

Promising Strategies for Reducing Violence

A. Mark Amendola and Shana Scozzie

Cognitive interventions have been shown to promote learning and confront behavioral challenges among youth. Six model evidence-based interventions currently used in schools and treatment programs are highlighted.

Many programs purport to reduce violence and aggression among youth. Positive interventions with a solid evidence base offer the most promising strategies to address behavioral problems with youth. Here we briefly review six such models.

The Check and Connect Model

Check and Connect is a sustained K-12 intervention for promoting student engagement with school. Demonstrated outcomes include decreases in truancy and dropout rates and increases in accrued credits and school completion. Check and Connect (2003) is data driven and grounded in research on resiliency and home school collaboration. Student referral criteria include alterable warning signs of school withdrawal – primarily attendance indices (absences, tardies, or skipping class), in the context of academic, emotional, or behavioral problems. Check and Connect is conducted by a “monitor” who is a cross between a mentor, advocate, and service coordinator. The monitor follows students for at least two years in order to keep education a salient issue for target students, teachers, and family members. Students’ levels of engagement – such as attendance, grades, or suspensions – are checked regularly and used to guide the monitor’s efforts to strengthen “connections” with school.

Check and Connect was developed through a partnership between the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis Public Schools, Dakota County Community Services, and area public schools. Key

features of this model include relationship building, routine monitoring of alterable indicators (checking warning signs, such as attendance and academic performance), individualized and timely intervention, long-term commitment, persistence plus (persistently motivating youth and their families), problem solving, and affiliations with schools and learning.

Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum

Second Step is a school-based curriculum for pre-school through junior high school students and focuses on social skills and on altering attitudes and behaviors that lead to violence through empathy, impulse control, and anger management (Committee for Children, 2003). This curriculum has been shown to decrease physical aggression and increase pro-social behavior.

The Second Step program allows teachers to recognize how to deal with disruptions and behavior issues. Children learn how to recognize and understand feelings, make positive and effective choices, and keep anger from escalating into violence. Research shows that aggressive behavior in children predicts risk of later delinquency, substance use, school dropout, early parenthood, and depression. Classroom use of the Second Step program helps provide children with the skills they need to create safe environments and to become successful adults.

Based on more than 15 years of classroom application in academic, social, and emotional research, the

Second Step curriculum focuses on three essential competencies – empathy, impulse control and problem solving, and anger management. The Second Step lessons are easy to teach, flow sequentially, and require minimal teacher preparation time. Integration activities tie the lessons into academic learning requirements – health, science, math, social studies, and language arts – helping teachers build on what they are already doing in the classroom.

Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP)

Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP) is a school-based violence prevention program designed to provide students in middle and junior high schools with conflict resolution strategies and skills. It combines a classroom curriculum of social/cognitive problem solving with real life, skill-building opportunities, such as peer mediation. Students learn to apply critical thinking skills and personal management strategies to personal health and well-being issues. Delivered over three years, RIPP teaches key concepts that include:

- The importance of significant friends or adult mentors
- The relationship between self-image and gang-related behaviors
- The effects of environmental influences on personal health

Using a variety of lessons and activities, students learn about the physical and mental development that occurs during adolescence. They analyze the consequences of personal choices on health and well-being, learn that they have non-violent options when conflicts arise, and value the benefits of being a positive family and community role model. A series of evaluations compared students involved in RIPP with control students (SAMHSA, 2003). At post test, RIPP participants were significantly less likely to have discipline code violations for carrying weapons, were less likely to have in-school suspensions, had lower reported rates of fight-related injuries, and were more likely to participate in their school's peer mediation program. RIPP students also showed a significant increase in their knowledge of curriculum material and decreases in anxiety. At a six-month follow up, RIPP students reported lower rates of peer pressure to use drugs and a significant increase in pro-social responses to hypo-

thetical problem situations. In another study, students at intervention schools reported more favorable attitudes towards non-violence, less favorable attitudes towards violence, and a decrease in the frequency of aggression.

Family Function Therapy

This intervention model helps families and their children reduce delinquency and violence along with drug and alcohol abuse through goal setting. The curriculum works with families and children to develop skills for coping and improving self-esteem.

This model family-based prevention and intervention program has been applied successfully in a variety of settings with a range of adolescents at risk and their families (Alexander, Robbins, & Sexton, 1999). A major goal of functional family therapy is to improve family communication and supportiveness while decreasing the intense negativities so often characteristic of these families. Other goals include helping family members adopt positive solutions to family problems and developing positive behavior change and parenting strategies. Although originally designed to treat middle class families with delinquent and pre-delinquent youth, the program has recently included poor, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural populations with very serious problems, such as conduct disorder, alcohol and drug abuse, and violence.

Positive Adolescent Choices Training (PACT)

The PACT program provides social skills training and incorporates several curricular elements from the Prothow-Stith Violence Prevention curriculum (Hamilton Fish Institute, 2003). This curriculum is culturally sensitive to African American youth. Youth learn how to give positive and negative feedback, resist peer pressure, and solve problems effectively. Studies have demonstrated that treated children increase their skill level in giving feedback, solving problems, and resisting peer pressure. Treated youth were also shown to have considerably reduced the number of in-school and out-of-school suspensions at posttest. One of PACT's main goals is to arm these youngsters with various skills that can help them to identify and avoid potential conflict situations. This program has been developed with special sensitivity to the needs of African

American youth, although its techniques are applicable to all ethnic groups.

Aggression Replacement Training (ART)

One of the most widely recognized cognitive interventions being used in schools and treatment programs is Aggression Replacement Training (Goldstein, Glick, & Gibbs, 1998). ART has been recognized by the U. S. Department of Education's Expert Panel on Safe, Disciplined & Drug Free Schools as a Promising Program and designated as a Model Program by the U.S. Department of Justice, the American Correctional Association, and the United Kingdom's Home Office.

Dr. Arnold Goldstein, the former director of Syracuse University's Center for Research on Aggression, developed this model. ART employs a three-part curriculum:

- 1. Social Skills Building/Skillstreaming.** Fifty positive social skills are taught as alternatives to aggression. Examples include "Making a Complaint," "Keeping Out of Fights," and "Understanding the Feelings of Others." To put these skills into practice, students role-play problem scenarios in group settings with performance feedback, involving praise and re-instruction as an essential follow-up component. This competency-based accountability encourages youth to transfer these skills to real life situations beyond the classroom.
- 2. Anger Control Training.** Youth learn how to maintain self-control when dealing with their anger or that of others. This includes an array of techniques like "identifying triggers" or "using self-evaluation." As in Skillstreaming, these are demonstrated through role-playing. The positive chain of behaviors arm youth with knowledge and awareness to recognize signs of aggression in themselves and others before a conflict erupts.
- 3. Moral Reasoning.** During this portion of the ART curriculum, youth are presented with fictional moral dilemmas. These spark discussion of concepts such as fairness, justice, compassion, and concern for others' rights and responsibilities. Throughout this component, youth are exposed to different perspectives of other group members,

challenging them to use more mature moral reasoning and decision-making in social situations.

Summary

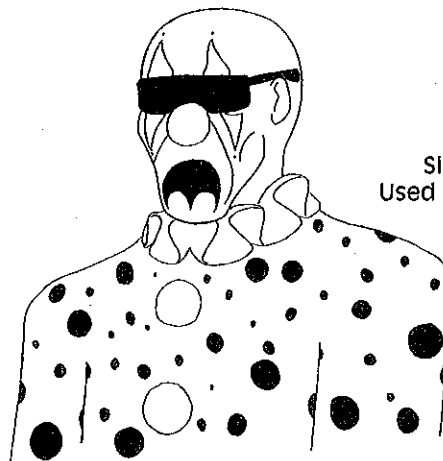
Aggressive behavior, if left untreated, can have devastating effects on a child's overall success in school, work, social situations, and life as a whole. While there is no shortage of purported violence-prevention programs, the most promising results will come from those that are comprehensive, evidence-based, and serve to build positive skills and strengths in young persons.

A. Mark Amendola, LCSW, is the executive director of Perseus House, Inc., Erie, Pennsylvania. He may be contacted by phone: 814/480-5956 or e-mail: mamendola@perseushouse.org

Shana Scozzie is grants coordinator and development associate at Perseus House, Inc. She can be reached by phone: 814/480-5937 or e-mail: sscozzie@perseushouse.org

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