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Kids need help to become caring adults

The stories of murder in Indianapolis have been disturbing. The horrific execution-style killings of seven family members this summer on the near-east side and a spate of murders since should make Indianapolis residents question what needs to be done to solve the problem.



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Commentary

Mayor Bart Peterson, City-County Council members, and candidates vying for the office of Marion County prosecutor have recommended judicial and prosecutorial solutions. Of course, habitual-offender laws, vigorous prosecution for crimes committed, and proper housing of inmates will all help.

However, in addition to mandating longer prison sentences, working to lessen the backlog of court cases, and appropriating money for more prison beds, we need to look at solutions that go to the root of why people resort to violence as a means of solving conflict.

In many cases, the actions and decisions that propel an individual to contemplate murder or to be in an environment where assault and murder are viewed as plausible are the result of influences and decisions of years before. Often, the environment where murder occurs is facilitated by drug and alcohol abuse, a poor educational foundation,

physical and verbal abuse, and unemployment or underemployment.

What could have a long-term impact on this crisis? Mentoring. The term "mentor" is derived from the character "Mentor" in Homer's epic tale "The Odyssey." Mentor was a trusted friend of Odysseus, the king of Ithaca. When Odysseus went to fight in the Trojan War, Mentor served as friend and counsel to Odysseus' son, Telemachus.

The image of the benign helper has been enduring. The core elements of mentoring are sharing experience and providing guidance that facilitates the growth and development of the advisee. The mentor and advisee develop a bond, the hallmark of which is a sense of trust.

Some adolescents need one or more mentors to help them develop into caring and responsible adults. Perhaps we should consider a long-term investment in Indianapolis' future by focusing a larger share of community resources on programs that support mentoring for children. Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Indiana is an active participant in providing mentoring for youth. About 300 children are waiting for a Big Brother or Big Sister. The impact of this program on area youth is impressive:

- Nine out of 10 children demonstrate increased self-confidence and sense of future;

- Eight out of 10 children demonstrate improved academic performance;

- Eight out of 10 children demonstrate improved relationships with fami-

ly, peers and adults.

Nationally, children matched with Big Brothers Big Sisters were found to be: 46 percent less likely to begin using illegal drugs, 27 percent less likely to begin using alcohol, 52 percent less likely to skip school, 37 percent less likely to skip class, and 33 percent less likely to hit someone.

Minneapolis' Search Institute has identified the involvement of three adults, in addition to the parent, in a child's life as one of 40 developmental assets. The list is concrete, common sense, positive experiences and qualities essential to raising successful young people.

Many modes of mentoring exist. A traditional one-on-one community based model of mentoring is giving way to a proliferation of alternative approaches that make use of varying configurations of mentors (group, team and peer mentoring), sites (schools, workplace, faith-based organizations), and modes of communication (Internet).

The local Big Brothers Big Sisters now serves close to 1,800 boys and girls. By 2010, the organization hopes to be serving 6,000 youth. To serve that many kids, Big Brothers Big Sisters needs an equal number of mentors. Perhaps you can help. Our city and your neighbors would be better for it. •

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