Bang Bang You’re Dead
A guide for teachers

Preface:

Bang Bang You’re Dead (BBYD) is a Showtime Original Movie that deals powerfully with the issue of school violence. Showtime is a premium movie channel that is broadcast over satellite and cable channels. It is available in the metro-Denver area. It will premiere on October 13 and will be rebroadcast regularly for at least six months. Depending on ratings and other economic factors, it may run longer on Showtime and its related networks.

This movie is not endorsed by the Jefferson County Education (JCEA) Association, the Colorado Education Association, or the National Education Association. However, the Association at all levels has worked successfully with Showtime in an attempt to mitigate the possible negative impact the movie, and its graphic content, may have on our own traumatized community, as well as others across the nation. Also, please note that neither the Jeffco PTA nor Jeffco Public Schools has endorsed this film.

JCEA has facilitated a number of preview screenings to a cross section of adult audiences in Jefferson County, Colorado. The reaction to the movie has been from “This is irresponsible exploitation; how can we keep this off the air?” to “Every teacher and student in America ought to see this film.” Such varied reactions are to be expected.

BBYD is not a dramatic reenactment or documentary about the tragedy on April 20, 1999, nor is it intended to be. It is a movie based on the writing of playwright William Mastrosimone, who wrote a widely performed, one-act play of the same name. The movie parallels the themes of his play and is intended to be provocative. It achieves that purpose.

To promote positive discussion and reflection, Showtime worked with KIDSNET to produce a community-based discussion guide. You can access that guide at www.kidsnet.org and at www.sho.con/bbyd/. This guide includes the following advisory:

“The content of this film may disturb some viewers. Please have professionals available to support viewing of this program. There may be more than one way to offer guided viewing for students who need extra support. Previewing by parents and teachers is strongly recommended.”

We agree. We also strongly urge any teacher planning to use the film as part of an instructional program to check with his/her principal regarding compliance with district policies, especially regarding “controversial materials” and parental notification.

Further because of the sensitive issues raised in the film—and the need to provide appropriate mental health support—teachers should consult with members of the school’s counseling department.

Our concern with the content of the movie is primarily two fold.

1. BBYD contains many visual and sound cues that may trigger strong, and unexpected emotional responses from people who are struggling to live with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). That includes many in our community and, as a result of 9/11, many across the nation.
Unfortunately, many people who experience PTSD may not be aware of the reasons for their emotional responses. Some symptoms include:

- Flashbacks and nightmares
- Trouble eating or sleeping
- Startled reactions
- Crying
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering
- Difficulty making decisions
- Headaches or stomachaches with no physical cause
- Withdrawal or isolation
- Feeling empty or emotionally numb; feelings of shock, anger, helplessness
- Suicidal feelings or threats

While these sorts of reactions are normal responses, anyone who is concerned is urged to reach out and talk to someone he/she trusts. Talking to a friend, your parents, a school counselor, teacher, doctor, or minister. You may also call the 24-hour emergency line at the Jefferson Center for Mental Health: (303) 425-0300. Find out more about PTSD by visiting: http://www.jeffersonmentalhealth.org/stress.html

2. BBYD contains an especially graphic youth suicide scene that has alarmed our mental health community. Youth suicide is the second or third leading cause of death among America’s youth, and our community is not immune. One of our high schools is currently experiencing what is called cluster suicides. Many of their students, as well as those in other schools are considered at-risk of suicide contagion. Some warning signs for suicide are:

- Suicide threats
- Previous suicide attempts
- Statements revealing a desire to die
- Sudden changes in behavior such as withdrawal, apathy, moodiness, anger
- Depression, which may manifest itself in crying, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, and statements about hopelessness and worthlessness
- A preoccupation with and asking questions about death
- Trouble concentrating and making decisions
- Loss of interest in appearance
- Taking unnecessary risks
- Acquiring a weapon
- Failing to take prescribed medication or following required diets
- Making final arrangement, such as giving away personal possessions
- Sudden appearance of happiness and calmness after a period of some of the characteristics listed above

Teachers should also be aware that the risk of youth suicide increases if a close friend or family member has died as a result of suicide or tragic accident.

If you observe these signs, contact a counselor or mental health professional for a consultation as soon as possible. **Please note: talking with youth about suicide or any other self-destructive behaviors does not encourage or promote such behaviors.**

The Association believes that mentally health youth will deal appropriately with this movie. We also believe that through constructive dialogues, teachers can help students gain a deeper understanding of the more positive themes and outcomes of BBYD.
—Teacher guide—

There are many possible approaches to using BBYD as a teaching tool. This guide presents two options that can either be taught separately or combined. The important thing to remember is that the choice you make should be comfortable for you, as well as be age and developmentally appropriate for your students.

As you plan, identify the curriculum standards and objectives as a part of this lesson plan.

Because the movie runs about 1.5 hours, normal viewing will need to be done over a series of days. This fact may actually help in the processing of the film.

Teachers are advised not to show the film in one day, even if time permits, unless adequate time is provided for preparation, viewing, debriefing and follow-up.

The objectives of this guide are to:
1. Provide a structured, process for evaluating and critiquing the movie.
2. Provide an opportunity to assess your school/classroom climate/environment and the power of the individual to make a positive difference.
3. Understand the role that bullying, stereotyping and harassment play in contributing to violence.
4. Reinforce that violence and/or self-destruction are not viable, rational options.

Option I:

Prior to viewing the film:
1. Assign every student in the class one of the following characters to observe throughout the movie: Trevor (the “mad bomber”), Sean (leader of the Troggs), Val Duncan (drama teacher), Principal Meyer, Jenny (the new girl in school), Mr. Adams (Trevor’s father), Mrs. Adams (Trevor’s mother), Brad (#32 on the football team), Mark (#44 on the football team).
2. Define terms: bullying, harassment, stereotyping, “zero tolerance”
3. Discussion questions: Ask students to focus on the three questions below as they observe their characters in the movie.
   a. Throughout the movie, what choices did your character make that had an impact on others? What were the consequences of those choices on themselves and/or other?
   b. What factors, events, or pressures affected those choices?
   c. Did your character have other choices he/she could have made? What were they? Why didn’t they choose them?

After the movie:
1. Discuss the three questions above. Teachers may ask students to respond individually or may group them based on the character observed. By working in small groups, students may feel more comfortable in sharing their views, thus stimulating more thought and discussion.
2. Answer these questions: Again, this could be done in small groups with a report out, as a whole class discussion, or as a writing assignment.
   a. How is Rivervale High School like our school? How is it different?
   b. Because this is a movie dramatization, characters and situations are greatly exaggerated. Given that, what are some of the stereotypes that are found in the movie? How were they reinforced? Why do we, as human beings, create stereotypes? Did the stereotypes in this
movie impact the choices your observed character made in the movie? Why is it so difficult for all of us to break out of the mold? Is it more difficult for teens?

c. What ultimately caused the Trogs and Trevor to determine that violence was their only answer? Was it the only answer; what other choices did they have? How did they get so isolated from the rest of the students? How does the bullying and harassment in this movie compare to what goes on in our school? What can we do about that?

d. Why does Trevor ultimately stop the tragedy? Did his relationship with Mr. D and Jenny impact his final choice? Why? If you were in the school in this movie, would you have reached out to Trevor? To the Trogs? Why/why not?

e. At the end of the play (within the movie), what does Trevor’s character, Josh, learn about the choice he made to use violence?

**Option II:**

Option II is a more linear approach. This set of questions would be useful for teachers planning to show the film in smaller segments with discussion time sprinkled throughout the lesson. It can be combined with the first half of Option I.

1. How is the climate of the school in this movie like our school? How is it different?

2. Define stereotype. List the stereotyped groups at our school. How are these groups identified within the school? Why do human beings stereotype others? (Consider both the positive and negative effects of stereotyping.) What factors create the need to pigeonhole a person based on a small piece of information?

3. Most schools have instituted a zero tolerance policy. What does zero tolerance mean at your school? Does zero tolerance create more feelings of safety for students and parents? How does the use of metal detectors, school resource officers, lockdown drills, etc. affect the climate of a school, both positively and negatively? How does zero tolerance aid or detract from the goal of honoring diversity? Bullying can take many forms. Create a continuum of bullying behaviors from mild to severe. Please note how males and females employ different bullying techniques.

4. Depression is often the result of anger turned inward. List the factors in Trevor’s life that are contributing to his anger. (Parent discounting, stereotyping, bullying, community reaction) How do Trevor and his new friends process their anger? (Withdrawal, sarcasm, rehearsed violence, acted out violence, suicidal thoughts)

5. Many teens and families operate under a “code of silence,” yet it takes one person to notify the appropriate people if a dangerous situation arises. What is the difference between tattling and telling? What are the feared responses to tattling? What are the positive outcomes of telling? Do you think you or your classmates would break the code of silence under the following circumstances:
   - If you knew a weapon was at school either on the person, in their car or locker?
   - If you knew a person was a threat to themselves or suicidal?
   - How would you feel if you knew but didn’t tell and the end result was tragic?

6. Why does Trevor not follow through with his suicidal plans? (Please note that statistically boys are more apt to be successful, while girls are more apt to use a suicide attempt as a cry for help.)

7. Val Duncan, the drama teacher, demonstrates the power of one person. What does he see in Trevor that led him to cast Trevor in the role of “Shooter” for the play? Mr. Duncan challenged Trevor with the question, “Why don’t you decide who you are before someone else does?” What does that question imply? What are the barriers or catalysts to self-determination? Why do so many teens struggle to break out of the mold?

8. Everyone needs to connect with others. What about the Trogs appeals to Trevor? How does the new girl at school create a lifeline for Trevor? What elements of independent thinking does she exhibit?
9. Social scientists note that our society has created a culture of victim hood. In what ways does the movie reinforce this concept? Which characters captured our empathy? Why? Who are the victims and how does a person’s viewpoint alter the list of who in the film qualifies for victim status?

10. How do people respond when feeling victimized, fearful and hopeless? Trevor had two paths he could take: Be the “X” or be the perpetrator. What is the “X” Mr. Duncan referred to? How can individuals, families, schools, and communities help cultivate the “X” factor? Which of the paths mentioned above takes more strength of character?

11. Most of the adults in the film appear to be rather inept. What could/should the adults in the school or community have done to provide better role modeling, embrace diversity, and avert tragedy? Consider the role of the principal, school counselor, teachers, and Trevor’s parents.

**Reflection Questions:**
- Write a real life postscript to the film. What happens to Trevor, the Trogs, the Jocks, and the school personnel?
- Postulate: Would Trevor have acted to stop the Trogs attack on the school had he not seen the consequences of their actions in the play?
- How does Trevor demonstrate the power of one person with the Trogs? In the school? In the community?

The following individuals provided significant contributions to this guide: Julie Stamper (Counselor at Pomona high School), Natalie Portman-Marsh (School Services Manager for the Jefferson Center for Mental Health), Marta Murray (President of the Jeffco PTA), and Dexter Meyer (JCEA Director of Communications).

Produced by JCEA Communications

Jefferson County Education Association
1050 Wadsworth Blvd., Lakewood, CO 80214
303-232-6405/Fax: 303-248-2215/Web: jcea-cea.org