

School Violence Prevention

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) vigorously supports and promotes efforts that create safe, secure, and peaceful schools free of the destructive influence of violence in all of its forms. NASP further maintains that schools must implement purposeful, coordinated strategies that increase levels of safety and security that simultaneously promote student wellness and resilience. NASP supports all evidence-based policies and practices that promote the safety of our students, schools, and communities because these efforts improve students' readiness to learn and build school climates characterized by positive civil engagement.

School violence is a broad term that includes overt aggressive behaviors such as physical fights on campus, bullying (including online bullying or *cyberbullying*), physical assault, bombing, arson, or other deliberate means of causing harm to the staff and students. Sadly, it includes rare, tragic, and devastating school shootings. In addition, school violence includes more covert behaviors that increase fear and diminish school safety such as threats of injury at school, weapons possession, and harassment (Furlong, Jones, Lilles, & Derzon, 2010). In some communities, gangs recruit school-age students to be members and contribute to violence in schools. Although not the core focus of school violence prevention, exposure to gun violence and inappropriate access to firearms are highly associated with increased risk of injury and death among youth as well as diminished social, emotional, and academic well-being (Garbarino, Bradshaw, & Vorrasi, 2002; Kirk & Hardy, 2014).

Recent national reports indicate that efforts to reduce school violence have shown some success. For example, between 1999 and 2011, there was a 49% reduction in students reporting that they are fearful of being attacked or harmed on their school campus and a 15% reduction in student reports of both carrying weapons and fighting at school (Robers, Kemp, & Truman, 2013). These encouraging trends are associated with coordinated, comprehensive efforts by schools and communities to reduce school violence. However, other less obvious forms of school violence such as threats, teasing, and mean-spirited verbal attacks, including cyberbullying, occur at higher rates and make schools less welcoming settings for students (Nekvasil & Cornell, 2012). In addition to violence affecting students, schools need to be mindful of the victimization of teachers and staff. Eighty percent of school teachers and school staff members reported victimization (harassment, theft, or physical attack) in the past year, primarily by students, but also by two or more perpetrators, such as students and parents (Espelage et al., 2013).

Despite some welcomed reductions in school violence, it challenges assumptions that society holds about the role of schools. When parents send their daughters and sons to school each day, they trust that their children will be cared for and safe. They believe that schools will minimize exposure to all sources of harm, be it tragic campus shootings, chronic bullying, cyberbullying, name-calling, sexual

harassment, or social exclusion. When violence occurs at school, trust is violated, which thereby diminishes schools' efforts to attain their primary mission of educating all students and helping them to reach their full potential. Research shows that victims of school violence are at increased risk of academic (Lacey & Cornell, 2013) and social-emotional problems (Nickerson & Slater, 2009; Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010).

Although gun violence in schools is extremely rare, the majority of youth homicides are by a firearm, and nearly half of youth suicide deaths involve the use of a gun (CDC, 2014; NASP, 2013). Most often, those firearms are obtained from home, a friend, or a relative (Reza et al., 2003). Efforts to reduce violence in schools and communities at large must include strategies for eliminating inappropriate youth access to firearms, strategies to keep guns out of the hands of those who would harm students, and school policies which ensure that the only armed persons at schools are highly trained professionals (e.g., school resource officers).

NASP recognizes that no single strategy or program will create a safe school and that effective efforts require collaboration among administrators, teachers, school psychologists, other school mental health professionals, school resource officers, parents, students, and community agencies. NASP supports a balanced cross-discipline approach to school safety promotion that emphasizes clear communication, fostering positive personal connectedness, and the implementation of evidence-based support services (Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence, 2013).

Teachers and other educators, including school psychologists, have the potential to be resources for children and youth who experience multiple chronic risk factors. The relationships that students form with adults in the school setting can help them cope with challenges and avoid violence perpetration and/or victimization. It is important to consider the role of positive school engagement in promoting and enhancing school violence prevention efforts (Tillery, Varjas, Roach, Kuperminc, & Meyers, 2013). Having school-based mental health professionals, such as school psychologists, is an important way to prevent school violence and provide support if it happens.

ROLE OF THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

Educators have a responsibility to monitor and maintain campus conditions that create safe, secure, and peaceful schools. NASP recognizes that school psychologists, as key members of the school student support staff, must play a central role in the prevention of campus conditions that diminish student and staff safety and must manage and respond to violence when it unfortunately occurs. Principle IV.1 of the NASP *Principles for Professional Ethics* (NASP, 2010, p. 12) states that “school psychologists use their expertise in psychology and education to promote school, family, and community environments that are safe and healthy for children.” NASP supports school psychologists’ leadership in encouraging schools to develop comprehensive approaches to prevent violence and appropriately prepare for and respond to violence-related crises when they occur. To carry out these school-wide approaches, school psychologists are trained to:

- provide group facilitation and consultation to help schools form effective safety and crisis planning teams (Furlong et al., 2010);
- facilitate efforts to collect and organize safety, violence, and crisis needs assessment information at school and district levels using validated instruments that support effective evidence-based decision making (Larson & Mark, 2014);

- implement prevention and intervention programs that include collaboration among parents, teachers, students, and community members designed to reduce aggressive behaviors among students (Larson & Mark, 2104);
- consult with school staff to implement programs that foster social–emotional skills, so that students are better able to avoid conflicts and to resolve them peacefully when they do occur (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymniki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011);
- counsel and support victims of violence in all its forms (e.g., physical, psychological, and social isolation; Brock, Nickerson, Reeves, Savage, & Woitaszewski, 2011);
- participate in and facilitate the implementation of empirically validated procedures to respond to threats of targeted violence (Cornell, Sheras, Gregory, & Fan, 2009); and
- help individuals and communities respond to and recover from crises spawned by violence (Brock & Jimerson, 2012).

To prepare all school psychologists to provide leadership in creating campus conditions that increase physical and psychological safety, NASP has developed school violence professional training standards and advocates that they be adopted by all state education credentialing bodies (Cowan, Vaillancourt, Rossen, & Pollitt, 2013).

CREATING SAFE SCHOOLS

Efforts to reduce school violence are most successful when they use multiple strategies selected to be appropriate for each school’s needs, which include:

- ***Creating school–community safety partnerships.*** No school district or individual school alone can implement a comprehensive, multitiered school violence prevention program without engaging in a systematic planning process to understand its school safety challenges and opportunities. This is effectively done in concert with multiple stakeholders, including community partners. School psychologists assist schools by helping them to engage in conducting comprehensive vulnerability assessments and creating corresponding safety plans and teams (Brock et al., 2009). School psychologists can assist in community-wide efforts that increase and strengthen protective factors aimed at reducing violence inside and outside of school. Such efforts might include tutoring, mentoring, life-skills training, case management, increased parental involvement, improving connections with schools, and other opportunities for supervised recreational activities (Leap, 2013). They can facilitate capacity building within community organizations through education, training, grant writing, evaluation, and use of evidence-based best practices (Espelage et al., 2013).
- ***Establishing comprehensive school crisis response plans.*** Although violence prevention is the most important goal, NASP recognizes that it is critical to have crisis plans for multiple crisis situations with clearly defined roles for each member of the multidisciplinary crisis team. Plans should also consider the importance of the mental health response to minimize the traumatic impact of such events. Therefore, crisis response plans should have explicit procedures for reaffirming physical health, ensuring perceptions of safety and security, re-establishing social support, evaluating psychological trauma risk, and providing the interventions appropriate for the level of risk (Brock et al., 2009).
- ***Enhancing classroom and school climate.*** Some programs might not focus on specific violent behaviors directly, but seek to alter conditions that might unintentionally foster violent acts. Teachers’ classroom management skills are a strong indicator of the extent to which student

violence is directed toward teachers (Espelage et al., 2013). Individualized instruction and remedial support, where needed, can reduce academic failure and frustration. Programs to decrease racism and other forms of intolerance have the effect of also increasing appreciation of diversity and improving levels of trust among members of the school community (Savage & Schanding, 2013). Such programs can also decrease violence by creating a climate of acceptance and understanding and improve the quality of the relationships among students and staff (Steffgen, Recchia, & Viechtbauer, 2013). Complementing climate-building strategies are those that promote robust social-emotional skills, which enhance positive, adaptive interpersonal relations among all students and educators (Durlak et al., 2011; Furlong, Froh, Muller, & Gonzalez, 2014).

- ***Promoting positive school discipline and support.*** Although school violence may engender a desire to discipline aggressors harshly, NASP encourages school personnel to balance disciplinary responses with efforts to promote cooperation, positive social skills, and peaceful means of resolving conflicts. Approaches such as school-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS) use a systems approach for establishing a positive social culture and individualizing behavior supports to make schools safe, supportive learning environments (Sprague & Horner, 2012). Addressing school violence must go beyond increasing campus security and punishing students who have violated school rules and should seek to create an authoritative (as compared to authoritarian or permissive) school discipline climate that includes high levels of structure and support (Gregory et al., 2010). A comprehensive campaign to end school violence must also encompass efforts to increase support, trust, and caring among students and staff, as is the foundation of restorative justice, which offers an alternative positive discipline approach (Sharkey & Fenning, 2012).
- ***Using nonstigmatizing school violence prevention programs.*** Attention to early behavioral and emotional distress signals from students will help to ensure that students are provided prevention and support services as early in their school careers as possible. Such efforts will ensure that students get help prior to the need for extreme disciplinary responses. NASP does not support assessment procedures known as risk assessment. Such procedures claim to identify or “profile” students as being “at risk” of committing acts of violence; research shows that such methods are associated with high false identification rates. While many students have emotional or behavior difficulties, relatively few commit serious violent acts and using so-called “violence risk profiling” assessments are more stigmatizing than useful. Instead, NASP believes that schools can and must respond to all threats that students (and others) make on school campuses. For this reason, NASP endorses using a threat assessment approach to understanding students’ potential violent behavior (Cornell & Allen, 2011). Although research shows that the vast majority of student threats of school violence do not result in actual violence, they nonetheless provide opportunities to explore, better understand, and respond to any special needs of the students making the threat and the students being threatened. Each such threat needs to be reviewed and threat response efforts at school should be based on research-validated procedures (Cornell & Allen, 2011). NASP promotes the use of positive methods of school discipline, such as solution-focused approaches that include the application of behavior management principles and strategies (Bear & Manning, 2014; National Association of School Psychologists, 2014; Sharkey & Fenning, 2012).
- ***Promoting antiviolence initiatives that include prevention programs for all students.*** NASP advocates the use of a multilevel model of school violence prevention. At the most general level, interventions include school-wide violence prevention programs, particularly those that address bullying, which is the most pervasive school safety challenge (Felix, Greif Green, & Sharkey, 2014; Ttofi & Farrington, 2012). These activities encourage all students to experience positive emotional development and to use nonviolent means to resolve their personal conflicts. Such programs are

natural bridges between interventions that focus on individual change and those seeking to change the ecology of the school (Larson & Beckman, 2012).

- ***Providing support for students exhibiting early warning signs of disruptive behavior.*** Not all students respond to school-wide programs; therefore, violence prevention efforts must provide support for students who have shown aggressive behavior at school. Policies that focus solely on catching and punishing violent behaviors fall far short of creating a safe school environment (Gregory & Cornell, 2009). An authoritarian school discipline approach (high structure accompanied by low student support) is linked with higher levels of victimization at school, whereas authoritative discipline (high structure and high support) is associated with lower levels of victimization (Gregory et al., 2010).
- ***Intervening with students who experience significant school behavioral adjustment problems.*** Schools must also make efforts to modify the behavior of students who have engaged in or are at risk of engaging in violent behavior. NASP strongly supports systematic efforts to implement strategies that foster students' social-emotional skills that are associated with adaptive coping and resilience. In addition, for students who are experiencing social and/or psychological distress, the complex problems they face require the coordination of interventions across school and community agencies. Schools alone cannot address the myriad needs of these students. For this small number of students, cooperative agreements will be needed with community mental health, juvenile probation, child welfare services, alcohol and drug treatment, and other youth and family-serving agencies. These students often will need coordinated wraparound services and interventions that are empirically validated (Larson & Beckman, 2012).
- ***Supporting policies that reduce access to firearms by youth and others who are of immediate danger to themselves or others.*** Undeniably, firearms play a significant role in school and community violence (American Psychological Association, 2013). Multiple lines of research have demonstrated a clear connection between local availability of guns and gun-related violent behaviors, with estimates of close to 2 million children and adolescents having access at home to loaded, unlocked guns (Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence, 2012). Although extremely violent and lethal school events are rare, most school-associated homicides involved a firearm (Modzeleski et al., 2008). Additionally, exposure to gun violence in the community can result in anxiety, depression, antisocial behavior, and a decline of students' capacity to meaningfully engage in academic tasks (Garbarino et al., 2002; Sharkey, Tirado-Strayer, Papachristos, & Raver, 2012). NASP supports policies that take a holistic approach to decrease the potential for the injury or death of students, staff, and other community members on school campuses, on the way to/from school, and when participating in school-sanctioned events. Such approaches include eliminating inappropriate youth access to guns; keeping guns out of the hands of individuals deemed at risk of hurting themselves and others; improving awareness of safe gun practices, including secure storage of firearms; and restricting the presence of guns in schools to only commissioned school resource officers.

SUMMARY

Left unaddressed, overt acts of school violence and other common forms of victimization can erode the climate of the school, damage the resilience-promoting influence of schools, and leave many students to suffer in silence with diminished personal wellness and resilience capacity. Efforts to reduce violence at school, therefore, must be multifaceted. NASP recognizes that serious violent acts at school, although rare, have complex origins and profound consequences. In addition, less extreme forms of violence such as bullying, sexual harassment, and fights are much more common, yet can have pervasive

effects on individual students and the overall campus climate (Mehta, Cornell, Fan, & Gregory, 2013). These forms of school violence occur on every school campus. A successful program will ensure the ongoing safety of all students and staff by creating conditions that discourage violence by responding quickly and effectively when violence occurs. To be truly comprehensive, however, violence reduction programs must influence student attitudes toward violence, teach students and school staff effective conflict resolution skills, and create a climate that promotes tolerance and understanding among students and staff. School safety programs are most effective when integrated with other violence prevention efforts involving local law enforcement, juvenile probation, public health personnel, and other parent and community groups. When an entire community commits to reducing violence, the health and well-being of its children and youth are enhanced.

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Acknowledgment of position statement writing group members: Michael Furlong (chair), Amanda Nickerson, and Rosario C. Pesce.

Please cite this document as:

National Association of School Psychologists. (2015). *School violence prevention* (Position Statement). Bethesda, MD: Author.