

LIFEGUIDE: A Plan to Reduce Crime, Child Abuse, and Mental Illness

Ernest Hartmann, M.D.

Violent crime is obviously a major problem in our society. We repeatedly read of inner city teenagers who kill for a pair of sneakers, or because of a disrespectful look. It is no secret that these teenagers have a bleak past, often having suffered poverty, neglect, and physical or sexual abuse. And they have a bleak future, including a high death rate, a high incarceration rate and a high likelihood of becoming abusers and neglecters of children in their turn. We now know that abused children not only tend to become violent, but are likely to develop a wide variety of diagnosable mental illnesses as well.

What can we do? Nothing has been very effective. Suggested solutions have often been based on the politics of the proposer rather than on the facts of human development. One frequently suggested approach involving tougher law enforcement and more prisons is plainly not succeeding. We already have proportionally more prisons and prisoners than other civilized or semi-civilized countries, but the prisons just keep filling up. The "demand" forever exceeds the supply. The alternative remedies involving treatment, rehabilitation, preventive school programs, etc. sound more humane, but they are expensive and have usually been tried only in a sporadic half-hearted way. The results, while sometimes encouraging, have been less than dramatic.

I would like to suggest a different approach which should be effective while costing almost no money. We have neglected a very straightforward path towards a solution. Long-term research — starting with the famous studies of delinquent boys by Glueck and Glueck in the 1930s — as well as clinical experience — has established that a child who has a good relationship with a caring adult is less likely to become a delinquent or a criminal. This is hardly a surprising finding, but we have not made proper use of it. There are indeed various "Mentor" programs, "Big Sister" and "Big Brother" programs, which are sometimes helpful. However there is general agreement among people who have worked in these programs that they last too short a time, and they start too late!

What I mean by making proper use of this knowledge is putting it together with a basic principle of human development that is only gradually becoming appreciated: in broad terms, every year of life is (alas) more important than the next. In other words our genes and our intrauterine life have a huge influence on our future. The first year of life makes a big difference too, the second year slightly less, and so on. In my years of research and practice I can think of hardly any more valid general rule; yet we hate to acknowledge it, since it makes us pessimistic as to how much we can change once we're adolescents or adults. However everything is relative. It's not that we are incapable of change as adults, but that we can change so much more — and with more important consequences — when we are young. Especially when we are very young. Therefore a good relationship with a caring adult should start as close to birth as

possible.

I suggest that every child at birth be provided with an adult to be called something like a "Lifeguard". I emphasize "every child." In families with two loving parents an additional adult might seem unnecessary, but all too frequently this is not so (see below). My vision is that the program would be a voluntary program, not imposed by government, but strongly encouraged — a kind of "immunization" to prevent crime and mental illness. Ideally the parents and perhaps other important family members would meet around the time of the child's birth to choose some trusted person to fill the role of "Lifeguard". It might be a minister or clergyman, an older trusted friend, possibly an uncle or aunt or other relative. Occasionally, if the family can think of no one suitable, or if the family is totally new to the community, the parents might ask for help from a volunteer organization or social agency in finding a "guide".

The duties of the "Lifeguard" would not be onerous. They would consist of spending one or at most two hours per week with the child. I have faith that a relationship — usually a mutually loving relationship — would develop. After all babies are designed to be loveable. It's one of the reasons the species has survived.

I strongly believe that the "Lifeguard" program could be useful in all segments of society. Perhaps the need is most obvious in inner cities or impoverished rural areas, in families with little internal support where perhaps there is no father and the mother is barely coping. Middle class families may think they have no need for something like this. But consider an unfortunately quite common scenario. At birth the child has two loving parents. But a year or three passes and the parents separate or divorce. The mother, custodian of the child or children, becomes depressed, perhaps drinks a bit. Already she is not as good a caring parent as she was. Then she finds a new man, maybe not the perfect man, but he seems to love her. However he cares little for her child, and the child may sometimes be physically or sexually abused. The mother often doesn't stop the abuse, because she's depressed or because she needs the man too much. This is a sadly familiar story. But is such abuse more or less likely to occur if in addition to the mother the child also has a "Lifeguard", someone familiar and trusted, with whom she or he spends time every week, shares troubles, etc.?

A "Lifeguard" sounds a bit like having a good godfather or godmother, and indeed it is. Unfortunately godparenting, even where it exists, is seldom taken very seriously. Rare is the godparent who actually spends an hour a week with the godchild.

Prevention is not a new idea. Here's how former Attorney General Janet Reno has put it: "I started 15 years ago in the juvenile justice system of Dade county ... and I quickly learned that we would never have enough dollars in America to change the lives of all the 16- and 17-year olds that I saw coming into the system, if we waited until they were 16 or 17. the criminal justice system will never be able to prevent crime as well as prevention programs can up front." My point is that we have not truly tried prevention. Isn't it time for a nationwide program such as "Lifeguard"?

I see "Lifeguard" as basic immunization against some of our worst illnesses. This is a program that would not cost any government money. However the government could be very useful: the Attorney General could recommend "Lifeguard" as crime prevention. The Secretary of Health and Human Services and the Surgeon General could recommend it as mental illness prevention. It may take some time to become accepted. But if movie stars and ballplayers as well as physicians, psychologists, teachers, and members of the clergy saw its benefits and started to use and recommend it, it just might get off the ground.

Of course I can think of all sorts of possible problems. Some families and some "Lifeguards" would move and make it difficult to continue the relationship. Some families might resent the presence of any "stranger" even though they had chosen the person themselves. Very occasionally a "Lifeguard" might turn out to be unfit, or even be an abuser. Not everyone would accept the idea, even with strong encouragement. But in my opinion if twenty-five percent of children born from now on had "Lifeguards", the reduction in child abuse starting almost immediately, and the reduction in violence, crime and mental illness starting ten to fifteen years from now, would be astounding.

Ernest Hartmann, M.D.
27 Clark Street
Newton, MA 02459-2425

617 969-9383