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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
Adolescent Choices Training (PACT) program (one of the three programs reviewed in the paper), we have found evidence of long-term positive effects on aggression and other delinquent behavior since our initial descriptive report.

Failure of “classroom-based curricula.” In his review of research to support a conclusion that “classroom-based curricula” to prevent high-risk behavior have not been effective, Webster relies primarily on two secondary reviews of substance abuse and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) prevention programs covering a wide range of approaches such as scare tactics and standard health “risk education” curricula. He mentions only briefly programs that use a structured, skills-oriented training approach. This review offers little basis for predicting the efficacy of a particular prevention methodology except to highlight that traditional health risk education delivered via lecture is not likely to produce change in complex behavior problems among adolescents-certainly not “new news,” but a widely acknowledged conclusion reached by many investigators. Since few violence prevention approaches rely primarily or exclusively on didactic education about violence risk as their principal component, Webster has underscored the ineffectiveness of a behavior change strategy, but such a strategy is not the foundation of most violence prevention programs. Where meta-analytic research and individual studies have differentiated among diverse prevention strategies, there is substantive evidence of long-term effectiveness of particular methods such as small-group behavioral and skill-based training, interactive teaching, incentive or reinforcement systems, and use of positive peer role models. While not universally successful, there are far too many sustained positive outcomes reported-particularly as related to aggressive behavior-to conclude definitively that violence prevention approaches based on such methods could never be effective.

Faulty premises. Webster reiterates an inaccurate presumption that conflict resolution programs are based on the concept that adolescents engage in violent behavior because they lack an understanding of their risk. He also suggests that these programs focus only on negotiation as the most critical skill for avoiding physical conflict. Since neither premise is true of the programs described in his paper, it is difficult to assess the validity of this criticism. In fact, violence prevention training based on social-skill methods usually teaches negotiation as one of several focal skills. It also directs efforts to influencing attitudes that support aggression, building motivation to behave in ways that minimize the potential for violence, and removing barriers such as poor anger control to achieving nonviolent solutions.

He further argues that violence prevention programs are typically “blanket” efforts that do not differentiate between the diverse needs of “early starters” versus “late starters” (youngsters whose chronic antisocial behavior patterns follow different developmental paths). This program attribute is not universally true, as our program targets adolescents with identified risk characteristics. However, we believe that there is logic to other choices. Policy decisions as to whether to direct efforts to primary prevention for all adolescents, to secondary-level interventions for high-risk adolescents, or to tertiary treatments for identified aggressors are difficult. Given the problems in intervening once aggressive patterns are well established, there is a strong rationale for primary and secondary-level efforts. However, since “seasoned” offenders do account for a disproportionately large number of assaultive violent crimes, it would be unwise to ignore their need for treatment to prevent recidivism. Identifying the optimum age of a priority population for preventive programs presents equal challenges. Epidemiological data on assaultive violence patterns make a convincing case for early prevention, even at preschool levels, yet it is especially compelling to address the more immediate risks of young adolescents entering the period of greatest vulnerability.

We conclude that there is no single perfect model that meets all needs. It is unrealistic to expect that a prevention effort will address the full range of potential contributors to violent behavior and will preclude
the need for other interventions. Prevention efforts also should be implemented at multiple levels of the continuum. Violence is a multifaceted problem. It is difficult to conceive of a single prevention approach that could simultaneously deal with the risks of sexual assaults, serial killers, random drive-by shootings, drug- or gang-related homicides, parental or caretaker abuse, and crimes of passion between boyfriend or girlfriend rivals. Yet all are forms of violence that can kill or injure a young person. Most violence prevention programs address the problem of expressive violence, which results from loss of control among friends, family members, and acquaintances. This seems a reasonable path, based on research suggesting that expressive violence is far more prevalent and represents a greater threat to adolescents than other forms of violence. Adolescent violence tends to occur among near-age peers with similar demographic profiles and is related most often to uncontrolled anger and the inability to manage personal interactions skillfully. To substantiate his concern about the differing needs of potential participants in a violence prevention program, Webster cites research on the small percentage of chronic offenders who account for a large proportion of crime in general and for violent acts in particular. We share Webster’s concern about the seriousness of this problem and encourage continued research on the constellations of factors contributing to the emergence of habitual criminal behavior and the protective factors that mitigate against it. Because most adolescent violence prevention programs do not broadly address antisocial or delinquent behavior per se, it may well be that the needs of the “early-starter” youth will not be met by a primary prevention program begun at middle school level, targeting expressive violence, and addressing only “host-level” factors related to social-skill and anger-management deficits. Evaluation research needs not only to give practitioners information on the potential effectiveness of particular intervention strategies, but also to indicate at what age and for which youths those efforts would best be applied. Webster also expresses concern that social information processing and other skill-oriented models address only cognitive beliefs about violence, rely on hypothetical situations and paper-and-pencil measures, and fail to address attitudes about violence. This is a case of “lumping together” programs as if they were a single model following uniform implementation and evaluation practices. To the contrary, our program addresses the critical issues of attitude and motivation; emphasizes real-life rather than hypothetical situations; uses school and community behavioral indicators as outcome measures; includes the learning of rationales for skill and skill-step use (the overall skill and its separate step-by-step components); incorporates techniques for adult reinforcement and self-reinforcement as motivators for continued use; and encourages the “over-learning” of social scripts and the generalization of skill use to real-life conflicts experienced by the participants. This is quite a different scenario than “brainstorming techniques practiced a few times in school,” which Webster portrays as a “typical” practice of violence prevention programs. We were also disturbed by the statement that “brief adult-led curricula cannot be expected to produce sustainable attitude change,” because “adolescents are in a developmental stage characterized by defiance of adults.” If we accept this as a ruling precept, we would be forced into the pessimistic conclusion that there is virtually no hope of ever influencing adolescent behavior positively, because we can think of few education or health programs that are not “adult-led.” The statement further seems to presume that an adult-facilitated program is necessarily a passive effort that imposes knowledge upon its captive adolescent audience through lecture-style methods. In fact, social-skill training methods are highly participatory and depend heavily upon positive peer modeling and culture, respecting the central role of the learner and the powerful influence of his or her peers in acquiring new knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Regarding Webster’s review of our program, PACT, we first note that in our own cited report of preliminary findings, we ac-
knowledged the limitations of our data based upon many of the same points raised by Webster—for example, small sample size and short follow-up period. 2 We intended only a descriptive review of outcomes because we understood that statistical tests on such a small number of subjects (and with some data sets missing) would have been virtually meaningless. 8 We now have trained large numbers of adolescents and have built from our early work to address other methodological limitations described; for example, we have conducted longitudinal follow-up including out-of-school behavior on all experimental and control groups and have found statistically significant positive effects on aggression and other delinquent behavior in favor of the treatment group. These data have not yet been published and so could not have been considered in Webster's analysis. However, we would not want to see pilot reports such as ours discouraged by criticism that they do not show long-term effects.

While we generally agree with most of Webster's recommendations for preventing violence, we do not believe that focused approaches such as school-based skills training programs are in opposition to the need for broader solutions to the structural conditions such as poverty and disorganized communities that contribute to violence. In fact, most leaders in the field of violence prevention are very much in the forefront of calling attention to these basic needs by engaging in legislative advocacy, public education, and the formulation of public policy recommendations. In terms of the diversion of resources away from the environmental, economic, or social conditions that foster violence, it appears to us that there is a far greater danger that politicians will "let themselves off the hook" by promoting get-tough-on-crime solutions such as establishing more boot camps—a particularly unfortunate outcome, because these expensive programs do little to deter recidivism of violence or other crime. Certainly there is a critical need to intensify and broaden violence prevention interventions, to focus on environmental improvements such as enhancing school performance and school safety procedures, and to reduce the availability of guns. At the same time, we must serve the large population of young people now facing high and immediate risk of violence-related injury or death. We believe that these needs can and should be met by well-conceived school-based violence prevention programs and that the case for such programs is much more convincing than the case against them.

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2. Ibid.