



## The WCPA News

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### Responding To School Violence

By Brett Newcomb, L.P.C.

School safety and the issue of violent behavior occurring in or near schools is a topic of national interest and concern. Surveys indicate that many people believe schools are very dangerous places and that there is widespread concern regarding the safety of our children, our teachers and the general school environment. In a seemingly paradoxical note, however, the same studies indicate that parents and staff usually identify their own schools as being very safe. The statistical data supports this latter belief. According to the research, there exists a statistical chance of less than one in two million that an individual at school will be at risk for an act of violence that could possibly be lethal. In actuality, the most common risk of violence faced by students and staff fall under the headings of theft and bullying. The St. Louis Post Dispatch recently cited a Justice Department source as saying that as many as 160,000 students stay home from school on any given day due to their fear of being bullied or harassed at school. These forms of violence are far more pervasive, and yet the risk of a lethal incident is the subject of most media coverage and concern.

As a result of this concern, the FBI recently released a report entitled *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective* (September, 2000) which examined in detail eighteen separate episodes of lethal violence in schools, looking for an enhanced understanding of the nature of these incidents and their perpetrators. The FBI wanted to determine if it is possible to identify possible assailants before they perpetrate violence at school, and what protective and preventative measures could be identified and implemented by the schools to ensure school safety.

Using this latest FBI information, Comprehensive School Services of West County Psychological Associates has developed and is presenting a six hour long seminar about school violence and school safety. This seminar has been attended by approximately two thousand Missouri teachers, representing over ninety schools. Information presented in the seminar includes: causes of violence and aggressive behavior, signs of children at-risk to act out violently or aggressively, intervention strategies for anticipating, recognizing, and intervening in potentially violent or aggressive situations, and suggestions for working with hostile or aggressive parents. The major recommendation of the workshop is that schools need to develop and implement three levels of response in order to address the long-range question of school safety: **(continued, next page)**

### **DR. LARHONDA JONES, M.D.**

Joins West County Psychological Associates

We are delighted to announce the arrival of LaRhonda Jones, M.D. Dr. Jones is a native of St. Louis. She is a child and adolescent psychiatrist, who specializes in the treatment of children, ages 0-18, who have major psychiatric and/or behavioral disorders. Dr. Jones attended medical school at the University of Missouri at Kansas City, completed her residency at Louisiana State University and completed a Child and Adolescent Fellowship at St. Louis University. Dr. Jones maintains an affiliation and faculty appointment with St. Louis University. She is on staff at both St. John's Mercy Medical Center and SSM-DePaul Health Center. Dr. Jones will see patients at our office. You may schedule an appointment with her by calling our office, at (314) 275-8599. Welcome, Dr. Jones!

## Our Philosophy

### We believe that individuals and systems:

- Are capable of permanent change
- Function best with clearly defined authority that stems from a family systems hierarchy
- Are accountable for both positive and negative aspects of behavior
- Achieve success by conscious choices that lead to strength and development of personal responsibility
- Control their environment by establishing boundaries that are consistent with their values

### WCPA promotes change and growth by:

- Helping to establish order within the environment
- Meeting consistently in a collaborative relationship to achieve identified goals
- Helping to identify and process significant issues
- Aiding in resolving issues as they arise

The result for the system or individual is the development of a strong sense of identity and boundaries that allows for the achievement of goals.

## From the Director

Dear Friends,

I hope that your school year is going well.

I am constantly reminded that being an educator brings great rewards. But now, more than ever, this work also requires tremendous effort and time. The needs and expectations of the children and families that you serve can sometimes be overwhelming. I have come to realize that education is not for the faint of heart. Rather, educators today must have great personal strength in order to accomplish all that needs to be done. We, at West County Psychological Associates, admire you for all that you do. Know that our help is here to support you in your work.

Mary Fitzgibbons, Ph.D.

## Responding to School Violence (Continued)

The first level of response is the establishment of a Crisis Intervention and Risk Assessment plan by each school and each school district. Most schools already have partial crisis response plans, designed to deal with tornadoes, fires and earthquakes. These plans need to be supplemented by the establishment of procedures to be followed by students and staff when there is a lethal weapons risk or an actual shooter at the school. These plans should be developed in cooperation with local law enforcement authorities and should follow their guidelines.

The second level of response is the establishment of preventive planning programs to address the level of risk specifically arising from harassment, bullying, stereotyping and scapegoating. These plans should begin at the Kindergarten and primary levels and should include teaching students the skills of conflict resolution, impulse control and anger management. They should also include faculty training in the areas of supervision and classroom management techniques.

The third level of planning focuses on creating an environment where there is administrative support for the supervision of all students at all times, supported by constant, consistent and enforced policies. These policies should reflect the values of respect, inclusion, tolerance and self-control. We cannot overstate the importance to school safety of the concept of a faculty/administrative team who are professional in their conduct, skillful in their classroom management behaviors, involved with and knowledgeable about their students, and in frequent contact with parents.

Many schools who have participated in the School Violence Workshop are expressing interest in follow-up training sessions on related topics, such as anger management, conflict resolution, bullying and harassment in the school setting, as well as workshops designed to teach teachers how to facilitate impulse control skills and to teach self-discipline through good boundaries. You will see more information about these topics in future newsletters, and you are welcome to contact our office for more information.

**If you would like more information about any of these workshops and their content, please contact Brett Newcomb, at our office, (314) 275-8599.**

## **Eating Problems Group to Begin**

*Nobody ever really eats alone. We must all negotiate the voice of our culture and its contradictory messages about food and the body. These cultural imperatives especially confuse and burden women as they struggle with the insidious power of the diet culture and current demands about body size and shape.*

- From **Eating Problems** (1994), Bloom, C. , et al.

The young woman in contemporary American culture is caught between two ideas. She knows that food represents love when given to others, but is dangerous when she eats it herself. She understands that taking care of those around her is valued, while taking care of her own needs is taboo. In the context of our society, a woman's body is the place in which are inscribed the rules of culture. A woman's body is also the site of her expression, her social position and her agency. In a world where there is little voice or sense of control for a young woman, her body, and what she puts into it, may be the one area of her life where she has a sense of mastery and choice. A girl's body is the place where she tells about her standing in the world – the world of her family, her sexuality and her school – and about what she believes to be possible and impossible.

For today's young woman, the very act of eating presents a dilemma. She does not feel entitled to eat. She does not feel entitled to respond to her hunger from within or to a body that she experiences as "knowable." She is burdened with the need to conform to images that bombard her daily, including the image that to be thin is to be desired by men and envied by women. As long as her sense of control comes from external sources, however, she has no real control.

Many treatments for eating problems aim only to control the symptom (i.e. force healthy eating). This approach merely reproduces in the client the loss of control created by internalized messages from a fat-phobic society. The Eating Problems Group at West County Psychological Associates enables young women to begin to experience themselves in a different way, to strengthen their capacity for self-nurturance, to "feed" themselves, and to find a voice to express their needs without compromising their bodies in an unhealthy, and often deadly, way.

The Eating Problems Group at West County Psychological Associates is facilitated by Christine Wood, Ph.D., and is a 10-week, 90 minute group meeting. The goal of the group is to provide a safe environment in which young women, ages 12-18, can freely discuss their challenges with eating within their family, school and larger social context. Fee for the group is \$300, payable upon registration. The group will begin on Tuesday, January 16, 2001, and will meet from 6:30 – 8:00 pm for 10 consecutive weeks.

Chris Wood holds her doctorate degree in Marriage and Family Therapy from St. Louis University, and is a licensed Clinical Social Worker in the State of Missouri.

### **Dealing with Difficult Parents (Tips for Teachers)**

- Initiate early, positive interactions with parents. Identify those that need more interaction, and provide it.
- You are the professional. Set the tone: I'm listening, I care, I will do my best, I am available.
- When a student receives consequences, make certain that they are fair, then state them directly and don't back down.
- Know your school's policies and consistently enforce them.
- Never have a serious discussion spontaneously or on the fly. You need time to prepare and do it right.
- Always control your own temper. An emotional reaction from you may be just what a parent wanted.
- Be consistent. Even when a parent doesn't like a rule, it stays. (If it's fair and consistent with school policy.)
- Keep clear, orderly documentation about your interactions with parents, particularly difficult ones.
- Sometimes, we have to forget about our desire to be liked by our students and/or parents. When doing what is right and necessary for the school's overall effectiveness or safety, we may not be liked.
- Be a model. Follow the rules that apply to you.
- Forgive. Whatever the difficulty with a parent, once the confrontation is over, it should be over.