

The lessons we are teaching our children

By Dean Nelson

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It's hard to imagine what the neighbor by my daughter's elementary school was thinking when he waved a gun at the kids at recess recently and set off a firecracker to scare them.

Maybe the kids were bothering his dogs, as he claims. Still, what rock has he been living under to not realize how terrifying an act like that is today? Generations before this one practiced getting under their desks in preparation for an attack by the Russians. That attack never came. Now schools have drills to keep them from getting shot from both outside and inside their buildings. Those attacks, as we all know, aren't the fabrication of a government propaganda machine. And the attacks aren't coming from a menace outside our borders.

So when the Vista Grande Elementary School children reported to a teacher that they had seen a man point a gun at them from his property adjacent to the school's playground, the school went into what they call "lockdown mode." Police responded to the principal's call, and within 11 minutes they had the man's house surrounded.

Teachers and administrators kept their cool. None of the students, my daughter told me, were afraid.

But my wife and I were terrified. Fort Worth, Granada Hills, Littleton, Jonesborough, Paducah, all came to mind. Schools, churches, children as targets.

I was at Columbine High School this past August because I wanted to see the students go back into the building on the first day of school and face the demons that had changed -- and ended -- people's lives there. It was an eerie, mystifying sight.

So the explanation that the man in my neighborhood was just trying to scare the kids off simply doesn't cut it. It was only a BB gun, we found out later. Are kids and teachers astute enough to discern a real threat with a real gun from a perceived threat with a BB gun? He had a gun in his hand, for crying out loud, and guns just aren't props anymore.

Mitch Albom, the great Detroit sportswriter and author of "Tuesdays With Morrie," wrote in one of his columns about a drive-by shooting that killed and wounded members of a suburban football team, "Tell me again that we're safer with all of these guns out there."

When I covered the terrorized neighborhoods of Richard Ramirez, known to Orange County as the Nightstalker, for The Boston Globe, I interviewed gun-shop owners who said that gun sales were at the highest level while the killer was loose. Then I interviewed local pastors who told me that they feared for their neighborhoods -- not because the Nightstalker hadn't yet been caught, but because with all of these guns in parishioners' houses, more innocent people will be killed.

I have heard the incredible logic that, if only someone at the Baptist Church in Fort Worth had been armed, he

or she could have picked off that killer before he killed too many in the sanctuary. The logic is that, if the rest of us are as heavily armed as the nut cases, then we can neutralize them before they do too much damage.

Is that really what we've come to? That for me to feel safe anymore, I need a gun? To protect myself or my daughter from my neighbors? Or that my grade-school daughter or her teachers need weapons?

Nothing tangibly terrible happened at the school, so I am grateful for that. My daughter wasn't really traumatized. She's sleeping soundly at night. But I'm not. I just wish I could believe people when they tell me that we're all safer when we can have a gun at our fingertips, ready to point at someone who is shooting up a church, breaking into a house or teasing a dog.

Reading, writing, arithmetic, and now "lockdown mode." That's a lesson I wish the schools didn't have to teach the children.

Caption: 1 DRAWING
MIKE RITTER

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- Nelson is the director of the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University.