

Introduction

Charlotte was a free spirit who jumped, skipped, and ran to the beat of her own drum. She was boldness, she was mischief, and she was love. Her crazy antics made us laugh daily. Her insight and curiosity amazed us. We miss her singing loudly with the car radio, hearing her feet always at a run, never at a walk, down the hallway in our home. . . . She was and continues to be our brightest star in the sky.

—Parents of six-year-old Charlotte Helen Bacon,
a first grader who was murdered at Sandy Hook
Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut

Young Charlotte was one of twenty-six children and adults killed at Sandy Hook Elementary in December 2012, and her parents are among many forced to wrestle with their anguish after living through the nightmare. While our nation struggles to understand the heinous acts of Adam Lanza in Newtown and numerous young mass shooters since, many parents are asking, “What is going on, and what can be done about it? How can we protect our children?”

Some parents worry that a troubled youth they know could harm people, and others have to accept that their child did the unthinkable. Perhaps wanting to warn the public, Adam’s father, Peter Lanza, said, “I want people to be afraid of the fact that this could happen to them.”

Are events like Newtown usually preceded by warning signs that could have been acted upon to prevent tragedy? What factors lead young people to commit senseless acts of violence and are there warning signs for those? Research points to many underlying risk factors, and yes, there are often warning signs before young people harm themselves or others. You'll learn about these warning signs as you read this book.

When a young person commits an atrocity, many of us want to think that he or she had a mental illness and there was nothing anyone could have done to predict the event, because it makes disturbing scenarios more palatable. This would indicate that there's not much we can do—but fortunately, that's usually not the case. This book discusses warning signs relating to mental and emotional health, including those shown by Adam Lanza, but you'll learn about other more significant risk factors for aggressive and violent behaviors, which, when recognized, can prompt productive, early intervention.

While we frequently hear news of events that we fear most, such as children being shot in schools or abducted, relatively few children will be victims of these. However, most American kids and young (or emerging) adults ages eighteen to twenty-four are victims or perpetrators of other forms of aggression and violence, with far-reaching consequences.

Aggression is attempting to inflict or inflicting physical or psychological harm to someone by physical, verbal, or situational means, or dominating someone by using power. Examples are taunting, manipulating, threatening, stealing, cheating, humiliating, excluding, and inducing fear. Many of these behaviors are part of bullying and relational aggression, which affect up to 30% of our children. We'll show you how to help your children survive and even thrive in the midst of it.

More severe forms of physical aggression—such as physical assault with or without a weapon, threats with a weapon, vandalism, rape, murder, and child and animal abuse—are considered violence. Cutting and suicide are forms of violence against oneself. Compared to any other age group, adolescents are the most frequent victims of violence.

How many youth are victimized? Here are some statistics for you. According to a 2013 study in *JAMA (Journal of the American Medical Association) Pediatrics*, more than 40% of kids up to age seventeen were physically assaulted at least once in the prior year. During that same period, almost 60% were exposed to violence, crime, or abuse as victims or witnesses, and about 25% were victimized by robbery, theft, or vandalism. In 2013, almost six hundred thousand young people up to age twenty-four were treated for physical assault injuries, and more than two hundred thousand of these people were younger than eighteen.

A hundred years ago, infectious diseases were top causes of death in children. Today, children are slain by murder much more often than disease, and are murdered disproportionately more often than adults. While homicide isn't a top ten cause of death in adults over age forty-five, it's the third leading cause for one- to four-year-olds. In 2013, more than fifty-two hundred children and young adults were murdered and almost nine hundred were younger than fifteen years old.

Reports indicate that of the one in five females who are raped in the United States, more than 40% are under the age of eighteen when first raped and more than 12% are under age eleven. More than 27% of male rape victims were ten years old or younger when first raped. Sexual assault and dating violence harm even higher numbers of youth. Most sexual violence goes unreported.

Suicide is the ultimate violence against oneself, and can sometimes follow cruelty by other kids. Audrie Pott, a bright, lovely fifteen-year-old girl, took her own life after fellow students shared pictures of her being sexually assaulted by three sixteen-year-old boys whom she considered friends. The boys and other students tormented and humiliated her before she hanged herself. In 2013, 17% of high school students seriously considered killing themselves, and 8% attempted it. More than fifty-two hundred teens and young adults died by suicide that year. We'll provide preventive measures against suicide as well as sexual assault, rape, social media perils, and bullying.

Deplorably, millions of children begin their lives as victims of domestic violence, abuse, and neglect at home. According to a joint

report by the Children's Bureau and the US Department of Health and Human Services, an estimated 679,000 American children were neglected or abused at the hands of caretakers in 2013, while the study published in *JAMA Pediatrics* estimated that one in four children are victims of maltreatment at some time during childhood. Associated costs are estimated at \$124 billion each year. More than fifteen hundred children died from abuse or neglect in 2013, most under the age of three. Millions are also victimized by domestic or family violence, witnessing parents violently mistreating another parent, romantic partner, child, or other family member. Many also endure being bullied by a sibling. Children who experience maltreatment and home violence are at increased risk of being victimized in other ways and of becoming aggressive and violent.

As many youth are victimized, many also perpetrate aggression and violence. Cynthia Alvarez was found guilty of murder in her mother's strangulation death and in the death of her stepfather, who was killed with a baseball bat and knife; the killings occurred after Alvarez, then fifteen years old, lay in wait for her mother to come home. Alvarez testified that she and her sixteen-year-old boyfriend, who was also charged, went shopping for Halloween party supplies in the vehicle in which her dead mother's body lay. The Bureau of Justice Statistics indicates that children killing parents is a fast-growing type of homicide. Although it's fortunate that aggression against parents rarely goes that far, research shows that up to 17% of adolescents physically assault their parents.

Rates of violent crimes committed by male youths are lower than in the 1990s, but violent crime by girls—particularly assault—is increasing at alarming rates. It's important to note that many youth crimes such as theft go unreported, and that detrimental, insidious forms of relational aggression aren't included in crime statistics.

What causes some kids to seriously harm people while others wouldn't think of it? And how can we help kids protect themselves? This book is about the many risk factors for becoming victims or perpetrators of violence and aggression. These include dangerous friendships, social isolation or rejection, sexualization, drug and alcohol use,

harmful media exposure, access to weapons, mental illness, ineffective parenting, home violence, and perilous thoughts and emotions like entitlement, rage, and hate. All these common threats to our youth constitute increasing challenges for parents.

Parents today may fear their children's reactions to interventions or face entitled attitudes and aggressive manipulation. During a therapy session, a single mother described telling her sixteen-year-old son that she didn't want him to go to an unsupervised party. Her son screamed, "Lady, you just don't get it, do you? I know my rights and will do what I want—back off!" He then approached, glared into her eyes, and slammed the door as he stormed out. She found herself walking on eggshells, trying not to "set him off," and he often talked her out of setting limits or rules. We'll discuss thoughts and emotions that lead to self-destructive or aggressive behaviors and how to defuse them. Suggestions for teaching problem solving, anger management, empathy, coping, and other protective shields are given.

The good news is that research and clinical experience point to a multitude of things that parents can do to protect and guide their children. Our personal experiences and hunger for solutions to societal violence led us to this writing project. This is the first book of practical parenting advice that provides parents with warning signs and risk factors so they can help prevent their children from becoming victims and perpetrators. This book discusses how to strengthen children for the challenges of growing up in today's aggressive and violent world.

Risk factors are things that make someone more susceptible to a condition (for example, smoking, obesity, and hypertension are risk factors for heart attacks). Warning signs are things that suggest an imminent threat (for heart attacks, they include squeezing chest pain, difficulty breathing, and arm or neck pain). As with heart attacks, there are risk factors and warning signs for violence that, if recognized and reported, can be acted upon to prevent tragedy.

Chapters are organized to address parenting practices, types of aggression and violence, and risk and protective factors. Throughout, we'll provide preventive measures and warning signs illustrated by news and personal stories that can aid decisions to act. You'll find ways to

help kids heed your advice to recognize and deal with danger and talk about violent events. Because it can be hard to decide what to say to kids, or how to say it, we will provide suggestions in *finding the words* sidebars. We will also provide advice on approaching other parents when concerned about them or their children.

Our suggestions are based on research and clinical and personal experiences. Data are from reputable sources such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Crime Prevention Council, American Psychological Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, National Institutes of Health and Mental Health, World Health Organization, National Gang Center, US Departments of Justice, Secret Service, and Federal Bureau of Investigation.

We think you'll find that our combined credentials and experience provide a unique set of vantage points on managing risks to your young, adolescent, and emerging adult children. As a husband-wife team of professionals, we have more than forty years of combined experience working with parents and children. Brian is a child psychologist, university professor, and parenting researcher and expert, and Laurie is a retired board-certified obstetrician-gynecologist and a writer and speaker on parenting and adolescent health.

But we're not just professionals—we're parents! We feel fortunate to have raised two strong, caring children together in the face of today's unprecedented parenting challenges. By using our evidence-based suggestions, you can reduce your child's chances of having emotional and behavioral problems and of becoming victims or perpetrators while making your life much easier and happier.

In this book, you'll also read about ways that aggression and violence can be prevented and mitigated nationally. We believe that parents, united in priorities and actions, possess the highest capacity to create powerful solutions that would benefit our families and our country.