

Family Dynamics and School Violence

A review of the film



We Need to Talk About Kevin

(2011)

Lynne Ramsay (Director)



Reviewed by

[April Bradley](#)

[Erin Olufs](#)

We Need to Talk About Kevin, directed by Lynne Ramsay, is based on the novel of the same name by Lionel Shriver (2011). It stars Tilda Swinton as Eva, a mother coping with the emotional trauma and social ostracism caused by her son's mass killing at his high school. Excellent acting and character development provide an engrossing and haunting experience.

Unexpectedly, the focus of the film is not Kevin's violence but the dynamics of the mother-son relationship. Flashbacks from Eva's memory tell the story of her and Kevin (played by Jasper Newel at age six and Ezra Miller as a teen). The film captures many serious family issues, such as postpartum depression, substance abuse, poor communication, ambivalent attachment, difficult temperament, and child behavior problems.

The story highlights the dynamics between Eva's depressive behavior and frustration with Kevin and Kevin's noncompliance and ambivalent attachment style. Kevin grows from a quiet, developmentally delayed, oppositional child into a withdrawn, noncompliant, and sadistic teenager. The power struggle between Eva and Kevin continues to develop until Kevin's final act.

The film provides no definitive answers to the nature–nurture question, but one is left to conclude that Kevin’s violent behavior is a product of the interaction between the two. Kevin’s difficult temperament from birth, delayed developmental milestones, sociopathic impression management, and oppositional behavior lend themselves to a biological explanation for his behavior.

However, a significant portion of the film highlights parenting issues and the problematic attachment between Kevin and Eva. Eva is depicted as depressed through much of the film, beginning during the pregnancy. Some research suggests that maternal depression is linked to much higher rates of noncompliance and antisocial behavior in children (Gross, Shaw, Burwell, & Nagin, 2009). In addition, children who are more temperamentally difficult get more negative feedback from their parents during problem-solving tasks (Gauvain & Fagot, 1995) and are more likely to be criticized by parents (Rutter & Quinton, 1984). These problems are exacerbated by maternal depression.

Kevin appears to display an ambivalent attachment style with his mother. Infants and young children with ambivalent attachment will often seek contact with a caregiver but angrily resist that contact when it is achieved. Mothers of ambivalent children tend to be less responsive to their children’s needs. They are often inconsistent with appropriate and neglectful responses, resulting in their children’s inability to use them for comfort or management of their emotions (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978).

Kevin and Eva’s relationship also fits Patterson’s (1982) early childhood coercion model (ECCM), in which parent–child interactions are characterized by hostility and negative emotionality and are maintained through mutual reinforcement (Keenan & Shaw, 1995). The ECCM assumes that coercive parent–child interactions originate in early childhood. It also assumes that child temperament influences the quality of interactions with parents and harsh parenting strategies; when children are temperamentally difficult and react to parental requests with anger or resistance, their parents also become negative and are increasingly angry and hostile in their responses toward their child. This cycle of child negativity and increasingly harsh parenting leads to coercive interaction cycles (Scaramella & Leve, 2004).

Whether due to nature or nurture or a combination, Kevin exhibits many of the characteristics found in school shooters. He has a history of behavior problems, antisocial and narcissistic traits, and social marginalization (O’Toole, 2000), as well as a conflicted relationship with his parents. His parents are accepting, or at least avoidant, of pathological behavior. He lacks intimate relationships with family members and has access to weapons. However, the presence of these characteristics does not help in identifying future school violence, as many juveniles who never commit a violent crime exhibit these characteristics.

We Need to Talk About Kevin is an exceptional and haunting film that stays with the viewer. The lack of resolution in the conflicted mother–son relationship and lack of explanation for the violence, while realistic, is unsatisfying. The painful portrayal of ongoing

trauma and sense of loss for the survivors (both Eva and the community) give the viewer some sense of the emotional difficulties for survivors of this type of violence.

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