

## Curbing violence in schools

### Implications for Christian educators

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#### Abstract

**A safe and supportive school environment is necessary for enhancing and nurturing students' gifts, talents and abilities. Within the last ten years, however, there has been a dramatic increase in violent confrontations within school environments around the world. There is no doubt that the well-being of students is at risk. This article explores the antecedents and etiology of violence and describes psychoeducational intervention and prevention models that can be used to reduce or prevent it. It also focuses on the collaborative roles and functions of Christian educators in significantly reducing the incidence of violence through the implementation of self-enhancing, growth-producing, and character-building programs and activities for students.**

Despite the warm weather, Alex is dressed in several layers of clothing, including a hooded sweatshirt and a jacket. He has felt depressed for months and has decided to do something about it. He wends his way to school with one thing on his mind. He enters the building just minutes before the bell rings to signal the start of the first period. The hallways are filled with students, teachers, and staff personnel. He slowly unbuttons his jacket and clutches his fingers around the trigger of a gun.

Derek, aged 16, a newly accepted 11<sup>th</sup> grader at Stakeholders High School was repeatedly punched and kicked by five of his peers on his first day at school. They told him that all new students had to go through the 'initiation'. He was told that if he complained to his parents or his teachers, he would be subjected to more attacks.

#### Definition of violence

Violence refers to the threat or use of physical force with the intention of causing physical injury, damage or intimidation of another person.<sup>1</sup> There are a variety of forms of interpersonal violence, such as

homicide, aggravated assault, armed robbery, and forcible rape through to shoving, pinching, hitting, and throwing objects. In each case, the intent is to harm or intimidate another human being.<sup>2</sup>

#### Selected school and youth violence statistics

A 2005 study, "School violence and its antecedents: Interviews with high school students", the largest of its kind ever conducted in Australia, was jointly funded by the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research and the New South Wales Department of Education and Training. The following are selective summaries of the results:

1. **Frequency of attacks on school premises:** Of the 2,533 students who responded, 43.9% (1,112) reported attacking another student at least once in the past 12 months. Of these, the majority had done so only once in the past 12 months.
2. **Most recent attack: When?** Of the 43.9% of students who reported attacking another student in the last 12 months, 21.3 % reported that this occurred in the last week and over 60% indicated that it occurred in the last 3 months.
3. **Most Recent Attack: Why?** The majority of respondents said that they were provoked into the attack either physically or verbally. More specifically, 26.4% said that the other person had physically attacked first, 31.8% said that they had been bullied or teased by their opponent; 11.7% said that they did not like the person, or had no reason at all as their motivation for their most recent attack on another student.
4. **Most Recent Attack: What Happened?** Respondents who self-reported assaulting someone were asked to indicate the way they had attacked the other person as well as how they themselves had been assaulted. Compared with their opponents, respondents were more likely to push (63% vs. 54%) and

“Violence involves the intent to harm or intimidate another human being”

hit with a fist (57% vs. 37%) but were less likely to throw something, kick, bite or hit with an object. In terms of different types of violent actions across gender, proportionately more male than female students involved in a fight hit their opponents with their fist (60% vs. 40% respectively), however, more female students kicked their opponents (26.5% vs. 18.7%) and / or pulled their hair (33.7% vs. 6.9%) respectively.<sup>3</sup>

A 2004 study which investigated weapon carrying in a sample of high school students in New Zealand concluded that the prevalence of weapon carrying was relatively high.

1. Overall 27.5% reported having ever carried a weapon and 19.3% carrying a weapon in the past 30 days.
2. Weapon carry was significantly more common among males.
3. Three variables were strongly associated with weapon carrying in the past 30 days, namely: (a) being male; (b) fighting in the past 12 months; and (c) feeling unsafe in the past 30 days.
4. Those students who reported a medium level of favourable perceptions of school were 26% less likely to report weapon carrying, as compared with those having the poorest perceptions.<sup>4</sup>

The prevalence of bullying in New Zealand schools has been a major concern. A study done in 2004, on 1480 male and female students from eight primary and secondary schools concluded that:

1. The majority of students (63%) reported one or more experiences of bullying within the past year (50% were bullied “once in a while”; 8% were bullied “about once a week”; and 5% were bullied “more than once a week”).
2. Examples of types of bullying included rude gestures, mean teasing, nasty racial remarks, offensive sexual suggestions, hitting, punching, kicking, shoving, threats, knife or other kind of weapon and receiving nasty letters.
3. In response to how often they had witnessed bullying, 46% said “once in a while”; 20% indicated “about once a week”; 20% reported “more than once a week”; and 14% said “never”.<sup>5</sup>

## Antecedents of school violence

### Home influences

There seems to be a positive relationship between the stability of the family unit and the escalation of violence in schools.

Soaring rates of teens giving birth, homeless families and chemically dependent parents, contribute to the desperate plight of our children.<sup>6</sup>

Parenting which tends to be restrictive and punitive places firm limits and controls on the child and allows little verbal exchange. Children who experience this type of parenting tend to be socially incompetent.<sup>7</sup> They may also demonstrate resentment and aggression towards others, in home, school and community environments. Indulgent parents place few demands or controls on their children. This leads to behaviours that are extreme and uncontrollable. These children may be “domineering, egocentric, noncompliant, and have difficulty in peer relations”.<sup>8</sup>

Children of single-parent families may also be at risk for behavioural problems. Single parents are challenged by limited resources, while at the same time attempting to raise their children without the help of the other biological parent. The end result may be poor academic achievement, emotional problems, and conduct problems.<sup>9</sup>

### School influences

The school environment, a powerful socialising agent, can also be a powerful catalyst for violent behaviour. Schools which function without a clearly enunciated philosophy, mission and vision for education and character development are hotbeds for chaos and disorder. Students within this context are more inclined to model their own system of values, morals and conduct, which may have been learned and reinforced in dysfunctional, destructive or fragmented homes and communities. The consequences are likely to be demonstrated through student violence, intolerance, impulsivity and academic failure.

The school might further contribute to behavioural disorders and academic failure in one or more of the following ways: insensitivity to students’ individuality, inappropriate expectations for students, inconsistent management of behaviour, instruction in non-functional and irrelevant skills, ineffective instruction in critical skills, destructive contingencies of reinforcement, or undesirable models of school conduct.<sup>10</sup>

### Media influences

Violent media are powerful contributors to undesirable patterns of conduct among children. Since the 1950s, more than 3500 research studies have investigated the relationship between violent media exposure and subsequent violent behaviour. All but 18 have confirmed that a positive correlation exists between media exposure and violent behaviour.<sup>11</sup> One of the main conclusions from

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these 3500 studies is that interactive media may have a more lasting effect on violent behaviour than television and movie media. Many studies have revealed that children and adolescents become desensitised to violence, have increased levels of aggressive thoughts and behaviour, and show more hostility towards others after experiences with violent interactive media. The studies also showed that the strength of the correlation between exposure to media violence and aggressive behaviour is larger than that of a condom non-user and sexually transmitted HIV; lead exposure and lower IQ; passive tobacco smoke and lung cancer; or calcium intake and bone mass.<sup>12</sup>

There is no doubt that children are continually exposed to media depictions of violence.

Such depictions pervade not only television, but film, music, online media, video games and printed material. These depictions desensitise children to the effects of violence, increase aggression and help foster a climate of fear.<sup>13</sup>

## Intervention and prevention models

There are a number of school-based models which have been effectively utilised in curbing violence. The following models have been used successfully in reducing the incidence of violence in school and classroom environments.

**The Public Health model** focuses on three levels of prevention, depending on the stage to which a disease is progressing. The first is primary prevention, the purpose of which is to keep diseases from occurring. The second is referred to as secondary prevention, which involves early identification of the disease and the implementation of interventions. Tertiary intervention, the third level, focuses on the treatment of those who are severely ill. The primary objective here is to assist the individual in living usefully, in spite of the illness.<sup>14</sup>

How relevant is this model to violence prevention? The objective of primary prevention is to prevent extreme behavioural problems which may be violent in nature. This involves addressing antecedents and causes of the problems.

[It is] a complex interaction of physiological, psychological, and environmental variables, such as brain injury, mental illness, chemical abnormalities, availability of weapons, exposure to media violence, and the acceptance of violence in a particular society or culture.<sup>15</sup>

Secondary prevention highlights the risk factors associated with violence and suicide. These factors can be addressed in the home, school

and community through early intervention and therapeutic intervention. Primary consideration is given here to:

- providing for the physical and psychological safety of all students;
- ensuring that all the students learn the skills necessary for academic and social success;
- working cooperatively with parents, community agencies and public or private treatment providers;
- providing necessary and appropriate training and support for teachers and other personnel making referrals to appropriate school and community programs and to agencies.<sup>16</sup>

Using more intrusive measures to contain the problem and to protect others in the violent individual's environment is the essential component of tertiary prevention. Imprisonment and incarceration, and rehabilitation are the interventions of choice.<sup>17</sup> It is virtually impossible for the school alone to implement these interventions. These demand a collaborative effort among parents, community organisations and churches.

**The Second Step model** encompasses a violence-prevention curriculum. It is widely used in the United States and Canada, and has been adapted for use in Australia, Germany, New Zealand, Norway and the United Kingdom.<sup>18</sup> The primary purpose of this program is for preschool to middle school children to develop socio-emotional skills necessary for successful living. The core competencies addressed are empathy, problem solving and anger management.

Lessons include short stories which illustrate ways to recognise feelings in self and others, to consider others' perspectives and to respond emotionally to others. Students acquire perspective-taking skills through role-playing social problems and sharing personal experiences and reactions to hypothetical situations.<sup>19</sup> In order to develop social problem solving skills students are taught to identify the problem, brainstorm solutions, evaluate solutions, try the solutions, determine if the solution works, and decide what to do next. Lessons create opportunities for students to practice problem identification by using narrative and context clues. Strategies to help students recognise anger cues in their bodies are also addressed and positive self-statements and other stress-reduction techniques are used to alleviate angry behaviours.<sup>20</sup> Although the content of lessons varies, depending on the age and developmental levels of students, modelling, practice and reinforcement of skills are integral to the success of this program.<sup>21</sup>

“*Positive self-statements and other stress-reduction techniques are used to alleviate angry behaviours*”

**The Peacemakers Program model** is a guided curriculum for Grades 1 through 12 which focuses on teaching and modelling negotiation and mediation procedures. The premise of this program is that conflicts are not the problem but part of the solution. The emphasis is on encouraging conflict and managing it constructively. Conflicts managed constructively can:

- increase achievement and long-term retention of academic material.
- increase the use of higher level cognitive and moral reasoning.
- increase healthy cognitive and social development.
- focus attention on problems and increase the energy dedicated to solving them.
- clarify one's own and others' identity, commitments, and values.
- identify areas in need of change.
- release anger, anxiety, insecurity, and sadness that, if kept inside, may contribute to mental distress and illness.
- strengthen relationships by increasing individuals' confidence in their ability to resolve their disagreements, and by minimising irritations and resentments so that positive feelings can be experienced fully.<sup>22</sup>

There are five implementation steps for this program. Step One involves the creation of a cooperative context. This means that constructive conflict management must be nurtured in a context that is cooperative rather than competitive. Helping all students understand the nature and desirability of conflict is the essence of Step Two. Students are taught to recognise the value of conflict as a means of gaining insight, solving problems, providing opportunities for learning and supplying a source of laughter. To facilitate their peace-making functions, students are given criteria for ascertaining whether a conflict has been resolved constructively. In Step Three students are shown how to engage in integrative or problem-solving negotiations which benefit all parties involved in the negotiations. Step Four focuses on training students in peer-mediation procedures. Students are called upon to assist two or more students in resolving conflicts which they cannot resolve themselves. Steps in negotiation procedures are used to mediate the conflicts. Reinforcing and upgrading students' conflict resolution skills is emphasised in Step Five. Teachers are encouraged to incorporate activities in their lesson plans which reinforce and improve students' skills and competence in negotiation and mediation procedures.<sup>23</sup>

**Creating New Choices** is a violence prevention project for schools in Australia. It began in 1994, in the northern region of metropolitan Melbourne. It was initiated by Berry Street Child and Family Services, an independent, non-government welfare organisation.

[It aims to] assist schools to develop strategic partnerships within their own community, in an attempt to develop long-term community-based strategies that address violent behaviours and attitudes.<sup>24</sup>

The project goals identified for this program are:

1. To adopt a critical approach aimed at highlighting and redressing structural inequality and institutionalised violence;
2. To inform, educate and model ways for students, teachers and parents to resolve conflict and take responsibility for their own behaviour;
3. To help a school community to develop strategies that prevent violence and build on the strengths within their community;
4. To understand and respond to the needs of schools and those people that work, study and participate in the educational arena;
5. To work in a consultative manner to help schools to develop strategic partnerships within their own community; and
6. To develop long-term community-based strategies that address violent behaviour and attitudes.<sup>25</sup>

### Implications for Christian educators

Christian schools are not immune from the scourge of violence. There are instances of bullying, hitting, shoving and more extreme violent confrontations; however, in comparison with public schools, violent behaviour is most likely less prevalent. This should in no way convey that intervention programs are not necessary. Actually, such programs are needed in order to further de-escalate the potential for such extreme externalising behaviours. The authors of this article propose that the low incidence of violent confrontations in Christian schools may be attributed to teachers, parents, administrators and students who espouse in word and deed a philosophy and vision of teaching and learning which is Christ-centred.

It is imperative that Christian educators work collaboratively with personnel from public and parochial school systems, mental health professionals, parents, clergy and community-based agencies. The focus of such collaboration must be the design and implementation of curricular and

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extracurricular programs for children and youth which focus on character building—one of the most powerful antidotes able to reduce or eliminate destructive externalising behaviours in children and youth. Programs which address issues such as conflict resolution, anger management, behaviour modification, social skills development, cooperation and respect can enhance the character building process.

The urgent need for character education has been espoused by parents, teachers, administrators, writers, researchers, theologians and paraprofessionals. Thomas Lickona, an authority on character development, stressed that there are ten good reasons why schools should be committed to teaching moral values and developing good character.

1. Young people are increasingly hurting themselves and others, and decreasingly concerned about contributing to the welfare of their fellow human beings.
2. Transmitting values is, and always has been, the work of civilisation.
3. The school's role as moral educator becomes even more vital at a time when millions of children get little moral teaching from their parents and when value-centred influences, such as church or temple, are also absent from their lives.
4. To provide a common ethical ground even in our value-conflicted society.
5. Democracies have a special need for moral education because democracy is government by the people themselves. People must care about the rights of others and the common good and be willing to assume the responsibilities of democratic citizenship.
6. There is no such thing as a value-free education.
7. Moral questions are among the great questions facing both the individual person and the human race.
8. There is broad-based, growing support for values education in schools.
9. An unabashed commitment to moral education is essential if we are to attract and keep good teachers.
10. Values education is a "doable job".<sup>26</sup>

Lickona emphasised that character has three interrelated parts, namely, moral knowing, moral feeling and moral behaviour.

Good character consists of knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good habits of the mind, habits of the heart, and habits of action.<sup>27</sup>

There is an urgent need for a more relevant and meaningful integration of character education across the curriculum of public, private and parochial schools. Since character building is central to the goals and outcomes of Christian education, educators who espouse its tenets must play a leading role in its promotion, development, implementation and maintenance through workshops, seminars and continuing education activities.

A character-building program known as TAB (Taming Acting-out Behaviour) was successfully implemented in public and parochial schools in England, the United States and Jamaica. Students who participated in this program were able to demonstrate the cardinal virtues of honesty, respect, fairness, kindness, self-discipline and self-control.\*

This program, which was developed in 1992 by Dr. Lenore Brantley, an educator and counselling clinician, teaches children to recognise and understand their emotions, put them into perspective and deal with them appropriately. Students learn skills which can be successfully used at home, at school and in the community.

There is also an urgent need for Christian educators to implement, and / or strengthen school-based mentoring programs. In these programs, teachers or other school personnel refer a student who could benefit from adult friendship and support. Mentors then commit to meeting with the student one-on-one for an hour a week throughout the school year. In addition, they also engage in other activities such as playing sports, exploring the Internet, or doing artwork so as to help build a strong relationship.<sup>28</sup>

Christ has given us a model for working with those with behavioural and emotional challenges. Unconditional love for humankind was the hallmark of his teaching. "In every human being, He discerned infinite possibilities."<sup>29</sup> This is a powerful legacy for teachers, parents and administrators who must continually demonstrate how to love students who are disruptive, disrespectful, violent and unlovable. Christian educators can become more involved in curricular planning at the local, regional and national levels by working hand in hand with school districts, community agencies and churches in creating learning environments which engender spiritual and moral values, respect, sharing, peacemaking, self-control and character formation. **TEACH<sup>®</sup>**

\* You may contact the following individuals for further information on the TAB project:

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## Endnotes

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