

## School violence: An oxymoron

María S. Ciruzzi<sup>1</sup> 

*“We live in an age so possessed by demons that soon we will only be able to practice kindness and justice in the deepest secrecy.”*

**Franz Kafka**

My childhood wasn't idyllic. Dangers were lurking just around the corner: the boogeyman with the bag, who kidnapped children<sup>a</sup> who misbehaved, disobeyed their parents, or didn't do their homework; the bullies and tough guys, who challenged us at school or picked on us in the parks. There were “manteadas” and “hit here” signs pinned to our backs. There was also abuse from some adults: “donkey ears,” derogatory and belittling phrases like “tell me what you're laughing at so we can all laugh,” and “you're a well of ignorance” are part of my private collection of grumbles.

But we also had a family-like, social, and educational environment that supported us. The teacher was like a mother to us in the classroom, someone we had to obey and respect. We could count on the police officer on the corner for any dangerous situation we might encounter on the street—especially on the buses, when, as preteens, we began to realize that girls could be the targets of sexual harassment by an adult. We received quick, basic training on how to protect ourselves from the dreaded experience of men

rubbing up against us on crowded buses<sup>b</sup> when harassment and abuse were not yet significant terms in the social lexicon.

There are three sacred spaces for our children: home, school, and hospitals. By their very nature, these are safe places where violence should have no place.

School is a place of education in both the formal and practical senses. In addition to the curriculum, students learn how to get along with others, follow rules, show respect, and cope with their own frustrations.

However, violence in schools is also a reality. Physical altercations and bullying, incidents involving firearms or knives, defiance of authority... schools are nothing more than a painful reflection of the loss of values in our community.

Easy access to weapons, the feeling of being “betrayed” and “trapped,” the absence of positive role models (family, social, institutional), social inequalities, and a widespread climate of tension and intolerance create a fertile breeding ground where the multifaceted causes of violence can easily take root.<sup>c</sup>

Our task is monumental: to counter a culture of conflict with violence, in a micro/macro world that is *inherently* violent, one that views violence as *cool*. This necessarily calls for a new social

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contract that allows us to (re)establish lost values—respect, humility, the courage to reject violence, and responsibility—within a framework of peaceful conflict and frustration management.

We can start with the basics: 1) there is no right to bear arms: when we choose to live in society, the exercise of punitive and defensive power falls to the state; only in exceptional cases may individuals exercise it on their own; 2) ensure that laws and policies on firearms exist and are effectively enforced; 3) prevent violence before it occurs by identifying at-risk children; 4) promote mediation and community action;<sup>d</sup> 5) offer comprehensive social and educational programs for vulnerable children and families; 6) reduce the economic incentives for joining gangs; 7) ensure that children affected by violence have access to appropriate support, including mental health and addiction services; and 8) promote child-friendly justice and help young offenders rebuild their lives through restorative justice.<sup>e</sup>

Our challenge is enormous. We must shield our children from the risks and harms of a violent world without clipping their wings, without getting in the way of the natural process of growing and maturing as they face life's hardships. We are the mirror in which children see themselves. We are the voice that seeks out contradictions. We are the embodiment of diverse and conflicting intentions.

Our children are watching us. They expect us to protect them, to ward off all the evils of the world, and to keep them from being harmed. To do this, we must reclaim the power of dialogue, understand what they are going through, identify their internal and external demons, weigh our options, balance the pros and cons, and be fully present. Bioethics shows us this path: consensus and dialogue, deliberation, and weighing the consequences in every situation. Respect for the other in their uniqueness—a being in constant evolution and potential, unique and irreplaceable even in their own vulnerability. Respecting their dignity demands an adult responsibility that cannot be delegated: accompanying and strengthening them without nullifying or replacing them, amplifying their voices to protect them, and teaching them that freedom and responsibility are mutually dependent.

In a world marked by violence, where it seems we have lost our capacity for wonder in the face of lawlessness and aggression, children challenge us forcefully: let us not relinquish our role as adults. For it is our duty to create a framework

that channels human behavior within a sphere of personal respect—for that is what it means to live in society.

In an era of crisis in social and individual morality, appealing to bioethics amounts to nothing more—and nothing less—than an act of adolescent rebellion: drawing on moral values to strengthen individual rights to restore a sense of humanity to personal relationships.

## NOTES

<sup>a</sup> Throughout this manuscript, the term “child” is used in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Art. 1: “every human being under the age of 18.”

<sup>b</sup> The grandmother's famous brooch was a cherished heirloom passed down from generation to generation among the women of the family. It had many uses (a multifunctional tool): it held a hat with the same elegance as a scarf and kept the perpetrator at bay just as effectively when he tried to get close to our little one.

<sup>c</sup> Armed violence is a complex challenge that disproportionately affects children in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). The region has the highest child homicide rate in the world—four times the global average—and homicide is the leading cause of death among adolescents: 8 of the 10 countries with the highest homicide rates in the world are located in LAC. (<https://www.unicef.org/lac/violencia-armada-impacto-ninez-adolescencia>)

In the United States, in 2024, 68% of all homicide deaths among children involved a firearm, and 45% of all suicide deaths involved a firearm. Firearm-related death rates were highest among adolescents (ages 12-17), Black and American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) youth, and young men. (<https://www.kff.org/mental-health/child-and-adolescent-firearm-deaths-national-trends-and-variation-by-demographics-and-states/>)

In Argentina, we lack statistics that consider the impact of gun violence beyond the cases that reach the criminal justice system. But the widely known facts reveal a truly alarming situation.

<sup>d</sup> So-called “compassionate cities”, a concept coined by the palliative care community. *“A compassionate city is an uncomfortable city! A city that is uncomfortable when anyone is homeless or hungry. Uncomfortable if every child isn't loved and given rich opportunities to grow and thrive. Uncomfortable when as a community we don't treat our neighbors as we would wish to*

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*be treated,”* said Karen Armstrong, founder of the global Compassion Charter movement.

<sup>e</sup> See, in this regard: <https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/reports/violence-against-children-adolescents-latin-america-caribbean-new-data-solutions>