

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 385 388

PS 023 519

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 TITLE Fighting Violence without Violence.
 PUB DATE [94]
 NOTE 7p.
 PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.)
 (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Conflict Resolution; Crime Prevention; Elementary
 Secondary Education; Parent Associations; Parent
 Participation; Parent Role; Parent School
 Relationship; Peer Influence; *School Safety; *School
 Security; *Student Behavior; *Violence; Volunteers
 IDENTIFIERS Conflict Management; *Parent Teacher Association;
 *Peer Mediation; Safe Schools Act 1993; Student
 Assistants

ABSTRACT

Violence is becoming the number one problem in United States schools. Approximately 20 percent of high school students regularly carry guns and other weapons. Several nonviolent measures are appropriate to reduce violence in schools; but only the implementation of multiple ideas and measures, not "quick fix" solutions, will curb violence. Peer mediation, a program in which selected students are trained as mediators to help their peers in resolving conflicts before violence erupts, may be one important measure. Research asserts the effectiveness of letting children resolve their own conflicts. Another violence-reducing measure is the elimination of school lockers, which serve as hiding places for weapons and contraband and also as congregating places where violent confrontations can start. An active Parent Teacher Association (PTA) could also have a profound impact on school violence. One way for parents to help is to create "safe houses" where students can feel safe from violence on their way home from school. Parents could also volunteer to patrol hallways, cafeterias, bathrooms, and school grounds, and to staff phone lines for unsupervised children who need help or guidance. Another measure is the federal government's Safe Schools Act of 1993, which sets aside funds for qualifying high-crime school districts. Not every method will work in every situation, therefore each school and district needs to evaluate its own situation and determine what will work best for it. (BCG)

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Fighting Violence without Violence

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Today's youth are being plague by an epidemic of violence. It's unbiased and reaches people at all levels of education, from the universities all the way down to preschool children. The following statistics compiled by the Secretary of Education, Richard W. Riley, are a grim reminder of what children face every day as they leave home for school:

- Every six seconds of every school day a theft or violent crime is committed on or near school grounds.
- Approximately 20 percent of high school students now carry a gun, knife, razor, club or other weapon on a regular basis. Many of them carry these weapons to school.

Violence is quickly becoming the number one problem in schools across the country, and like any problem there is a solution. A way of decreasing the number of incidents to a tolerable that will make our schools safer and more conducive to teaching and learning. It's not a quick fix that can be implemented overnight, but rather a multitude of ideas and measures that can be employed to reduce violence. Say reduce because it's unrealistic to think we can totally eliminate all forms of violence.

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PS 020519

One relatively new and innovative measure being used by many schools across the country is peer mediation. It's a program designed to get student's involved in resolving conflicts before they erupt in violence. The programs main objective is to provide basic skills to resolve conflicts to all students(Stomfay-Stitz, 1994, p. 279). In the interim selected students are trained and work closely with the school staff to act as mediators to help other students resolve their conflicts peacefully. It's a way of teaching children how to work through their problems by talking and reason rather than resorting to violence.

Enlisting the students to act as mediators serves a dual purpose. Young people find it easier to talk and be more open and frank about their problems when talking to people their own age, it also gets them actively involved. Research has shown that children resolve their conflicts more often when allowed to work it through themselves without the presence of an adult (Wheeler, 1994, p. 298). The students have their own ideas for creating a safer environment and parents and educators need to be attentive to what the students are saying and encourage their participation in the effort to reduce violence.

The benefits of peer mediation have extended beyond the school and

into the children's homes. "Parents and students indicated that they were resolving their home conflicts in new and more productive ways, and with noticeable benefits to sibling relationships" (Stomfay-Stitz, 1994, p. 281). Schools are receiving requests from parents soliciting the training for their children and themselves. Conflict resolution skills being taught are impacting the students entire life, not just their school life. Implementating peer mediation will not eliminate all violence overnight, but it can be a peaceful start in the right direction.

An ideal solution to reducing school violence would be to know what's going to happen before it does. Since this is not possible, the next best solution would be to eliminate one originating point of violence - school lockers. Eliminating lockers eliminates time consuming locker searches and a popular place for student congregation. Students need a place to gather and discuss academic and extracurricular activities, but not in front of a locker in a crowded, noisy hallway. A substantial amount of what students do during the day is planned and decided while huddling around lockers, including violent and disruptive behavior. By eliminating lockers we can eliminate a small percentage of disruptive and violent behavior. It also eliminates a popular hiding place for weapons and contraband. However, it

should be mentioned that implementing this idea will infringe on the school's budget in the form of increased textbook purchases. This idea may seem inappropriate in an era of shrinking budgets, but the benefits would definitely outweigh the costs.

Another means of curbing violence in and around school grounds is through a proactive Parent Teacher Association (PTA). An involved PTA can have a tremendous impact on helping children feel safer getting to and from school.

In a school's surrounding neighborhood "certain houses are identified as safe havens for children on their way home from school" (Hatkoff, 1994, p. 285). In addition to safe houses "warm lines" could be established. These are special telephone lines for unsupervised children who need help or guidance (Hatkoff, 1994, p. 285). Another measure would be to employ parents on a volunteer basis to help students feel more secure during school hours. They could patrol the hallways, cafeterias, bathrooms and school grounds during and between classes. Most times the sight of an adult will be sufficient deterrence for a child contemplating some type of misbehavior. The Secretary of Education at a youth forum on violence stated that parental involvement contributed to a decrease in violence and crime at

school.

One final measure is the federal governments help in reducing school violence through the Safe Schools Act of 1993. This program set aside money that could be distributed to qualifying school districts with high crime rates, and violence based on their percentage of children from economically disadvantaged families. The Act stipulates that at least 6500, or 15 percent, of the districts children come from economically disadvantaged families. The districts can spend the money as they see fit, but cannot spend more than 33 percent on metal detectors and security personnel.

These are only a fraction of the ideas and measures being used to reduce school violence across the country. Not every method will work in every situation, and each school and district needs to evaluate their own situation and determine for themselves what will work best for them. We are talking about children not numbers, and providing them with a safer school where they can learn without fear must be our top priority. With a concentrated effort from everyone involved we can reduce violence in our schools and make them institutions of learning instead of fear.

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