



JPA

Juvenile Protective Association



March 2018

The Toxic Three

Over the weekend, we watched as hundreds of thousands marched around the world protesting gun violence and its toll on children, prompted by the most recent shooting of 17 innocent victims at Marjory Stoneman Douglass High School. The news has alternatively shown us praise for the students who spoke so movingly at the marches and photos of the many trolls who delighted in posting shots of themselves with their automatic rifles. Indeed, it's time to take up arms — loving arms.

Let's focus on what contributed to the malevolence of that day. As part of our work in mental health, including our work in school-based counseling over the last 12 years, we've observed three toxic factors at play: Stigma. Isolation. Lack of a supportive community. We know that many people tried to alert the authorities about their concerns that he was dangerous. In fact, he called the police for help shortly after his mother died. It's clear, Nikolas didn't get enough of the help he needed.

The issues that bring children to the JPA therapy room often begin with their acting out in the classroom. Underneath those behaviors are feelings of loneliness, isolation, deep loss and grief. We know, however, that only four percent of people with mental illness will ever act violently. So, what should we do?

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- **Destigmatize Mental Health Services:** Since everyone has mental health, we should encourage strong voices to lift the stigma around mental health services. “I grew so much from the experience,” performer Jay-Z said about therapy in a recent New York Times article. “But I think the most important thing I got is that everything is connected. Every emotion is connected, and it comes from somewhere.” We need to move that message into the classroom so we can have an open dialogue about mental health, why and how problems arise, and the hopeful things that can be done to ease suffering.
 - **Fund Mental Health Services:** Only twelve percent of children referred for counseling ever see a therapist in a clinical setting and then only for a few times. Congress and local governments should fund mental health services in schools, so children and families who need long-term, compassionate, and comprehensive support can get it.
 - **Reimagine Schools:** We must reimagine the function of schools and accept that their role in our current world goes well beyond the academic. This process will require providing educators with the resources they need to meet the social, emotional, and mental needs of students and their families: more funding, training, and ongoing support.

We cannot hope to prevent more violence if we turn our backs on children like Nikolas Cruz and their struggling families. People who have been demeaned, bullied, neglected or abused, and those who struggle with mental health issues, internalize the harm. Most suffer and struggle alone, a terrible form of self-imposed punishment. A very few will turn that harm outwards and hurt the innocent. But much of that is preventable.

As politicians debate yet again the wisdom of common sense gun reform, let’s not wait to act. Let’s arm teachers and families, not with guns, but with the tools and support they need to meet the needs of children who are hurting.



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