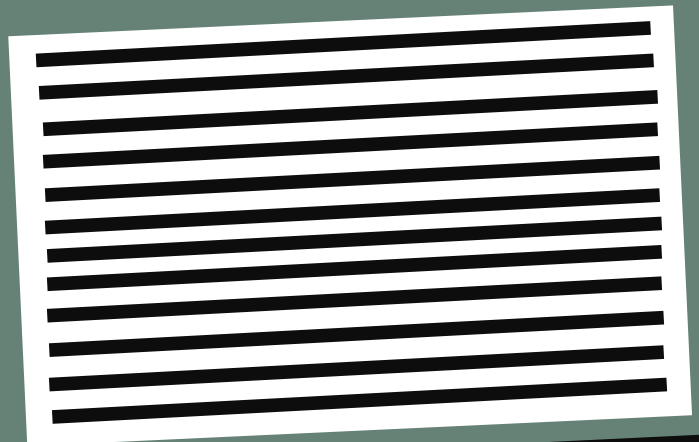





Partnering with Parents

Nurse on a mission to ‘rescue childhood’

Ten years after the horrific massacre at Columbine High School sharpened the nation’s views on youth violence, Mary Muscari sees cause for optimism — and for deep concern — about the way adolescents are growing up in America.





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— Mary Muscari

“Many things have gotten better. School shootings are horrible things, but they’re incredibly rare,” she said. “Schools are still basically a safe place. However, we have enormous issues with bullying and cyberbullying. We have too many kids who don’t realize these are nasty things to do.”

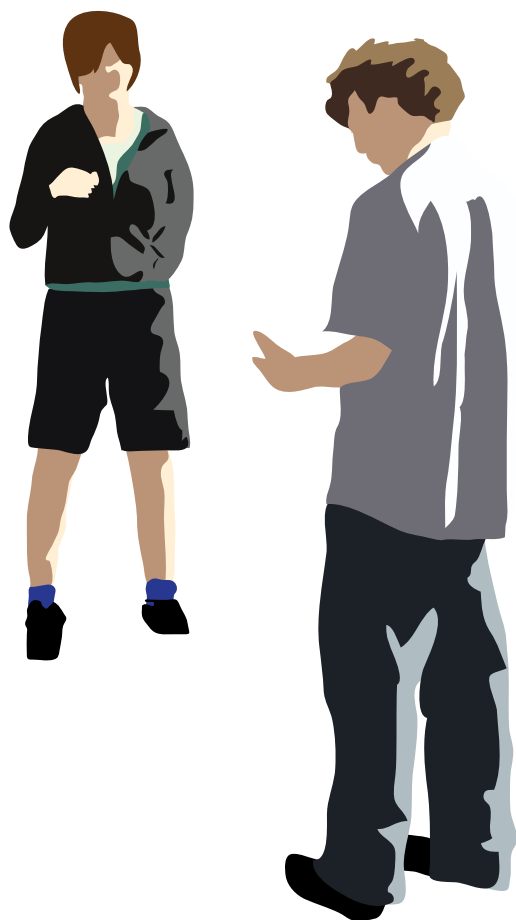
Muscari, associate professor of nursing at Binghamton University and a nationally known expert on parenting, has worked with juvenile delinquents since the early 1980s. As a pediatric nurse practitioner, she has also worked with healthy children throughout her more than 30-year career. Muscari, author of five books for parents, has conducted parenting workshops around the country on topics such as keeping kids safe from predators, bullying and how to raise nonviolent kids.

She approaches the problem of youth violence using a public health model, she said.

“We have primary, secondary and tertiary prevention,” Muscari explained. “We have kids without any issue at all, and you’re trying to keep them on an even keel. We have kids who are at risk and need more early intervention. And then we have kids who are already having problems requiring more intensive interventions.”

Muscari recalls vividly how the Columbine shootings, in which two teenagers killed 13 people and wounded 21 others before committing suicide, changed her professional life. She was scheduled to lead a youth violence workshop for teachers and counselors the week of the incident in April 1999 and was expecting perhaps 10 or 15 people to attend. After the shootings, organizers moved her to a room that could hold 75. It filled to capacity, and Muscari began making plans for what became her first book, *Not My Kid: 21 Steps to Raising a Non-Violent Child*.

The no-nonsense book, written in language any parent can understand, includes ways to help children build self-esteem, manage stress and develop tolerance. It also encourages parents



to watch for warning signs such as aggressive outbursts in preschoolers or mistreatment of animals in adolescents — and get help when they need it.

A typically reassuring passage from the book tells parents: “If raising a teenager makes you feel like you’re losing your mind, don’t worry. It’s normal — and temporary. Sparked by raging hormones, adolescence is a period of rapid physical and emotional transformation that can create a tenuous sense of balance for both teens and parents.”

Muscari continues: “Some degree of teen-parent friction is expected, but disruptive family conflict isn’t normal. Neither is persistent defiance, fighting or property destruction. This turmoil represents pathology, and it will not be outgrown. The early appearance of antisocial behavior is associated with more serious problems later in the adolescent period and on into adulthood.” She goes on to list some behaviors that warrant professional attention, including early experimentation with alcohol or drugs, a lack of close friends and themes of violence or death in writing or artwork.

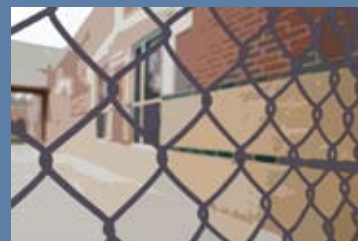
Muscari’s ability to address these concerns clearly and directly has made her not only a sought-after writer but also a popular speaker with several national organizations.

“She’s one of the most down-to-earth people I’ve met,” said Dolores Jones, director of practice, education and research for

HOW SAFE ARE OUR CHILDREN?

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there is some evidence that student safety has improved in recent years. The victimization rate of students ages 12-18 at school declined between 1992 and 2005.

However, the center reports, violence, theft, drugs and weapons continue to pose problems in schools. During the 2005-06 school



year, the most recent for which statistics are available, 86 percent of public schools reported that at least one violent crime, theft or other crime occurred at their school. In 2005, 8 percent of students in grades 9-12 reported being threatened or injured with a weapon in the previous 12 months, and 25 percent reported that drugs were made available to them on school property. In the same year, 28 percent of students ages 12-18 reported having been bullied at school during the previous six months.

Among children ages 5-18, there were 17 school-associated violent deaths during the 2005-06 school year, including 14 homicides and three suicides. In 2005, among students ages 12-18, there were about 1.5 million victims of nonfatal crimes at school, including 868,100 thefts and 628,200 violent incidents such as assaults.



Mary Muscari

the 7,000-member National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners. “She has real-life examples that she’s able to bring about kids that she’s seen in her practice. She’s able to talk about the children she has helped already.”

Jones said she considers Muscari a role model for other nurse practitioners. “Educating is one of the most vital roles that nurses play,” Jones said. “Being able to talk to the public in a way that people can understand is a special talent.”

Part of Muscari’s motivation when it comes to working on youth violence is the opportunity to break what can become a cycle of behavior.

“When you have a child who’s a victim and a child who’s a perpetrator, you really have two victims,” she said. “You have two lives that are damaged. We really should not have all these violent kids. Kids act up, of course, but the extremes that we see are a failure of society.”

Muscari begins each book project with a literature review, examining pediatric journals and other expert sources. She takes what she finds as well as what she sees in her own practice and in workshops with parents, and endeavors to come up with a book that parents can — and will — read.

“My mantra is that kids are not just small adults,” said Muscari, whose core philosophy could be summed up as old-fashioned parenting for today’s times.

“Some of the things you want to do with kids are timeless,” she said. “They need values. We know that kids want values — and that if they don’t get them at home they’ll look elsewhere for them. Usually when they look on their own they don’t find very good ones. We know that kids want and need attention and they’ll do anything to get it. Negative behavior gets attention faster than positive behavior. It’s easier to be bad than it is to be good. So some of these things don’t change with time.

“What I try to do is to say, ‘Now how can we do that today?’ We do need to spend more time with kids; it’s not just quality. They want quantity, too. What I try to do is work with parents to find time and to say, ‘Here are some options.’”

That might mean turning breakfast into the family meal if everyone’s too busy to sit down to dinner together, for instance.

Muscari acknowledges that parents today face certain new challenges.

The increased sexualization of childhood is one, she said, recounting the story of a mother who struggled to find a bathing suit appropriate for her young daughter. Another is the way technology has changed adolescents’ dating relationships, allowing teens to be in touch through text messages and e-mail essentially all day and all night.

MARY MUSCARI'S BOOKS FOR PARENTS

The Everything Guide to Raising Adolescent Girls (with lead author Moira McCarthy)

The Everything Guide to Raising Adolescent Boys (with lead author Robin Elise Weiss)

Not My Kid: 21 Steps to Raising a Non-Violent Child

Not My Kid 2: Protecting Your Children from the 21 Threats of the 21st Century

Let Kids Be Kids: Rescuing Childhood

The first two are from Adams Media, while the other three were published by University of Scranton Press. Proceeds from the *Not My Kid* and *Let Kids Be Kids* books were donated to the Keep Your Child Safe and Secure Campaign, which promotes child mental health.



“Forty years ago, Mom could stop you from answering the phone,” Muscari said. “It was on the wall. I know my mom did. We didn’t have the Internet. Technology has changed the way kids relate, and it has taken away some of their social skills. Back then, we had to talk to people face to face if we wanted to talk. It’s not to say technology is a bad thing, but it can be abused.”

She also worries about how children and adults alike have become desensitized to violence through videogames, movies or other media. Muscari said she often asks people whether they thought for just a second that they were watching a movie when they saw coverage of the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. The vast majority tell her they did, she said.

Other parenting concerns have changed relatively little over time, Muscari said.

She has adopted a fight against materialism as an ongoing cause, for example. She encourages parents to ask their children in January what they received for Christmas. “You’ll see they already can’t remember many of the gifts,” she said, suggesting that parents think about whether an item will still be a prized possession years later before putting it into the shopping cart.

Muscari has many qualifications for this work, including a master’s degree in pediatrics, a doctorate in nursing as well as post-master’s certificates in psychiatric nursing and forensic nursing. But she is not a parent.

“I think it helps that I don’t have kids,” she said. “I can be objective about kids I’ve worked with as opposed to thinking about what my own kids are like. Some people say, ‘How can you write about kids when you don’t have kids?’ I think it’s an advantage because I’m never comparing to what I have. I’ve also had the advantage of work experience with perfectly healthy kids — and a lot of them — as well as kids with psychological problems who haven’t done anything illegal and kids who have broken the law. I’m fortunate to have a background that runs the gamut, from one extreme to the other.”

Muscari said she wrote her first book hoping to help at least one child. She hopes now she has had an effect on many more.

“It’s very rewarding,” she said. “There are results. And there’s no better reward than knowing you helped a kid.” ■

— Rachel Coker