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Early Intervention to Prevent Violence

By Linda Lumsden

With most social problems it makes sense—both practically and financially—to be proactive and provide intervention at the earliest possible moment rather than waiting to respond until issues escalate further or become more deeply entrenched. The problem of youth violence is no exception. If children who show early signs of antisocial behavior are provided with support and services at a young age, they may be able to be diverted from a course that will ultimately end in violence or delinquency.

Although schools should not be expected to shoulder the full weight of dealing with students who demonstrate evidence of emotional or behavioral disturbance, they do have a key role to play.

In fact, there is evidence that teachers of young children are able to predict with a high degree of accuracy which of their students will engage in delinquent behavior as they grow older. FBI agent Terry Royster notes that teachers, who observe and interact with students on a daily basis over time, are more reliable sources of information about which students are most troubled and in need of help than are the numerous "warning sign" lists that have been crafted by a variety of education-related organizations.

Royster says, "What I stress is to really forget the school shooter behavioral assessments and go into the classroom. Every teacher can tell you who's likely to cause trouble" (LaFee 2000).

When teachers notice a student who appears troubled and in need of help, how can schools respond in a way that meets the needs of both the student and the entire school community? The works reviewed below offer educators a sampling of possible avenues for intervening to assist troubled children and youth.

Myrna Shure discusses two primary-prevention programs designed to teach interpersonal problem-solving skills to young children.

Hill M. Walker, Bruce Stiller, and Annemieke Golly provide an overview of First Step, a program being used by schools with young children who exhibit "soft" signs of antisocial behavior such as aggression, bullying, and defiance.

Robert H. Horner, George Sugai, and Howard F. Horner approach violence prevention from the perspective of schoolwide discipline policy.

Anne Wescott Dodd emphasizes the necessity for schools to focus not only on the 3 R's but to teach and model the 3 C's—care, concern, and connection.

Dewey G. Cornell offers an overview of a variety of research-validated community, family, and school-based violence-prevention approaches and programs.

Shure, Myrna B. **Preventing Violence the Problem-Solving Way.** *Juvenile Justice Bulletin* (April 1999): 12 pages. Available from: Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, Publication Reprint/Feedback, P.O. Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20849-6000. 800-638-8736.

Several studies over the past twenty years have found that delinquent and predelinquent adolescents tend to differ from their nondelinquent peers in terms of their interpersonal cognitive problem-solving (ICPS) skills. This finding is the foundation on which two early intervention programs are built. Both focus on changing students' thinking processes instead of the problematic behaviors themselves.

I Can Problem Solve is designed for use in school settings with four- to eight-year-old children. Both this program and Raising a Thinking Child, a related program that trains parents to teach problem-solving skills to their children at home, have been recognized as exemplary juvenile delinquency prevention programs.

The ultimate goal of both programs is to prevent later, more serious behavioral problems and to help children "grow into thinking, feeling human beings who will be able to make good decisions when they reach adolescence and adulthood."

Specific ICPS skills emphasized include means-end thinking, weighing pros and cons, alternative solution thinking, and consequential thinking. Studies have found that students who are able to both think of alternative solutions and formulate means-ends plans tend to be rated high on prosocial behavior and low on impulsive or inhibited behavior.

On the other hand, children with less developed ICPS skills, in particular deficient means-ends thinking, are more likely to display "impulsive antisocial behaviors such as physical and verbal aggression, inability to delay gratification, overemotionality in the face of frustration, inability to make friends, and less tendency to show empathy or sympathy to others in distress." Deficiencies in two other ICPS skills—alternative solution thinking and consequential thinking—are strongly associated with impulsiveness, withdrawn behavior, and lack of prosocial skills.

Both programs focus on helping children develop a habit of generating and evaluating multiple possible ways of getting their needs met. There is evidence that children exposed to the training improve their problem-solving abilities. Academic improvement, though not a stated objective of the programs, also tends to occur among children who receive the training at home and/or at school. A followup study found that positive effects of training had been largely maintained.

Walker, Hill M.; Bruce Stiller; and Annemieke Golly. **"First Step to Success: A Collaborative Home-School Intervention for Preventing Antisocial Behavior at the Point of School Entry."** *Young Exceptional Children* 1, 2 (Winter 1998): 2-6. Available from: Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403. 541-346-3592. \$5.00. <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~ivdb/index.html>

If children show signs of antisocial behavior, the earlier an intervention can be initiated, the greater the likelihood they can learn more appropriate ways of responding to others and thereby be diverted from forming deeply embedded, and ever escalating, patterns of antisocial behavior.

One intervention program being used with young children who exhibit "soft" signs of antisocial behavior, such as aggression, bullying, and defiance, is called First Step to Success. The two- to three-month program strives to increase students' adaptive behavior and time engaged in teacher-assigned tasks while decreasing aggressive and other forms of maladaptive behavior.

The program consists of three modules: early detection, school intervention, and home intervention. The early detection module employs a universal screening process that ranges from teacher nomination to use of rank ordering, teacher ratings, and direct observations.

The school intervention component is based on a modified version of CLASS: Contingencies for Learning Academic and Social Skills. It initially involves a program consultant who works with the students; later the student's classroom teacher assumes responsibility for administering the intervention program. A green/red card used by the consultant, and later on by the teacher, gives the student behavioral feedback and is also tied to a point system in which students can earn access to special activities and privileges.

Finally, the home-intervention module of the program, called homeBase, enlists the support of the child's parents, who receive instruction from the program consultant in six skills critical to school success: (1) communication and sharing at school, (2) cooperation, (3) limit setting, (4) problem-solving, (5) friendship making, and (6) developing confidence. Parents, after receiving training themselves, teach their children these skills, provide them with opportunities for practicing the skills, and reward their children for using the skills.

Followup studies have shown positive effects persisting for up to two years following a child's exposure to First Step.

Horner, Robert H.; George Sugai, and Howard F. Horner. "**A Schoolwide Approach to Student Discipline.**" *The School Administrator* (February 2000): 20-23. Available from: AASA Distribution Center, PO Box 411, Annapolis Junction, MD 20701. 888-782-2272. \$7.70 for complete issue.

Few would argue that a goal of school leaders should be to reduce dangerous and disruptive behavior by students. According to Horner and colleagues, principals can take three steps to reduce disruptive behavior.

First, schools should identify, define, teach, and support a small set of expected behaviors rather than presenting students with a laundry list of unacceptable behaviors. When the emphasis is on affirming desired student behavior instead of on what students are not supposed to do, a more positive tone is set for establishing and maintaining schoolwide discipline. Having a limited number of positively framed, overarching rules for conduct (such as be safe, be respectful, be responsible, be kind) can assist students in cultivating socially appropriate norms.

Second, it is important for schools to develop a distinct discipline system to deal with students who consistently violate behavioral expectations. To increase adult supervision and monitoring of these students, some schools use check-in and check-out procedures. These procedures can be implemented

with only minimal staff time and commitment and have the potential to improve educational and social success among students at risk.

Finally, for the 1 to 7 percent of students with entrenched, high-intensity problem behaviors that have been unresponsive to traditional intervention, individualized behavioral support based on a functional assessment of the student is often the best way to proceed, say the authors.

Horner and colleagues identify six "traps," or faulty assumptions about school discipline, administrators can get caught in: (1) Getting tough is enough; (2) focusing on the difficult; (3) looking for the quick fix; (4) finding one powerful trick; (5) believing someone else has the solution; and (6) believing more is better.

If administrators make schoolwide discipline a high priority and embrace practices that are research-validated, schools can do much to reach troubled children and youth and perhaps prevent another school shooting.

Dodd, Anne Wescott. "**Making Schools Safe for All Students: Why Schools Need To Teach More Than the 3 R's.**" *NASSP Bulletin* (March 2000): 24-31. Available from: National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1904 Association Drive, Reston, VA 20191. 703-860-0200. \$15.00.

Driven by a desire to prevent violent outbursts in the nation's schools, many administrators have stepped up physical security in their buildings by installing metal detectors and video cameras, requiring students and staff to wear ID badges, and hiring police officers and security guards. Dodd questions whether adopting practices common in prisons will make schools safer or just more secure.

The body of the article explores the concept of the schoolhome (as opposed to schoolhouse) and the necessity for schools to focus not only on the 3 R's but to teach and model the 3 C's—care, concern, and connection. A schoolhome is a place where all students feel valued and respected by both adults and peers, and, in turn, value and respect those with whom and from whom they learn.

According to Dodd, teachers interested in creating a classroom climate characterized by respect and collaboration should do the following:

- Examine what they teach and what they ask students to do while attempting to assume the

students' perspective.

- Listen to students and give them opportunities to share their concerns.
- Give students choices and responsibilities within the class.
- Think in terms of collaborative problem-solving rather than punishment when responding to particularly challenging students.
- Find ways to connect learning to the world outside the classroom.
- Make student learning public and/or connected to the larger community in some way.

Dodd also notes that revising the curriculum "to be more interdisciplinary and inclusive of all cultures, races, and genders" can provide substance to schools' stated interest in making all students feel welcome and valued. All students must become convinced that "I have value as a person, I can learn, and I have a future worth working for."

Acknowledging that none of these recommendations will eliminate the problem of youth violence, Dodd stresses that usually the difference between an ultimately successful at-risk youth and his less successful counterpart is the presence of at least one caring adult. Not infrequently, that pivotal person is a teacher. Dodd suggests that if every faculty member were to "adopt" as a "secret pal" a student who was "on the edge," the resulting impact on teachers' and students' lives and their attitudes toward one another would be substantial.

Cornell, Dewey G. "**What Works in Youth Violence Prevention.**" In *Youth Violence Prevention in Virginia: A Needs Assessment*, edited by D. Cornell, A. Loper, Al Atkinson, and P. Sheras. Available from: Virginia Youth Violence Project, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22093-2495. 804-924.8929. Full text online: <http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/curry/centers/youthvio/subpages/current/special/truewhatworks.html>

This report describes a variety of community-wide, family-focused, and school-based violence-prevention strategies.

Three community-based prevention strategies are mentoring, supervised recreation, and community policing. The family-focused strategies are parent education, family therapy, and preschool programs.

Conflict-resolution training, violence-prevention counseling, social-competence development, bullying-reduction efforts, and drug education are featured in the section on school-based prevention strategies.

Conflict-resolution training teaches students "to listen carefully and respectfully to another person's point of view, accept that there are meaningful differences, and develop creative, mutually satisfactory solutions." Peers may also be trained to help mediate disputes between students. There is evidence that peer mediation and other conflict-management strategies are effective, particularly when the programs are implemented schoolwide using a "peacemaker" approach. Controlled-outcome studies found that students can learn to use conflict-resolution skills in both school and family settings. In schools studied, overall school problems declined and there were beneficial effects on student achievement.

Violence-prevention counseling programs, such as Coping Power, provide youth with constructive ways of managing their anger and resolving conflicts without fighting. These programs also strengthen students' decision-making skills. Considerable research indicates such cognitive-behavioral approaches to violence prevention reduce aggressive behavior. Some studies have also found improved school attendance and grades and lower substance-abuse rates following implementation of such a program.

Although sometimes ignored or passively accepted as the "norm" in schools, bullying can be devastating for those being picked on and victimized by their peers. Bully-Proofing Your School, one prevention program, seeks to create and maintain a school environment that is both physically and psychologically safe. This program involves "staff training, student instruction, intervention with bullies, and collaboration with victims and parents." Besides directly lowering incidents between bullies and victims, programs to stop bullying also often reduce vandalism, truancy, and fighting.

Efforts are also being made to provide social competence training for students identified as being at risk for emotional and behavioral problems. Programs such as I Can Problem Solve and the Primary Mental Health Prevention project teach recognition of others' feelings, brainstorming alternative ways of solving a problem, and consequences of choices.

Finally, drug-education programs that emphasize the interpersonal skills needed to resist negative peer pressure, as well as other programs that teach social-resistance skills, have been found effective in helping students steer clear of behavior that is destructive to themselves or others.

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