

# A Review of

## *Violence-Proof Your Kids Now: How to Recognize the 8 Warning Signs and What to Do about Them*

Karres, Erika V. Shearin. (2000). Berkeley, Calif.: Conari Press.

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**By Susan Leigh Flinspach**

In *Violence-Proof Your Kids Now: How to Recognize the 8 Warning Signs and What to Do about Them*, Erika V. Shearin Karres holds all concerned adults responsible for helping children in need. Her message is simple and convincing: one adult—any caring, informed adult—can make the difference in a troubled child's life. Whether they are parents, neighbors, school staff, or community members, Karres's readers are asked to view themselves as the key to keeping children and their schools free from violence.

In order to help troubled children, adults need to be able to distinguish between those who are profoundly hurt and angry and those who are merely testing their limits. Thus, Karres discusses eight warning signs of youth violence and cautions readers that a child exhibiting two or more signs merits concern. She suggests about seventy lay strategies—actions that parents and others without expertise in psychology or mental health can take—that facilitate the rebuilding of a child's attachment to adults, family, school, and society. She includes a chapter on the intervention role of the school, and she closes the book with a guide to several types of resources.

Karres's book is not unique in identifying signs of youth violence. The American Psychological Association has identified nine immediate indicators of violence, as well as conduct and attitudes that (if left unchecked) signal the potential for dangerous behavior.<sup>1</sup> A 1998

report from the U.S. Department of Education and the Department of Justice, *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools*, enumerates yet another set of early warning signs.<sup>2</sup> The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction identifies silent, indirect, or internalized warning signs and overt, direct, or externalized warning signs.<sup>3</sup> Like the lists of characteristics generated to describe effective schools in the 1980s, the lists of warning signs from these different sources have significant overlap, but no two are identical.

Unique to Karres's book is the faith she puts in her audience. She writes to mobilize or revitalize the commitment of readers to the children they know. Her language is clear, persuasive, and empowering; it builds a sense of personal responsibility and of individual efficacy. For example, Karres writes:

But I believe we do care. That's why I implore you to check up on every kid you come into contact with. Stop whatever you're doing and examine each and every youngster in your home, family, kindergarten or play group, classroom, school, neighborhood, church, synagogue, and on the teams you coach. In your mind, examine them to see if they're immune to youth violence.<sup>4</sup>

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1. American Psychological Association and MTV: Music Television. *Warning Signs*. Retrieved October 11, 2001, from the American Psychological Association Web site: <http://www.helping.apa.org/warningsigns/>.

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2. K. Dwyer, D. Osher, and C. Warger, *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Retrieved October 11, 2001, from the U.S. Department of Education Web site: <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/Products/earlywrn.html>.

3. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Alternative and Safe Schools Section, Division of School Improvement. *An Educator's Guide for Prevention and Early Intervention: Early Warning Signs for Identifying Students at Risk of Being Involved in Disruption, Crime or Violence*. Retrieved October 11, 2001, from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Web site: [http://www.ncpublicschools.org/alternative/educators\\_guide.html](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/alternative/educators_guide.html).

4. E. V. S. Karres, *Violence-Proof Your Kids Now: How to Recognize the 8 Warning Signs and What to Do about Them*. (Berkeley, Calif.: Conari Press, 2000), 183.

Karres's book is a call to action, written with the conviction that her audience will respond because they care about children.

Two other aspects of the book are noteworthy. First, Karres believes that no child should be lost to violence and that schools must accept this principle as part of their educational charge. The school, she argues, should be a disciplined environment that nurtures and supports every student and adult. Because children learn from the adults they observe, schools should be places of acceptance and respect. Children pay attention to whether every member of the school staff—from the principal to the custodian—does valuable work, is a caring individual, and models good character.<sup>5</sup> Karres maintains that to help deter children from violence, schools need to be a supportive world for all who enter their doors.

Second, the book suggests specific interventions for parents, teachers, and other caretakers to try when a child's actions become disturbing. For the student who seems alienated from school, Karres first recommends that the child be screened for poor school skills (especially reading level) and for health problems. Should either be an issue, the caregiver needs to seek extra assistance (medical treatment or tutoring, outside learning centers, summer school, or academic camps) to help the child move from failure to success in the classroom. Karres suggests that the caregiver make an ongoing effort to learn what interests the child. Those interests can serve as hooks to reel the student back into reading, specialized classroom projects, and school activities. She advises parents to get personally involved in school organizations and activities, thereby encouraging children who feel disassociated from school to question what draws their parents there. She also suggests that teachers and parents challenge high school students who are not meeting their potential with exposure to college and college-level curricula. Boredom contributes to student alienation from school, and high school students—whether average or high achievers—may benefit from such exposure. Karres presents these strategies to spur caregivers into finding the right interventions for the students they know.<sup>6</sup>

These last two points dovetail nicely with the violence-prevention model proposed in *Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Guide*, a recent report on school safety from the U.S. Departments of Education

and Justice.<sup>7</sup> The report expands on the warning signs and safety recommendations in the 1998 report from these departments with more guidance about making schools safer. The three-level model takes the form of an equilateral triangle sitting on one side (see Figure 1). The thick base segment of the triangle represents the building of a schoolwide foundation for all children. This is similar to Karres's notion that school safety begins with a disciplined, supportive environment for all. The narrower band above the triangle's base represents early intervention for some children, which corresponds to the strategies Karres suggests to help individual students. Finally, the top of the triangle represents intensive intervention for a few children, which lies outside the scope of Karres's book.<sup>8</sup> School personnel and parents who face such situations have to secure professional assistance for these children.

Despite its strengths, the book has limitations and does not apply to all situations. First, it is not a research report; rather, it is based on the career experience of one educator. Although Karres seems to be well informed, her eight warning signs of youth violence and her intervention strategies are the products of observation and reflection rather than of empirical study.

The unresearched nature of Karres's work does little to assist school decision makers who must set priorities and fit general proposals into specific circumstances. Take, for instance, her blanket recommendation that school personnel annually administer a survey to fifth graders and older students in order to assess their potential for violence at school.<sup>9</sup> Karres advocates the use of her own survey instrument without mentioning other available options. The items on her survey cover smoking, drinking, participating in sex, admiring Hitler and serial killers, and wishing for death; however, Karres ignores the fact that such a survey may be appropriate in some schools and communities but not in others. She also recommends the survey's introduction at fifth grade. In 1999, a character education survey that included items related to a student's violence potential was administered to sixth, eighth, and eleventh graders in the Wake County Schools. The ensuing controversy over items on "sensitive matters such as sexual activity, drug

5. Karres, 168–69.

6. *Id.*, 78–91.

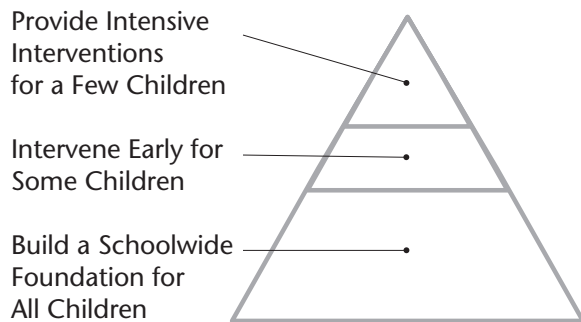
7. K. Dwyer and D. Osher, *Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Guide*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, American Institutes for Research, 2000). Retrieved October 11, 2001, from the U.S. Department of Education Web site: <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESERS/OSEP/Products/ActionGuide/>.

8. Dwyer and Osher, 3.

9. Karres, 176–77.

Figure 1

### A Three-Level Approach to Preventing Violence



#### ▲ Build a Schoolwide Foundation

Support positive discipline, academic success, and mental and emotional wellness through a caring school environment, teaching appropriate behaviors and problem solving skills, positive behavioral support and appropriate academic instruction.

#### ▲ Intervene Early

Create services and supports that address risk factors and build protective factors for students at risk for severe academic or behavioral difficulties.

#### ▲ Provide Intensive Interventions

Provide coordinated, comprehensive, intensive, sustained, culturally appropriate, child- and family-focused services and supports.

Source: K Dwyer and D. Osher, *Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Guide* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, American Institutes for Research, 2000), 3.

use and suicidal thoughts<sup>10</sup> forced the superintendent himself to defend the use and appropriateness of the instrument, especially for sixth graders.<sup>11</sup> The Wake County example illustrates how the use of Karres's survey might be a matter for local debate rather than a practice to be adopted without question by administrators. Karres's ideas, backed by her experience only, do not necessarily provide sound information for school and district decision making.

10. T. Silberman, "Wake student survey worries many," *The Raleigh News and Observer*, 1 December 1999, A1.

11. T. Silberman, "Leaders defend school survey as fitting for 6th graders," *The Raleigh News and Observer*, 2 December 1999, B1.

Moreover, Karres seeks to motivate her readers by keeping things simple—in some cases, overly simple. She writes about Kevin and Crystal, who represent all children who are not "violence proofed":

Sometimes it's a small slip from early on—maybe Kevin made a low grade or Crystal got sent to the office once for as [*sic*] small infraction—and then your kids are forever enrolled in the troublemaker club, that is, in the group of kids that thrives on mischief in school. . . .<sup>12</sup>

Although she has an engaging writing style, Karres overgeneralizes and obscures important differences among children. One of the most obvious of these is the child's developmental level. The 1998 *Early Warning, Timely Response* report cautions readers to view warning signs within a developmental context:

Children and youth at different levels of development have varying social and emotional capabilities. They may express their needs differently in elementary, middle, and high school. The point is to know what is developmentally typical behavior, so that behaviors are not misinterpreted.<sup>13</sup>

The report also explains that differences such as the child's past experiences, home life, and schooling environment can be important in interpreting early warning signs of violence.<sup>14</sup> However, in order to make her message more universal, Karres chooses to ignore these differences.

School personnel have to respond to individual students with unique histories and needs. They must avoid stigmatizing children who fit a profile defined by some of the warning signs, and yet they must also be able to identify students in real trouble. Training to address these concerns should go beyond the simplified picture Karres paints. Teachers and other school staff need solid professional development about school safety and the warning signs of violence. Karres's book may supplement such education, but it should not supplant it.

Although not sufficient to fill the needs of school decision makers or school personnel, the book can still inspire individual teachers, security monitors, and other school staff to reach out to a troubled child. Karres wrote this book as a call to action, and that remains its greatest strength. ■

12. Karres, 102.

13. Dwyer, Osher, and Warger, 7.

14. *Id.*