.S. Secret Service and U. S. Department of Education. (2002) Safe School Initiative Final Report. Retrieved May 2, 2007 from www.secretservice.gov.

"BEHIND THE MOST DRAMATIC CASES OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE ALMOST ALWAYS IS A HISTORY OF PEER VICTIMIZATION."



According to Georgeann Rooney, a threat assessment specialist at the Secret Service, Cho's attack fit seven of the 10 criteria.⁵ While there is no profile per se of students who become attackers, Rooney said, we do know that patterns of abuse, neglect and victimization often are the triggers that can lead to violence.

VICTIMS OFTEN BECOME PERPETRATORS

Students who commit crimes often are victims themselves. Many times those who hurt and hate are young people who have experienced a great deal of threat, rejection, love deprivation and mistreatment from adults. In fact, children who are victims of abuse and neglect are 67 times more likely to engage in delinquent acts before their teen years.⁶

If not being taught hostility through poor modeling at home, children often find themselves subjected to bullying, teasing, harassment and victimization at school. Behind the most dramatic cases of school violence almost always is a history of peer victimization.



Most school bullying doesn't turn into violence, but social ridicule, psychological intimidation and group rejection can be just as devastating. Today's form of bullying is more insidious, leads to further dehumanization and really should be termed psychological torture.

⁵ Pelley, S. 2007. *The Mind of an Assassin*. 60 Minutes. Aired April 22, 2007.

⁶ Petit, M. and Brooks, T. R. (1998) *Abuse and Delinquency: Two Sides of the Same Coin*. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 7(2): 77-79.



Ridicule, too, is a form of psychological torture. It includes mocking, insults and ill-humor designed to make others the butt of jokes. Most children being victimized become angry at the mistreatment but feel helpless to stop it. Instead of understanding that their peers are being cruel, they can instead internalize the ridicule and humiliation by concluding that they indeed are worthless individuals who deserve the shame, humili-

ation and rejection. The continuous ridicule can result in the inability to cope and have hope, often times leading to self-destructive behaviors, depression and possibly violently lashing out at others.

COMPETING PRIORITIES

The No Child Left Behind Act certainly was aimed at increasing achievement in our students. However, this emphasis on test scores has decreased and at times eliminated attention to creating positive and caring school environments. Value lessons are being lost at school, which for so many children is the only place they may see positive role models. While achievement scores might go up, our young people's ability and desire to empathize with others, show social interest, and contribute to a safe and secure school culture declines or disappears.

Our belief is that putting a concentrated and educated emphasis on building a positive and caring culture can result in significant gains in test scores measuring academic achievement. When the environment focuses so much on achievement, the reverse seems to be in place. The basic human elements of kindness and helping our fellow human beings is lost.

The results of ignoring the environment are dramatic. In a recent Bolt Media survey of more than 4,000 teenagers, nearly half said they believe a classmate could be a killer. This large number indicates that many teens are aware of their peers' inability to cope and empathize.⁷

UNDER THE RADAR

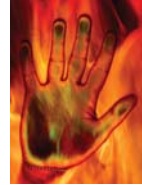
The standards for human civility have dipped dangerously low and while sensationalized acts of school violence make headlines, a great level of hurt and pain occurs daily under the radar in our schools.

⁷ Fleetwood, B. (2007) *The Whole Class Started Laughing and Saying "Go Back to China."* Retrieved April 20, 2007 from Huffingtonpost.com.

Take for example the journal of an Albion, Michigan high school student who logged her experiences – ‘the good, the bad, the ugly’ - for 30 days. She showed her journal to her father who in turn made copies for the superintendent and school board members

Upon reading the journal, the school superintendent saw that a “good” day for the student was one in which she and others were not directly intimidated, put down, or verbally/physically assaulted. The superintendent came to see that both students and educational staff at the high school had over time become desensitized to the almost constant hurtful behaviors that never resulted in a major fight or blowup.

“A GREAT LEVEL OF HURT AND PAIN OCCURS DAILY UNDER THE RADAR IN OUR SCHOOLS.”



Further examples of school violence that flies under the radar are the deaths of 32 students in one year from Chicago schools.⁸ The violent deaths of these students – whether it took place at school or at home – plagues the schools and the community, a predominantly African-American area of Chicago.

Yet the deaths of these youth, which equates to one young life taken every 10 days that school year, receives little media attention compared to the highly organized suburban attacks mentioned earlier that garnered such a flurry of hype.



ATTEMPTS TO DEAL WITH HURTFUL BEHAVIOR

Most schools have policies in place for dealing with bullying and students and staff recognize that putting others down through dominance and abuse of power is wrong. However, schools that attempt to deal with these problems through “zero-tolerance” policies rarely get to the core of the hurtful behaviors; they simply “get rid” of the so-called problem youth by ejecting them out of the school and into the communities.

⁸ *Banchero S. with Rozas A. and Aguilar, A. (2007, May 16) Year of Violence, Grief: 27 City Students Slain. Chicago Tribune. Retrieved June 19, 2007 from chicagotribune.com.*

But the biggest cause behind bullying continues to be negative peer climates. Too often, students and staff who witness these acts do not speak up when someone is being hurt. Some just accept these hurtful behaviors as simply “part of the school experience” and may even come to believe that the children who are victimized somehow can benefit from this horrible treatment to help them “get tough.”



In such educational settings antisocial groups form and negative peers become potentially destructive. Youth unwittingly and sometimes knowingly encourage negative and violent behavior from each other.

NATURE VS. NURTURE

Traditional psychology through the years said that we are born selfish and only through moral education, values lessons and socialization are we able to grow into true helpful, altruistic tendencies.

But science is demonstrating just the opposite. Studies are now showing that children are innately more altruistic than previously thought. Not only are we born more altruistic, but parents and schools can do more to foster a sense of helping others. The altruism-dulling taking place in today’s classrooms creates a culture of competition not cooperation.

“TOO OFTEN, STUDENTS AND STAFF WHO WITNESS (BULLYING) DO NOT SPEAK UP WHEN SOMEONE IS BEING HURT.”



Take for example new research by the National Institute of Health that shows being generous to others and placing the interests of others before your own activates a primitive part of the brain that lights up in response to food or sex. This is evidence that morality has biological roots.

THE FIVE SHIFTS

Originally developed by Sherlock Graham Haynes and further adapted for work with parents and children by Jim Longhurst and other leaders of Starr Commonwealth, the Five Shifts serve as a model for humans to try solving new problems with old methods. As we address the challenges of dehumanization and desensitization, it is helpful to look at these problems from a new perspective.

The first of The Five Shifts is the **Material to the Spiritual**.

As humans we want to make sense out of what we see in our world, sometimes without much conscious thought. When we see someone, we instantly size them up based on their appearance – faces, skin color, clothes, etc. Subconsciously we make assumptions about what we see and hear, and we think we know subtle things about them.

These value judgments prevent us from truly connecting with young people. Parents must make the shift to get beyond the material or physical, and try to understand what's underneath.

Making the shift from the **Cognitive to the Affective** requires using our hearts over our heads, which is especially important for adults because children use their feelings to express themselves. We must focus on how the child is feeling and resist the urge to try to get them to think more clearly

The third shift is **Certainty to Curiosity**, and one that is especially useful in understanding what might lead our children to act out violently. Too often we are certain we know what is going on in our children's lives and that we know what is best for our children. Being reluctant to hear new information or ignoring truth that is hard to swallow creates resentment among children.

The fourth shift, **Solution to Transformation** allows us to get beyond looking for an immediate solution. Sometimes, the change we are looking for in youth really starts with a look at ourselves. We must ask if we are modeling behaviors such as respect and dignity that we expect from our children?

The final shift, **Discussion and Debate to Dialogue** teaches us how to effectively communicate with our children. Parents and children can become frustrated when both sides seem to be emphasizing their points, looking for flaws, or looking only to be right. These interactions can do much harm, putting adults and children in adversarial positions that are not productive for human relationships. *(continued inside)*

The Five Shifts continued

Listening, letting the words sink in and resisting the urge to respond too quickly allows us to develop a shared understanding with children.

Again, the ability to listen to troubled children and understand their behaviors isn't an acceptance of those behaviors. But refusing to understand the problems and refusing to change our perception of what's really happening helps perpetuate the violence.

CREATING SAFE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

In order to inoculate our youth against crimes in their own schools, the students need to feel empowered. Peer helping processes must be in place and students should know how to step up and speak out in helping others.

Produced by the U.S. Dept. of Education in collaboration with the nation's premiere law enforcement agency, the U.S. Secret Service, these are recommendations for creating more positive environments in educational settings:

- Mutual respect: In a climate of safety, adults and students respect each other.
- Connection to an adult: Each student has a connection to at least one adult.
- Problem-solving focus: Problems can be resolved without fear, shame or reprisal.
- Code of openness: Students bring serious concerns to the attention of adults.
- Peer helping: Students try to help friends and peers who are in distress.

When properly applied, these suggestions create greater opportunities for youth to form respectful alliances with one another and adults who can intervene.



Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) also is an important movement toward a curriculum that fosters more attentive listening, sensitivity to body language, social interest, teamwork, empathy and interpersonal skills. Interestingly,

according to the Department of Labor, these are the same skills desired in new employees.

Children are a rich resource for addressing the serious environmental challenges we face in our nation's schools. They have the ability to help and want the best for each other and the adults who serve them. Cultures of caring are achievable, however the journey to this end starts with us achieving a greater awareness of what the true challenges are.

We are not served well by living in a world of denial and not adequately understanding the tragic results of dehumanization and desensitization. We can and will do better.

*Martin L. Mitchell, Ed.D.,
is President and CEO of Starr Commonwealth.
Founded in 1913, Starr Commonwealth is a nonprofit
organization that serves children and families from locations
in Albion, Battle Creek and Detroit, Michigan, and Van Wert
and Columbus, Ohio. Services range from foster care to
residential treatment and in-home counseling programs
that help young adults learn to live independently.
Starr also offers No Disposable Kids,[®] a multi-faceted
training program that helps schools identify their
strengths, analyze their weaknesses and utilize
practical, prevention-oriented tools for
creating safe and productive
school environments.*

*James Longhurst, Ed.D.,
is Vice President of Clinical
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*Dana Jacob, B.A.,
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Director at Starr
Commonwealth
and a former editor.*



WHO WE ARE

Founded in 1913, Starr Commonwealth is a nationally and internationally recognized private, non-profit organization. Starr serves troubled children of all ages through community-based and residential programs at five sites in Michigan and Ohio. Over two dozen programs provide pathways to healing, behavioral change and values development. Starr's programs are fully licensed in Michigan and Ohio, and are accredited through the Council on Accreditation of Services for Families and Children. Last year alone, Starr served nearly 5,000 children, families and professionals; 1,423 were direct program services. In addition, Starr's No Disposable Kids® educational training services provided training to 2,845 educators. This has potentially impacted over 85,350* youth in numerous school systems.

WHAT WE BELIEVE

Starr Commonwealth believes that all children and families possess the strengths and abilities to help them overcome even life's most difficult challenges. We believe in the power of relationships to make positive changes in children's lives, particularly when children are provided opportunities in environments marked by encouragement, dignity, and respect. We believe in teaching children to take personal responsibility for their actions, while they learn care and concern for others. "We see the good in every child" – and, we are committed to helping every child in our care achieve greatness!

