# Violence Prevention: A Mental Health Issue
# Tips for Parents and Educators

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School should be a place where maximum learning takes place and all who enter feel safe and secure. Indeed, schools today are among the safest places for children; however, the threat of violence remains a concern. Perpetrators of violent behavior at school are most often students who engage in many forms of violence, ranging from bullying and fighting to armed assault, gang activity, and self-harm or suicidal behaviors.

Violence interferes with learning and jeopardizes the personal safety and security of students, teachers, and others in the school building. Moreover, students who are at risk for or are engaging in violent behavior are often suffering from emotional or psychological problems and need help. A large body of research suggests that students commit violent acts against others due to an inability to appropriately express aggression and other negative emotions. This is a serious mental health issue that schools need to address through a comprehensive prevention and early intervention approach. Successful violence prevention requires the involvement of parents and educators, and is essential to producing mentally healthy, safe, secure, and thriving learners.

## Prevention Starts at Home: What Parents Can Do

Parents are students' first teachers. Before children enter school, they are students in their parents' classroom of life. Therefore, it is very important that parents create a home environment that is conducive to positive emotional coping strategies. This can be accomplished in several ways.

- **Be Good Role Models**- Violent behavior is often learned behavior. Therefore, parents must model appropriate behavior. Angry or excessive physical discipline, yelling and verbal aggression, and physical or verbal abuse of children always should be avoided, as should violent arguments or behavior between parents. Teaching children to be caring of themselves and others can be a good preventative measure.
- **Limit/Avoid Exposure to Violent Media**- One particular culprit that lends to violence among children is the television and other media. Studies of the effects of TV violence on children have found that children may become immune or numb to the horror of violence and gradually accept violence as a way to problem solve. This fact holds true for music and video games as well. Parents should limit the amount of exposure their children have to violent television and video games.
- **Keep The Lines of Communication Open** - Parents should make themselves accessible to their children for talks about events in their lives, problems they may encounter, and feelings that they may experience as a result. Parents should assist with healthy problem-solving; stressing problem-solving without violence.
- **Teach Positive Ways to Express Emotions.** Help children understand that all feelings are valid but there are appropriate ways to express them, even anger and frustration. Help them learn to identify how they feel and why. Suggest a variety of ways to express their emotions, including talking, drawing, writing, and playacting as well as strategies for stress release such as physical activity and mediation.

- **Keep Weapons Away From Children**- Ideally, do not keep guns at home. Store all weapons (e.g., guns, knives) in securely locked locations. For safe gun storage, make sure that the gun's safety is engaged, the gun is not loaded, and that ammunition is stored in a separate location. Only parents should know where the weapons are located.
- **Monitor Changes in Behavior** – Pay attention to changes in your child's behavior. For example, if your child begins to exhibit new or increased rule breaking behavior and acts aggressively verbally and/or physically, address this behavioral change with the child and seek assistance from mental health professionals as necessary.

## Prevention at School: What Educators Can Do

Educators have the ability and responsibility to prevent violence among youth and to make schools safe havens where students can learn and have healthy social and emotional experiences. Some strategies include:

- **Create a Positive School Climate** - Develop a strong academic mission along with clear nonviolent and prosocial behavioral expectations. Apply consistent and fair rule enforcement.
- **Early Identification and Intervention** – Identify students who exhibit at-risk characteristics of violent behavior, and provide support before these students engage in disruptive or violent behavior.
- **Teach Conflict Resolution** - Implement social skills programs and other programs designed to teach peaceful ways to resolve conflicts. Examples of these types of programs are Stop and Think, Peacebuilders, Second Step Intervention, and Peacemakers.
- **Provide School-Based Mental Health Services** - Have available staff to whom students can go when they are having problems, having difficulty coping with, or adjusting to particular events or situations in their life. These staff can help students' work through their personal difficulties and/or refer the student and their family to community resources. .
- **Collaborate With Others on School Safety Teams** - Develop collaboration among general and special educators, support staff (e.g., school psychologists, counselors), administrators, parents, and students to create a school safety plan for your school.
- **Adopt Zero Tolerance for Weapons** – All forms of weapons should be banned from school property. Security measures should be taken to seek out and confiscate any weapons on school grounds, immediately. Consequences for violators should be clear and consistent.
- **Build Community Partnerships**- Schools should collaborate with community service agencies to provide additional knowledge, skills, and resources that can contribute to greater outcomes of violence prevention efforts.

Information contained here provides a few ways that parents and educators can promote violence prevention among children. For more information about this issue please contact your local school psychologist. [INSERT YOUR INFORMATION HERE]

## NASP Resources Available Online

NASP has a number of resources available to assist families and educators in helping to create school environments that promote positive behavior and develop life skills. Available at www.nasponline.org.

## Resources for Schools and Parents

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (2006). Facts for families: Children and firearms.
http://www.aacap.org/page.ww?section=Facts%20for%20Families&name=Children%20And%20Firearms

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (2006). Facts for families: Children and TV violence.
http://www.aacap.org/page.ww?section=Facts%20for%20Families&name=Children%20And%20TV%20Violence

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (2006). Teaching the basics of violence prevention. http://www.aap.org/pubed/ZZZJ4RC2R7C.htm?&sub_cat=1

NASP (2002). Position Statement on School Violence, http://www.nasponline.org/information/pospaper_violence.html

NASP (2006). Talking to Children About Violence: Tips for Parents and Educators, http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/index.aspx

NASP (2006). Tips for School Administrators for Reinforcing School Safety, http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/index.aspx

National Association of Secondary School Principals (2005). Preventing School Violence: A Plan for Safe and Engaging Schools, http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals/Student%20Counseling%20Violence%20Prevention.pdf

National Association of Secondary School Principals (2005). Threat Assessment: An Essential Component of a Comprehensive Safe School Program, http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals/nassp_threat.pdf

Shapiro, J.P. The peacemakers program: Effective violence prevention for early adolescent youth. Communiqué, 27 (6).

Skiba, R., Ritter, S., Peterson, R., Miller, C., & Forde, S. (2002, March). Creating safe and responsive schools: Systems change issues in school violence prevention. Communiqué, 30 (6).