

How to Make a Killer

Excerpted from *The Manual* by Dr. Faye Snyder

Criminologist Lonnie Athens offers the most detailed description of the childhood experiences that lead to creating violent criminals. He breaks down the necessary ingredients into three main stages in which the drive to kill is ultimately established (1992).

The first stage, **Brutalization**, involves subjugation, or being controlled. The child is treated violently. If that dominance is challenged, the perpetrator beats the child into submission. Once the child pleads for mercy, the beating stops. However, there is another level of subjugation in which the brutality is out of control and surrender does not stop the beating. This beating is a retaliatory beating resulting in a bitter, buried drive for revenge. The child resigns to the ongoing beating, but fantasizes ways to stop the attacker by killing him. When the child is treated to horrification, he helplessly witnesses the abuse of a loved one such as a sibling or a mother. The child thinks of rescuing his mother or sibling by attempting to attack and even kill the abuser, but instead develops feelings of helplessness and guilt for not being able to do anything about it. He has to listen or watch, knowing that if he intervenes the attacker will turn on him. His helplessness and guilt turns in to excruciating self-loathing and fantasies of killing, possibly in order to rescue.

Additionally, if he lives in a violent neighborhood he is not safe to leave the house. The other children in the neighborhood have turned into bullies from similar abuse. It is not only dangerous at home, but it is dangerous to even go to school. The child has begun suffering the social experience of being picked on and ridiculed by his peers. His persona becomes identified as a subject only worthy of ridicule, rejection and abuse.

In the second stage, **Besiegement**, he is pressured into becoming violent with violent coaching, which consists of ridicule and coercion. He is harangued with relentless taunting to fight. "If you don't beat that kid up, you stupid wimp, I'll give you a beating you'll never forget." At around the same time he is introduced to vainglorification, where someone established in the neighborhood takes an interest in him and shows him how wonderful it is to be feared.

The third stage in creating a violent person is the **Belligerency** stage. The child becomes older and bigger and begins reflecting about the world and its seemingly contradictory values. He has heard of law and order and seen or heard of members of society who enjoy the good life while the child's life has been riddled with nothing but fear and jeopardy. He wonders why his parents hate him and he thinks about the hypocrisy in the world, that he is not protected and the world is not the place some present it to be. He tries to make sense of the contradiction between his experiences and the way society represents things. He sees he is under siege, not only by his own parent(s), but also in the world at large. It's "me vs. them," he thinks. The child faces the dilemma of whether or not he can bear any more abuse and what he has to do to stop it. He decides in one downtrodden moment that he will do whatever it takes to fight back to win, even kill, to protect himself or his loved one. The day comes as he gets older and his body gets bigger when someone attempts to hurt him and he actually retaliates. Usually this is in the form of a violent personal revolt on behalf of a family member or himself. It may be to protect himself from a bully. It's a dangerous crossroad. Once he decides he will kill to protect himself or another, he faces whether or not he can. It is a kill-or-be-killed choice. He cannot afford to lose and there are no draws or ties. He contemplates weapons. He has to reign or he is in greater jeopardy than ever.

He wins. Once the older child becomes successful in defending himself, he discovers there was a greater reward awaiting him than simply avoiding further abuse. Much to his bewilderment and delightful surprise, he has merited a sudden change in his reputation. Now he is someone who is highly regarded. He has a new identity. Now people in his life speak of him differently and treat him with deference. He becomes intoxicated with power and enjoys an identity for the first time in his life that is positive, not negative. He has a new role and perspective on life. He decides that no one will ever hurt him again. He develops a chip on his shoulder and he begins to interpret the slightest disagreement as disrespect, which he will put down. He begins the transition into becoming a predator because it is such a relief and feels so good. Now no one can ever convince him that he should give up violence.

Serial Killer: Stages of Development

■ Brutalization Stage

Subjugation

Brutal domination by someone in child's life.

Pleas for mercy to stop the beating. Pleas for mercy don't stop the beating.

Child fantasizes murdering his perpetrator.

Horrorification

Child witness brutalization of someone he loves.

Child wants to rescue, but shrinks back knowing the attacker will turn on him.

Child suffers guilt and helplessness.

Child experiences deeper self-loathing.

Child fantasizes vividly about killing and rescuing.

Living in a Violent Neighborhood

Regular interaction and terrorizing by bullies.

Worthless identity, good only for others to bully and abuse.

■ Besiegement Stage

Violent Coaching

Ridicule: Family members and peers ridicule child for weakness.

Coercion: Significant others try to coerce the child into violent activity.

Haranguing: Taunting to fight is relentless.

Vainglorification

Someone takes child under his wing.

Child admires person who boasts of violent accomplishments.

Person enjoys respect from others. Oh to be like him, safe and respected.

■ Belligerency Stage

Child gets bigger and older.

Reflection about his circumstances and his dilemma and the double standard: Good values will kill him. Bad values may save him.

Moment of retaliation brought on by real threat: If child loses, child may die. If child wins, child may live. He thinks about weapons.

Child wins! Child is praised and newly regarded, something he didn't even anticipate. Child swears he'll never return to old identity.