American Orthopsychiatric Association

Safe and Humane Schools: Violence Prevention

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Introduction

Many tragic school shootings in recent years have motivated policy-making aimed at putting an end to senseless violence in schools. Yet most violence prevention remains reactive, aiming to identify and reduce risk factors (Banyard, 2013), rather than facilitating positive attitudes, behaviors, and relationships that are the foundation of safety in schools. Moreover, legislation that focuses on school building safety (e.g., security guards, metal detectors, surveillance cameras) or exclusionary discipline (e.g., suspension, expulsion, arrest) may have limited effectiveness, and may actually contribute to a climate of danger and fear in school. Safe learning environments that promote the physical and psychological safety of students and adults must include considerations for a positive school climate, with a focus on student and family engagement, caring and supportive relationships, and behavioral health.

Purpose/Problem Statement

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), nearly three-quarters of public schools reported one or more violent crime incidents in 2013. Witnessing violence, whether directed toward peers or toward teachers, has profound effects on children's development, contributing to post-traumatic stress disorder, emotional distress, aggression, as well as conduct problems and substance use (Buka, Stichik, Birdthistle, & Earls, 2001). These issues have important implications for children's behavioral health and global well-being. Violence prevention experts have suggested integrated models of risk and protective factors for programs that nurture positive youth development (Biglan, Flay, Embry, & Sandler, 2012).

Unfortunately, some current violence prevention strategies, such as increasing the presence of school resource officers, may make schools less welcoming and more threatening. Kathleen Nolan (2011) found that when school police implemented discipline policies, students experienced greater alienation and distrust in school, and misbehaved more, especially when they felt that practices were unfair. Statistics suggest that the use of law enforcement in schools has increased arrests and referrals to the juvenile justice system, often for minor offenses (e.g., class disruption, disorderly conduct) that do not threaten school safety (Advancement Project et al., 2013). In addition, zero-tolerance and exclusionary discipline policies have inadvertently hurt student-adult relationships, contributed to poor student achievement, and hindered the overall school environment (American Psychological Association (APA), 2008).

Instead, priority should be given to proactive approaches that address underlying causes of problem behaviors and facilitate student engagement and positive student-teacher interactions. Studies have identified diverse factors related to school shootings, including social alienation and

rejection from close-knit peer groups (Subcommittee on Youth Violence, 2013), and to everyday violence and bullying, such as low levels of social support from teachers (Berkowitz & Benbenishty, 2012). Because alienation is a key trigger, a positive pscyhosocial climate that supports healthy peer and teacher relationships are critical to preventing violence, and research confirms that these reduce peer violence in schools (Eliot et al., 2010; Vossekuil et al., 2002). Relational aspects of school community, including school connectedness, trusting teachers, and availability of caring adults are associated with lower rates of aggression and violence in schools, as well as a greater likelihood of help-seeking (Gregory, Cornell, & Fan, 2011).

Policy/Position Statement

Violence in school can cause physical and psychological trauma and undermine the safe environments that are critical for learning. At the same time, policies intended to increase safety may inadvertently create punitive environments where students are likely to become disengaged or pushed out of school. Schools must evaluate discipline and violence prevention strategies to ensure that they are benefiting students (within developmental frameworks) as well as school safety (APA, 2008). To best serve students and ensure safety, schools should incorporate a focus on promoting prosocial behaviors and trusting relationships in classrooms and school-wide.

Violence prevention programs have been primarily focused on changing individuals instead of changing environments. Yet research shows that violence prevention programs are more successful when there is a focus on changing the classroom and school environment (Espelage & De La Rue, 2011). A positive psychosocial climate plays a foundational role in the efficacy of bullying prevention programs, for example (Low & Van Ryzin, 2014). Students are safest in schools where they feel connected with adults and peers and trust adults enough to share their problems. Ortho encourages interdisciplinary dialogue between educators, researchers, and policymakers on topics that inform violence prevention, such as:

- Evidence-based programs that improve school connectedness and student-teacher relationships for all students (e.g., bullying prevention and intervention, social-emotional learning, positive behavior supports)
- School-based mental health services and threat assessment strategies (e.g., Youth Mental Health First Aid, TeenScreen Schools)
- Advocacy for relevant legislation on school climate and student supports (e.g., Mental Health in Schools Act)

Ortho supports comprehensive approaches that address social contexts, prevent social isolation, and nurture child and youth development. Such environments can prevent violence and promote behavioral health in ways that security measures and harsh discipline do not. While governments and schools work to address safety in the aftermath of tragedies, strategies should not promote fear and distrust, but rather help restore the sense of connectedness to school and trusting relationships that keeps students safe.

References

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