



By

Richard De Angelis

- Springfield, Oregon.
- Jonesboro, Arkansas.
- Pearl, Mississippi.
- West Paducah, Kentucky.

**Four schools, twelve dead and forty-four wounded in just the seven months from last October to this May.**

**We are becoming accustomed to images of sobbing children, frightened parents, and silent boys being hauled off to prison in shackles. And every time it happens reporters, parents, administrators and survivors ask the same question: "Why?"**

### OPEN SEASON

On March 24 of this year, 13-year-old Mitchell Johnson and 11-year-old Andrew Golden allegedly fired into a crowd gathering outside the Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas. Dressed in camouflage and waiting in ambush on a hill under cover of brush, the two boys had reportedly set off a fire alarm to flush their prey from the building. In less than four minutes, ten children lay on the ground wounded, along with four girls and a teacher who were shot dead. Caught while fleeing the scene on foot, police took an arsenal of nine guns from the boys.

Afterwards, Doug Golden told authorities that his grandson had

broken into his house immediately before the shooting and stolen three of the weapons later confiscated by police, including his "deadly accurate" deer rifle. Standing in his home, surrounded by guns and mounted antlers, Golden was at a loss to explain what could have influenced these basically good boys to go on such a murderous rampage. As if to reassure people about his grandson's sense of responsibility, Golden told the Associated Press that Andrew "knows to respect guns, and he knows what they are." Proving that the boy also knows their purpose, he added, "He killed his first duck this year."

Most hunters never turn their weapons on humans. There is no proof that hunting, any more than playing video games or listening to rock music, inspires homicidal behavior. Like these less harmful preoccupations, however, it may have an allure for already troubled children. Certainly, disturbed young people unable to control their feelings of rage and hostility might be drawn to this bloodsport as a means to vent their violent desires. Whether it is the cause of hunting or the result, a diminished sense of empathy — at least toward animals — is definitely an asset when pulling the trigger or releasing the bowstring of a weapon aimed at a defenseless deer, pigeon, or other living target.

Responding to the epidemic of school shootings, Heidi Prescott, National Director of The Fund for Animals, said, "If we teach young people to be kind to animals, that compassion will spread and they will be kind to people. If we teach them that it is acceptable to hide in ambush and to shoot other creatures, we risk tragedies like [these], where they graduate to bigger game."

### PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

On May 21 of this year, heavily armed 15 year-old Kip Kinkel

walked into the Thurston High School cafeteria in Springfield, Oregon and allegedly unleashed a hail of bullets that killed two classmates and wounded 22 others. Although an obsessive gun enthusiast, Kinkel was apparently not a hunter. However, according to friends, he did have a history of animal abuse that included decapitating cats, dissecting live squirrels and blowing up cows. One schoolmate recounted that Kinkel would often go into graphic detail about "how he'd cut animals open with



hunting knives."

The story was much the same in all four shootings. A friend of Andrew Golden reported that the alleged Jonesboro sniper "said he shoots dogs all the time with his .22." On December 1, 1997, 14-year-old Michael Carneal shot three classmates to death and wounded five others during a prayer meeting held at Heath High School in Paducah, Kentucky. Long before that date however, the convicted murderer is said to have talked about throwing a cat into a bonfire.

But of all the grisly incidents of animal abuse that preceded these acts of violence against humans,

one of the most disturbing was committed by 16 year-old convicted murderer Luke Woodham. In his personal journal, Woodham recorded how he beat, burned, and tortured his own dog, Sparkle, describing the animal's painful death as a thing of "true beauty." Unfortunately, authorities did not learn about this cruel act until after Woodham had entered the crowded lobby of his high school in Pearl, Mississippi on October 1, 1997, and opened fire with a rifle, killing two students and wounding seven.



One classmate described Kip Kinkel during his assault on Thurston High: "His face was casual, like it was something he did every day." In the view of *Denver Post* columnist Chuck Green, "It was. But no one took it seriously when the victims of his perverted killing sprees were four-legged creatures."

### HOME IS WHERE THE HURT IS

In an Associated Press article, New York University Professor of Education John Devine placed part of the blame for these recent school shootings on a widening generation gap and "violence on television, in

video games, in music videos, and on the Internet." Like so many others, he asked, "How is it that kids are acting these fantasies out and where do they get these fantasies from?"

The only problem with this question is that kids are not acting out fantasies. The aggression they are emulating is real, not make-believe. Growing up at the mercy of the world around them, many children, especially boys, get their first experience with personal power through their interaction with animals. Often, children who live in abusive situations deal with their feelings of helplessness by striking out at the family dog or cat. While these early incidents of cruelty sometimes go unnoticed by others, often they do not. A neighbor watched Luke Woodham set fire to Sparkle but failed to report it. When adult authority figures dismiss the moral significance of hurting or killing animals — whether wild or domestic — they risk teaching children a much harsher lesson than they may have intended. Before heading for school with guns in hand, both Luke Woodham and Kip Kinkel claimed their first human victims at home. Luke stabbed his mother to death and the bodies of Kinkel's parents were found shot.

A 1985 study showed that 25% of aggressive criminals incarcerated in federal penitentiaries had committed five or more acts of animal cruelty during their childhood, compared to only 6% of nonaggressive inmates. None of the noncriminals interviewed as a control group reported any childhood cruelty to animals. In a Federal Bureau of Investigation study of 36 convicted multiple murderers conducted in 1970, 46% confessed to acts of animal torture during their adolescence. Finally, an overwhelming number of serial killers — including Albert DeSalvo, David Berkowitz, Ted Bundy, and Jeffrey Dahmer — began their predatory careers at young ages by mutilating and killing animals.

Shortly after they turned their lethal attention toward people, the violent histories of these latest child killers were being reported in the press. Yet everyone from their parents to the President publicly lamented that there were no warnings to indicate these boys were capable of mass murder. Most people seem to believe that there is some impenetrable psychological barrier in the human brain that neatly separates the capacity for violence by species, and every time we disregard blatant acts of animal cruelty as childish pranks, we make it easier for kids to believe it too. In other words, we give them permission to practice inflicting pain without fear of being punished.

### HEALING WOUNDS

Certainly, animals deserve our protection for their own sakes. But even for those people whose sole concern is for their fellow humans, ignoring animal cruelty is an invitation to disaster. That is why it is crucial to treat animal abuse as the serious crime it is. The American Humane Society (AHA) offers a booklet that lists the category and maximum penalty for violating cruelty statutes in all fifty states. If animal cruelty is still only a misdemeanor where you live, contact your legislators and insist that your state join the 21 others that classify it as a felony. If there is a cruelty case pending in your area, the Doris Day Animal League can provide judges and prosecutors with our booklet, *The Violence Connection*, which illustrates the importance of imposing stiff sentences that include mandatory counseling.

Of course, while severe sentences help protect people from future violence, they do nothing for the animals who have already been abused. As with most illnesses, the best cure is prevention.

"First Strike," a campaign of The Humane Society of the United States, is

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trying to spread the word that childhood cruelty toward animals is often just the beginning in an escalating pattern of violence. Organizations like the AHA and the Latham Foundation, dedicated to ending the abuse of both animals and children, are excellent resources for information and educational material. The Jane Goodall Institute's "Roots & Shoots" program teaches children to respect all animals and appreciate their place in the world. The Fund for Animals offers *Animal Crusaders*, a newsletter/activity book for teachers, as well as a variety of youth oriented material addressing animal protection issues. Lastly, the Center for Compassionate Living, led by Zoe Weil and Rae Sikora, offers a one-to-two-year independent study program for humane education certification.

In the wake of these recent tragedies, schools across the country are being turned into fortresses. Metal detectors, locker searches and security guards will not prevent these outbreaks of violence. We need to trust children more, not less. Specifically, we need to trust them with the information they need to make the right decisions about cruelty — toward animals and people.

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*A recent case in Rock County, WI demonstrates that sometimes the system does work. Accepting a plea bargain from Assistant District Attorney Scott Dirks, confessed multiple cat killer Barry Herbeck pled guilty to five felony counts of cruelty to animals. Finding that Mr. Herbeck's actions "offended the sensibilities of the community," on July 7, Judge Richard Werner gave him the maximum possible sentence of twelve years in prison, which is believed to be the most severe sentence ever handed down in this country for an animal cruelty case.*