

The
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**Research-based
information on
timely topics**

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VIOLENCE PREVENTION

What is Violence Prevention?

America's schools are among the safest places a young person can be. But the recent shooting deaths in Colorado and last year's string of school shootings around the country have served as a dramatic wake-up call—deadly youth violence has found its way inside the school-house door in unimaginable ways.

While clearly not a new phenomenon, school violence has become more intense and lethal within the past 10 years. And children at ever-younger ages are increasingly represented on both sides of the knife or gun. As the incidence of serious school violence continues to rise, the call for effective prevention programs echoes across the United States. School officials everywhere are hearing the same question from concerned parents: What is being done to make sure our children are safe at school?

In response, administrators are trying every possible approach to violence prevention—from quick response interventions to sophisticated long-term programs. And there are numerous approaches to choose from. Unfortunately, not all violence prevention strategies work. A good many, in fact, seem to stand primarily on the strength of good intentions and slick marketing material.

To help school administrators become better informed about what does and does not work in violence prevention, this issue of the *Balanced View* summarizes what the research says. Our review focuses on effective violence prevention **strategies** rather than on specific programs, although we do give examples of well-known programs

throughout the discussion.¹ We begin this review with an outline of the primary violence prevention approaches. As a starting point for absorbing this information, some points of explanation and some caveats are in order:

1. The prevention strategies reviewed cover a range of anti-violence interventions. Certain interventions, however, were beyond the scope of our summary. They include those involving school security, strategies for reducing gang activity outside the school, comprehensive community-based programs, and programs for reducing bias, prejudice, and sexual harassment.
2. Outcomes targeted by the prevention strategies deal with a variety of problem behaviors including substance use, delinquent and criminal behavior, conduct problems, aggression, truancy, and withdrawal from school. Thus, the term "violence prevention" should be interpreted broadly.
3. School violence occurs in a unique context in every school and every situation. Determining what type of prevention approach is best for a particular school, therefore, requires an assessment of the school's circumstances, student body, and resources. No one strategy will be effective for all students or all settings.
4. Even the most effective violence prevention strategies will fail if poorly implemented. To ensure fidelity of implementation, staff training, administrator oversight/support, and follow-up assistance are essential.

¹ For information about effective prevention programs, including those cited in this issue, see the reference box on the last page.

5. Good schooling goes to the heart of good violence prevention. Thus, schools that are engaged in efforts to foster high academic achievement, safety, socially appropriate behaviors, meaningful family involvement, and positive relationships between staff and students are creating a strong foundation to prevent and reduce violent behavior.

School-Based Violence Prevention Approaches

The research generally classifies school-based violence prevention approaches into two clusters: *organizational change* strategies, which focus on altering the school or classroom environment, and *individual change* strategies, which focus on changing knowledge, behaviors, attitudes, and skills of individual students.

The *organizational change* strategies include three categories of school-based prevention:

- Capacity-building Approaches
- School Norms and Policies
- Learning Environment

Similarly, the *individual change strategies* include five school-based prevention categories:

- Early Childhood Programs
- School Instructional Programs
- Peer Programs

- Counseling and Mentoring
- Enrichment and Recreational Activities

What Does Research Say?

Clear conclusions about what works and what doesn't work in violence prevention requires a high level of confidence in the results. The conclusions summarized below, therefore, are based on methodologically rigorous studies. Features of these studies include 1) a strong research design with comparable experimental and control groups, low rates of participant attrition, and valid and reliable measurement; 2) statistically significant effects on most outcomes assessed; 3) replication of effects in at least two other studies; and 4) sustained effects beyond participation in the designed intervention. The research summary is organized according to the change strategies presented above.

Organizational Strategies

■ *Capacity-building Approaches* - Capacity building approaches enhance a school's ability to manage itself by helping educators plan, implement, and sustain change. Typically, these strategies engage teams of staff and (sometimes) parents, students, and community members in planning and carrying out school

improvement activities. Teams diagnose school problems, formulate goals, design solutions, monitor progress, and evaluate results. **Total quality management** and **benchmarking** are generic examples of capacity-building approaches.

Findings. Only a handful of studies have tested for a causal association between capacity-building strategies and various forms of problem behavior; the results from all studies, however, have been uniformly positive. Among the outcomes consistently observed are the following:

- significant reductions in delinquency and drug use;
- significant decreases in school suspension and punishments;
- significant improvement in measures of school climate.

■ *School Norms and Policies*- A growing number of schools are discovering that the most effective ways to reduce school violence are through schoolwide efforts to clarify and communicate norms about behavior. Norm-setting strategies include campaigns against drugs or bullying, "zero tolerance" provisions, and ceremonies during which students declare

Violent Behavior: The Early Warning Signs

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ social withdrawal ■ excessive feelings of isolation ■ excessive feelings of rejection ■ being a victim of violence ■ feelings of being picked on and persecuted ■ low school interest and poor academic performance ■ expression of violence in writings and drawings ■ uncontrolled anger | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ patterns of impulsive, chronic hitting and bullying ■ history of discipline problems ■ history of violent and aggressive behavior ■ intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes ■ alcohol and drug use ■ affiliation with gangs ■ inappropriate access/use of firearms ■ serious threats of violence |
|---|---|

Source: *Early Warning and Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools (1998)*. U.S. Department of Education

their intention to remain drug free. They also include discipline codes and mechanisms for establishing and enforcing clear, consistent, and fair school rules.

Findings. Several evaluations of norm-setting programs aimed at delinquent behavior have been conducted. The **Bullying Prevention Program**, for example, has a solid research base, as do various discipline management programs, e.g., **BASIS**. In general, the research has shown that such programs

- substantially reduce students' reports of bullying, victimization, fighting, and truancy;
- significantly improve student attitude toward school and schoolwork, as well as time-on-task;
- substantially reduce vandalism costs.

Strategies that promote norms against drug use also have proven effective. While they are often used in conjunction with drug education curricula, researchers have been able to disentangle the effects showing that norm-setting, alone, can reduce substance use.

■ *Learning Environment*- Learning environment approaches refer to changes in the way students are organized for instruction. They include classroom management techniques such as multi-age grouping, heterogeneous grouping, and cooperative learning, and broader organizational changes such as reduced class size, smaller learning units (e.g., schools-within-schools), and changes in instructional settings (e.g., alternative schools).

Findings. The literature on the effectiveness of classroom/organizational arrangements is vast, but most of it focuses on academic outcomes. To date, only a few studies have examined behavioral outcomes. This research suggests the following:

- classroom management strategies have a marginal impact on substance use and virtually no effect on aggressive behavior or delinquency;

they do, however, increase factors known to reduce risk for drug or delinquent involvement at a later time, e.g., school performance, attitudes, and attendance;

□ programs that group students into smaller units hold promise for reducing delinquency and drug use, but further replication is necessary to confirm the effects;

□ alternative schools that segregate aggressive or anti-social youth for instruction are largely ineffective, and can actually increase problem behaviors.

Project **STATUS** is an example of an effective prevention program whose key elements involve changes in classroom and organizational arrangements.

Individual Strategies

■ *Early Childhood Education Programs (ECE)*- ECE programs are designed to promote child cognitive and social development and, at the same time, strengthen the skills of parents. ECE includes preschool programs (e.g., Head Start, prekindergarten) and parent support services such as home visits, life skills training, and parenting classes.

Findings. There is a large and uniformly positive body of findings on the effectiveness of ECE in violence prevention. This research indicates that preschool education combined with family support services have both short-term and long-term effects on crime and anti-social behavior. Among the documented outcomes are the following:

- significantly fewer fights, disruptions, obstinacy, and impulsivity among elementary students;
- significant decreases in the incidence, severity, and chronicity of later involvement with the juvenile justice system;
- significantly fewer adult criminal arrests for felonies and misdemeanors, and for drug-making or drug-dealing crimes.

Examples of effective early childhood programs include the **High Scope/Perry Preschool Project** and the **Parent Child Development Project**.

■ *School Instructional Programs*- School instructional programs enable students to develop the necessary skills, attitudes, and values to avoid destructive influences. They include general health curricula, violence and drug education curricula, character development programs, law education programs, resistance skills training, and broader life/social skills training (e.g., developing self-control, stress management, problem-solving, social resistance, communication skills).

Findings. Several meta-analyses and reviews on the effectiveness of school instructional approaches have been conducted. Findings suggest the following:

- approaches that provide only didactic information or emphasize fear arousal, moral appeal, or self-esteem development are largely ineffective for reducing school violence;
- approaches that emphasize resistance-skills training aimed at specific behavior problems do reduce substance use and other problem behaviors, but their effects are small and short-lived in the absence of continued instruction;
- the most effective violence prevention strategies 1) feature multiple components and contexts (family, school, peers, media); 2) are developmentally tailored; 3) cover a broad range of social competency skills; 4) are based on a strong theoretical foundation; 5) are delivered over a long period of time to continually reinforce skills; and 6) rely on teaching methods that enable students to practice skills (e.g., frequent role playing, rehearsal of skills, and behavioral modeling).

Life Skills Training, Social Decision Making and Problem Solving, and **PATHS** are examples of effective school instructional programs.

■ *Peer Programs*- Peer programs include peer counseling, where small groups of at-risk youth (or adjudicated delinquents) counsel each other about problem behaviors and attitudes; and peer mediation, where students are trained to resolve disputes when conflicts arise among students.

Findings. Evaluations of peer programs for at-risk youth have not been promising. Results indicate that

□ peer counseling actually increases rather than reduces delinquent behaviors;

□ peer mediation is ineffective when implemented as a stand-alone prevention program.

■ *Counseling and Mentoring*-

Counseling programs include individual and group interventions for high risk youth, led by a trained professional. School-based mentoring programs involve lay persons who provide advice or assistance to youth.

Findings. Many studies have examined the effects of counseling interventions on delinquency. For the most part, these studies lend no support to treatment benefits. As for the popular school-based counseling program, the **Student Assistance Program**, which accounts for half of the expenditures for Drug-free Schools and Communities funds, evaluations are virtually absent.

Only a few studies have been conducted on school-based mentoring programs, and the scientific rigor of these efforts is poor. Still, mentoring programs appear promising for increasing school attendance—a risk factor for school violence. Also, community-based mentoring programs (e.g., **Big Brothers Big Sisters Program**) have been shown to reduce substance use, but the results may not be generalizable to mentoring programs run in or by schools.

■ *Enrichment/Recreational Activities*- After-school enrichment activities have enjoyed a boost in popularity in light of statistics showing that 22% of violent juvenile crime occurs between 2 and 6 PM on school days. These activities include drop-in recreation centers, after-school and weekend programs, dances, and community service events.

Findings. Studies indicate that time spent in after-school programs is unrelated to delinquent acts. Furthermore, alternative activities programs have been found *not to* prevent or reduce the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

Summary

In summary, the research suggests that the following strategies *work* in violence prevention:

■ Approaches aimed at building the capacity of schools to plan, implement, and sustain change;

■ Approaches that clarify norms about behavior and consistently enforce schoolwide rules;

■ Early childhood programs that combine preschool education with family support services;

■ Comprehensive, theory-based, and developmentally appropriate instructional programs that provide deep coverage of social competency skills, and are delivered for at least a 3-year period;

The research also suggests that the following strategies *do not work*:

■ Instruction that focuses on didactic information, fear arousal, moral appeal, or self-esteem;

■ Counseling problem students, particularly in a peer context;

■ Segregating problem students into separate groups/schools;

■ Offering students after-school recreation activities in the absence of more potent programming.

Finally, the research highlights certain *promising* approaches;

■ Programs that group students into smaller units, such as “schools-within-schools;”

■ Community-based mentoring.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

Safe Schools, Safe Students: A Guide to Violence Prevention Strategies (1998);

Making the Grade: A Guide to Drug Prevention Programs (1998).

Both guides available from Drug Strategies: (202) 663-6110

Guide for Selecting Violence Prevention and Attendance Improvement Programs to Improve Schools (1998). Available from the NYS Education Department

Blueprints for Violence Prevention (1998). Available from the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence: www.colorado.edu/cspv