

PEACE POWER



SHARE POWER

MAKE PEACE

ACT WITH RESPECT

RECOGNIZE
CONTRIBUTIONS
AND SUCCESS

YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION THROUGH CULTURAL CHANGE



BY DAN HARVEY

In recent decades, the issue of youth violence — its causes and consequences — has been a major concern in the United States.

In 1999, when two students opened fire on classmates at Columbine High School in Colorado, concern was ratcheted to even higher levels. Subsequent similar events — as well as the accompanying media exposure — compelled many to seek immediate answers and solutions. However, in the aftermath of such confounding tragedy, the tendency is toward facile generalization and reactive measures.

For the Peace Power Working Group and its coordinator, Mark Mattaini, DSW, ACSW, youth violence prevention is much more complex. For the past several years, the group has been developing and refining ways to deal with violence at its cultural roots. Practical and science-based, Peace Power concepts extend well beyond “Just Say No” sloganeering, anger management, and security installations in school hallways.

A SOCIETY AT RISK

With the world as it is today, youth are subjected to increasing and incredible risk. In his new book, *Peace Power for Adolescents: Strategies for a Culture of Nonviolence* (2001, NASW Press), Mattaini presents some alarming statistics:

- Youth between the ages of 12 and 24 are the victims of violent crimes at least 2 million times a year.

- About 3,000 persons under the age of 18 are murdered each year.

On the surface, the statistics are disturbing enough. However, Mattaini says they indicate even deeper trouble. It is not just youth who are at risk, but society as a whole. The violence arises from the culture in which

**“PROGRAMS THAT ASK YOUTH
TO GIVE UP THE POWER THAT
VIOLENCE, THREATS, AND
COERCION PROVIDE,
WITHOUT OFFERING
ALTERNATIVES, ARE DOOMED
TO FAIL.”**

— Mark Mattaini, DSW, ACSW, coordinator of the
Peace Power Working Group

we live, a culture deeply rooted in coercive and adversarial power, explains Mattaini, an associate professor and director of the doctoral program at Jane Addams College of Social Work, University of Illinois at Chicago. The outcome of such power is violence.

Therefore, the Peace Power strategy attacks the problem of youth violence at several cultural levels. Its goal is to affect a change throughout all of society.

NEUROTRANSMITTERS AND NATIVE AMERICAN WISDOM

Peace Power is a unique intervention based on biological science, applied cultural

analysis, and Native American wisdom. Those seeking to implement it may learn as much about brain chemistry — including serotonin and neurotransmitters — as about indigenous cultural philosophies.

Developed over the past several years, Peace Power is built upon the common characteristics of the most effective social programs. Its goal is the development of community and organizational cultures that avoid the use of violence, threat, and coercion. To facilitate the peace-building process, it provides training, consultation, and materials. The Peace Power strategy strongly focuses on youth, but mainly it strives to change the society in which they live.

“The strategy is deeply grounded in the natural science of behavior, which emphasizes that viewing individual youth as the vectors of violence and coercion is largely a dead end,” says Mattaini.

Mattaini believes that programs focusing only on the individual — for instance, anger management curricula and skills training — have value in some cases, but typically produce modest increments of change. Substantial change, he says, can be achieved only by changing the cultures in which young people live. These cultures — or microcultures — include school, family, peers, and community. The changes must support prosocial behavior and offer youth the opportunity to influence their world in nonviolent ways. Most importantly, they must allow the development of other, more positive powers.

“Programs that ask youth to give up the power that violence, threats, and coercion

