Can we escape the violence?

It has been a difficult year in education and it has ended badly, with an unspeakable tragedy in Connecticut. It will be impossible to enjoy Christmas without thinking of the parents in Sandy Hook who, quite unexpectedly, have had their young children taken away from them.

Since 1980, an astonishing 297 children and adults have been killed in US schools either by their peers or by young adolescents who have recently left school. Easy access to guns is clearly a factor and we can be thankful that this is not the case here.

But this is where any complacency should end. The urban riots of two years ago in our cities saw children and adolescents using extreme violence against general targets. It's hard to forget the images of a group of youths, many of them school age, walking down a local high street in Birmingham and firing guns at a police helicopter. School arson is a very widespread violent crime and is worse in Britain than anywhere else in the world. Gang-related killings among youths, especially in London, reached a high point last year.

Until recently, the majority of school child-on-child killings took place in the USA in the context of gang feuds, money, drugs or girlfriends. Much the same things adult men, especially those bordering on or fully engaged with a criminal sub-culture, fight about. Like the arson and gang violence in the UK, these are socially enacted crimes or have some sort of 'social' motive, no matter how twisted or misplaced.

Since the mid '90s however, the pattern of child killings within schools in the US has been changing. Most are single or paired young men 'snapping' and slaughtering many teachers and students at random. Very frequently they kill their parents. Very frequently they are highly intelligent, yet often the trigger is an inconsequential slight or argument that breaks the camel's back. The pattern emerging is one of young isolated males who are depressed, even suicidal and who feel inferior, powerless and angry. And the crimes are shifting from the urban poor to the white, often rural, middle-class.

Dr Alan Unis, a university of Washington psychologist, carried out an assessment of one teenage killer. Dr Unis found him to be depressed and even suicidal, a phenomenon reported again and again. Mood disorders like depression and suicidal feelings are happening earlier and earlier, Unis asserts.

It is isolated children who are socially retiring or socially inept and who frequently turn to the internet or 'geeky' solitary pursuits to seek solace who seem to characterise a lot of the young killers. Adolescent angst, for a tiny minority, becomes deadly when it has access to guns.

It all chimes alarmingly with UK research that our children are more stressed and unhappy and that material well-being is not compensating for loss of quality time with parents and other traditional channels for social integration.

It is also possible that the shift to personal violence in schools is being reflected by student assaults on teachers, the amount of which has risen dramatically in the last few years, according to union reports.

Patterns of isolation and alienation in class emerge quite early and a very simple idea from Tabitha Smith in our Primary File starts to address the problem of the shy child who never speaks up, or the child who hides a profound distress. Her article 'Why every child needs a one-page profile' can give teachers a profound insight into the personality and inner life of each child and help teachers respond to issues as they arise. The idea here is to bring a child's feelings to the surface so they do not fester and corrode a child's sense of well-being. It's the exact reverse to the practice observed in the article 'Dubious emotional signals' of bribing a child to stop crying with stickers. Refusing to acknowledge legitimate feelings of distress is not the right way to build emotionally intelligent children. We need to change the way we handle young children so that the school culture helps prevent other tendencies in children's social existence that drive them towards violence.

Schools are under pressure to deliver results rather than happy children. Yet those schools who build a very supportive pastoral/tutoring system that can link personal and learning support often produce the best academic returns. Personal tutoring, as we discussed in the last issue, will emerge as a major influence in education over the next few years, for good educational reasons, but also, sadly, as a pre-emptive strategy to deal with the darker forces in our societies.