

Schoolyard Violence: Roots And Remediations

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Abstract

In a society filled with firearms and angry young males inundated with violent images from a profit-driven media, it is no wonder that we have been subjected to the terror of violent boys on a war path. This article offers six steps to bring true discipline to the learning environment. Also, four proactive approaches to curb violence are explored. Lastly, the four A's of meeting the developmental needs of students are addressed.

Violence is too often the lead story on the evening news or the headline in the morning paper:

- October 1, 1997, Pearl Mississippi – After apparently killing his mother, a 16-year-old boy goes to school and shoots nine students. Two die, including the boy's former girlfriend.
- December 1, 1997, West Paducah, Kentucky – A 14-year-old boy is accused of opening fire on a student prayer circle at a high school, killing three and wounding five.
- December 15, 1997, Stamps, Arkansas – A sniper wounds two students outside a school in southwestern Arkansas; a 14 year-old boy is arrested after a manhunt.
- March 24, 1998, Jonesboro, Arkansas – Two boys, aged 11 and 13, open fire outside a middle school, killing a teacher and four girls; nine girls and one other teacher wounded.
- April 25, 1998, Edinboro, Pennsylvania – A 14-year-old male student shoots and kills a teacher; two 14-year-old boys are wounded.
- May 19, 1998, Fayetteville, Tennessee – A male high school senior shoots and kills another 18-year-old male senior.
- May 21, 1998, Springfield, Oregon – A 15-year-old male student, a day after being expelled for carrying a firearm, opens fire in the school cafeteria, killing two students and wounding 25 others (Los Angeles Times, May 22, 1998).

In a society filled with firearms (Humes, 1996) and angry young males inundated with violent images from a profit-driven media (Boyatzis, Mattillo, & Nesbitt, 1995), it is no wonder that we have been subjected to the terror of violent boys on a war path. This article offers six steps to bring true discipline to the learning environment. Also, four proactive approaches to curb violence are explored. Last, the four A's of meeting the developmental needs of students are addressed.

Six Steps: A Short Walk for Schools

Findings from research in 1996 indicated that when seen as violent institutions, schools tend to emphasize control and punishment over academics and achievement. Further, when students view schools as prisons and educators as guards and wardens, they begin to behave like prisoners instead of students and violence manifests as its own self-fulfilling prophecy (McLean, 1996).

Moreover, research reveals that teachers often equate discipline with punishment. But punishment is only one component of the construct known as discipline. To assume behavior management strategies which utilize punishment are solely effective is misguided at best, pernicious at worst. Discipline is a systematic paradigm comprised of preventative and interventional strategies intended to manage, not control student behavior. Schools can work to prevent inappropriate student behavior through:

1. Setting clearly stated boundaries or rules.
2. Engaging student attention by using effective teaching methods.
3. Structuring the classroom environment to increase student learning.
4. Individualizing instruction and adapting assessment techniques to individual needs.
5. Engaging student attention by offering a challenging, relevant curriculum.
6. Providing feedback to students in a constructive, positive manner with the use of praise, rewards, and increased teacher attention. Discipline approached in this way transforms inappropriate behavior into an opportunity for learning instead of an occasion for punishment (Buck, 1992).

Additionally, "positive interactions with parents and other adults can lessen the risk of violent behavior" (Sautter, 1995, p. K8). Research has been reported that finds that "one caring adult can make all the difference in the life of an at-risk youth" (Sautter, 1995, p. K8).

Four Approachable Areas

Meanwhile, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency has sought to clarify the origins of violence and the avenues available for rational intervention (Krisberg & Austin, 1993). Consistent with this inquiry are four proactive approaches that could curb violence:

1. Social Bonds
2. Stress and conflict resolution
3. Cultural Sanctions and
4. Brain controls (Brentro & Long, 1995).

Social Bonds

Social bonds are the most critical factor in restraining violent behavior. Not surprising. In fact, early in the 20th century, many children who were raised in depersonalized settings such as orphanages developed affectionless personalities (Karen, 1994). Ninety percent of students and teachers view their schools as safe. Schools are a natural starting place to prevent and remediate violent tendencies in children while providing the glue of social bonding (Males, 1998).

Stress and Conflict

When children are overwhelmed by stress and/or conflict, they may behave in ways that are self-destructive and antisocial. The school setting itself is a source of much stress for many students. Students regularly risk bad grades, encounters with bullies, and rejection. Sociologists have identified patterns of school-induced delinquency caused by school failure (Gold & Osgood, 1992). Students sometimes attempt to gain attention in an antisocial manner when other means toward acceptance and recognition appear too difficult or unavailable (Brentro & Long, 1995).

Cultural Sanctions

When society places well-articulated, lucid sanctions against aggressive acts, mass production of violent children rarely occurs. While the United States does have legal prohibitions against violence, these prohibitions are applied inconsistently with competition from many pro-violent messages. Through analysis of violence in the media and education on the meaning of sportsmanship, educators may help inoculate children from these pro-violence messages (Brentro & Long, 1995).

Brain Controls

Neurobiologically-based aggression has also been identified in research. Some children with prefrontal cortical deficits can become enraged at the slightest irritation. Hyperactive children occasionally display tornado-like aggression, which often passes as quickly as it begins. Those who suffer paranoid disorders may plot revenge, setting off predatory patterns in the brain not unlike a stalking panther. Some scholars speculate that even psychologically-based aggression can cause secondary impairment to the brain (Hunt, 1993). An intact, rational, sober brain is best able to control aggressive impulses (Brentro & Long, 1995).

While we know that violence is often a by-product of intoxication, mental illness due to neurological trauma, disease, or chemical imbalance can also warp thinking while provoking undesirable behavior. When organic problems are suspected, it is an educator's responsibility to get appropriate diagnosis and treatment (Brentro, Long, & Johnson, 1993).

Student behavioral problems may be prevented or reduced by meeting the developmental needs of students. In order to meet student needs, schools can utilize the four A's:

1. Attachment – positive social bonds are a prerequisite to pro-social behavior.
2. Achievement – setting high expectations means refusing to accept failure.
3. Autonomy – true discipline lies in demanding responsibility, not obedience.
4. Altruism – through helping others young people find proof of their own self-worth (Brentro & Long, 1995, p. 56).

By concentrating on these four A's, educators can engage student involvement in a developmentally appropriate fashion, while providing a sense of meaning and coherence in the lives of students.

Conclusion

It is difficult to believe that school violence has actually declined since the high point year of 1992 (King & Murr, 1998). And, indeed, it is almost an axiomatic proclamation that violence is *symptomatic* but not *inevitable* (Travis, 1998, p. M5). It is, perhaps, still credible to assert that school violence is simply aberrant behavior of "disturbed individuals, and not necessarily a sign that society is falling apart" (Travis, 1998, p. M5). But where is the boundary between the individual and the societal or cultural? What is the division between self, other, and environment? It is not so clear. Like it or not, we are all products of our culture; creatures of our society. Everything from language and protocol to love and trade sits within, and is largely determined by culture and the society in which we live.

What has been suggested in this article is that there are several avenues that our society can utilize to reduce the production of violent youth. Utilizing schools as social agents, we can take proactive steps to prevent and remediate violent acting-out among our children. Schools have long been targets on the front line of social battle; today they have become the literal targets of a few disturbed individuals. Now is the time to implement educational programs that can mitigate the violence that runs so rampantly in the neighborhoods and hamlets of our nation. It is past time to create schools to be the beacons of discipline and humanity that our angry offspring so urgently need.

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