

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

LOREN W. CHRISTENSEN

Author of Surviving a School Shooting

School shootings are among the most frightening and tragic episodes in society today. While there are numerous studies available about the psychology of school shooters and the social issues that spawn them, there are few resources that spell out exactly what kids and teachers can do to save themselves if there's an active shooter in the building or on campus.

Loren Christensen has filled that void. His latest book, *Surviving a School Shooting*, is a detailed plan of action for parents, teachers, and students that helps them sort out the best responses to a school shooting *before* an incident occurs. Should you flee or hide? If so, where? Should you fight back? If so, how? Christensen gets into all these topics and much more in this invaluable guide.

PALADIN PRESS: Why did you write *Surviving a School Shooting*?

LOREN W. CHRISTENSEN: For the same reason I wrote *Surviving Workplace Violence*: there wasn't another book on the market that addressed the issue of what to do when bullets start flying. There is a great deal of literature on the psychology of workplace violence and the psychology of a school shooter, but there was little out there on what to do when in the moment. What do you when someone rushes into your classroom, and screams, "A kid has gone insane and is shooting everyone in his sight! And he's coming this way!"

I wanted to offer a product that prepares parents, teachers, and students for such a horrific event. *Surviving a School Shooting* offers solid information that is highly readable on how to mentally prepare in advance for a shooting, how to instantly react, how to take cover, hide, rescue injured people, escape, and even how to fight back using everyday objects in the school as weapons of self-defense.

PP: For generations, countless kids have been bullied, suffered broken romantic relationships, or felt ostracized at school, but they didn't lash out by murdering their schoolmates. What has changed? Was there a particular incident that spawned this development, or an era when school shootings became more frequent and part of the national consciousness?

LWC: This is one of many questions that various individuals and groups are studying right now. Will they find one answer? No. Will they agree on all the answers? Probably not. If I were to list a few things off the top of my head that are greatly different now from how they were 40 years ago, they would be:

- The growth of and the availability of more sophisticated firepower. While only a few school shooters have used sophisticated weaponry—one of the shooters at Columbine fired a 9mm Intratec Tec-9 semiautomatic—just the existence of such

weapons and their visibility in videogames and movies likely stirs the imagination of some kids. When I was in school, there was only Wild Bill Hickok's six shooter.

- The sheer volume of violent media—movies, TV, videogames, and music videos. While these things don't affect everyone, the stats show that many school shooters were fascinated by them. Also, a general theme that runs through so many of these is that all problems can be easily settled with a gun or bomb. The school shooter in Finland, Matti Juhani Saari, liked a German Goth singer named Wumpscut and quoted his lyrics on Youtube. Some of Wumpscut's songs refer to child murder and burned corpses. One song is titled "Death for the Masses." Well, the Finnish shooter indeed brought death to the masses and then burned some of their corpses with Molotov cocktails.
- The Internet, specifically YouTube and MySpace. As if it weren't bad enough that there are blogs and chat rooms where people can criticize, defame, challenge, mock, and threaten others, now these same types can download photos, movies, and essays on YouTube and MySpace to do the same thing. Case in point: That kid in Finland, who shot and killed 10 students and then killed himself, had earlier posted three videos on YouTube of himself shooting his gun. In one clip, he fired just below the camera and said, "You will be next." In this case, YouTube served as a forum for his narcissism and allowed him too see through the camera's eye what his victims would see.

PP: The statistics you report in the book indicate that it's difficult to establish a typical profile of a school shooter because, other than being overwhelmingly male, there is no "average" trait—they come from all sorts of backgrounds, have varying degrees of grievances, and are triggered to commit murder for a number of reasons. The one statistic that stood out is that 71 percent felt bullied, persecuted, or attacked prior to their rampage. Many schools have implemented anti-bullying awareness policies to help stifle this behavior, but has there been any indication these programs help to ease the pressure on bullied children?

LWC: There are some older studies that show such programs do work. One study, conducted in 2006, showed a reduction in name-calling, hitting, false rumors, threats, and racial comments. However, there wasn't any area that showed a reduction higher than 21 percent. That's a start, but a somewhat unimpressive one, in my view. The good news, however, is that I found what appears to be a large movement across the country to implement such programs. Hopefully, because of the sheer numbers of schools making an effort, we will find which programs work best and which ones need to be round filed.

PP: You acknowledge that many kids, not just school shooters, are fascinated with violent movies and videogames, so it must be difficult for a parent to discern where this normal interest crosses over to abnormal and worrisome. What would you consider to be red flags in this area that parents should note and address?

LWC: "Red flag" in my mind denotes obsession. If your child is obsessed over violent videogames, bloody movies, and shoot 'em up and blow 'em up television, that is a red flag. For our purposes, let's define obsession as "fanatical," "preoccupied," and "fixated." These definitions all indicate abnormal behavior in any area. Couple the viewing

obsession with dressing like their favorite entertainment media killer—*Rambo*, *Natural Born Killers*—and the red flags should be flapping as if they were in a hurricane.

PP: The examples you give of “zero tolerance” policies run amok (e.g., third graders suspended for drawing pictures of armed soldiers) are exasperating. Why don’t some school authorities and prosecutors recognize the lack of common sense in such extreme responses?

LWC: Several of the examples I give in the book are almost laugh-out-loud funny if it wasn’t for the fact that the youngsters in question were deeply embarrassed, confused, and even traumatized by their suspensions. I’m sure there are many savvy teachers and administrators who are outraged at such over-the-top policies. I’m guessing that many iron-fisted principals are functioning in a CYA mode and doing so to the detriment of the child.

Perhaps one approach is for people to write letters to newspapers, school boards, PTAs and so on, voicing their outrage and encouraging those in charge to use a little common sense. There is a large gap between a third grader drawing a picture of a soldier—which he sees on the news, in newspapers, and in magazines all the time—and a high school senior drawing a picture of himself firing a gun into the heads of figures that have the names of fellow classmates captioned underneath them.

PP: There are a handful of books available on the causes of school shootings, and even a few that address potential solutions, such as seriously addressing the bullying issue. But in your research, did you come across any that, like yours, offer proactive steps for students to take in the event of an active shooter on school grounds?

LWC: I didn’t find any that addressed the power of mental imagery as a training method, nor any that talked about how to “see” your campus as a battleground, with places to take cover and hide, and ways to use common objects as weapons for self-defense. Every teacher that I asked in the course of writing this book said that their respective schools had no plan. Quite frankly, I don’t see how school teachers and administrators can sleep at night knowing that they have no plan to protect the children we send them every day, Monday through Friday. Denial must be their sleep aid.

PP: At what grade level should parents bring up the subject of school violence with their children? How do they broach the subject without making their kids afraid to go to school?

LWC: Tough call. To state the obvious, every kid is different. For some, kindergarten might be okay, while others might not be ready until first or second grade. You also must factor in this question: How long do I want to wait to prepare my child to be safe?

Whatever age you choose to talk to your child, you want to get him or her thinking in terms of hiding, taking cover, and fleeing. One approach is to ask, “If a mean dog got into the school, where are places you can hide in your classroom? The library? The cafeteria?” Or, “If you were playing hide-and-go-seek, where are places you can hide in

your classroom? The library? The cafeteria?” This gets the kindergartner and first graders thinking about hiding places without frightening them.

If you determine that your very young child can tolerate a, shall we say, more to-the-point approach, you can ask, “If a bad guy came into your school, where can you hide in your classroom? The library? The cafeteria?” If you don’t want to mince words, you can go all the way with, “If someone came into your school with a gun, where are places you can hide in your classroom? The library? The cafeteria?”

Might this frighten your child for a few seconds or longer? Yes. Might it prepare him or her to act defensively should the worst occur? Yes.

PP: You mention the Stages of Alertness in the book. How can parents practice with children in everyday situations to ingrain these behaviors?

LWC: The popular military and law-enforcement concept called Stages of Alertness—white, yellow, orange, red, and black—is probably too sophisticated for kids under sixth grade, although it’s great for teachers and students in high school and college. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t instill in the younger ones a sense of being aware of what is going on around them.

I discuss in the book that children, even very young ones, have what is commonly called “gut instinct.” Adults feel gut instincts and kids feel gut instincts, but adults know what to do with them; kid’s don’t. Very young children can be told that there is a weird, tingly sensation deep in their stomach that’s different than a stomachache. When they feel that, they need to get away and tell someone.

As adults, and especially as parents and teachers, we must listen when kids tell us that someone scares them or somehow makes them feel funny. We can’t tell them to be leery around strangers and listen to that funny feeling and then blow them off when they come and tell us about it. We must respect what they are saying and follow up on it.

PP: What can parents do to make sure their school administrators are taking the right steps toward making the school as safe as possible?

LWC: Denial is the biggest roadblock you will face when dealing with some administrations. So you must persist. You must annoy them. When they say they haven’t taken steps, ask why. Get specific: “Why aren’t you taking steps to teach your staff and children what to do should someone come into the school to shoot them?” You must challenge every excuse they give you—and you will likely hear some doozies.

If your school still balks, take it upon yourself to do a little research to see what is being implemented by schools that are doing something. Make some calls to get a copy of such a program, one that has documented results, and present it to your principal, to parent groups, to the school board, and even to the media.

Be annoying, be the squeaky wheel, and be in their face until the right steps are taken to safeguard the children.