

Authors reveal 'Warning Signs'

It's a problem parents can easily miss - or ignore. But low self-esteem in children can have devastating effects on families and society at large, according to the authors of the new book "Warning Signs - How to Read Early Signals of Low Self-Esteem, Addiction and Hidden Violence in Your Children" (LifeLine Press, 2002).

"Through our ever-changing culture, it is often difficult for parents to detect the signals that their children are trying to send out to them," said John Kelly, a New Jersey-based addiction counselor who wrote the book with Brian J. Karem, a Maryland-based investigative reporter and former correspondent for Fox TV's "America's Most Wanted."

In their book, Kelly and Karem say low self-esteem is the root cause of the growing rate of addiction, violence and depression in kids 8 to 18 years old.

The book is intended to help parents and clinicians identify low self-esteem and self-destructive behaviors in children and adolescents.

"The emphasis on the family in developing a cohesive strategy for raising healthy children in these complex times will empower parents in the struggle to ensure the well-being and protection of their children," said James O'Connell, director of Connecticut's Addiction Treatment Services, a renowned workshop leader of counselors, social workers and psychologists.

The authors use real case studies to show the early warning signs that children often display before their addictions or violent tendencies actually take hold.

"Parents should be able to notice when something is wrong with their child," said Kelly, who has been treating people with addictive illnesses for 15 years.

The problem, according to Kelly and Karem, is that too many parents today are "busy trying to be pals with their kids instead of parents."

On top of that, according to the book's authors, many parents are not spending enough time with their children to know what their kids are up to.

"A child manufacturing pipe bombs in the family garage shouldn't be discovered only after a murderous rampage," the duo write in their book, indirectly referring to Eric Harris, who participated in the nation's worst schoolhouse massacre, at Columbine High School, three years ago.

"Surely his parents would notice," they write. "That no one does notice or stop him only fuels his addiction and depression."

In "Warning Signs," Kelly and Karem say there is a way to stop violent behavior in kids before it starts. The first step, of course, is diagnosing that your child has a problem.

"What's really in that little Altoids tin? What's in the bottom of a backpack?" the book's authors write.

But Joe Tecce, a psychologist and Boston University professor, stresses there is a fine line between checking on your child and violating his privacy.

Parents may uncover useful information by rummaging through their child's room, Tecce said. But obtaining information at any cost may create new problems.

"Whatever feelings of low self-esteem led to the (errant behavior), the violation of privacy will magnify low self-esteem and the child will have feelings of being disrespected and unworthy of his parents' trust," Tecce said.

Kelly admits the book is sure to come under fire by scientists and health professionals who say addiction is the result of genetic predispositioning, not low self-esteem.

Still, Kelly, who spent 12 years researching the book, is ready to face the critics.

"No one has been able to pinpoint the gene that causes alcoholism or drug addiction," said Kelly, who himself has been recovering from cocaine addiction for 20 years.

"However, I can say that what is definitely there in addictive illness is a lack of self-respect and confidence. That translates to low self-esteem."