

Psychology of Mass Killers: What is Causing Kids to Kill

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Psychology of Mass Killers: What is Causing Kids to Kill?

Mass killings have been occurring for years, the first one on record being on July 26th 1764, The Enoch Brown Massacre.

This incident occurred during the Pontiac war and involved Indians coming into the settler's school house and killing and scalping 10 children and Enoch Brown, the school master.

(Unknown, n.d.) Over the years they have progressed and have become more frequent. Since 1996 we have had a lot more of them occurring at our schools. The news stations cover the events as they unfold, thousands of people's eyes are glued to the screen as they talk about the victims and police response immediately trying to figure out what the police could have done better and what they did wrong. As soon as information is released about the suspect they talk about them and for the next several days if not weeks their name is plastered all over news media outlets and in a way glorifying their actions.

They discuss possible reasons why the incident occurred, but the truth may or may not be discovered. People have a habit of blaming the guns used by these murderers, but what about the psychological mindset someone has to have to do something this horrific? What is the underlying issue that we are facing that causes someone to want to do something like that? What causes someone to be able to shoot into a crowd of people and not feel guilty about taking innocent lives? I feel that this is caused

an underlying mental condition coupled with the fact that our children are being desensitized by the media they are allowed to engross themselves in.

As law enforcement officers, it is our job to deal with these incidents and the aftermath of them and to do what we can to try to prevent them from occurring. In my fourteen years of law enforcement experience we have changed our tactics several times trying to prepare ourselves for a faster response to end the threat and lessen the casualties. What could we do to stop it? Prevention of these horrible incidents starts at home. In the next few pages I will cover the effects of music, television and movies, and video games on the mind.

Garbage in is Garbage Out

When I was young I had parents who really monitored what I did, what I listened to, and who I hung out with. My mom always used to tell me "Garbage in is garbage out". I would ignore her and continued with what I was doing. My music choices were not the best. I had and still have a very eclectic taste in music. I listen to things ranging from 1950's oldies to 90's gangster rap up to current trending music. Some of the music can take your mind off of what is going on and help relax you, some songs can get you excited, and some can make you feel more aggressive. Whether the music labels want to say they do or not, artists have songs that can shape a young mind and attitude. In 2002

Ronald Pituch killed his mother and an 11 year old boy. After he was caught it was discovered he was manic depressive and a paranoid schizophrenic. Ronald claimed that the song "Ronnie" by Metallica was written about his life and that the devil lived inside him. In 1994 a 17 year old killed a police officer and claimed that he was inspired by a Tupac Shakur song about killing a cop. Charles Manson even claimed that songs that the Beatles wrote gave him secret messages about a possible race war. This led to him ordering his followers to kill people.

As I was growing into a young man, I never realized how it really affected me at the time, but looking back I can see that when I listened to certain artists I became more susceptible to anger and my attitude reflected it. In a brief on apa.org, A. Palmer reported on a study that was published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. This study took more than 500 students and had them listen to violent song lyrics from different artists and also had them listen to non-violent songs. After the students listened to the songs, they performed various word-association task to test whether they linked more non-aggressive words with aggressive words or filled incomplete words with vowels to make aggressive words. They also reported on their feelings of hostility on the State Hostility Scale by ranking sentences on their emotions after hearing the songs.

The study indicated a relationship between violent song lyrics and increased aggressive thoughts and feelings of hostility.

(Palmer, 2003)

I know from my own experience that music has an effect on your mind. When I want to get pumped up before a hot call or a search warrant I listen to certain types of music to get me ready to go. I have found that it takes my mind off of the "what if" type scenarios and just lets me clear my mind and focus on what I need to do. If I just want to relax, I can usually turn on something like Nirvana Unplugged or some 70's rock and I can just sit there and listen.

People listen to music all the time, but do they really pay attention to what they are listening to and do the lyrics subconsciously stay in their minds? I have had song lyrics stuck in my head for hours after I heard the song even though I wasn't paying much attention to it at the time.

Television and Movies

Our Children start watching television at a young age. With the vast improvements of technology my children are able to travel while watching some of their favorite shows. Cars are now being built with a built in WIFI system so you can stream movies and shows on the go. It is easy as a parent to just allow your children to watch their iPad or T.V. while you do the things you need to get done. There are many days people come

home from an 8 hour day and they still have work that needs to get done, a house that needs picked up, or a dinner that needs to be made and it is easier for them to just allow their children to stay glued to the T.V. or iPad while they get things done.

The iPad and T.V. are easy "babysitters" for busy parents. You may think that your child is safe watching a T.V. show, but how many shows are depicting some sort of violence? Take a look at Family Guy. This is an extremely popular animated television show. Even though this show is usually rated a TV-14, it has a "Moderate" rating for violence and gore on IMDB. It goes on to say "Violence includes decapitations, torture, mass murder, excessive gore, explosions, hate crimes, and dismemberment". (imdb.com, 1998-2018) I don't think anything about this show is even okay for a 14 year old.

The other day I was sitting with my son, who is 4, watching videos on his iPad. Most of these videos were about his latest fascination with "mysterious sea creatures". While scrolling through various cartoons that pop up there were some videos that I would have to turn off because of things I don't want him to be subjected to at the age of four and this is on the YouTube Kids app. This app is supposed to be safe for kids, it's marketed for them and still contains videos with things they don't need to see or hear. Part of raising a child is monitoring

what they are taking in because it shapes their minds and develops their social skills. They pick up the dialogue, behaviors, and attitudes and they become absorbed into their minds.

In the book *Stop Teaching Our Kids To Kill* they talk about a study done by a Canadian researcher, Brad Bushman. They talk about a seven year old child that watched *Nightmare on Elm Street* every night when he went to bed. The researcher interviewed the child and asked him about the movies and if he was scared. The child tells them that he was at first, but then he started pretending to be Freddy Krueger and he is never scared. He goes on to say "By pretending to be Freddy Krueger, he arrives at a suitable solution for himself, although it may sadden, and even frighten us. Obviously, how children's brains decide to interpret what they see on the screen may not be the best or most accurate choice. Within their budding cognitive framework, they will interpret what they see in ways that make sense to them but may astound the adults around them. If we don't ask kids how they are interpreting media images we will never know how they filter them through limited lenses. And we sure won't be able to intervene appropriately, in case they are identifying strongly with the violent character, as this boy did with Freddy Krueger. The attitudes and behaviors- the scripts that make up Freddy's repertoire-become an integral part of the

young boy's script about himself. And, because the outcome of being Freddy is positive- he survives while others don't.

Freddy's violent antisocial behavior gets firmly embedded into the boy's script about himself." (DeGaetano, 2014)

This is a perfect example how a child can take what they are seeing and turn it into what they are. They adapt to be what they may fear. These forms of media are impacting our children's self-identity and parents are allowing it to happen.

On page 113 in the book *Stop Teaching Our Kids To Kill* there is a chart that covers how media violence can impact identity that was created by Gloria DeGaetano.

Ages 3-5	Ages 6-10	Ages 11-14	Ages 15-18
Imitates cartoon violence	Sees violence as acceptable way to solve problems	Follows peers to inflict emotional or physical aggression	Identifies self as violent
Wants to be like violent characters	Sees violent characters as heroic	Thinks violence is "cool"	Thinks being violent is "normal"
Difficult to teach cooperative behavior	Sees self as a "problem" possibly as a "misfit"	Thinks and acts with harmful intent	Normalizes own violent behavior
Violent characters imbedded in imagination	Difficulty coming up with cooperative ways to get along with others	Surrounds self with like-minded peers	Justifies own violent behavior

Clearly as a child grows while taking in violent media they grow into thinking that violence is normal behavior. Young children grow up imitating what they see. A study was done in the 1960s where researchers showed young children a video of an adult playing with an inflatable doll. It was called the Bobo doll experiment. During the video the adult sat on the doll, punched it the nose, kicked it, and hit it in the head with a mallet. After the children watched the video they were taken into a room with that doll and other toys. Those children imitated what they saw on the video and even played more aggressively with other toys in the room. There was a second group of children involved that were subjected to a non-aggressive video where the model played in a quiet and subdued manner and a third group of children that was used as a control group that was not exposed to a model at all. All of the children were subjected to "mild aggression arousal". "The conclusion from this study support Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory. That children learn social behavior such as aggression through the process of observation learning- watching another person." (McLeod, Updated 2014)

Video Games

Just recently the Washington Post posted a news article about a 9 year old boy who murdered his sister because she wouldn't give him the video game controller. (Wang, 2018) It is

asinine to believe that the boy did this as an accident. It could possibly be some sort of mental problem, but I could almost guess that this act of violence has to stem from what he is seeing with his own eyes, and what he is learning from these types of games. Where else would a 9 year old learn how to do something like this? Surely his parent(s) are not teaching him how to kill someone at that age.

Gaming has become a huge hit since the late 80s and early 90s, but the amount of violence has severely increased. We have gone from a Mario Bros. generation, where the object of the game was to save the princess to a generation of children who are seeing gruesome violent murders take place on the screens of their media devices and television screens over and over again. Now instead of jumping over or on the koopas and goombas and fighting Bowser to save Princess Peach, they are getting extra points for head shots and the amount of kills they get. They are also stealing cars, having sex with a prostitute and then beating her or killing her to get their money back. What is this teaching our children and how is it going to affect our society later on down the road.

In 2015 a report was written by the American Psychology Association based on thorough reviews of recent studies on violent video games and it states "The research demonstrates a consistent relation between violent video game use and

heightened aggressive behavior, aggressive cognitions, and aggressive affect and reduced prosocial behavior, empathy and sensitivity to aggression." (American Psychology Association, 2015) According to the research that has been done, more than 90% of U.S. children play some kind of video games. In children ages 12-17 the percentage rises up to 97%. More than 85% of video games on the market has some sort of violence in them. Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, a huge proponent of this theory, talks about the Columbine massacre and explains that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were avid players of the video game Doom. (DeGaetano, 2014)

Klebold and Harris weren't the only mass shooters that have ties to violent video games. In an article on Charisma News it talks about 14 mass murders that were linked to violent video games. (Fletcher, 2015) Michael Carneal, a 14 year old boy, stole a .22 pistol from a neighbor, took a few practice shots, and took it to school. He approached a group of kids who were praying during see you at the pole, a well known prayer time for students around their flag pole, and fired eight shots. He hit eight different children with those eight shots. Five of those shots were in the head, and three were in the upper torso. Lt. Col. Dave Grossman has talked about this massacre several times in his book. In one article he says "FBI data shows that trained law enforcement officers average around 20% hits in real

world situations at an average distance of 21 feet. In the 1998 Amadu Dialo shooting, four NYPD officers fired 41 shots at an unarmed African immigrant, at point blank range and hit him 19 times. This is about the level of accuracy you will find from trained marksmen in real world situations. In Los Angeles, in 1999, a neo-Nazi walked into a Jewish daycare center and fired over 70 shots, wounding five helpless children. This is the norm from untrained shooters." (Grossman, 1998)

Working in law enforcement, I know for a fact that there aren't many officers that are this accurate during training. Introduce a high stress situation and adrenaline and their shooting becomes even worse. Police departments around the nation along with police academies and even the military are even using video game type simulation to train. Look at the FATS system, it is a large scale video game we use to train our officers to do their job. You can use the officers response in a situation to escalate or deescalate a situation. It uses a simulated version of our gun, taser, and OC spray to use in training scenarios.

In the book *Assassination Generation* Lt. Col. Dave Grossman explains about conditioned responses. Google defines conditioned response as an automatic response established by training to an ordinarily neutral stimulus. In chapter 3 *The Human Brain on Violence*, he talks about WWII and how only 15 to

20 percent of riflemen fired their weapons in close combat. There is a hesitation in the human brain that we naturally have that prevents us from wanting to kill another human being. He goes on to say that since 1950 we have been using "operant conditioning" to train our soldiers. This same thing is what takes place with our police officers.

The military used to shoot at bull's eye targets, but now they use man shaped targets. These targets act as a "conditioned stimulus". "They pop up in front of you (a conditioned stimulus), you shoot the target (a conditioned response), and if you hit the target (target behavior), it drops down (positive reinforcement). If you hit a certain number of targets, you are rewarded (token economy)." (Grossman, Assassination Generation Videogames, Aggression, and the Psychology of Killing, 2016)

This is classical conditioning. Ivan Pavlov discovered this with his studies between 1890 and 1930. The first person shooter video games provide a "conditioned stimulus" and you get a "conditioned response" from the player. A target pops up giving you "target behavior" and then when you kill the target you get "positive reinforcement" because the target dies on the game. The more kills you get the more points you get, so you end up with a "token economy". This is no different than what the military has been doing for years to train our soldiers to

kill. This type of training conditions you to be able to kill without thinking about it; it becomes a natural response.

What Can We Do?

There have been a plethora of studies done to see what the psychological effects on children from media sources, and their main focus has been on visual media. Some of these studies have shown that there is an effect, while others disprove this theory. Which is correct?

Take a look at the way media has shifted to more violence and gore over the years and you will see a similar change in the amount violence our children are displaying. We have gone from a Sesame Street, Mr. Rogers's generation to a generation who are allowed to watch things like Five Nights at Freddy's, Family Guy, and other violent shows.

I, like many others play video games, and enjoy watching T.V. shows and movies that grab your attention. However, these games, T.V. shows, and movies usually all contain violence of some sort. Whether it is fighting zombies to stay alive, involves war, or even down to a crime drama. Our main source of entertainment is riddled with violence. None of this has turned me into a killer, but I do feel that it has desensitized me and if it is doing that to me what is it doing to our children?

The desensitization of our youth coupled with mental instability may be why we are seeing so much more violence in

our children. Not every child will turn out to be violent because of media violence, but the research is there that supports that it has an effect on their minds. Parents need to pay more attention to their children, invest more time in them, and stop allowing them to watch unfiltered garbage, because after all garbage in is garbage out.

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