Cite this article as:
R Wilson-Brewer
Comprehensive approaches to school-based violence prevention
Health Affairs 13, no.4 (1994):167-170
doi: 10.1377/hlthaff.13.4.167

The online version of this article, along with updated information and services, is available at:
http://content.healthaffairs.org/content/13/4/167.citation

For Reprints, Links & Permissions : http://content.healthaffairs.org/1340_reprints.php

Email Alertings : http://content.healthaffairs.org/subscriptions/etoc.dtl

Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution
Comprehensive Approaches To School-Based Violence Prevention
by Renee Wilson-Brewer

The Winter 1993 issue of Health Affairs provides valuable information from a range of sources on violence as a public health problem and efforts to address it. However, the membership of the National Network of Violence Prevention Practitioners takes issue with Daniel W. Webster’s Commentary, The Unconvincing Case for School-Based Conflict Resolution Programs for Adolescents.” The author purports to review the effectiveness of conflict resolution programs and other adolescent prevention curricula, as well as to present the basic premises of conflict resolution programs. He accomplishes none of these tasks. Instead, he misrepresents school-based conflict resolution programs and presents recommendations that not only have been made by violence prevention practitioners and others for several years now, but, in some cases, are already being implemented. Webster’s “unconvincing case” for school-based conflict resolution programs is premised on incomplete and, in some cases, erroneous information.

Choice of sample programs. Webster accurately states that “conflict resolution programs now exist in thousands of middle and high schools.” Considering the large sample of programs from which to choose, it is unclear why he provides no information on the sample size from which he drew the programs discussed. How many programs did Webster identify? How many of these have been evaluated? And how were determinations made about those that would be examined?

None of this information is provided. Despite the fact that Webster’s paper falls under the category of Commentary, we assume that he is still obliged to adhere to certain minimal scientific standards.

During the past two years the network, with support from the Carnegie Corporation, has identified more than 300 violence prevention programs and more than 100 conflict resolution curricula for middle and high school students. Was Webster aware of even a portion of these programs? The author does cite the 1991 review of the state of the art of violence prevention for young adolescents when he says, “[s]chool-based conflict resolution programs for adolescents have been one of the most popular public health strategies to reduce violence.” However, even that review, which presents eleven case studies of adolescent violence prevention programs, includes one—the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP) that had an independent evaluation. This conflict resolution/mediation program, which provides intensive training, technical assistance, and follow-up and involves all members of the school community, was not included.

In reviewing the Violence Prevention Curriculum for Adolescents, the first intervention discussed, Webster merely states that it was chosen because it is “perhaps the most widely used conflict resolution program in the nation.” The author provides no clues for the selection of the other programs. Equally noteworthy is the fact that once he settled upon three programs to review, he chose to provide only limited information about each.

For example, in the case of Deborah Prothrow-Stith’s Violence Prevention Curriculum for Adolescents, only one of the many components of the Boston Violence Prevention Program is presented. And so

Renée Wilson-Brewer is former director of the National Network of Violence Prevention Practitioners in Newton, Massachusetts. This essay was written in collaboration with the network’s Planning Committee.
while Webster bemoans the fact that “most school-based conflict resolution programs are implemented with no significant complementary efforts to address aspects of youths’ environment (family, peers, and community),” the first program he castigates is one that extends beyond the school into the community in significant, long-term ways. The Boston Violence Prevention Program, begun in 1986, is a pioneering effort that was also described in the 1991 review. Initially only a three-year pilot program, it is now funded by the city of Boston and provides training and technical assistance to schools, community agencies, and others.

In the case of the Washington (D.C.) Community Violence Prevention Program (CVPPP), the problem is not in the author’s description of the program but in his exclusion of what we consider significant facts. He failed to report (1) his role in the program evaluation when he was a member of the staff, (2) the positive evaluation results published in an Archives of Surgery report that he coauthored, and (3) the results of another program evaluation conducted by researchers at the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado, which found positive program effects. Once again, we are astounded at the incompleteness of Webster’s review, especially considering the wealth of information available to him.

Basic premises? Regarding the “basic premises of conflict resolution programs” presented by Webster, our only question is: Whence did these spring? We saw no citations in the text for these statements, just counterarguments provided by the author to basic premises it appears he himself devised. Members of the National Network of Violence Prevention Practitioners, many of whom consider school-based conflict resolution an important component of violence prevention programs, would be among the first to counter these basic premises.

For example, we have never held the belief that “violent behavior is similar to other health behavior, and models of individual health behavior change can be readily applied to the problem of violence.” Our belief is that violence is a public health problem, one that takes an enormous toll in terms of morbidity, mortality, quality of life, and use of health care resources. Applying a public health approach to violence is analogous to applying such an approach to disease prevention: charting occurrence, identifying risk factors and at-risk populations, and basing interventions on that investigation to reduce injury, disability, and death. And so we look to public health researchers and practitioners to bring the tools of their profession to bear on this problem—the tools of epidemiology and surveillance, as well as preventive intervention development, implementation, and evaluation.

We know that analysis of epidemiologic data can clarify patterns of violence and that an understanding of these patterns can be used to develop effective preventive interventions. But we look not only to public health for answers, but also to criminal justice, sociology, psychology, and a range of other disciplines for guidance.

The second premise, that “the violence prevention training needs of each student are similar enough that all would benefit from participation in a standardized program,” is also one that neither we nor our colleagues hold. The premise of most school-based conflict resolution programs is that all young people must learn skills to help them resolve conflicts successfully. The earlier they learn such basic survival skills, the better, since young people will encounter many conflicts throughout their lives.

In addition, perhaps because of his lack of understanding of the field, Webster has mistakenly presented violence prevention and conflict resolution as analogous. Most conflict resolution programs are not first and foremost violence prevention programs. Although many school-based programs include conflict resolution, they may also consist of a combination of any or all of the following: mediation, life skills training, self-esteem development, crime prevention and law-related education, mentoring, bullying prevention, stress reduction, self-discipline training, gender-issues exploration/relationship violence prevention training, and cultural awareness/prejudice reduction training. This is the short list.
Although resolving conflicts successfully means resolving them without violence, most conflict resolution programs seek to help young people build life skills—critical thinking, decision making, communication, and peer pressure resistance. Such skills are essential if young people are to define problems and generate solutions, anticipate consequences of behavior choices, learn self-control, manage stress, and form and retain friendships. A young person who does not possess the skills to resolve conflict may not resort to violence, but he or she may be unable to navigate difficult situations without such basic skills. And we believe that one of the most basic skills is the ability to resolve conflicts. We would consider the attainment of conflict resolution and pro-social problem-solving skills as prerequisites for violence prevention training, not substitutes for it.

In addition, we find Webster’s comparison of middle-class adults with youths from “crime-ridden neighborhoods” inappropriate and offensive. Why is it that these adults are able to use what he calls the “negotiated solution model,” while youths living in “ghetto areas” are unable to develop and use the same skills? We also fail to see the distinction Webster draws when he suggests that “fights between boys in their early and middle teens are usually about status and respect,” but that arguments among most middle-class adults “usually stem from disagreements and competing interests.”

A “heightened concern for respect” does not exist only among young people living in impoverished communities. Youth of all racial and ethnic groups and all socioeconomic levels express concern about their inability to gain respect and to be taken seriously, especially by adults. They struggle daily to make the transition from adolescence to adulthood, and that struggle involves not being taken seriously, being overprotected, being controlled, and lacking access to important information and resources. They struggle to break free from sex-role stereotypes, deal with physical and sexual abuse, and renegotiate relationships with adults. Youth from low-income urban centers are not the only ones who are “dis-respected and deprived of legitimate opportunities to acquire symbols of status.” The symbols may be different across groups, as may be the type of struggle, but almost all adolescents are likely to be engaged in struggles during this often turbulent period of development. And as with middle-class adults—many of those struggles are likely to involve conflicts stemming from disagreements and competing interests.

National network goals. The major goal of the National Network of Violence Prevention Practitioners is to advance violence prevention as a field. We strive to foster collaboration and mutual problem solving among practitioners and to bridge the gap between research and practice. To this end, the network is working with the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado, Boulder (another Carnegie Corporation-funded program), to broaden the expertise, perspective, and knowledge base of its members.

Although we concede that there is not yet a great deal of evidence on the effectiveness of school-based conflict resolution programs, some data do exist. In addition, we feel it is vital to acknowledge the relative youth of the violence prevention field, as well as recent efforts such as ours to improve research and evaluation efforts. We recognize the need to combine curricula with other interventions, and many of us are involved in such multicomponent efforts. We also agree with Webster that government agencies and foundations should fund long-term program evaluations, and we continue to advocate for such support.

Finally, although we agree that conflict resolution programs can provide “political cover” for politicians, criminal justice responses such as boot camps and metal detectors continue to garner even more support from some politicians. Politicians often feel that these types of high-visibility “solutions” have more clout with voters who want an immediate, if not long-term, change. We advocate prevention efforts founded on sound research and evaluated rigorously.

Webster’s paper has been misstated. It should have been “The Need for Comprehensive Approaches to Violence Preven-
tion.” With that we could agree. It is the message we continue to send as we work in our respective areas, sharing information, advocating for prevention, and searching for ways to halt the death and destruction of our most valuable resource: our children.

NOTES


The Positive Case For School-Based Violence Prevention Programs

by Betty R. Yung and W. Rodney Hammond

Daniel Webster’s paper on school-based conflict resolution programs raises some excellent points but is marred by several flaws. First, his conclusions are based on an oversimplification (and sometimes mischaracterization) of many of the premises and methods of violence prevention programs. He alludes to a proliferation of conflict resolution programs (generally understood to be peer-led interventions that provide a structure and process for mediating specific disputes in schools and neighborhoods) yet does not describe outcomes related to programs with this exclusive emphasis. Instead, he provides a critique of three violence prevention programs that are not based on the underlying premises he describes and finds faulty. Second, his literature review omits research that suggests conclusions different from those he reached. He does not include a very substantial body of literature that is quite pertinent to violence prevention conceptualizations. While he does discuss social information-processing research, this is a very specialized subset of broader social-skills literature. He touches only briefly on this vast research base and offers virtually no discussion of anger-management theory and practice. Training in social skills and anger control is an important component of our own and many other violence prevention approaches. They have neither a “dubious scientific rationale” nor a lack of supportive empirical evidence. Third, there is a glaring logical inconsistency in his conclusion. He indicts violence prevention programs in part because of their “absence of convincing empirical evidence” and argues instead that we should devote resources to such strategies as mentorships and recreation programs. These programs are certainly of general benefit to children and adolescents, but we are unaware of any “convincing empirical evidence” that they have had an impact on violence. What follows is a summary of our disagreement with Webster’s key arguments.

Lack of evidence of long-term change. Webster argues that there is no evidence that “conflict resolution” programs prevent violence because their long-term effects are not known. To support this, he cites three preliminary studies, which each report varying degrees of short-term success. An important distinction here is that the cited programs did not report longitudinal positive effects because of an absence of such effects. Instead, they could not describe sustained change because each of them was in too early a stage of development and implementation. It seems quite premature to discount or dismiss early positive results in such cases. Webster appears to equate “absence of evidence” with “evidence of absence”—a dangerous leap to make. In fact, in the Positive