



School-Based Violence Prevention Curricula

by

Linda Dusenbury and Roger Weissberg

In the area of violence prevention, the need for programs in schools and other institutions that work with youth has increased at a faster pace than the availability of solid evaluation research. Causes of school-related violence have been examined in numerous studies and there is evidence that prevention and early-intervention efforts can reduce troubling behaviors in schools. Research-based practices can help school communities recognize the warning signs of violence, promote a positive school climate, and foster norms against violence.

Definitive studies are not yet available to identify the most effective violence prevention curricula. Although a handful of methodologically rigorous evaluation studies are underway, none have been completed at this time. However, preliminary findings from these studies suggest that certain strategies may reduce aggressive behavior in students. Based on these preliminary studies it is reasonable to expect that violence prevention curricula are an effective component of our national violence prevention strategy (Gottfredson, 1997). However, it may be five years before studies identify programs that work, or begin to answer a number of important questions about the various skill areas that are needed or the minimum number of sessions required.

Most curricula currently available to schools use a broad definition of violence, which includes fighting, intimidation or bullying, and other acts of aggression. These curricula help students learn how to resolve conflicts peacefully. A limited number of programs are focused on more specific issues relating to violence, including hate crimes and dating violence. While serious acts of violence (e.g., homicide or rape) are relatively rare in schools, aggression and intimidation are usually all too familiar. Curricula that address these everyday problems, or promote peace, are therefore welcome and immediately relevant to schools.

Based on studies of the causes of violence, as well as studies of other types of prevention programs (e.g., delinquency prevention, drug abuse prevention) this *Spotlight* features a list of the elements of effective school-based violence prevention curricula (Dusenbury, Falco, Lake, Bosworth, & Brannigan, 1997).

OVERVIEW

A recent guide to violence prevention, *Safe Schools, Safe Students: A Guide to School-based Violence Prevention Curricula, Policies, and Environmental Changes*, identified a total of 84 school prevention curricula targeting violence—an astonishing

number, given that the field of violence prevention is very young. The earliest violence prevention programs began appearing 10 years ago, and most curricula available to schools appeared in the past 5 years.

As a point of comparison, drug abuse prevention programs have existed for well over 20 years, yet a recent guide to drug abuse prevention (*Making the Grade: A Guide to School-based Drug Abuse Prevention Curricula*, 1996) identified only 47 programs available to schools. On the surface this would appear to be a contradiction. Why would violence prevention—a newer field than drug abuse prevention—have almost twice as many programs? The answer, according to users and implementers of these programs, is that there probably has not been time yet to eliminate those that do not work. While drug abuse prevention curricula have been subjected to rigorous evaluation studies for the past two decades, at this point very few curricula in the field of violence prevention are being evaluated, and little is known about what will work. Out of 84 curricula recently identified in *Safe Schools, Safe Students: A Guide to School-based Violence Prevention Curricula, Policies, and Environmental Changes*, only six had been evaluated using pretest-posttest control group designs, with outcome measures

of aggressive behavior. None of these had yet followed students beyond the initial posttest.

ELEMENTS OF VIOLENCE PREVENTION CURRICULA

Although effective curricula have not been identified in completed evaluation studies, approaches to school-based violence prevention that are most promising include the following:

Appropriate content based on a strong theoretical or research foundation. The content of effective curricula can be organized into two major areas: normative education and life skills training. While programs often focus only on normative education or life skills training, research indicates that the best programs will combine these approaches.

Normative education (including school climate programs) is designed to promote a positive, peaceful norm, and to correct misperceptions that students often have about violence. For example, many students believe that fighting is an appropriate way to handle conflict. School administrators send powerful messages about whether or not aggression and bullying will be tolerated. Good normative programs help schools communicate a strong message that violence will not be tolerated by adults and that the consequences for violations of school rules concerning violence will be swift and sure.

Life skills training includes cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills that teach young people how to make decisions, solve problems, cope with stress and anxiety, set goals for the future, communicate effectively, get along with others, be assertive, and resist negative social influences. Life skills training approaches have been demonstrated in a number of prevention studies to enhance personal and social competence, as well as to reduce a variety of problem or risk behaviors, including smoking, drinking, drug use, delinquency, and premature sexual behavior. Specific skills especially relevant to violence prevention include anger

management and empathy training, as well as social problem solving.

A comprehensive, multifaceted strategy with activities for families, schools, and communities. Life skills and positive norms need to be developed and reinforced in various settings. Within the school, well-designed curricula provide ways of infusing materials across different subject areas, as well as in different settings (e.g., playground, cafeteria). Ideally there are complementary programs for families, as well as communities, so that new norms and skills are reinforced outside of school, as well. Media campaigns also help to generalize and institutionalize prevention strategies.

Implementation and adequate follow-up. Prevention strategies should begin early in the primary grades and be reinforced across grade levels. Research has not yet determined the number of sessions needed to reduce aggression or violence. Because life skills approaches are effective at reducing risk for a variety of problem behaviors, including drug use and premature sexual behavior, one way to provide strong implementation and adequate follow-up is to develop an integrated strategy that addresses multiple problem behaviors within the context of a single program. Life skills development and behavioral change may require multiple sessions; an integrated approach helps minimize the number of sessions required for addressing different problem behaviors by providing some skills training each year in school, and by reinforcing skills developed in previous years.

Material that is relevant, culturally sensitive, and developmentally appropriate. Prevention programs are more likely to be accepted and effective if they address the developmental issues and cultural norms of their audience. For example, adolescents are interested in being accepted by peers, and programs that teach skills for resisting negative peer influence while maintain-

ing friendships are more likely to be effective than prevention programs that suggest that young people should "just say no."

Interactive techniques appropriate for developing new skills. Personal and social skills are most effectively taught using modeling and coaching. In addition, students need opportunities to practice new skills. Interactive techniques that use discussion, cooperative learning, behavioral rehearsal and role play have greater impact on behavior. Peer mediation is an element of some violence prevention programs that involves providing peer leaders with the interactive skills needed to mediate student conflicts. Training peers in this way may also help to develop and reinforce positive norms.

Teacher training. For prevention strategies to have impact, they must be implemented effectively. Teachers need to understand what the critical elements are and how to develop them using interactive techniques. Educator training that includes modeling and on-site coaching helps teachers to master the program and impart violence prevention.

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