

Preventing School Violence: A Plan for Safe and Engaging Schools

Schools are in a unique position to identify violent behavior among students early and to implement prevention strategies that affect the entire community. This column is the first in a three-part series on preventing school violence.

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Creating safe supportive schools is essential to ensuring students' academic and social success.

There are multiple elements to establishing environments in which youth feel safe, connected, valued, and responsible for their behavior and learning. Key to this is preventing violence in all forms whether bullying, aggressive classroom behavior, gun use, or organized gang activity.

In recent years, school administrators have worked hard to ensure safety at school and it is encouraging to know that their efforts are making a big difference. The U.S. Departments of Education and Justice issue an annual report on school crime and safety, and the 2004 report (DeVoe et al., 2004) shows that in most areas school violence has decreased significantly among secondary school students:

- Students who report being afraid at school decreased from 12% in 1995 to 6% in 2003
- Between 1993 and 2003, the percentages of students reporting that they had a fight on school property in the past year declined from 16% to 13%
- Between 1993 and 2003, the percentage of students carrying a weapon at school in the past 30 days declined from 12% to 6%.

The basic principles that underlie effective strategies to reduce violent behavior are the same as those that underlie strategies that promote healthy development and learning for all students. Effective approaches balance security measures and discipline with positive supports, skill building, parent and community involvement, and improved school climate. Successfully incorporating these principles as founda-

tions of school policy and procedure will not only reduce violence but also improve academic and social outcomes for all students.

Build a Foundation

Safe schools develop through purposeful planning and organization. This process begins with the formation of a safety team whose role is to develop a comprehensive violence prevention plan. The safety team leads efforts to identify needs, choose options, garner support from school and community stakeholders, and coordinate various services. The school safety team should include a broad range of stakeholders, including administrators, faculty and staff members, parents, students, and community members who:

- Implement systematic and recurrent assessment of the school's needs through regular data collection.
- Create a comprehensive plan based on a multilevel strategy that seeks to build and maintain a peaceful school campus by implementing prevention activities. This plan should include strategies at the building, classroom, and individual student levels.

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- Train school staff members to be observant and respond to student needs before they result in unhealthy behaviors. This training should include a clearly articulated process for threat assessment.
- Target bullying because it is a pervasive form of violence present in all schools. Attention should also focus on other common forms of peer victimization among middle level and high school students, including sexual harassment, relational aggression (i.e., harming another person's relationships through spreading rumors or lies), and dating violence.
- Balance the need for security with the school's primary mission to educate and promote students' well-being.

Collect Data

An important first step in systematic change to prevent violence is to conduct a needs assessment that identifies

Effective Interventions

Anger Coping Program. Eighteen hours of weekly cognitive behavioral training guided by two program leaders. Modeling, role play, problem solving, and positive reinforcement are taught to small groups of students ages 8 to 14 years.

Second Step—Middle School Version. Embedded within existing school curricula, skills-based lessons teach an understanding of violence, empathy, problem solving, and anger management to middle school students.

Think First. Two 50-minute sessions a week for six to eight weeks teach anger and aggression management skills to secondary students through role playing, modeling, and rewards.

The Bullying Prevention Project. A comprehensive model for bullying prevention that includes training for parents and staff members, classroom activities, and schoolwide procedures for preventing and responding to bullying for elementary and middle schools.

the strengths and risks of the school. Assessment efforts should include descriptions of the types of violence that occur, the experiences of various stakeholders with violence, the context within which violence occurs and how that context contributes to violence, the discipline procedure and the number of

referrals, and the impact of previous intervention efforts. The needs assessment provides information to staff members about what is happening at their school and gives staff members an opportunity to discuss their ideas, opinions, and philosophies about education, violence, and school safety.

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As school personnel wrestle with the issues raised by the needs assessment and integrate the information with their personal and professional beliefs, they should begin to determine the goals, objectives, and expectations they have for students, staff members, and the school in terms of violence prevention. The essential rules for gathering school violence prevention information are that it must be done regularly *and* it must be shared with the school community so everyone can understand and support the school's school safety efforts.

Plan Systematically

A problem-solving approach, such as that described by Larson and Busse (in press), can be used to create, implement, and evaluate comprehensive school violence prevention programs. This systematic approach maximizes chances for intervention success and involves five elements.

Problem identification. Using the information gathered from the needs assessment regarding current status and future goals, stakeholders systematically identify the problems that should be addressed.

Problem analysis. Validate and prioritize problems and translate them into objective and measurable goals that can be accomplished through specific, testable, actions. Consider the needs at student, staff member, and environmental levels.

Response proposals. Identify the programs and procedures that address the needs of students at all levels of exposure to school violence. Choose programs because they will address the identified problem, not because they are popular. Important considerations at this stage include allocating funds, determining who is responsible, and deciding what would indicate success.

Response implementation. Interventions should be implemented after giving consideration to student and staff member interest in and motivation for the program. Communication with stakeholders may be important to gain

involvement and avoid frustration and negative attention over intervention selection.

Evaluation of prevention strategies. Evaluation includes both an ongoing evaluation of how the program is being implemented and determining how it works with your student population. To make the program and activities more effective, changes can be made on the basis of the evaluation.

Address Bullying

Bullying intervention programs are integral to overall violence prevention efforts. They seek to eliminate existing bullying problems, prevent the development of new bullying problems, achieve better peer relations at school, create a positive school climate, and increase caring behaviors toward bullying victims by peers and adults. Before implementing a prevention program,

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the following must be considered:

- **Staff training:** What type of training is required? Who will provide training? How will training occur?
- **Program funding:** How much funding is available? How will funds be allocated?
- **Time commitments:** How much time is required by trained individuals outside of normal duties? How often will programs be implemented and for how long?
- **Clear behavioral objectives:** What will be expected of students after the intervention? Will the school rules be changed?
- **Alternative programs:** What services will be available for students who do not benefit from the intervention?
- **Program leadership:** Who will take the lead? How will staff members be chosen to participate? What qualifications and training are necessary?

All staff members should receive training, including bus drivers, maintenance staff members, and cafeteria workers because bullying often happens in undersupervised contexts, such as the hallways and the lunchroom. Training should include raising awareness about the extent of bullying on campus, specific strategies for dealing with bullying, and an understanding of the nature of bullying.

Create a Balance

Schools must maintain control of the campus and develop a climate that allows each teacher and student to fully engage in learning. By necessity, efforts to prevent school violence must include a plan to address disciplinary infractions when they occur. In some cases, the infraction will be sufficiently serious that it poses a significant danger to the school. In many cases, state education law will require suspension or expulsion for certain violations (e.g., gun possession, serious vandalism, and serious assault). Although each school must have a clear, fair discipline code for serious infractions, research has very

strongly demonstrated that punishment must be balanced with a student discipline plan that views infractions as educational opportunities. Students make mistakes and when they do, educators can use the mistakes as opportunities to help students learn more-appropriate behaviors.

There is no evidence that very strict, rigid models of discipline prevent violence in the long run; in fact, exclusionary discipline is more likely to exacerbate than prevent violence on campus. Violence prevention from an educational perspective is one that takes steps to understand the function of a student's behavior and develops a plan to help the student learn appropriate skills.

Foster Collaboration

Garnering parent and community support in developing and maintaining an efficient and responsive violence prevention program is necessary to intervention success. With parent and community representatives, a school safety team can serve as a vehicle to coordinate the input and expertise of these larger groups. Schools will likely be more efficient at identifying needs, gathering resources, raising funds, recruiting volunteers, implementing programs, and instilling broad community changes than parent and community groups would be. It also sends the powerful message that school safety is a shared community concern.

Final Thoughts

The human resources of a school are the most important asset in preventing and handling school violence. At one school, the teaching staff may have the talent and energy to implement a schoolwide social emotional curriculum and monitor its impact on schoolyard fights and other aggressive behaviors. At yet another school, a counselor or a psychologist may have special skills in anger management programs; therefore, it may be decided to implement a counseling program with high-risk youth in conjunction with a classroom consultation component. Planning and programming provide the framework for violence prevention and should take into consideration the skills of school staff members who must work with families and students to create a peaceful school community.

Efforts to reduce school violence encourage the development of peaceful norms on the school campus. They expand and strengthen students' personal connections with adults and have a generalizing effect to the broader community. Schools are important sites for broader efforts to break the cycle of violence because schools provide the only viable setting in which community antiviolence programs can be implemented and high-risk youth can be identified and referred to intensive early intervention programs. Schools have an obligation to make

Fundamental Questions to Address Violence Prevention

Prevention programs should not be pulled off the shelf and implemented without prior planning that documents school-site needs and is responsive to the objectives of a school's violence prevention efforts. As part of the process of prevention planning, school crisis teams must address such fundamental questions as:

- Which problems are we likely to face at *our* school?
- What are the primary short-term and long-term objectives of *our* school violence prevention efforts?
- Who are the targets of the violence prevention efforts?
- How is the prevention effort tied to broader community-level violence prevention efforts?
- Five years from now, how will the school know if the violence prevention program worked?

campuses safe, secure, and peaceful and to collaborate with the broader community to address societal systemic violence. **PL**

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Resources

- **American Association of School Administrators School Crisis Management and Response Plans**
www.aasa.org/issues_and_insights/safety/state_crisis_plans.htm
- **National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center**
www.safeyouth.org/scripts/school/index.asp
- **Carolina Center for the Prevention of School Violence**
www.ncdjjdp.org/cpsv.htm
- **Counseling 101: Bullying Prevention and Intervention.**
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- **Hamilton Fish Institute** www.hamfish.org
- **The Nuts and Bolts of Implementing School Safety Programs.**
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- **Partnership Against Violence Network** www.pavnet.org
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- **Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative** www.sshs.samhsa.gov

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