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Untangling a violent web

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If we've learned anything in the 20 years since Marc Lepine massacred 14 female engineering students in Montreal, it's that violence doesn't happen out of the blue.

Moreover, we now know enough about the precursors of violence that we have the tools to prevent much of it, raising resilient kids with coping skills instead of breeding sociopaths.

As a child, Lepine was beaten by his father and witnessed his women-hating dad battering his mother. That early exposure to misogyny poisoned something deep in his core and Lepine grew up blaming his inadequacies on women.

When he snapped, he could just as easily have directed his rage in the usual fashion of men who crack from an explosive combination of anger, depression or any of the other typical red flags. He could have killed a girlfriend.

Instead, for reasons we'll never know, he gunned down a group of aspiring female super-achievers before killing himself, blaming feminists for ruining his life in his suicide note.

There's no question that we've made progress in the prevention of violence against women, domestic abuse and relationship violence in general. Spousal homicide rates are the lowest they've been in 30 years and Statistics Canada reported recently that the rate of police-reported spousal violence was down 15% in 2007 from 1998.

This is presumably due to greater public awareness about the issue, community concern about violence in a broader context and efforts by experts to head off potential tragedies.

In Ontario, for instance, a special committee reviews every domestic homicide to identify patterns with an eye to preventing such atrocities.

Alberta took a different approach by setting up a province wide threat assessment unit two years ago. Police in local detachments refer high-risk cases to the team which looks for risk factors and intervenes if necessary.

"Domestic violence is almost never about an isolated act," says centre director Val Campbell, adding that the team has conducted more than 100 threat assessments.

But the best way to prevent violence is to teach kids coping skills. A healthy relationships program called the Fourth R, begun in London, Ont., schools in 2001, is now part of the high school curriculum in about 1,000 schools across Canada.

"Here's the thing that's so alarming," says Peter Jaffe, an education professor at the University of Western Ontario. "If you do surveys on adolescents ... about 20% report abusive dating relationships."

Violence is learned behaviour so we have to nip it in the bud, he says. "You're never going to hire enough police officers, Crown attorneys and judges to deal with this as a justice issue. It's going to have to be seen as a public health issue where there's a major investment in ... prevention."

According to a recently published study, the Fourth R program reduces dating violence. Curiously, however, that applies only to boys. Girls who took the course were just as likely to be violent with their boyfriends as those who didn't participate in the program. The study suggests this may reflect a double standard in how society views male vs. female violence.

"Girls may not recognize that relational and physical forms of violence are inappropriate, regardless of the apparent lack of injury or the indifference of their ... partner."

Apparently, some girls don't think slapping their boyfriends constitutes violence. Gender violence, it seems, is more complex than we thought.

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