

School Safety Issues and Prevention Strategies: The Changing Landscape of What We Know

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In the decade of the >90's, the landscape of school safety and the expression of youth violence changed substantially. The overall rate of youth violence reached its peak in 1992 and began a slow decline thereafter. However, the incidence of school-violence tragedies dramatically ramped up in this same year and continued into the latter part of the decade. Some assumptions about the associated characteristics of this trend and some potential causal factors are listed below:

1. While the prevalence of school tragedies has declined in the last few years, the number of deaths and injuries per tragedy has increased substantially.
2. Much larger numbers of planned school tragedies have been detected and averted in recent years primarily because of peers revealing these plans to school authorities and parents in advance of their planned occurrence.
3. Each school tragedy now produces an immediate number of copycat incidents suggesting that these events have been planned and contemplated for some time rather than spontaneously arising in connection with a tragedy.
4. The public and parents generally have now moved beyond expressing concern for troubled youth who commit these tragedies to outrage about them and making demands for ensuring that schools become safer for all children and youth.
5. Schools, students, and parents are now increasingly victimized by fears about the possibility of a tragedy occurring in their particular setting, which lowers overall quality of life and reduces a student's ability to get the most out of the schooling process.

6. Our society is largely to blame for the spate of school-shooting tragedies that have occurred during the >90's; the societal forces that spill over into the schooling process and are associated with these tragedies include **dysfunctional families, incivility, substance abuse, child neglect and abuse, the coarsening of our culture, the flood of media violence, the anger and social fragmentation that is pervasive in our society, and so on.** These forces have been a long time in developing and will not change or go away in the near term.

7. A major concern vis a vis school tragedies is today=s peer culture, which has absorbed the baser sides of our society=s unfortunate changes of the past three decades; increasingly, our youth are immersed in a peer culture that is coarse, crude, cruel, uncaring, and often destructive to an individual=s self-esteem.

8. Bullying, mean-spirited teasing, and the humiliation of certain peers are normative processes in many school settings and poison their climates; these destructive processes are often encouraged and supported by the presence and attention of peer bystanders.

a. 160,000 students miss school every day in the U.S. because of bullying and threats of intimidation.

b. Fully 2/3s of school shooters interviewed by the U.S. Secret Service were teased and bullied in their school careers.

9. It is remarkable that so many of today=s youth are willing to write off the rest of their lives as a consequence of settling their grievances through violence against their peers, and adults, in the school setting; many of these same youth are very likely suicidal, are extremely depressed, and in urgent need of mental health services and care.

What the Science Says About What Does and Does Not Work in School Crime Prevention

The contributions of Gottfredson and her colleagues in this area represent very solid work regarding identification of evidence-based strategies that work, as well as those strategies and approaches that either do not work or actually make things worse. Their work is highly recommended as a key source of information on this topic. Table 1 lists generic strategies which they recommend as effective and those that are considered to be ineffective (see attached Table 1).

In March, 2001, Hardy Myers, Oregon Attorney General, released the report of the Oregon School Safety Coalition on safety in Oregon's schools. This coalition assessed the landscape of school safety in Oregon over a 15-month period and issued an outstanding report to guide school policies in this area. Jeffrey Sprague, Co-Director of the IVDB, is the principal author of the report, which is highly recommended as a resource for every school administrator in Oregon. The report contains recommendations for increasing school safety and can be downloaded from the IVDB website (See Appendix A).

Recommended School Safety Response Strategies

We believe the following strategic approaches can move schools in the direction of greater safety and will reduce the likelihood over time of a school tragedy occurring: **(1) Secure the school; (2) Address the peer culture and its problems; (3) Involve parents in making the school safer; (4) Create a positive, inclusive school culture; and 5) Develop a written school safety and crisis-response plan.** The more at-risk a school is perceived to be, the more important these topical areas become and the greater the investment that should be potentially made in them. Their importance and relevance increases as one moves from elementary to middle to high school.

Secure the School

The most immediate and direct method of addressing school safety issues is to secure the school. The three primary approaches to seriously consider in this regard are: **(1) the appropriate use of school security technology, (2) employment of school resource officers, and (3) use of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) principles and techniques.** Used in combination, these three approaches can be effective in reducing the likelihood or probability of a school shooting tragedy. Currently, two of these three approaches (**school resource officers, CPTED**) are built into the Healthy Students/Safer Schools initiative currently being implemented in 4J, Springfield, and Bethel school districts through a federal grant. Considerable progress has been made in the development and appropriate use of security technology to make schools safer without turning them into fortress-like structures. This technology is being increasingly used in schools across the country. An excellent resource on this topic has been developed and published by the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (See Green, 1999, Appendix A). School administrators should be aware of the status, advantages, and limitations of this technology when considering implementation of school safety options and strategies.

Address the Peer Culture and Its Problems

The primary target for our prevention and safer-schools efforts should be the peer culture. The norms, actions, beliefs, and values within broad sectors of today=s peer culture are socially destructive and demeaning. Many youth experience a trial by fire in negotiating the complex and difficult social tasks involved in finding one=s place in this peer culture. Far too many fail this critical test, become lost within it, and wander aimlessly while seeking acceptance that is generally not forthcoming. They become homeless persons within the larger peer group and their lack of fit is well-known among peers. This process forces many marginalized youth to affiliate with atypical or deviant peer groups, which can prove destructive to them.

Transforming this destructive peer culture is perhaps our most formidable task in the area of school safety. This culture is not of the schools= making but schools are perhaps the only social institution, excluding the family, capable of addressing it effectively. Five ongoing strategies are recommended for your consideration in this regard.

1. Adopt and implement the Ribbon of Promise school violence prevention programs: ByKids, ForKids (BK4K) and Not My Friends, Not My School.

These programs are designed to transform peer attitudes and beliefs about the risks to school safety that emerge from the peer culture. They promote ownership by peers of the tasks involved in preventing school tragedies and are highly recommended as a first strategy for enlisting a school=s peer culture in this effort. Their video has been widely distributed and is available to all local schools.

2. Bully-proof the school setting by adopting effective, anti-bullying/harassment programs, such as Bully Proofing Your School and Steps to Respect.

The best disinfectant for bullying, mean-spirited teasing and harassment is sunlight. These events need to be defined as clearly unacceptable in the school by everyone (administrators, teachers, other school staff, students, and parents) and made public when they occur. Students should be given strategies for reporting and resisting them in an adaptive fashion and the reporting of those who commit these acts should be made acceptable. The above-cited programs incorporate these principles and strategies.

3. Teach anger management and conflict-resolution techniques as part of regular curricular content.

The **Second Step Violence Prevention Program**, developed by the Committee for Children in Seattle, is one of the best means available for creating a positive peer culture of caring and civility and also for teaching specific strategies that work in controlling-managing one=s anger and resolving conflicts without resorting to coercion or violence. This program was recently rated as the most effective of all those currently available for creating safe and positive schools by an expert panel of the Safe and Drug Free Schools Division of the U.S. Department of Education.

4. Refer troubled, agitated, and depressed youth to Mental Health Services and Ensure That They Receive the Professional Attention They Need.

Youth with serious mental health problems and disorders, who are alienated, socially rejected, and taunted by peers, can be dangerous to themselves and others. These students are often known to peers and staff in the school and should be given the appropriate professional and parental attention, access to services, and social supports. Having mental health problems combined with being the target of severe bullying and taunting by peers has proven to be a dangerous combination in the context of school shootings.

5. Ask Students to Sign a Pledge Not to Tease, Bully, or Put Down Others

Reports from schools that have tried this tactic indicate that it makes a difference in the number of incidents that occur and in the overall school climate.

Involve Parents in Making the School Safer

With each new school shooting tragedy, parents of school-age children and youth seek greater assurances that their child=s school is safe and, increasingly, are asking for a voice and role in helping the school attain this goal. Recently, a prosecuting attorney, the mother of four children, described a plan for creating a parent-based advocacy group on school safety that would rate the safety of schools and make this information broadly available to all parents. Parents have much to offer in this regard and can be a powerful force in bringing greater safety and a sense of security to the school setting.

Four strategies are recommended below for facilitating parent involvement:

1. Create a parent advisory-planning group at each school devoted to school safety issues for that school.

Such an advisory group would bring valuable knowledge, experience, and advocacy to the process of dealing with local school-safety challenges. It could also serve as a forum for reacting to district- and state-level policy directives in this area.

2. Advocate for parents to teach their children adaptive, nonviolent methods of responding to bullying, teasing, and harassment at school and to avoid encouraging them to fight back

In the vast majority of cases, fighting back will not be effective and may escalate the situation to dangerous levels. It will more likely increase the probability of the offensive behavior occurring again rather than reducing it. An anti-bullying program at school, that has parental support and involvement, will be much more effective.

3. Advocate for the securing of weapons at home and to access gun safety instruction for all family members.

Given the society we live in and the number of guns in U.S. homes, it is becoming imperative that everyone have some understanding of the dangers involved in handling guns and in being in proximity to those who are doing so. Trigger locks and secured gun cases are essential elements for securing weapons in the home where the keys to same are also secured. The National Rifle Association has developed some excellent information on gun safety that can be accessed by anyone. In connection with these efforts, young children need to be taught a golden rule about the sanctity of life and that guns are deadly, life-ending instruments.

4. Make available to parents solid information on effective parenting practices and provide access to those parents who seek training and support in more effective parenting.

There are five generic parenting practices that are instrumental in determining how children develop. They are: **(1) discipline, (2) monitoring and supervision, (3) parent involvement in children's lives, (4) positive family-management techniques, and (5) crisis intervention and problem-solving.** The attached handout explains these techniques in some detail. A large number of available parent-training programs address these parenting practices.

Create a Positive, Inclusive School Climate and Culture

There is solid evidence that effective schools are safer schools and vice versa. The research of Gottfredson and others shows that a school climate which is positive, inclusive, and accepting is a key component of an effective school. Three recommended strategies are provided below for addressing this component of school safety.

1. Create and promote a set of school-based positive values about how we treat others that include civility, caring, and respect for the rights of others.

It is unfortunate that schools have to teach civility in addition to everything else they do but such is now the case. Children and youth are daily exposed to very poor models of incivil behavior toward others by adult society. Making civility a core value of the school=s culture may help reduce some of the coarseness of the peer culture that has become such a problem in our schools and society.

2. Teach all students how to separate from their own lives the exaggerated media images of interpersonal violence, disrespect, and incivility to which they are exposed daily.

School curricula exist that teach media literacy relative to interpersonal violence. It is especially important that young children learn how to make the disconnect between media displays of violence and their own behavior and actions.

3. Establish school-wide rules and behavioral expectations, as well as setting specific applications of same.

The Effective Behavioral Support program is an excellent and proven vehicle for accomplishing this goal. EBS is being broadly implemented in local districts, in Oregon and across the country. It is a highly-recommended approach for schools to use in creating orderly, positive, well-managed school environments.

Develop a Written School Safety and Crisis-Response Plan

Oregon has a law requiring each school to develop a school-improvement plan but no law that mandates development of a written school safety and crisis-response plan. In today=s environment, it is essential that each school go through a planning process designed to reduce the likelihood of a school tragedy and to manage a crisis when it occurs. (See handout on guidelines for developing such plans.) Cathy Paine, a school psychologist in the Springfield, Oregon school district, has become a national expert in this area and is a valued local resource.

Conclusion

Policy generally lags well behind the research that validates evidence-based approaches which can inform and guide policy decisions and practices based upon them. This is especially true in the area of school safety and violence prevention. The pressures and demands of the moment force school administrators into making decisions about school safety strategy and tactics that may appear promising but are not, as yet, proven through the research process. Thus, we are left with basing such decisions upon practices that appear promising, relying on our experience and using our best judgment, until the knowledge base on school safety becomes more solid, cohesive, and evidence-based. The action recommendations described above represent what we appear to know about these complex issues at present.

Appendix A

Recommended Resource Materials on School Safety

IVDB Website Address: <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~ivdb/index.html>

Books

Gottfredson, D. (1997). School-based crime prevention. In L. Sherman, D. Gottfredson, D. MacKenzie, J. Eck, P. Ruter, & S. Bushway, (Eds.) Preventing crime: What works, what doesn't, what's promising: A report to the U.S. Congress (1-74) Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.

Green. (1999). The appropriate and effective use of security technologies in U.S. Schools. U.S. Dept. of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 810 Seventh St. N.W., Washington, DC 20531.

Walker, H. M., & Epstein, M. H. (2000). Making Schools Safer and Violence Free. Austin, TX: PRO-ED, Inc.

Schneider, T., Walker, H. M., & Sprague, J. R. (2000). Safe School Design. Eugene, OR: The Educational Resources Information Clearinghouse (ERIC), University of Oregon.

Poland, S., & McCormick, J. (1999). Coping with Crisis: Lessons Learned. Longmont, CO: Sopris West, Inc., P.O. Box 1809, zipcode: 80502-1809. 1-800-547-6747.

Poland, S. (2000). Take Back Your School: Empower Your Students to Prevent Violence (Grades 6-12). Longmont, CO: Sopris West, Inc.

Reports

The Oregon School Safety Coalition. (2001). How Safe Are Oregon Schools? Salem, OR: State of Oregon Attorney General's Office (available from the IVDB website).

The Citizen's Crime Commission. (2000). KIIDS Report. Kids Intervention Investment Delinquency Solutions. Available from the Citizens Crime Commission, Portland Chamber of Commerce, 221 N.W. Second Ave., Portland, OR 97209-3999, (503) 228-9736, contact Ray Mathis, Executive Director, or Tiffany Dyck for information (available online at: <http://www.kiids-ccc.com>).

Early Warning/Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools (available from <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/earlywrn.html>).

Safeguarding our Children: An Action Guide (available from [http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/Action Guide](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/Action%20Guide)).

Articles

Sprague, J. R., & Walker, H. M. (2000). Early identification and intervention for youth with antisocial and violent behavior. Exceptional Children, 66(3), 367-379.

Walker, H. M., & Walker, J. E. (2000, March). Key questions about school safety: Critical issues and recommended solutions. NASSP Bulletin, 46-55.

Hawkins, D., Catalano, R., Kosterman, R., Abbott, R., & Hill, K. (1999, March). Preventing adolescent health-risk behaviors by strengthening protection during childhood. Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine, 153, 226-234.

Recommended Programs for Preventing Violence and Bullying-Harassment

Second Step Violence Prevention Program (available from the Committee for Children, Seattle, WA, 1-800-634-4449, <http://www.cfchildren.org>).

Steps to Respect (anti-bullying program--available from the Committee for Children, Seattle, WA, 1-800-634-4449, <http://www.cfchildren.org>).

Bully Proofing Your School (available from Sopris West, Inc., P.O. Box 1890, Longmont, CO 80502-1809; 1-800-547-6747).

Recommended IVDB Programs for Making Schools Safer, Effective and Positive

Effective Behavioral Support (EBS). Contact George Sugai at (541) 346-1642 or Rob Horner at (541) 346-2460.

Building Effective Schools Together (BEST). Contact Jeff Sprague at (541) 346-3592.

Ribbon of Promise Programs. Contact Cindy Brown at (541) 726-0512 or www.ribbonofpromise.org.

By Kids, For Kids

Not My Friends, Not My School

Safe Schools Organizational Resources

The National School Safety Center. Ron Stephens, Director; 141 Duesenberg Drive, Suite 11, Westlake Village, CA 91362; phone: (805) 373-9977; fax: (805) 373-9277; website: www.nsscl.org.

National Resource Center for Safe Schools. Carlos Sundermann, Director; 101 S.W. Main St., Suite 500, Portland, OR 97204; phone: (800) 547-6339.

Table 1
Scientific Conclusions Regarding What=s Effective
in School Crime Prevention

What Works?

Strategies for which at least two different studies have found positive effects on measures of problem behavior and for which the preponderance of evidence is positive are:

- ! **Crime and delinquency**
 - " Programs aimed at building school capacity to initiate and sustain innovation.
 - " Programs aimed at clarifying and communicating norms about behaviors by establishing school rules, improving the consistency of their enforcement (particularly when they emphasize positive reinforcement of appropriate behavior), or communicating norms through school-wide campaigns (e.g., anti-bullying campaigns) or ceremonies.
 - " Comprehensive instructional programs that focus on a range of social competency skills (e.g., developing self-control, stress-management, responsible decision-making, social problem-solving, and communication skills) and that are delivered over a long period of time to continually reinforce skills.

What Does Not Work?

Strategies for which at least two different studies have found no positive effects on measures of problem behavior and for which the preponderance of evidence is not positive are:

- ! Counseling students, particularly in a peer-group context, does not reduce delinquency or substance abuse.
- ! Offering youths alternative activities such as recreation and community service activities in the absence of more potent prevention programming does not reduce substance use.
- ! Instructional programs focusing on information dissemination, fear arousal, moral appeal, and affective education are ineffective for reducing substance use.

What is Promising?

Several strategies have been shown in only one rigorous study to reduce delinquency or substance use. If the preponderance of evidence for these strategies is positive, they are regarded as promising until replication confirms the effect. These strategies are:

! **Crime and delinquency**

- " Programs that group youth into smaller schools-within-schools to create smaller units, more supportive interactions, or greater flexibility in instruction.
- " Behavior modification programs that teach thinking skills to high-risk youths.
- " Programs aimed at building school capacity to initiate and sustain innovation.
- " Programs that improve classroom management and that use effective instructional techniques.

From Gottfredson, D.C. (1997). School-based crime prevention. In L. Sherman, D. Gottfredson, D. Mackenzie, J. Eck, P. Reuter, & S. Bushway (Eds.), Preventing crime: What works, what doesn't, what's promising (pp. 5-1 to 5-74). College Park, MD: Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

Tips for Parents on

EFFECTIVE FAMILY MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES - 1

Research on parenting has identified five key parenting practices that are very important in the upbringing of well-adjusted children. Each of these practices is briefly discussed below.

- 1. Discipline.** Parental discipline needs to be fair, consistent and predictable. It should **never** be harsh or punitive. There should be a logical relationship between child behavior and the consequences that are applied to it.
- 2. Monitoring.** Careful parental monitoring of a child=s activities, whereabouts and friendships/peer associations is one of the single most important things that parents can do to ensure that their children grow up healthy, well-adjusted and safe.
- 3. Parent Involvement.** This practice involves simply spending time with your child in either structured or unstructured activities. The parent-child contact is the important thing and the activity chosen is usually incidental to the time spent together and the positive interactions that occur.
- 4. Positive Parenting Techniques.** Positive parenting means being supportive and encouraging of your child. It is important to establish a warm, caring relationship between you that involves mutual respect and affection. In this way, you will be better able to influence your child in the right directions using techniques like social interest, praise and approval, persuasion, and logical thinking, without resorting to punishment and other negative methods of behavioral control.
- 5. Problem Solving/Conflict Resolution/Crisis Intervention.** During their upbringing, children experience many minor crises that, nevertheless, loom very large in their lives. When they bring problems to their parents for assistance, it is **very** important that they be responded to immediately and completely. Alternatives should be developed for them to consider in solving the problem and they should be encouraged to choose one that is acceptable and that works for them. Children should **always** have the confidence that such problems will receive a fair hearing and that they will have access to your assistance as needed.

Adherence to these simple, yet critically important practices in your parenting efforts will have a very powerful, positive impact on your child and your relationship with him or her. Further, they will contribute to a much more positive set of family dynamics.

EFFECTIVE FAMILY MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES - 2

The following rules are offered for your consideration in parenting your child. They can be very helpful in the prevention of adjustment problems later on in your child=s life.

- ! Set up a daily debriefing time in which you review the child=s day and what it was like. ATell me what you did today.@, AWhat did you do that was fun or interesting?@, AWho did you play or talk with?@, ADid anything happen that was a problem or that you didn=t like?@ are excellent ways to conduct such a debriefing. Why should you debrief? First, it tells the child you care for them and are concerned about what happens in their life. It is also an excellent method for screening to detect problems in the child=s life that you might not discover otherwise. Once the child starts schooling, it is extremely important to conduct a daily debriefing of this type.
- ! Monitor your child=s activities, behavior, schedules, whereabouts, friendships and associations very carefully. It is important to provide such monitoring in a positive, caring manner but to do so in a way that is not smothering or unpleasant. Careful monitoring of this type can be a very powerful protective factor in the child=s life. As your child grows and matures, such monitoring may have to change form and become more subtle and less direct. However, it is extremely important that it occur, especially as s/he enters adolescence, when the risks of problems are so much greater.
- ! Children should be taught positive attitudes toward school, and schooling should be perceived as a highly-valued activity. A pattern of cooperative, pro-social behavior will do a great deal to foster a good start in school that will ensure both academic achievement and social development over the long term.
- ! The most important skill you can teach your child prior to entering school is listening as you read to him or her. Your child should see the material you are reading and associate the sound of the words with their symbols on the page. This activity is an important precondition for developing a child who is a good reader and who is interested in reading. It is one of the very best things that can be done to prevent later school failure and to help ensure academic success.

Safe School Plans

Oregon has a law that requires each school to develop a **School Improvement Plan**. Given the changes in our society and youth population that have occurred over the past several decades, it is imperative that Oregon give careful consideration to a law that requires each school to develop a **Safe Schools Plan**.

The attached fact sheet on School Safety and Violence Prevention outlines some of the key findings that emerged in this area. There is now a solid knowledge base on how to move schools in the direction of greater safety and the prevention of violence. The key elements that should be addressed in a comprehensive school safety plan are as follows:

- § School safety audits that evaluate school safety and violence vulnerabilities due to structural characteristics of the building and patterns of building usage.
- § A crisis-intervention plan that allows school personnel to respond to and control crises that carry potential implications for violence or reduced school safety.
- § A school-wide curricular program that teaches social skills instrumental in violence prevention (anger management, conflict resolution, empathy, and impulse control).
- § A well-established communication plan that provides interactive linkages between school personnel, public safety, and parents.

These four elements would be essential to improving the safety and security of any school building and grounds. Well-developed procedures exist for assessing a school=s degree of risk and for implementing each of the components listed above.

Fact Sheet

School Safety and Violence Prevention

- 1) Academically effective schools, with positive school cultures and high levels of student engagement, tend to be safe schools and vice versa.
- 2) Every school contains, in varying proportions, regular students, at-risk students, and chronically involved students; different but interrelated intervention procedures are required for each group.
- 3) Each school should develop a safe schools plan that includes at least three components: a) an audit of the physical plant and school supervision-monitoring practices to assess the risk(s) for lack of safety, b) school-wide teaching of violence prevention concepts, skills and strategies to include impulse control, anger management, conflict resolution, and empathy for others, and c) a self-assessment of risk and protective factors associated with safe versus unsafe campuses.
- 4) There are three key points in which resources and expertise should be concentrated in order to reduce the risks of school failure and dropout: a) at the point of school entry b) during the middle school years and c) in the transition from middle to high school where the dropout rate is highest.
- 5) It is possible to identify pools of students, at any point in the K-12 grade continuum, who are at elevated risk for school failure, dropout, and delinquency. However, determining which of these at-risk students will become violent at some point is a very difficult task and subject to considerable error.
- 6) At-risk students should be identified in kindergarten and the primary grades with cooperative, home-school interventions implemented to help the child get off to the best start possible in school.
- 7) Severely at-risk, chronic students in the elementary, middle school, and high school grades should be considered for alternative classroom and school programs in order to keep them engaged with schooling for as long as possible.
- 8) At-risk students are increasingly marginalized by the rising academic and behavioral expectations of schools with many becoming early school-leavers and adopting a delinquent lifestyle; 80% of daytime burglaries in the U.S. are committed by suspended, truant, expelled and out of school youth.
- 9) There is a moderately strong relationship between discipline referrals in school and arrests committed outside school for at-risk samples of middle and high school age youth. Approximately 65% of discipline referrals in a school are accounted for by 6 to 8% of the student population. Similarly, a majority of delinquent offenses are accounted for by about 8 to 9% of juveniles.