

WHAT DO KIDS NEED?

3/2008

As I sat reading the paper and thinking about what to write for this issue my eyes caught hold of the story regarding the recent drive-by shooting here in Medford. Yes, I can do two things at the same time. I believe the terminology is MOM. Well, that just about did it for me. I've known about local gang activity for quite some time. But this is Medford for pity sake. Not LA or Chicago or some other place in the world that is synonymous with this kind of violence. A great, great sense of loss and sadness came over me.

What drives kids towards this kind of behavior? I am not an expert on juvenile crime but this much I know, kids join gangs because they need to belong somewhere. All of us have this basic need---to belong. Studies point to this over and over again. Not when we're two, or ten, but at the moment of birth. And it's about a twenty-year process.

When we are born, typically it is into a loving family that has been anticipating our arrival. Think for a moment how it feels knowing that someone, somewhere, be it a close friend or relative, has been eagerly anticipating your arrival. A sense of belonging connects us to others. We know who we are and whose we are. We become confident, hopeful, and full of dreams. We can see possibilities. We can see our own potential and the potential in others as well. Kids who are well grounded are able to develop meaningful and fulfilling friendships, find mentors to emulate, and gain knowledge and wisdom from life's challenges and experiences.

We cannot **teach** self-esteem. Sorry. I don't care how many times you say 'good job' per day or how many stickers you hand out. These outward reinforcements have been challenged and do not build a strong self-concept. Self-esteem is built from the inside, out. Not the other way around. Self-esteem is built based on our own perceptions of how the environment treats us. Stickers and empty phrases may control behaviors but do little to develop a sense of who we are over the long term. When we are young those that are closest to us act as social mirrors, we watch how they interact with the environment and with those around them. In turn, we express our self-concept in the way we interact with others and our surroundings. A child's first attachment to loving and significant people is vital and cannot be stressed enough. That is the true basis of self-esteem, knowing who is there, not to rescue us, but be close by as we experience all of life's emotions, inspiring us and modeling for us, being our trusted companions. As parents this is a lifetime calling. For a community it is our responsibility to provide continuing moral guidance and leadership for children through all of their various stages. Our conscience does not simply land on us when we are born. We learn it through experience, interactions, and human connections.

Too many kids are fending for themselves without the advantage of a moral compass. I'm not certain if the word 'moral' is socially acceptable these days or not. Oh well, too bad. We need to stop apologizing and making excuses because someone may get their feelings hurt. Our communities are littered with too many children who are morally impoverished because of delinquent parents, fractured family units, and an entertainment industry that could care less about moral codes and how these messages get handed down to our next generation who, by the way, is our investment to the future social health and well-being of our nation. Instead of connecting to real people who overcome real life tribulations,

our children are connecting to heroes and role models that live in 6-minute segments with 4-5 commercials in between.

Too many kids go home to an empty house without any kind of check-in system in place. They do not know when their people will arrive or what to expect when they do. There are no expectations of them or accountability for how they spend their time. They don't know when or if a meal will be prepared or are left to figure it out on their own. Some studies have expressed that many kids don't even have a place to sit at the dinner table if there is a dinner table or dining 'place' at all. Isn't that just a simple and basic thing? Too know where your place is at the family table? Poverty, single parents, grandparents raising grandchildren, etc. all factor in but are we using these as excuses in order to justify our own inability to face the fact that we are failing our children. I struggle with the entire notion of 'it takes a village', etc. Children need to connect to a family *first* before they can ever connect to the outer world. Families are the basic unit and back bone to any community. First things first. There are many pieces to the puzzle. The village is a part but not the whole not to mention that there are aspects of the village that families must constantly be alert too. Again---kids need to know where they belong. Robert Coles, in his book titled, "The Moral Intelligence of Children" asks,

"Where are the grown-ups in our life upon whom we can really rely, whom we can trust, whose values are believable, desirable, because they have been given us out of the shared experience, moment to moment, of a life together? Where is a moral companionship that has been experienced-a daily context for the expressed shoulds and should-nots, the injunctions that have been pressed on us? "

Why, for some kids, is staying out of trouble a full time job? I guess it's pretty hard to see your own potential when you are uncertain about your own existence. It is reasonable for all of us to be alarmed if not angry. We are all victims of someone else's poor decisions. Parents, even our youth, relatives, community citizens, our nation and law enforcement--all should worry and for good reason. Until we make it better it isn't going to get any better. We all bungle it occasionally along the way. Mistakes and learning about restitution are a part of growing up. Some lessons are learned by what I call 'the 2X4 method'. I have had a few of those lessons myself.

So, back to the shooting. I am trying to be understanding, but my stomach just churns at the thought that kids see nothing valuable in their lives or in the lives of others. In fact, I'm really ticked that it happened at all. The first question that went through my mind was, "Where in the heck were these kids parents'?! "What were they doing out at that hour on a school night? "And where on earth did they get the gun?!" Call me old fashioned if you will.

I have a dear colleague and mentor. Her name is Bev Bos. She is the Director of a preschool program in Roseville, California. Many years ago she said, "Kids need our *presence*, not our *presents*."

Well said Bev, well said.