

Youth Violence: Inside the Skin

3 -HOUR WORKSHOP FOR TEACHERS

(Includes watching 93-minute film)

1. Introduce the film:

The Youth Violence Project is a 4-year project encompassing two feature-length films (a dramatic film and a documentary). These films explore through interviews as well as fictional scenarios the roots of youth violence in today's society.

June Mack and her students at the University of Alabama at Birmingham are experiencing a growing concern about youth violence. They are filmmakers -- not psychologists -- who feel that they cannot understand the actions of others unless they attempt on some level to experience their worlds. They believe film is a powerful tool for sharing experience.

In 2005 Mack and her students began interviewing people who were involved in youth violence. Over a 3-year period, they interviewed more than 50 gang members, incarcerated youth, innocent students, police, parents, teachers and psychologists. These interviews were used as the basis for the film *Youth Violence: Inside the Skin* which you will see today.

Their process involved studying the interviews for common themes and threads. They isolated 3 major: 1.) violence begets violence, 2.) boredom and addiction, and 3.) followers and leaders.

Mack and her students used these interviews to write a feature-length screenplay made up of composite characters and storylines from the true stories. They envisioned that a dramatic film would help young people experience being inside the skin of characters much like themselves. In September of 2005 eighty actors volunteered to help bring these stories to life. Many of the actors had never before acted on stage or screen. By the time this film was completed over 200 people from the Birmingham area had participated in some way in the project.

2. Show the 3 sample interviews in "Special Features" on the DVD before showing the film.

To viewers: Prepare to watch the film by making the assumption that the best way you can help a child is imagining you are in his/her position. See yourself as the child and focus on your relationship with your own parents and teachers. Your understanding of these kids depends upon your own personal experience. Many times behavior patterns, especially parenting styles, are passed down from generation to generation -- so look for children and parents that you know, your own children, yourself, and your parents in this film.

3. Watch the film "Youth Violence: Inside the Skin" (93 minutes)

4. Instruct the group to take a 10 minute break.

5. After the break, instruct participants to sit in small discussion groups of 3 or 4, the smaller the better.

6. Read or paraphrase the following questions and commentary. When there are a series of questions written together, present them all so they can be discussed at one time. Allow participants to discuss each issue until about 2/3 of them appear to be finished with the topic. It's best to keep things rolling along rather than letting them come to a stop.

• **Did you see any child that you know in this film? Yourself? Your own parents or teachers? Other people that you know?** *(pause for discussion)*

• **This refers to the scene where Kisha and James were in bed listening to the drunk boyfriend refusing to leave the apartment:**

One of the interviews for the film was a 13 year old boy who was incarcerated for rape. When asked what his childhood was like, he responded that he remembered being really angry when he lay in bed and heard his mom and her boyfriend fighting in the next room. He described how helpless he felt. Children feel helpless and angry when those who are supposed to be in control (the adults) are not in control. Some of these children grow up with major control issues and act out their anger in forceful ways later in life. This type of child feels a strong need to exert control with aggression and sometimes with weapons to give himself/herself more power. The persons he/she is angry toward have long since gone, but the anger lives on. It builds up as a pressure that must be released or can be triggered instantly by a word or action that associates to the childhood experience. How can a child learn to manage this type of anger? What can you do to help? *(pause for discussion)*

After discussion: Without a great deal of intervention, the child must wait until he/she becomes old enough to see that parents aren't perfect -- and he/she learns to forgive them. This can be very hard psychological work and usually requires the maturity of an adult mind. It is important that the parents and teachers watching this film ask themselves if they have forgiven their own parents for their aggressive actions -- for being imperfect -- which is the natural expectation of every child. If our personal work has been done, we have a much better chance of understanding and helping at-risk kids.

• **James' mother's friend, Sadie:** Note the value of having a supportive person or group. It's very important to have someone with a clear head and perspective when you are immersed in difficult experiences with a child or other family members. How can you get involved in a supportive way in abusive situations without overstepping your bounds as teachers? What exactly ARE your boundaries? *(pause for discussion)*

• **When Kisha walked out to meet Akievo and the gang, we were watching a violent scene on the television. Kisha "walked through" the picture of the hand with a blood drop on each finger. This symbolizes a question: Did Kisha have the blood of Sean on her hands?** Some parents have pointed out that Kisha and James had the same mom (who was a good mom, she was just overworked and had poor judgment with men). Kisha told the boys not to get involved in the gang, but did so herself. Is this a contradiction? Not according to our interviews. Kisha, a teenage girl, had more desire than James to follow the "cool" crowd; she wanted the attention of an older male. She didn't understand that her involvement opened the door for other kids to follow. She didn't see that what she did affected others, regardless of her intentions. She forged the path to the gang and there was nothing she could do to stop others from using it. Do you know any Kisha's? Is there anything you can say or do as teachers to help kids understand that everything they do affects someone else? (*pause for discussion*)

• **The model for the character of James** was a student from UAB named Carlos. Carlos was on the script-writing team for this film. Carlos said that if it hadn't been for his mom, he would have ended up in jail or dead like all of his friends from high school. His mom kept him close, kept him busy with sports, and told him he could "amount to something some day".

Kids are biologically wired to seek their group -- their family, their buddies. They're like puppies and are group animals. Later they are able to see themselves as separate and think for themselves, but until they are past puberty and actually begin to develop as independent, thinking adults (this is usually mid-to-late teens), it is almost impossible to teach them to think for themselves. Therefore, if parents do not provide the strong, emotional link that they seek, they will look for it elsewhere. How does this translate into joining gangs? Do you know kids who are in danger of following the wrong leaders? (*pause for discussion*)

After discussion: For their own protection, we keep trying to teach them how to stand on their own feet -- but this will never work because of their biological development. We try to teach them how to analyze a situation or a person to be sure that the person has the child's best interest in mind and is not just using the child for gang dirty work or to support the power needs of an ego-centric personality - - such as a gang leader. We all know that kids are used by gangs -- and the kids think those in the gang really care. (This doesn't have to be a formal "gang" but a group of friends who hang together.) So we would like to teach the child to ask "does this person have my best interest in mind? Does he/she really care about what happens to me?" Most kids (and adults, for that matter) who are in need of personal support cannot see the person objectively enough to answer this question truthfully. All of our perceptions are colored by what we need and want in life. The filmmakers heard incarcerated teens say repeatedly, "I was hanging with the wrong crowd." We tell our children everyday, "Don't get involved with those people."

They're a bad influence." Parents or a positive adult figure must provide "the group" or the child will seek a supportive environment elsewhere. Don't blame the child for this; it is his/her nature as a developing human being. Parents must ask themselves some very hard questions if their kids get involved with "the wrong crowd".

- **Discuss why you think the "wrong crowd" is more alluring than the "right crowd."** (*pause for discussion*)

After discussion: "The right crowd" is less glamorous and, on the surface, appears to be less powerful. A child who doesn't have a strong home connection is deeply angry because he/she has not been given something vital. As Dr. Moyana said in the first interview, "There are 2 basic human needs, love and shelter." If these are not given, the child is severely handicapped. This handicap causes the child to seek power, to utilize force, to make things right inside -- so he/she seeks a forceful alliance on the outside to try to correct this problem. The wrong crowd uses force to get what they want. The child looks for the group that can give him/her a sense of control to require love, to punish parents (or someone else) because of the very deep anger the child has toward the injustices in his/her life.

- **Michael:** This is the story of what happens when a good kid gets pushed to the breaking point. Michael's parents were good parents, they were just busy and preoccupied with their own things -- which were very important to the family. We're all busy, we're all preoccupied with our own problems, but we must learn how to stop long enough to see the danger signals in our children. The courts are full of Michaels. Do you know any Michael's? (*pause for discussion*)

- **The killing of Anne:** In the end, Anne's temper cost her her life. How did she develop such a bad temper? Her mom pulled away from her, lost in her own depression, during the divorce. Anne needed her mom -- especially since her dad was gone -- but there was nothing she could do about it. She was deeply angry at her mom and she learned to hate situations where she had no control over outcomes. She learned to explode to try to get attention from her mom or make things go her way. Discuss children and parents that you know who may be dealing with parental depression and/or a neglected child. (*pause for discussion*)

- **Why did Mark kill Anne? Who was the follower and who was the leader?** (*pause for discussion*)

After discussion: Mark was the "follower" in the relationship with Brad, yet he took it upon himself to do a violent act against another human being. Remember when Mark said "I can't believe we just got away with that," and Brad replied "What's this "me" shit?" Right after that you see the boys in the car and hear Brad tell Mark, in so many words, that he's a coward. That's how leaders manipulate followers. Because of the nature of the relationship, followers are capable of doing terrible things even when the leaders don't set them up. When a young person needs to be loved, to show strength, to run in the fast lane with the big boys, these things happen -- and they are happening every day.

7. Instruct participants to come back together into one large group.

Closing thoughts:

To bring this down to the essentials, the most important ingredient -- and the hardest thing to give -- is love. This is not a touchy-feely, Pollyanna antidote. Psychology texts will tell you that love is a basic human requirement. When it is not there in early childhood, the child develops a very deep sense that something is wrong and feels that somehow this must be righted. This translates into an anger that never goes away UNLESS another adult becomes the surrogate parent OR as an adult, the child learns self-love and is able to see and forgive the parents inability to give the love that the child needed. This is true for your children and it's true for you.

If a caring adult does not enter the picture, the child will not have the opportunity to do the requisite psychological work until the child matures to the point of seeing him/herself as a separate entity, responsible for his/her actions. Until a person can step out of self and see him/herself in an objective way, a person is not able to "work on" him/herself. Also, self-discipline, which generally comes with maturity, is a necessary tool for re-programming childhood traumas.

When a child acts out, we must ask ourselves when is the last time an adult confided in that child that he/she was afraid or confused. Showing your vulnerability to a child will invite the child to share his/her own fears. It's a 2-way street. Remember teachers and parents don't have to be perfect. Most parental abuse takes place when an adult is angry about his/her own vulnerability. If adults could learn to talk about their fears and what they perceive as their failures, there would be far less child abuse.

- All of this information is no good to you if it is not practical. Can you think of one thing that you learned or realized today that you can use? Share it with the group. *(leader calls on 2 or 3 participants)*
- Can you give summary statements about what we've done here today and what you've learned? Just a few sentences... *(Call on several people to share summary sentences).*

Until we can see through the eyes of these children, we will not be able to make the connection that could possibly save a child. Seeing from their perspectives is the in-road to learning to care for them, and caring deeply for each child is the most important thing.