

2-HOUR WORKSHOP FOR PARENTS

(INCLUDES WATCHING 93 MINUTE FILM)

Introduce the film by saying that this film is based on true stories -- everything in it actually happened. Show the 3 sample interviews in "Special Features" on the DVD before showing the film.

To viewers: Prepare to watch the film by making the assumption that the best way you can help your child is imagining you are in his/her position. See yourself as the child and focus on your relationship with your own parents. Many times behavior patterns, especially parenting styles, are passed down from generation to generation -- so look for your child, yourself, and your parents in this film.

----- WATCH THE FILM "YOUTH VIOLENCE: INSIDE THE SKIN" -----

Please don't answer out loud, but did you see your child in this film? Yourself? Your parents? Other parents or children that you know?

- **This refers to the scene where Kisha and James were in bed listening to the drunk boyfriend refusing to leave the apartment:**

One of our interviewees was a 13 year old boy who was incarcerated for rape. When we asked what his childhood was like, he responded that he remembered being really angry when he lay in bed and heard his mom and her boyfriend fighting in the next room. He described how helpless he felt. Children feel helpless and angry when those who are supposed to be in control (the adults) are not in control. Some of these children grow up with major control issues and act out their anger in forceful ways later in life. This type of child feels a strong need to exert control with aggression and sometimes with weapons to give him/her more control. The persons he/she is angry toward have long since gone from his/her life, but the anger lives on. It builds up as a pressure that must be released or can be triggered instantly by a word or action that associates to the childhood experience. How can a child learn to manage this type of anger? Without a great deal of intervention, the child must wait until he/she becomes old enough to see that parents aren't perfect -- and he/she learns to forgive them. This can be very hard psychological work and usually requires the maturity of an adult mind. It is important that the parents watching this film ask themselves if they have forgiven their own parents for their aggressive actions -- for being imperfect -- which is the natural expectation of every child.

- **James' mother's friend, Sadie:** Note the value of having a supportive person or group. It's very important to have someone with a clear head and perspective when you are immersed in difficult experiences with your child or other family members. Find and be a support.

- **When Kisha walked out to meet Akievo and the gang, we were watching a violent scene on the television. Kisha "walked through" the picture of the hand with a blood drop on each finger. This symbolizes a question: Did Kisha have the blood of Sean on her hands?** In our workshops, some parents have pointed out that Kisha and James had the same mom (who was a good mom, just overworked and had poor judgment with men). Kisha told the boys not to get involved in the gang, but did so herself. Is this a contradiction? Not according to our interviews. Kisha, a teenage girl, had more desire than James to follow the "cool" crowd;

she wanted the attention of an older male. She didn't understand that her involvement opened the door for other kids to follow. She didn't see that what she did affected others, regardless of her intentions. She forged the path to the gang and there was nothing she could do to stop others from using it.

- **The model for the character of James** was a student from UAB named Carlos. Carlos was on the script writing team for this film. He told us that if it hadn't been for his mom, he would have ended up in jail or dead like all of his friends from high school. His mom kept him close, kept him busy with sports, and told him he could "amount to something some day". Kids are biologically wired to seek their group -- their family, their buddies. They're like puppies and are group animals. Later they are able to see themselves as separate and think for themselves. But until they are past puberty and actually begin to develop as independent, thinking adults (this is usually mid-to-late teens), it is almost impossible to teach them to think for themselves. Therefore, if parents do not provide the strong, emotional link that they seek, they will look for it elsewhere.

For their own protection, we keep trying to teach them how to stand on their own feet -- but this will never work because of their biological development. We try to teach them how to analyze a situation or a person to be sure that the person has the child's best interest in mind and is not just using the child for gang dirty work or to support the power needs of a ego-centric personality -- such as a gang leader. We all know that kids are used by gangs -- and the kids think those in the gang really care. (This doesn't have to be a formal "gang" but a group of friends who hang together.) So we would like to teach the child to ask "does this person have my best interest in mind? Does he/she really care about what happens to me?" Most kids (and adults, for that matter) who are in need of personal support cannot see the person objectively enough to answer this question truthfully. All of our perceptions are colored by what we need and want in life. We heard incarcerated teens say repeatedly, "I was hanging with the wrong crowd." We tell our children everyday, "Don't get involved with those people. They're a bad influence." We must realize that they are at an age that seeing objectively, thinking independently, is virtually impossible for them to do because of their biological and emotional development. Parents or a positive adult figure must provide "the group" or the child will seek a supportive environment elsewhere. Don't blame the child for this; it is his/her nature as a human being. Parents must ask themselves some very hard questions if their kids get involved with "the wrong crowd".

"The wrong crowd" is more alluring than the "right crowd" if home and family connection isn't strongly established. "The right crowd" is less glamorous and, on the surface, appears to be less powerful. A child who doesn't have a strong home connection is deeply angry because he/she has not been given something vital. As Dr. Moyana said, "There are 2 basic human needs, love and shelter." If these are not given, the child is severely handicapped. This handicap causes the child to seek power, to utilize force, to make things right inside -- so he/she seeks a forceful alliance on the outside to try to correct this problem. The wrong crowd uses force to get what they want. This looks like true power to the child who feels powerless to make parents care. So he/she looks for the group that can give him/her a sense of control to require love, to punish parents (or someone else) because of the very deep anger the child has toward the injustices in his/her life.

- **Michael:** This is the story of what happens when a good kid with good parents gets pushed to the breaking point. We're all busy, we're all preoccupied with our own problems, but we must learn how to stop long enough to see the danger signals in our children. The courts are full of Michaels.

- **The killing of Anne:**

In the end, Anne's temper cost her her life. How did she develop such a bad temper? Her mom pulled away from her, lost in her own depression, during the divorce. Anne needed her mom -- especially since her dad was gone -- but there was nothing she could do about it. She was deeply angry at her mom and she learned to hate situations where she had no control over outcomes. She learned to explode to try to get attention from her mom or make things go her way.

Why did Mark kill Anne? He was the "follower" in the relationship with Brad, yet he took it upon himself to do a violent act against another human being. Remember when Mark said "I can't believe we just got away with that," and Brad said "What's this "me" shit?" Right after that you see the boys in the car and hear Brad tell Mark, in so many words, that he's a coward. That's how leaders manipulate followers. Because of the nature of the relationship, followers are capable of doing terrible things even when the leaders don't set them up. When a young person needs to be loved, to show strength, to run in the fast lane with the big boys, these things happen -- and they are happening every day.

- **Closing thoughts:**

To bring this down to the essentials, the most important ingredient -- and the hardest thing to give -- is love. Psychology texts will tell you that love is a basic human requirement. When it is not there in early childhood, the child develops a very deep sense that something is wrong, and the child feels that somehow this must be righted. This translates into an anger that never goes away UNLESS as an adult, the child learns self-love and is able to see and forgive the parents inability to give the love that the child needed. This is true for your children and it's true for you. This psychological work is not possible until the child matures to the point of seeing him/herself as a separate entity, responsible for his/her actions. Until a person can step out of self and see him/herself, this individual identity cannot develop, and then one is able to "work on him/herself" because a measure of objectivity is possible, and enough self-discipline has generally developed by this time to give the "child" a method for self-improvement, for re-programming childhood traumas.

Do you see your child in this film? Yourself? Your parents?

Put yourself in your child's shoes. Imagine, deeply, that you are your own mom or dad and that this child is you. You have learned to be self-sufficient for your own survival -- and now you must learn to be sensitive and vulnerable so that you can feel what your child is feeling. Until you can feel what your child is feeling and see through your child's eyes, you will not be able to make the connection that could possibly save your child. If you feel that your child has stopped communicating with you, ask yourself when is the last time you confided in your child that you were afraid or confused? Showing your vulnerability to your child will invite your child to share his/her own fears. It's a 2 way street. Remember parents don't have to be perfect.