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School violence solutions proposed

Experts suggest ways to prevent possible crimes and danger in schools

By Felicity Ayles
Oregon Daily Emerald

Violent images in the media, child neglect and abuse and an anger-centered society all could be to blame for the rash of school shootings around the country.

Hill Walker, co-director and founder of the University Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior, proposed these causes and possible solutions to them when he addressed the media Wednesday about Tuesday's shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo.

Walker founded the institute in April 1995 and since then has dedicated his work to studying the increase of youth violence all over the country, University spokeswoman Pauline Austin said.

"The issue is to find causes of youth violence and find ways to prevent it," Austin said.

Walker has researched this issue for a number of years and feels more can be done to face the problem, she said.

The institute is funded by federal grants and works through the College of Education at the University. The IVDB was founded because of an increase in drive-by shootings but now encompasses shootings in schools.

"The College of Education is taking a look at the increase in violence," Austin said.

Walker is continuing that research by looking at the possible causes of violence in schools.

School buildings, student population and neighborhoods are possible factors in violence in schools, Walker said. The way a building is designed, used, supervised and administered can always be made safer, he said.

Also, the nature of the neighborhood can factor into crime rates. A high-crime area might equal an unsafe school, Walker said.

The population of students that make up the school is also a potential problem.

"Littleton resulted by a failure at the school level, as far as the supervision of space," Walker said.

But he stressed that Columbine High School was not to blame for the tragedy.

Most schools were designed in the 1950s and '60s and were not set up for this type of problem, Walker said.

Walker said he once visited a Eugene middle school with 65 separate entrances and exits. He said although administrators cannot be at every door and window, schools can be made safer.

"Every school has access to information that can make it safer and prevent these things from happening," he said.

Securing a school can mean supervising all entrances and exits, screening students on a regular basis, not allowing strangers on school property and implementing security in middle and high schools, Walker said.

But, he added, "These shootings demonstrate if you plan it carefully, schools are highly volatile settings for this type of thing happening."

In the Colorado shooting, Walker said the sheer massacre-type attack showed the killers' strong belief system.

"The number of victims in this related to how carefully they planned it and how committed they were," he said. "They were willing to give up their lives."

Walker said many school-aged children feel the same way the two gunmen in Colorado did, but the good news is that the majority don't act on it.

"We can't pick out these youths from a larger group and determine who will and will not commit these violent acts," he said.

Short of adding metal detectors and airport-style security to every school in the nation, Walker said he believes the best solution lies in prevention.

Ongoing projects to promote early intervention begin at the kindergarten level with IVDB's First Steps program. The program is designed to help keep antisocial children from turning to violence.

The Effective Behavioral Support program takes a school-wide approach to addressing student behavior, and the Peaceable Educational Practices Project offers elementary and middle school children alternatives to violence.In addition to early intervention programs, Walker identified five parenting practices that could be helpful for families with at-risk youth.

The first, most important two are fair, consistent discipline and careful monitoring of children's activities. The final three are: parent involvement in a child's life, using positive family management and a daily debriefing of the school day's activities.

Positive family management includes support, encouragement and persuasion for children, Walker said. Parents should show their children the logic they use and try to get them to understand.

A daily debriefing consists simply of a parent and child talking together about their day and discussing what was good and bad, Walker said. Parents should start all of these techniques with their children at an early age, he said.

"These five strategies would have a big impact on a lot of this," he said.

Walker cited Thurston shooting suspect Kip Kinkel and the Littleton suspects as examples of children who were not supervised enough.

Felicity Ayles can be reached via e-mail at fizzer@gladstone.uoregon.edu.

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