

THEY'RE NOT WELL LIKED
Rebecca Coffey
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Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold have become household names. They are the students in Littleton, Colorado, who killed twelve fellow students, one teacher, and themselves on Tuesday.

They share a sad sort of trait with two students who became household names *last* year: Michael Carneal, who has confessed to the school murder in Paducah, Kentucky, and Luke Woodham, who awaits trial for the school murder in Pearl, Mississippi.

The shared trait: They don't function well in groups. As Willy Loman might say, "They're not well liked." Luke Woodham was described by schoolmates as a "pudgy loner." Michael Carneal was teased at school for years. Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were social bottom dwellers and were reminded daily of their bottom-dwelling status. One of the students who survived Tuesday's massacre told the Associated Press, "People would yell comments at Dylan and Eric, like 'weirdo' or 'outcast.'"

We all know that teasing is no excuse for murder. But it may be an explanation—especially if we consider that childhood is a time to learn how to function as part of those social groups called families and friends. When we adults can't function well in groups it can be painful, but most of us find solace in non-homicidal ways—with other friends, other family members, or in intellectual, athletic, and artistic pursuits that help us make sense of what we've been through.

When children can't succeed socially it hurts, too. But for children it hurts "way bad," as they say. Children rarely have the wherewithal to find solo intellectual, athletic,

and artistic pursuits that can bring them comfort. For kids, art and athletics usually happen in groups—like Girl Scouts, the football team, and the marching band. When the group is hostile and the band doesn't like you, band is not a comforting place to “hang.”

I'm going to draw a comparison here between children who are perpetually teased and Vietnam veterans and rape survivors. Certainly, on the hierarchy of traumatic experiences, being teased does not rank on par with war trauma or rape. But there may be something that we can learn from therapists working with veterans and rape survivors that we might put to the service of children who are teased.

Most therapists who work with Vietnam veterans and rape survivors say that the experience of helplessness is the essence of psychological trauma. Your buddy is blown to bits before your eyes and your own foot is stuck in the mud. The guy with the knife is also bringing a brick down on your face and the train going by drowns your screams. The kids steal your books and kick you in the gut. Every day. Every day you cry, mucous runs down your face, gets on your shirt, and you have to wear that shirt in school. Maybe your mother rolls her eyes and asks how you bring all of this on yourself.

Therapists working with war and rape survivors will tell you that survivors often shed their certainty of helplessness by sharing their experiences with other survivors. From the sharing they get needed evidence that they are, indeed, powerful—powerful to help others feel less alone and afraid.

We're back to talking about groups now. I suspect that children who are teased brutally are, by definition, children who don't “do groups” well. And because they don't “do groups,” they don't easily approach other children—perhaps the many children who did not tease them—for comfort and support. Nor do they form consciousness raising

support groups for other kids who have been brutalized. I suspect instead that these kids become loners. Having lost faith in friendship and perhaps also in their families' abilities to understand and intervene, many swear off emotional attachment altogether.

Unreachable, weirdly isolated at the time that they need love and support the most, their lives become dominated by the experience of helplessness and the need to turn that helplessness around. And then they find a gun.

Or at least that's the connection that was explicitly drawn by Michael Carneal's lawyer when he pleaded guilty on Michael's behalf for the Paducah school murder last year. So what if Michael Carneal's lawyer is right? What do we do for kids like these? How do we help before the "gun" part?

I suggest that, however frustrated we parents and teachers may feel, we never roll our eyes when children are teased. I suggest that we educate children who "do groups" well about the impossibility of remaining neutral when another child is victimized. It may not be wise to publicly intervene or to stand in the fray. But it may be absolutely necessary to share a kind word later or to talk to a teacher on a schoolmate's behalf. I suggest that we give all children outrageously safe ways—like booger joke contests—to feel powerful. And I suggest that we adults keep a critical eye on our own tendencies to side with the socially seemly over the socially impossible. Whining children can be difficult to tolerate; with each victimization, many children become a little less easy to love. And that can be a problem, ultimately for everyone.

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