
Kids Killing Kids

A Thoughtful, Community-Centered Response to Keeping Children and Youth Safe in Our Schools and Communities

Minnesota Department of Human Services

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	2
Kids Killing Kids Introduction To The Problem	3
Keep Guns Away From Kids	3
Bringing Individuals Together: Methods To Address The Issues	3
What Works	5
A Comprehensive Approach, Including Family, Peer, Media And Community	5
Normative Change	6
Life Skills Training	7
Early Intervention and Prevention	7
Cultural Competency	8
Training And Consultation	9
Physical And Administrative Changes To Promote A Positive School Climate	9
What Doesn't Work	10
Solutions To Keep Youth Safe In Our Schools And Communities	11
Resources	12
Kids Killing Kids: A Thoughtful Response Group Members	15

Acknowledgments

Dear Stakeholder, The names of places like West Paduka, Kansas, Springfield, Oregon and Jonesboro, Arkansas doubtlessly conjure up images of school violence. In 1998 as the state and nation struggled with the images of children gunned down in their school yards, a group of Minnesotans was organized by Minnesota Department of Human Services Children's Mental Health Division to address violence among school-aged children. The group: Kids Killing Kids: A Thoughtful Response, sought to gather information on these violent acts, develop action steps to address them, and implement some workable strategies to help children and families. The attached report is a result of this group's work.

Kids Killing Kids: A Thoughtful Response also took part in:

- Testifying to the Minnesota Senate Task Force on School Safety
- Disseminating information on best practices and programs to help children in Minnesota who commit violent acts and to prevent violent acts
- Disseminating of information on the White House Conference on School Violence
- Hosting a one-day forum for youth attended by more than 60 Minnesota teenagers and young adults.

With the release of this report we hope to increase the peace among our youth in Minnesota.

We acknowledge the work of the young people from across the state who shared their insights, numerous state agency and community experts who provided the group with information, and the members of the adult group.* Thank you.

For more information, please contact: Kathy Jefferson at 651-215-6019.

Sincerely:

Janice Cooper Director, Children's Mental Health Division

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Kids Killing Kids Introduction To The Problem

In May and June of 1998 the news media was saturated with the news coverage of the tragic violent school shooting events in West Paduka, Kansas, Springfield, Oregon and Jonesboro, Arkansas. Throughout the country, including Minnesota, communities were painfully aware that *this* could happen in *our town*, in *our schools*. Adults were asking how could this happen? What went wrong with these kids? They must be held accountable. As information about the children in these incidents became known we learned they had histories of troubled lives. Concerns over these tragedies compelled individuals in Minnesota to seek ways to be proactive so that our communities would not join the list of towns, cities and suburbs devastated by youth violence. This concern also compelled Minnesota individuals to ask how, as adults, are we protecting and caring for our children.

Keep Guns Away From Kids

"Lots of ways to get a gun."

"You can't buy a CD with explicit lyrics but you can buy a gun at your local store."

"Adults should be more responsible for their guns."

"My dad doesn't have his gun locked up—even my little brother knows where it is."

"My parents have a shotgun against the wall in a bedroom."

Bringing Individuals Together: Methods To Address The Issues

The Children's Mental Health Division of the Minnesota Department of Human Services along with representatives from other state agencies formed an ad hoc group, Kids Killing Kids: A Thoughtful Response. This group brought together individuals from private, public and community organizations. The group's purpose was to develop action plans which are relevant and possible with a high potential for reducing violence among kids. The group, composed of approximately thirty-five individuals from throughout Minnesota, held four facilitated sessions to:

- examine underlying issues,
- target solutions, and

- develop ideas for action.

Early in the process it became evident to the adults that youth be included in the process. This led to the "Gathering of Youth Voices Forum," a day long youth conference. This forum brought together 65 Minnesota youth, from public and charter schools, and youth from residential correctional facilities, to participate in small group discussions facilitated by youth facilitators. The purpose of this gathering was to learn from these students how youth and adults can work together to keep youth safe in their schools and communities.

Kids Killing Kids: A Thoughtful Response Group addressed the following questions:

- What are the appropriate responses to children acting violently?
- What are the underlying issues of violence among children?
- What is it that adults are not hearing from children?
- What do youth need from adults to feel safe?
- What is currently happening statewide to ensure the safety of children?

Gathering of Youth Voices Forum responded to the following questions about creating safer schools and communities for youth:

- What is being done to make you feel safe in school? Is it working?
- Is there a zero-tolerance for violence policy in your school? If yes, does it help you feel safe?
- What are the most important things that police, lawmakers, and other officials can do to help you feel safe in your community? What kind of laws would you suggest?
- If you wanted a gun, where and how would you get it? What kinds of laws or policies would you suggest to prevent access to guns?
- If friends threaten to kill or hurt someone or themselves, what would you do about it? Would you talk to an adult about your concerns, if not, why not?

The youth participants were thoughtful, candid and serious in their responses. Most strikingly, these young people were very appreciative to have been asked to participate, to contribute their thoughts, ideas and recommendations. Frequent comments from the youth indicated that most of the time they feel adults don't want to listen to them or don't respect their opinions.

There was consensus between the responses of the adults and youth that:

- we must address the underlying issues that lead children to commit violence;
- there are no quick fixes; and

- there are solutions.

The following report is based on what adults and youth learned together. The adults' commitment to the young people was/is to listen, *really listen*, to them.

What Works

Often we are consumed by the problems, paralyzed by the highly visible events of violence among children. There is a tendency to reinvent the wheel, to begin with a clean slate. It is clear that while there are violent acts being committed, the majority of school buildings remain safe. The following are critical elements to programs, services and the environment for young people that hold promising practices according to the literature, and the groups of adults and youth. (Italics indicate direct quotes for the youth in The Gathering of Youth Voices Forum.)

A Comprehensive Approach, Including Family, Peer, Media And Community

Violence prevention program experts suggests that an integrated, coordinated approach that includes all aspects of youth life can have an effective impact on reducing violence. Specific elements of this approach are outlined below.

- Effective and safe schools are places where there is strong leadership, caring faculty, parent and community involvement, including law enforcement officials, and student participation in the design of programs and policies.
- Prevention and intervention strategies that involve the entire educational community-administrators, teachers, families, students, support staff, and community members-working together to form positive relationships with all children.
- Schools that have close ties to families, support services, community police, the faith-based community, providing the community at large many valuable resources.

"Good teachers make a big difference" "Not enough caring adults who will understand and you can trust." "The media makes it seem like it's so bad. At school there was a small fight. They act like it was a riot. Police brought in dogs and everything." "Violence is glorified -guns are the answer."

Resource Model:

The mission of Baltimore Police Athletic League (PAL) is to reduce juvenile crime and victimization by allowing young people to interact with police officers in a positive setting, while participating in constructive alternatives to antisocial behavior. With the success of this first pilot project, 26 additional academic and recreational centers are now operating. As the regular school day ends, PAL after-school and summer academic and recreational activities are run by Baltimore police officers, community service officers, and parent and community volunteers. These adults, serving as role models and mentors, work to create a healthy atmosphere that fosters trust and mutual respect between youth and adult authority figures.

Normative Change

Also referred to as normative education, normative change is based on the concept that children learn best and services are most effective when delivered in as normal an environment as possible.

Normative change activities are designed to show that violence is not the norm, and that changes in behavior or "norms" can occur. Specific elements of normative change activities include:

- Communication and reinforcement of clear, consistent norms
- Activities designed to foster school norms against violence, aggression and bullying
- Positive policies that demonstrate respect for students, and practices that create ways for them to share their concerns and feel safe expressing feelings.

"We need mutual respect." "A lot of violence stems from people not being respected." "I was the only black student... I was pushed around, called names... I had no support." "In some schools lockers are searched, and there are metal detectors. Metal detectors make it feel like a jail."

Resource Model:

An example of a strong normative change program, selected as a model in *Blueprints in Violence Prevention*, comes from the work of Dr. Dan Olweus in Norway, that was launched in the 1980s and included a school-based intervention. Teachers and schools received guidance on how to prevent bullying, including rules against bullying, and ways of protecting students from bullying. This resulted in a reduction of 50 percent in the frequency of bully-related problems, including fighting, for two years after the campaign began. Truancy, vandalism, and theft also declined while school climate, order, and discipline improved.

According to the 1998 Minnesota Student Survey:

- 45% of the 9th grade males and 46% of 12th grade males said they have made fun of or threatened students of different races or backgrounds some, most, or all of the time. 41% of 9th grade females and 44% of 12th grade females said they made fun of or threatened students of different races or backgrounds some, most, or all of the time.
- 30% of 9th grade males and 20% of 12th grade males said they had hit or beat up another person, at least once or twice during the past 12 months. 20% of 12th grade and 11% of 9th grade females said they had hit or beat up another person at least once or twice during the past 12 months.
- 63% of 9th grade males and 68% of the females thought their teachers showed them respect most or all of the time. 12th grade males thought teachers respected them 64% of the time and females thought so 70% of the time.

It is clear that students could benefit from programs that include a normative change component.

Life Skills Training

Life skills training refers to skill building that stresses personal, interpersonal, problem solving and other skills necessary to address aspects of everyday life. Specific aspects of such training may include:

- Teaching skills in anger management; social perspective taking - education on empathy and how the same situation could be viewed differently; social problem solving; peer negotiation; conflict management; peer resistance skills, active listening and effective communication. Where appropriate, content should address hate crimes, prejudice, sexism, racism, male-female relationships and the role of bystanders. Bystanders can escalate or de-escalate situations by their behaviors.
- Violence prevention, drug prevention and social competency training programs share many common elements. Schools should identify common elements among these prevention programs, while noting curricula differences.

"We need to learn how to talk to each other." "We need to learn how to confront others without violence." "More classes to talk about differences and what's inside people" "We need more programs to teach ways to learn good behavior." "Need to learn about anger management and thinking errors like: glorifying, self-centered, minimizing, assuming the worst, blaming others. How to ask for help, moral judgement."

Resource Model:

The U. S. Departments of Education and Justice first Annual Report on School Safety, model programs section, outlines a variety of Life Skills programs throughout the county.

Early Intervention and Prevention

Prevention and Early intervention refers to activities designed to reduce the incidence of violence by targeting young people who have not engaged in violent behaviors, who are at risk for violent behaviors, or who are beginning to engage in minor exhibitions of violence. Below are issues to be considered with early intervention and prevention.

- Prevent student violence through a positive relationship with an adult who is available to provide support when needed.
- Establish many preventive measures for children's mental and emotional problems as well as a comprehensive approach to identify early of all warning signs that might lead to violence toward themselves or others. (Violence refers to a broad range of troubling behaviors and emotions shown by students, including serious aggression, physical attacks, suicide, dangerous use of drugs, and other dangerous interpersonal behaviors. Some of the signs of potential violence toward others are also signs of depression and suicidal risk, which should be addressed through early identification and appropriate intervention.)
- Intervene and get help for troubled children, and respond to school violence when it occurs.

- Work with small groups or individual students to provide direct support, as well as link children and their families to necessary community services and/or providing these services in the school.
- Ensure interventions are developmentally appropriate.
- Provide family therapy and parent training about delinquent and at-risk youth.

"There are family problems -family not caring, family violence, alcohol and drug abuse." "It's like no one paid attention to the kids who shot other kids. They wanted to be accepted. We need to work more with the relationship between students than on metal detectors and stuff." "We need parent education." "We need mentors." "In 9th grade my friend tried [suicide]. We told the school counselor and he talked to her. Her parents really didn't do anything."

Resource Model:

Families and Schools Together (FAST) is a two-year program that engages parents in providing social supports for children ages 3-13 and their families. Implemented by schools nationwide, this program seeks to improve student behavior and strengthen communities, schools, and families by reaching out to socially isolated families, creating support networks, and encouraging parents to take leadership roles in the program. It does this through a well-defined collaboration between parents, the school, a local mental health agency, a local provider of substance abuse prevention and intervention services, a youth advocate, and a youth partner. The program is replicated in 30 Wisconsin schools and in California schools. According to the 1998 Minnesota Student survey, 31% of 9th grade females and 16% of the males thought about killing themselves during the last year. For the 12th graders, 19% of the females and 15% of the males thought about killing themselves during the last year.

Cultural Competency

Cultural competency has been defined as a "set of congruent behaviors, attitudes and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals, enabling them to work in cross-cultural situations... The word culture is used because it implies the integrated patterns of human behavior that include thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values and institutions of racial, ethnic, religious or social groups. The word competence is used because it implies having the capacity to function within the context of culturally integrated patterns of behavior defined by the group."

According to the U. S. Department of Education, Early Warning Timely Response, A Guide to Safe Schools, a major source of conflict in many schools is the perceived or real problem of bias and unfair treatment of students because of ethnicity, gender, race, social class, religion, disability, nationality or sexual orientation.

- Schools should provide administrators and staff with culturally competent knowledge, skills, and attitudes to know, understand and respect the values and reality conditions of the racial, ethnic and highly diverse student populations which are critical to reducing violence and helping students succeed.

"Racism and drugs/alcohol are big parts of it [violence]." "We should have anti-violence and anti-racism classes "We need more one-on-one time with people different from you." "When I was the only kid of color, the teacher was inappropriate.

Resource Model:

The Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP) is a comprehensive, school-based program in conflict resolution and intercultural understanding. RCCP began in 1985 as a collaboration of the New York City Public Schools and the New York City Chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility Metropolitan Area, an independent nonprofit organization. The overall goal of RCCP is to incorporate conflict resolution skills and intercultural understanding into the classroom curriculum and everyday social interactions. The primary objectives are to achieve a long-term reduction in violence and violence-related behavior and to promote intergroup understanding and positive intergroup relations, greater student academic achievement and a reduction in the absentee rates for both students and teachers.

Training And Consultation

Training and Consultation refers to opportunities for learning to ensure appropriate implementation of principles and programs and consulting with experts in specific issues such as behaviors, building school capacity and community resources.

- Teachers and staff who have specialized training in identifying and addressing behavioral and emotional needs of children
- Schools where teacher and staff have access to qualified consultants who can help them address behavioral and academic barriers to learning.

Resource Model:

There are a range of training and consultants to support violence prevention activities through-out the country.

Physical And Administrative Changes To Promote A Positive School Climate

Extensive research suggests that there are physical plant changes and administrative procedures that can help promote a school climate that reduces violence.

- Grouping students into smaller units for more supportive interaction and flexibility in instruction.
- Stagger class periods and lunch times to reduce hallway and cafeteria congestion.
- Eliminate poorly lit and visually obscured spaces.
- Keep physical plant well maintained and clean.

"We are over crowded in our school. Can't get a seat at lunch." "Classes too big." "More kids, crowded together, more conflict."

Resource Model:

A variety of models have been implemented nationwide to address the issue of school climate. In Minnesota, a partnership between the Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) and the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) funded by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau of the Department of Health and Human Services is designed to address school climate. Critical elements of this program include:

- Examining student attendance
- Training "design teams" which are student support teams that monitor communication, consultation and support, and
- Staff wellness programming that assesses how teachers and support staff are trained, and supported to ensure optimal staff performance and that staff are able to recognize the links between positive achievement and mental well-being. For more information contact Lois Harrison, Minnesota Department of Health at 651-281-9896 or Lucy Kapp, Minneapolis Public Schools at 612-588-6994

What Doesn't Work

According to the National Institute of Justice and Drug Strategies available evidence indicates the following programs fail to prevent crime or reduce risk factors for crime:

- Peer counseling of students in schools
- Gun "buy back" programs
- Boot camps using traditional military basic training
- Scared Straight programs whereby minor juvenile offenders visit adult prisons
- Instructional programs that are too brief and not supported by a positive school administration
- Programs providing only didactic information without helping students develop skills necessary to avoid and handle conflict.
- Segregating aggressive or anti-social students into a separate group. As reported in *Safe Schools, Safe Students, A Guide to Violence Prevention Strategies*, norms become especially powerful for adolescents, when the desire to be accepted by peers is at its peak. At that point, even if adolescents oppose violence, perceived group norms that support violence may prevail. Consequently, grouping aggressive or anti-social students into segregated groups only reinforces the negative behavior.

The adults in the Kids Killing Kids Group and the youth in the Gathering of Youth Voices shared concerns about zero tolerance policies and out of school suspension and expulsion policies that were not clearly and publicly communicated and that did not provide alternative resources to students.

"Zero tolerance does not get rid of the violence. The violence gets to go out to the community." "School violence policies do not work." "We don't know if there is a policy." "Focus should be broader and more preventative than punishment." "Suspension doesn't work if you don't want to be in school anyway. Then they [students] are left unsupervised."

According to the Minnesota Department of Children Families and Learning, there was a 250% increase in the numbers of children expelled from school between 1990 and 1997. Over 60% of the students were expelled for violence or the threat of violence. This number is considered a gross underestimation. Anecdotal information suggest far more students are excluded through humanitarian transfers, options to self-exclude including offers to drop out or enroll at another school or in another school district.

Resource model: What Works -an alternative to out of school suspension

Community Accountability And Prevention (CAAP) program. When a student violates a school district policy, which in the past would have meant suspension, a meeting is held with the parents, administrator, and counselor or social worker. The student and parent(s) sign a contract which outlines specifically the expectation of the student while in the CAAP program. Completion of school work, provided by the classroom teachers, is always required. Other conditions such as community service, anger management class or restitution may also be included. CAAP has been operational for three years. Contact: Doris Karls, John Glenn Middle School, Maplewood, MN, (651) 748-6311

Solutions To Keep Youth Safe In Our Schools And Communities

Recommendations:

- Keep guns away from children. Hold adults responsible for their guns. Enforce the laws we currently have in place.
- Work with the media to establish incentives to educate the public on responsible gun ownership and on laws prohibiting access for minors, and to de-glorify violence and guns.
- Develop media training and incentives for reporters to act responsibly in their reporting. Sensationalism promotes the "contagion" effect or copy cat acts. Incentives could include establishing fellowships for journalists on responsible reporting on children and public policy; making it prestigious to report responsibly; recognizing journalists who try to set high standards.

- Address the role of racism in youth violence and alienation. Develop culturally appropriate programs to train providers in the schools and community to respond to the needs of a diverse group of young people.
- Develop in-school suspension alternatives to out-of-school suspension or expulsion.
- Equip each school building with the resources they need to meet the mental health, substance abuse and risky behavioral needs of their students. Increase the number of social workers and counselors in schools and readily available qualified consultants who can help to address behavioral and academic needs.
- Provide teacher and school administrators education and training about the psychosocial and emotional needs of children; and provide mental health, social service and corrections professionals with the training and skills necessary to work with teachers and school administrators.
- Support in-school and community based classes and programs that assist students to learn communication skills, anger management and problem solving skills, and foster youth -adult mentor relationships.
- Establish in every public school building in Minnesota: elementary, middle, and high school a recognized group comprised of an equal number of students, teachers, parents and school building personnel. The purpose of the group is to provide school administration with honest, accurate feedback about what specific policies, attitudes and behaviors will prevent and reduce incidents of violence and create a sense that schools are safe and respectful places.
- Require safety locks on all guns. Minnesota has made tremendous progress with the use of the seat belt. Use of gun safety locks and accompanying education has the potential to substantially reduce the number of firearm related violence.

The preceding information is based on information gained from, but not limited to, the following sources: the Kids Killing Kids: A Thoughtful Response Group, the Gathering of Youth Voices Forum, Drug Strategies, the National Institute of Justice, the U. S. Department of Education, the U. S. Department of Justice and the White House Conference on School Safety: Causes and Prevention of Youth Violence.

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