

Violence Prevention and Students with Disabilities: Perspectives from the Field of Youth Violence Prevention

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■ Though violent crime rates have decreased generally over the past two decades, youth violence remains a significant public health problem. Each year in the United States there are over 5,000 homicide victims between the ages of 10 and 24 years and more than 700,000 youths are treated in emergency departments for violence-related injuries (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention [CDC], 2012). In a recent national survey, over 60% of children reported that they were exposed to violence within the past year, and 46% were assaulted within the past year (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2009). The short- and long-term consequences of youth violence are significant. Exposure to youth violence contributes to a range of other poor physical and mental health outcomes for youth, including substance use, high risk sexual behavior, depression, academic problems, and suicide (Arseneault, Walsh, Trzeniewski, Newcombe, & Caspi, 2006; Finkelhor, Turner, & Ormrod, 2006; Menard, 2002; Swahn & Bossarte, 2006).

Developmental studies have provided increasing clarity about the types of risk factors to target in order to reduce youth violence (CDC, 2012; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001; World Federation of Mental Health, 2002). The key risk factors associated with youth violence are generally divided into four broad domains: individual, family, peer, and community or neighborhood (Hawkins et al., 1998; Herrenkohl et al., 2000). As a result, a growing list of preventive interventions aimed at children and youth and targeting risk factors identified in basic developmental studies have been shown to be effective (Catalano, Arthur, Hawkins, Berglund, & Olson, 1998). Thus, we know that programs can be designed to affect developmental trajectories and risk.

Much of the work in youth violence prevention has been based in a public health model and guided by a developmental-ecological perspective on risk and prevention

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1988). A central tenet of developmental-ecological theory is that individual development is influenced by the ongoing qualities of the social settings in which the child lives or participates and the extent and nature of the interaction between these settings. Child development and behavior is influenced by family functioning, peer relationships, schools, communities, and larger societal influences (e.g., norms; media). This model also emphasizes development as an important consideration, recognizing children's capacity for change over time. The same factor may have a different impact depending on the age of the child. Thus, the developmental stage must be considered when identifying and attempting to intervene on risk and protective factors.

The key implication of the developmental-ecological model for violence prevention is that the impact of preventive interventions is likely dependent on the social ecology in which development occurs and the intervention that is provided (Gorman-Smith, Tolan, & Henry, 2000; Tolan, Gorman-Smith, & Henry, 2003). Just as the social-ecological model of development emphasizes that individual development depends in part on social context, so the developmental-ecological prevention model emphasizes that prevention efforts always take place within some social context, so their impact may depend in part on features of that context.

In addition to the substantive findings of each, the papers in this special issue contribute to the field of youth violence by advancing understanding of the nature and importance of context in risk and prevention for a population often left out of the youth violence prevention discussion—students with disabilities. Given the risk for both peer victimization and sometimes perpetration of violence found among this population, these papers highlight the need for further research to better inform the development of effective preventive interventions for these vulnerable youth.

The paper by Farmer, Lane, Lee, Hamm, and Lambert (2012 [this issue]) highlights the important contextual influence of school social dynamics in supporting or suppressing aggressive behavior. The authors review research and provide a framework for understanding how the school social dynamics and the peer group process, particularly during late childhood and early adolescence, play an important role in supporting bullying or aggression within a school or classroom. Their research is consistent with others who have identified peer influences and normative processes in social settings as an often neglected factor that plays an important role in social settings (Henry, 2008; Henry & Chan, 2010; Rodkin & Hodges, 2003). These processes must be considered when implementing interventions and violence reduction strategies. In addition, norms and social processes themselves may provide a potentially fruitful focus for intervention.

The paper by Sullivan et al. (2012 [this issue]) provides qualitative data to suggest it is not only the social dynamics of students, but also the adults within the school who affect the responses of students with disabilities when faced with challenging social situations. In this study, a number of individual factors were identified as supporting effective nonviolent and discouraging aggressive responses, including having a positive image and confidence to enact nonviolent responses, managing anger and emotion regulation, and taking perspective. Aspects of the peer context, particularly perceived instrumental and emotional support, were identified as factors supporting nonviolence. Importantly, students said they were more likely to seek adult assistance if they perceived that the adults at school were available, receptive, and supportive. Thus, it was not just student and peer relationships, but relationships with adults in the school that were important.

These two papers are consistent with other research that points to the importance of addressing school culture and norms regarding aggression and violence. For example, Henry, Farrell, Schoeny, Tolan, and Dymnicki (2011) argue that schools can build a culture that supports nonviolence by fostering norms that support nonviolence; improving interpersonal climate—including teacher-student relationships and student-student relationships; and responding appropriately to violence and to settings that provide opportunities for violence. Because norms

are maintained through feedback mechanisms among students, one of the most important things teachers can do is attend not only to those directly involved in bullying or fighting, but also to the bystanders. A teacher reprimanding the bully in a context of peer normative approval may only encourage further bullying, whereas the same reprimand in a context of peer normative disapproval is likely to discourage further bullying. These and other data suggests that placing greater emphasis on creating a normative climate that supports nonviolence is one way to substantially improve children's lives.

Individual development and behavior is not only influenced by the ongoing qualities of the social settings in which the child participates, but also by the extent and nature of the interaction between these settings. The study by Zablotzky, Bradshaw, Anderson, and Law (2012 [this issue]) is consistent with and extends previous research on the role of the interaction between two important socializing contexts—family and school. Using data from a national survey of parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, these investigators found that parents who rated the school climate more negatively were more likely to have had a child who experienced bullying behaviors. Those parents who viewed the school more positively were more likely to be involved in their child's school. These findings highlight the positive effect of parental involvement in school. Research has consistently found parental involvement in school to be associated with better academic and behavioral outcomes for children (Comer, 1988; Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). This may be particularly important for parents of children with disabilities given the higher risk for peer victimization than general education students found in some studies (Rose, Monda-Amaya, & Espelage, 2011).

The paper by Rose and Espelage (2012 [this issue]) provides additional data regarding both the higher risk status of students with disabilities as both victims and perpetrators of bullying, but goes beyond to highlight the fluidity of these roles. It is not the case that an individual student is only a bully or only a victim. Rather, students move between these roles as a function of context. Also important in this paper is the focus on subgroups and variation in risk and protective factors between different subgroups of students with disabilities. Students with emotional and behavioral

disorders reported higher levels of bullying than the other subgroups of students. Previous research suggested that students with disabilities may engage in higher levels of bullying as a means to reduce or avoid victimization. While this may be the case for some subgroups of students with disabilities, these investigators found that this was not the case for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Victimization status did not affect levels of bullying for these students. Rather, increased levels of anger were associated with higher levels of bullying. These data are consistent with findings in the violence prevention literature over the last 20 years that have shown that there is not a single pathway to violence and different patterns of risk and protective factors are associated with different developmental pathways (Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 2002). Thus, there is a need to understand specific patterns of risk and protection for subpopulations to better inform intervention and prevention efforts.

In addition, there is a need for scientific investigation to determine whether and how interventions that have demonstrated general efficacy might work similarly across contexts and across different subpopulations (Coie, Miller-Johnson, & Bagwell, 2000; Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 2002). Even as there is a growing list of tested and effective programs and policies for addressing youth violence, widespread dissemination and high-quality implementation of these effective programs and policies has not been achieved. There has been a call for greater attention to implementation and dissemination research to better understand how evidence-based interventions can be implemented at scale and translated to widespread practice in communities.

The paper by Lochman et al. (2012 [this issue]) contributes to our understanding of both the need to look at effects across subpopulations and to disseminate and implement research by examining whether an evidence-based school-based preventive intervention (Coping Power) for children with aggressive behavior impacts academic achievement when it is implemented by school counselors in a dissemination field trial. Across a two-year period, youth with counselors who had intensive training in the Coping Power intervention (CP-IT) had smaller declines in language arts grades as compared to youth in the control condition. No significant effects were found for math grades and no

moderating effects were found for youth in special education, suggesting that the CP-IT program had similar effects for all youth.

This group of papers and this special issue are a reminder that schools represent an important developmental context for both impacting risk (and protection) for involvement in violence and aggression, but also as a setting for intervention and prevention of these behaviors. School-based violence prevention programs are a critical component of the school curriculum. In a review of universal school-based violence prevention strategies, the majority of interventions were found to be effective in reducing violence, with an average of 15% reduction of violence across programs reviewed (Hahn et al., 2007). These data highlight the potential and critical need to support the broad-based implementation of such programs. In addition, this research suggests that it is not just violence that is impacted by these programs, but other behaviors including academic achievement and school performance.

The group of papers in this special issue also highlights the importance of implementing school-wide activities and policies to foster social connectedness and a positive learning and working environment. When young people believe that adults in their school care about their individual well-being as well as their learning, they are more likely to succeed academically and engage in nonviolent behaviors (CDC, 2012). Communities should implement activities and develop and enforce school policies that promote the connectedness of their students, families, teachers, and other school personnel to their school environments. These policies would help all students to feel supported and safe at school.

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