

WHAT BENJAMIN SMITH CAN TEACH US

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There is no formula and there are no guarantees.

You can go to every Little League game, every soccer match, every teacher conference and every school play. You can buy a nice house in a good neighborhood--it really does take a village, after all--with great services and fine schools. You can do all that and still end up with a child who goes off the rails, behaves badly, becomes a criminal.

But chances are you won't.

If Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold and, now, Benjamin Smith have made it seem that the world is spinning out of control and raising decent kids is at best a matter of rolling the dice, don't believe it.

The fact is that American kids as a group are smarter, healthier, less violent and more appreciative of their parents nowadays than at any time in recent memory. That goes for all kids--black, white, urban, suburban, poor and rich--even those whose objective circumstances would not seem to suggest a good outcome. And that is in no small measure because of their parents and the exertions they have made.

But Harris, Klebold and Smith stand out, not just because of the spectacular nature of their crimes, but also because their behavior clashes so radically with the general youthful pattern of success and decency.

Not much is known yet about life in the home from which Benjamin Smith sprang. Only the sketchiest information about his parents has emerged: mother a real estate agent and onetime member of the Wilmette village board; father a physician.

Smith grew up amid the kind of North Shore affluence that most Americans aspire to. Yet he clearly suffered from a poverty at least as pernicious as the physical, financial poverty that statisticians try to compute and Washington wages war against.

What else besides a deep spiritual-emotional poverty could explain Smith's fall--like an overripe fruit--into the arms of a bigot like Matthew Hale and his World Church of the Creator. He went in search of meaning and the best he could find was an ideology based on the color of his skin.

If Smith's life contains a lesson, it probably is the negative version of the positive lesson embodied in his most prominent victim, former Northwestern University basketball coach Ricky Byrdsong: Teach your children well. Teach tolerance. Teach respect.

And if 10 commandments are too many or you can't buy into Judeo-Christian theology, teach your kids just one: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

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