

Do We Really Want to Prevent Youth Violence?

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The recent, tragic school shootings have certainly not gone unnoticed. Television shows abound with experts explaining the cause or causes of youth violence in general and school shootings in particular. Magazines and newspapers run cover stories and devote pages to reporting and explaining what has happened. Books and articles are being written, workshops held, and school curricula being developed to create safer schools. Although generally well-intentioned, many times these work products fail to consider a basic challenge - find out what has already been demonstrated to work, and what does not work, in the specific type of setting with which one is concerned.

H. L. Mencken, a renowned journalist and political commentator of the early 20th century wrote: "For every complex problem, there is a solution that is simple, neat, and wrong". School systems, for example, often charge a particular administrator, teacher, guidance counselor, or worse yet, committee, to develop a violence prevention curriculum. Information will be sought from a variety of sources, preferably an integrated program that lays out what is to be done and by whom. Above all, it must be simple and manageable because of all the other responsibilities the school has. Too much cannot be asked of overworked, underpaid principals and teachers. And it must be politically correct. School uniforms are thought by some to hinder the constitutional right to freedom of expression. The teaching of conflict resolution skills may be opposed by some parents who see it as making their children weak and interfering with their rights to teach their sons or daughters how to handle interpersonal problems. Attempts to establish policies related to guns generates high emotion and arguments at both extremes - violence is due to too many guns or too easy access versus the assertion that the shootings would have not happened or the outcome would have been less catastrophic if school personnel had been armed. Attempts to identify and treat potentially violent youth are challenged as parents accuse authorities of selecting their child out of bias, failing to equally confront other students, and of "labeling" or "stigmatizing" their child.

For these and countless other reasons, the programs may be diluted to the point where little or nothing is done other than the most palatable, least complicated and, most likely, least

effective things. If violent incidents occur or increase, the conclusion may well be that “We tried a violence prevention program and it didn’t work so nothing will work” rather than “What was our program lacking that would have had a better chance of succeeding”?

Effective programs must be sensitive to community standards, of course. Programs that are effective in large, industrial northern cities may fit poorly the needs of smaller, rural communities. Programs that work in communities that are racially, religiously, and politically more homogeneous may fail in more diverse communities. Parochial and other private schools may differ from public schools, even those in their own neighborhoods, with respect to their needs, assets, liabilities, and resources. Programs based on prayer and religious or family values may be seen as necessary by some but as threatening or unconstitutional by others.

The development of a good program that is fiscally responsible must draw from the specifics of those successful programs that have done something quite rare - allow themselves to be evaluated as to their effectiveness. Psychologists and law enforcement personnel do know a lot about what has already been shown to work and not work and the variables that contribute to the success or failure of programs. Many of the features of successful programs are so well documented that they really are no longer subject to dispute.

Prevention programs need to start early. That doesn’t mean that programs in junior high or high school are useless. Patterns of delinquency, often involving drug use, frequently can be observed at the elementary school level. Third graders normally will not be involved in car theft but may very clearly display the poor socialization, lack of impulse control, and lack of empathy for others that warn of serious later problems.

Programs that start with young children can help interrupt the common progression from less serious to more serious offenses. The factors that contribute to worse behavior later can be altered or replaced before the inappropriate or violent patterns become more ingrained and over-learned.

Successful programs are comprehensive. They address the multiple, co-existing problems that potentially violent children display: poor social skills, poor problem solving skills, academic difficulties, low frustration tolerance, impatience and inability to delay gratification, and many others. They also are not restricted to one type of intervention or focus. Effort is directed not only at the individual child but also at his or her peers, family, siblings, and extended family as needed and works through resources such as the school, church, neighborhood, clubs, athletic teams, artistic activities, and employers. One may note that the interventions work with all the people and through all the resources where the problems may ultimately be manifested. This is an extremely important point.

Interventions done when and where it is most convenient for those doing the interventions may be completely ineffective. While there can be generalization of skills learned in athletic competition to, for example, interpersonal problems in a classroom, the most effective interventions are those carried out in the classroom itself at the time the problems arise. There is greater opportunity to teach and reward the necessary skills, to identify antecedent events, and simply understand more basic elements of the problem behaviors.

Successful programs have a long-term perspective and component parts build on each other. Serious delinquent patterns are very often stable over time so problems overcome and skills taught successfully in the fifth grade have to be followed by steps in the sixth grade, and in subsequent grades, to reinforce those skills and help apply them to the new challenges faced as the child and his or her peer group mature.

While effective school programs may include specific classes or “modules”, studies suggest that the best programs are far more comprehensive, more subtle, and involve a wide range of innovations in many aspects of the school operation. Violent behavior patterns are learned not in isolated, discreet episodes presented to the children with the expressed purpose of teaching them to be violent. They are part of the fabric of some children’s everyday lives or they occur and appear to work at critical times in the child’s life: domestic abuse and violence, violence as a way of maintaining stature and power, violence as a way of gaining material goods, violence as power, violence as a means of protection of one’s self or property. In the absence of

more socially accepted ways of dealing with these and other challenges, the children lack alternatives and the violent influences around them are more impressive and seem to work more quickly.

Therefore, the most effective violence prevention programs are those built into the fabric of all things that touch the child's life: school, home, church, neighborhood, leisure activities, work place, peer groups, etc. Because the school is the context in which many social challenges are met and, therefore, many social skills developed or lost it is one of the most critical sites in which to effect change.

The most effective school-based violence prevention programs start at the most basic unit in the school, apart from the individual - the classroom. How the classroom is organized and managed and the instructional techniques used have tremendous potential to prevent violence. This can apply to the layout of the class, including the seating arrangement. Certain types of instructional techniques can teach pro-social skills in powerful ways, encouraging close cooperation between students and between teachers and students.

School behavior management strategies are critically important. Clear consistent norms and expectations put forth in positive ways allow for the identification and reinforcement of appropriate behaviors, not merely the disciplining of misbehavior after the fact. Norms and expectations must be realistic. The layout of the school and the distance between classes, for example, must be considered when students are given instructions as to how long they have to get from one class to another - a simple matter but one that can lead to discipline of the student who is late, thus generating anger in the student who believes that he or she was treated unfairly.

Conflict resolution skills can be taught effectively in the school because the skills can be applied in a timely manner to a current situation. Many times schools not only fail to teach conflict resolution - they compound the problem by prohibiting the student from doing anything and requiring the student to do something that he or she perceives, often accurately, as useless, such as walk away and tell a teacher or administrator. When the school takes responsibility for

dealing with an interpersonal conflict, it misses the opportunity to teach pro-social skills and frequently is seen as doing nothing of consequence.

Peer mediation is one way of handling these conflicts that is effective and instructive. It can teach the art of compromise, of seeing a situation through the eyes of another. Peer counseling is another important alternative. Notice that in response to recent tragic event in the nation's schools, the students usually sought the comfort and counsel of peers even though teachers, administrators, school counselors, mental health professionals and clergy were on hand quickly. Both of these, and other programs, can be developed by the school as part of the ongoing operation of the school so they grow in acceptance by the students as a means of empowering themselves.

The organization of the school is important. Is there a clear organizational structure that lends itself to easy access at many levels by the students? Are guidelines available as to how a student can bring a concern to a responsible teacher or administrator? Do students have regular and well-defined access to the schools chain of command? Does the student organization have a real role to play in matters of substance in the school? Are there clear statements as to the rights and responsibilities of the students, not just as individuals, but as part of the student body? Are students aware, in advance, of those faculty members and administrators in whom they can confide if they have concerns about the conduct of other students? Are they aware of privacy and confidentiality safeguards? Are faculty and administrators aware of their responsibilities and protections if matters concerning public safety are brought to their attention? What obligations and options do they face?

Parent - teacher interactions represent one of the most powerful tools to prevent violence but also one of the most problematic. Teachers and administrators often fear the consequences if they discuss concerns about a child with that child's parent - accusations of bias and having prejudged a child, denial that any concern about that parent's child is justified, blame directed at other parents or students, threats from the parent of retaliation against the school or its personnel. Often, it is the parents of the most difficult children who are most intimidating and unapproachable. Sometimes, the behavior of the parents itself is the problem, not merely at home

in cases of domestic conflict but even in public, such as at athletic events. It is important to know that violent, abusive behavior by parents is a powerful influence on children and schools, to be effective, must have defined ways of dealing with them and sufficient leverage to enforce necessary consequences.

Mentoring programs are very helpful. More experienced students mentoring less experienced students in all school - related activities - sports, music, dramatics, publications, student organization, etc. It teaches patience, empathy, cooperation, communication, listening, and a sense of a common purpose. Students who eventually turn to violence often think of themselves as alienated, ridiculed, and demeaned by peers and others. When large numbers of these disenfranchised youth gravitate together, a gang-type system can develop. But when children see themselves as accepted and a part of something like a team or yearbook staff working toward a good goal, the spirit of cooperation can be learned and reinforced, a sense of pride and accomplishment can be experienced. These do not necessarily preclude violence but such factors certainly work toward more prosocial skills.

Politicians have railed against “midnight basketball” but they do so out of political ideology and profound ignorance. Afterschool recreation programs are very effective. Apart from merely occupying time and burning off energy, such programs teach discipline, self-control, respect for rules, cooperation, and a sense of belonging. They, like many effective interventions, may be more relevant in some schools or neighborhoods than in others but there is no doubt as to their utility in those schools and with those children. Working with a mature, capable adult as teacher, coach, instructor, etc. exerts as powerful a force for good as the lack of same can exert for ill. They are truly a necessary part of any effort to reduce or prevent violence.

Efforts to identify gang development and influences have become extremely important in recent years as many children who see themselves on the margin of society have found their “family”, their reason for living, their support system in the gangs. More common in the larger cities, the members of these gangs prey on their peers as well as the community at large. They are responsible for a great deal of crime and violence annually but it may not draw attention because the violence is often within or between the gangs or is simply the way life is “on the

streets”. The violent patterns of the gangs are more systematic and routine, occurring daily but at least so far, on a smaller, perhaps less obvious, scale than those events that have drawn national media attention. They are just as damaging, if not more damaging, to our youth and therefore our future.

Youth service programs, vocational training and employment opportunities, laws pertaining to weapons, especially guns, and community policing strategies are all elements of violence prevention efforts that often suffer at the hands of politicians. Youth service programs have been shown to teach social competency and critical thinking skills. Vocational training programs teach these as well along with the all-important job skills which have been so clearly shown in psychological, sociological, and correctional literature to be essential in giving the disenfranchised “ a place at the table”, thus reducing the pent up rage that so often leads to violence or teaching better ways to deal with it. Schools must work with the community to determine how the issue of weapons in the school will be handled. It is fine to espouse a “no tolerance” policy but if this is not supported by the local law enforcement personnel, the courts, and the school’s highest administration it is likely to be useless and unenforceable. The schools may have to take the lead locally in forcing the community to decide if gun laws are a constitutional matter or a public health and safety matter. Community policing has also been very successful in communities and schools where it has been properly used. It may be necessary to get beyond our aversion to having uniformed police in the schools in terms of what it means that our society now requires such presence. Sensitive, properly trained police officers have often become role models and confidantes for the students. Students can talk to and confide in a police officer about things that would be difficult for a teacher to handle, such as threats made by a student against another. The presence of police in schools has helped re-define how children view police officers, leading to a greater sense of mutual trust and confidence.

There is a tendency to think in terms of preventing incidents such as occurred in Littleton, Colorado, Paducah, Kentucky, or Jonesboro, Arkansas. To truly be effective in violence prevention, we must address the violence that occurs in more subtle ways, at earlier ages, and on a smaller scale. The violence of insulting words, the handling of small problems by resorting to violence, the need for some parents to see that their children never back down from a

fight - all must be seen as precursors to the explosive outbursts that, although unlikely with any particular student at any particular time or place, increase the danger of someone getting hurt, sometimes leading to mass casualties.

It is reasonable to ask if we truly have the will to see the problem in all its complexity and to address it. If we try to take a piecemeal approach or use programs or models that are either untested or, worse yet, documented to be ineffective, we will have wasted precious time and money. Well-designed programs require the skill and experience not usually available to the average school or district that has never dealt with such matters directly. It cannot be found just by “seeing what is out there” or by looking to professionals who have never faced such challenges, even though they may be in law enforcement, social work, or mental health. Something may well be worse than nothing.

Questions or Comments? Feel free to contact Dr. Shaw at CMC@CrisisInc.com