

## **Which Youth Violence Prevention Programs Work?**

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### **Abstract**

Violence is one of the greatest fears of American youth. Despite recent declines in violent death and injury, highly publicized school shootings, pervasive media, and interpersonal conflicts continue to make youth violence a significant developmental and community issue. Many schools and youth organizations have responded to violence quickly with intervention plans followed by educational programming. Yet little evidence exists that providers know which programs are effective with particular youth audiences. To address the need for educational program information, a review of effective programs with guidelines for curriculum selection is presented herein. The review suggests that while several promising resources are available, many heavily marketed materials are not extensively tested. Moreover, few materials adequately address special audiences and issues that youth-serving organizations are expected to reach.

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Violence is the greatest fear of American youth (Horatio Alger Association 1998). Violence, especially among the young, is more common in the United States than in any other industrialized nation (Richters 1993). The homicide rate for young American men aged 15 to 24 is the highest in the world. They are four times more likely to die by homicide than peers in the next most comparable industrialized nation, Scotland (Gelles 1998; Richters 1993) and 40 times more likely to be murdered by peers than teens in Japan (Fingerhut and Kleinman 1990). Homicide rates for young black men ages 15 to 24 are seven times higher than that of white peers (Richters 1993).

While rates of youth violence have declined recently, underlying causes of violent behavior, especially in urban settings and among minority and low-income youth, underline the need for continued attention to these issues (Satcher 2001; Elliott, Hamburg, and Williams 1999). School shootings in rural and suburban communities and earlier research on rural and suburban violence

(Garbarino 1999; Gelles 1998; Weisheit, Wells, and Falcone 1995), together with evidence of weapons use, fighting, and bullying in rural, suburban, and urban schools (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 1998) underline the ubiquity of the problem.

In the aftermath of Colorado (Littleton), Oregon (Springfield), Arkansas (Jonesboro), Kentucky (West Paducah), Mississippi (Pearl), and other shootings (see Table 1 for Killings in U.S. Schools), school and youth organization leaders have felt pressured to provide appropriate intervention and prevention strategies. Ongoing issues for adolescents, including bullying, gang activity, dating violence, racial and class conflict, and suicide continue to challenge youth workers and organizations. Faced with a plethora of conferences, curriculum options, and expert opinion, educators ponder which violence prevention programs are effective for particular audiences and settings.

Many highly touted programs provide little evidence of research foundations, and most offer no evidence of effectiveness in reducing violence, despite claims in program goals (Wahler, Fetsch, and Silliman 1997). In a survey of 51 programs, Wilson-Brewer et al. (1991) found that fewer than half the programs surveyed provided empirical evidence of reducing violence (Posner 1994). Lack of evidence may stem from limited funding for evaluation, failure to include evaluation in program implementation, failure to target the relatively small groups of young people who commit acts of serious violence, and seriously flawed program designs (Posner 1994).

Federal funding of model programs in violence prevention (Elliott 1999; Morley et al. 2000; Powell and Hawkins 1996) resulted in the development of effective strategies and curricula over the past decade. Much of this groundbreaking work is underused by community-based organizations. Reliable materials and well-trained staff require sustained support, including ambitious outreach to higher-risk youth, targeted and repeated training, and changes in norms regarding violence or pro-social behavior (Hawkins et al. 1999). Ineffective programs can waste resources, mislead stakeholders, or fail to address underlying issues. As in the case of domestic violence, mistargeted programming might escalate potentially violent situations, resulting in greater harm than help. Given the limitations of funding, support, time, and expertise, most schools and community-based organizations would be advised to work collaboratively with mental health and violence prevention experts. Educational organizations are most likely to be effective when they focus on practical problem solving and conflict resolution, referring serious behavior problems for more intensive intervention.

This article documents evidence for effectiveness among youth violence programs. Review and reporting of program effectiveness is intended to aid school and community educators who are selecting appropriate, effective programs. Nevertheless, the reader is cautioned that even with the

most effective programs, there is no guarantee that they will prevent particular individuals from violent behavior.

### **Methodology**

With funding from the National Network for Family Resilience (USDA-CSREES), five compendia of prevention programs were reviewed (Adolescent Violence Prevention Resource Center n.d.; Altman 1996; Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence 1996; Dean and Wallace 1995; Iowa Substance Abuse Information Center 1996) plus research related to RETHINK anger management (Institute for Mental Health Initiatives 1991). The authors reviewed, consolidated, and summarized the work from the six sources to make them more useful to Cooperative Extension educators, school officials, and youth organization stakeholders. The five-level evaluation model developed by Altman (1996) was adapted to evaluate curricula as follows (asterisks are explained in Figure 1):

1. Programs show no research support. The programs are being evaluated but claim no published program evaluation research.
2. \* Programs offer suggestive outcome data from studies with weak designs. Evaluations were attempted, but the quality of studies makes results difficult to interpret.
3. \*\* Program evaluation is in the beginning stages. Only process evaluations were used to conduct outcome evaluations.
4. \*\*\* Programs produce positive outcome data from well-designed studies. One or two studies show short-term impact on risk factors for violence.
5. \*\*\*\* Programs include a strong evaluation component. A series of studies over a period of years show consistent impact on risk factors for violence.

Of 380 youth violence prevention programs reviewed, only 23 (6 percent) were found showing evidence of program effectiveness. To aid in locating acceptable violence prevention programs by target audience (in Figure 1), resources are grouped as follows: 1) elementary; 2) junior/senior high; 3) adults/parents and families; and 4) helping professionals. In addition, Figure 1 separates 18 programs designed to help participants resolve conflicts and build interpersonal skills from five programs designed to provide self-protection or self-defense strategies.

This review of violence prevention resources reveals that currently within the field of violence prevention, there are two broad stratagems. The first addresses the critical issue of violence at the

individual or interpersonal level via skill-training programs. The second addresses violence at the community or contextual level. Since violence is both an individual and community concern, and since truly effective interventions demand both individual and community change, readers are encouraged to investigate additional community-strengthening resources (Heartsprings 1996; Minnesota Department of Education 1995; National Crime Prevention Council 1988; 1994; O'Brien, Pittman, and Cahill 1992).

Some of the programs and resources combined the two perspectives and addressed violence at both individual and community/contextual levels. This approach, while reflecting the most current literature on violence prevention, also represents some of the greatest challenges to empirical validation. PeaceBuilders is an example of an approach to violence prevention that combines both individual/relational and community level (e.g., neighborhood mobilization, monitoring) interventions. This program is exemplary both in its integration of the violence prevention literature and in its strong commitment to empirical evaluation.

## Discussion

Nearly 400 violence prevention programs were identified. While there are surely others, only seven were found showing consistent impact on violence risk factors. The question then may arise: How many are effective with severely angry and very at-risk youth? In response, since program evaluations involved a cross-section of youth, even highly tested programs may be ineffective with severely angry and very at-risk young people. Clearly, resources are needed to fund applied research studies to determine which programs work best with high-risk groups.

As pressure mounts for school, law enforcement, and community agencies such as Cooperative Extension to "do something" to quell the risk of violence in our schools, the age-old advice, *caveat emptor*, applies. Let the buyer beware! Based on the authors' knowledge and experience, several recommendations are made.

- Be careful consumers.
- Recognize that ineffective programs may do more harm than good.
- The field of youth violence prevention is similar to that of domestic violence prevention, where mistargeted programming can escalate potentially violent situations.

Plan and implement programs as follows:

1. Know the target audience. Curricular effectiveness depends upon fit with audience needs. Conduct formal needs assessments to determine participant needs and levels of anger and

violence. Talk with a sub-sample of participants in advance. Seek their input to determine violence-related problems or capacities before going further.

2. Use information about the target audience to broaden input for response. It may be wise to include school counselors, teachers, therapists, and others working with youth to gain perspective on the best material or strategies for intervention.
3. Once community leaders have discussed the target audience needs, review curricula to see if they have been tested with the target audience. If not, consider purchasing more effective curricula.
4. Resist the temptation to "do something," with just a good will intent to respond. Implementing ineffective programs may do more harm than good. Collaboration with other community organizations better equipped to address target audiences may benefit your organization by focusing rather than duplicating efforts. Tips for positive relationships, including respectful communication, problem solving, anger management, responding to stress or grief, and conflict resolution can be offered as general information immediately following a violent incident. Deeper solutions, including therapeutic approaches to rage and trauma, community change, and widespread use of positive communication takes the sustained effort of a dedicated task force. Initiating a group promoting this long view is much more important than offering a "quick fix" in the short term.
5. Remember that evaluation should be planned from the beginning, not as an afterthought. Tracking program effectiveness will provide practical information for providers and citizens and may contribute to the research base that guides curriculum and program development. In many communities, school districts or city/county programs employ a program evaluator. County staff of the Cooperative Extension System can involve state Cooperative Extension Specialists at land-grant universities to assist with program evaluation and design.

**Table 1. Killings in US Schools**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Community</b>	<b>No. Killed</b>	<b>Age of Assailants</b>	<b>Gender of Assailants</b>
<b>November 20, 1999</b>	Deming, NM	1	13	Male
<b>April 20, 1999</b>	Littleton, CO	15	17, 18	Male
<b>May 21, 1998</b>	Springfield, OR	2	15	Male
<b>May 21, 1998</b>	Onalaska, WA	1	15	Male

May 21, 1998	Houston, TX	1	17	Male
May 19, 1998	Fayetteville, TN	1	18	Male
April 28, 1998	Pomona, CA	2	14	Male
April 24, 1998	Edinboro, PA	1	14	Male
March 24, 1998	Jonesboro, AR	5	11, 13	Male
December 1, 1997	West Paducah, KY	3	14	Male
October 1, 1997	Pearl, MS	3	16	Male
February 19, 1997	Bethel, AK	2	16	Male
February 2, 1996	Moses Lake, WA	3	14	Male

**Figure 1. Summary of Research-based and Empirically Effective Violence Prevention Programs by Target Audience and Topical Area**

Topical Area	Elementary	Junior/Senior High	Adults/Parents & Families	Helping Professionals
<b>Conflict Resolution/ Interpersonal Skill Building</b>	Aban Aya Youth Project	Aggressors, Victims & Bystanders***	Fighting Fair: For Families*	Aggression Replacement Training****
	I Can Problem Solve****	Dealing With Anger***	RETHINK Anger Management for Parents***	Fighting Fair: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for Kids*
	Resolving Conflict***	PACT****		Resolving Conflicts Creatively***
	Second Step***	The Prepare Curriculum****		
	Talking with TJ***	RETHINK Workout for Teens*		
		Second Step***		
		Social Competence Promotion Program		

		for Young Adolescents****		
		Viewpoints****		
<b>Self Protection/Self Defense Strategies</b>	Let's Talk About Living in a World With Violence	Straight Talk About Risks**		PeaceBuilders****
	Straight Talk About Risks**	Violence Prevention Curriculum for Adolescents		

**Note:** Key to levels of evaluation (Altman 1966):

\*\*\*\*Strong evaluation program-a series of studies over a period of years that shows a consistent impact on risk factors for violence

\*\*\*Positive outcome data from well-designed studies-one or two studies that show a short-term impact on risk factors for violence

\*\*Beginning stages of evaluation-process evaluations only with plans for conducting outcome evaluations

\*Suggestive outcome data from studies with weak designs-evaluations have been attempted, but the quality of the studies makes the results difficult to interpret

None: No published evaluations but is currently being evaluated

For more details, cf. Wahler, Fetsch, and Silliman (1997)

<[http://www.nnfr.org/violence/yvp\\_litrev.html](http://www.nnfr.org/violence/yvp_litrev.html)> (YVPFig1.doc Rev. 2.040)

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