

## TEEN VIOLENCE

# WORDS DON'T WORK

## *Slogans won't change youth behavior.*

BY GLENN CAMPBELL

Get this into your skull: Words don't work.

You're probably not going to listen to me, since the only tools I have to convince you are... words! But I'm going to give it a shot anyway.

After a recent spate of shootings near schools, Las Vegas police held a news conference during which they urged absentee fathers to get more involved with their kids.

Yeah, right! Some deadbeat who hasn't seen his child in years is going to hear this appeal on Channel 8 and say, "Gee, I really should get more involved with my kid!" Then he's going to get up from the television and do something about it.

Not likely.

Just collecting child support from these cads is challenge enough—and that's with the threat of jail. The forces that tear families apart are so powerful that words alone have little effect.

Words are weak weapons against people's emotional drives. They may give the public the illusion that something is being done, but words alone are rarely effective in changing actual behavior.

Right now, Las Vegas seems to be engulfed in a tsunami of teen violence. The perceived "epidemic" may or may not be real in statistical terms, but some well-publicized violence near schools has prompted calls for change.

Having lived in Nevada for 15 years and in America all my life, I can predict the form this change will take.

More words.

There will be advertising campaigns urging teens to be less violent. There will be educational programs in schools to teach children the dangers of guns and gangs. Police will call on parents to get more involved. Students and teachers will hold candlelight vigils in support of "non-violence."

All of which will be ineffective, by any statistical measure, in deterring real violence.

The best example of the failure of words is the DARE program in public schools. The idea sounds good: educate kids on the dangers of drugs. But study after study has shown that DARE is statistically ineffective in deterring drug abuse. It may even encourage it by piquing kids' curiosity and essentially giving them a consumer guide to the product.

Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No." is a fantastic slogan that has entrenched itself in popular culture, but has it actually deterred anyone from using drugs? Probably not.

Words are popular because they are cheap. It costs almost nothing to invent a slogan and hold a press conference promoting it. The effort also plays well on the evening news because it gives the cameras something to record.

Unfortunately, truly effective solutions to violence and drug abuse are expensive and not so visible. You can't just spew words; you have to change the environment children grow up in.

A kid who is engaged in activities that he likes—be it football, math league or rodeo riding—simply doesn't have time for drugs or violence. No words necessary.

Environment is the only truly effective teacher. For example, a kid whose parents don't smoke probably won't do it himself. Words are never going to be a substitute for responsible parenting and a stable home life.

Some of this is within the power of government and some isn't. Government can't turn bad parents into good ones, but it can provide pseudo-parental alternatives by, say, funding team sports and other after-school programs. It can't fix dysfunctional families, but it can sometimes provide kids a means to escape from them.

No one ever said, "The DARE program saved my life." But they have said, "Football saved my life," because only ongoing activities like this can divert a vulnerable kid from a destructive spiral.

The difference here is between words and substance.

—G.C.