

Shaping children's thinking so they learn to be nonviolent

Psychologists explore strategies for giving children the power to resist violence.

By Bridget Murray

Monitor staff

Researchers at the Public Health Conference in Atlanta offered a host of strategies for preventing youth violence in the nation's most troubled neighborhoods, from teaching children antiviolence messages along with first-grade basics to involving parents and police more closely in children's lives.

And, the researchers agreed, children need those antiviolence messages constantly reinforced by parents, peers, community leaders and the police, who together can tackle the community problems that provoke violence.

'Instead of just looking at the individual, we need to focus on community factors, like poverty and the diffusion of firearms,' said psychologist W. Rodney Hammond Jr., PhD, director of the Division of Violence Prevention at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

At one of the conference sessions, researchers tied their prevention strategies to The Metropolitan Area Child Study, an intervention with youth in inner-city Chicago and its working-class suburb of Aurora. Led by psychologists Leonard Eron, PhD, and Patrick Tolan, PhD, of the universities of Michigan and Illinois-Chicago, respectively, the study seeks to foil a pattern uncovered in previous research: Too often, children learn violent behaviors as early as kindergarten, and without intervention, the violence tends to persist and to escalate.

'We knew that by the time children are 8 years old, violent habits are almost impossible to break, so we wanted to target young kids,' says Eron. Along with his research team, he developed a program that reshapes children's thinking about violence while they're still impressionable.

As his colleague Tolan puts it, 'We're trying to prevent the collapse of children and their families' hopes and dreams by the fifth grade.'

Foiling patterns of violence

The Metropolitan program's intensity varies to test how much antiviolence teaching is needed to make a difference. Started in 1991 and still going, the study focuses on close to 5,000 students, of whom 40 percent are African-American, 40 percent are Latino and 16 percent are white. With the exception of four control schools, teachers at two schools teach second- and fourth-graders about such social bonding behaviors as politeness and

respect. At eight of the schools, children already considered aggressive receive extra antiviolenace tutoring in small groups.

And in four other schools, students get the basic teaching, the extra tutoring and an additional 22-week program focused on their families. This extra component seeks to build parenting skills, family stability and family members' coping and problem-solving strategies.

After studying the program's effects for seven years, the researchers say it helps boost family stability and children's reading and mathematics test scores. However, only young suburban children receiving the full intervention show a reduction in violent behavior; violent behavior among inner-city children in the same program has not changed significantly.

'Families in our most neglected neighborhoods are up against so much in terms of poverty, gangs and poor schools, that psychological interventions don't make as much difference as they do elsewhere,' says Tolan.

Extra buffers

Despite the program's failure to show immediate effects on violent behavior among inner-city youngsters, its positive effects on families and school achievement could help buffer those children against violence as they grow older, says Tolan. But he and Eron argue that, for their psychological intervention to work properly, inner cities need additional environmental changes—a stronger police presence, for example, and neighborhood coalitions to reduce violence (see article, page 35).

Other conference speakers, namely Mark Rosenberg, MD, MPH, director of CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, noted that youth violence isn't just an urban problem. He pointed to nine killings in small towns over the past four years—the 'first mass murders by children in this nation's history,' he said. And he called on behavioral scientists to further investigate the questions of what triggers aggression and what can deter it.

'In this area of injuries and violence the questions are of extraordinary importance,' said Rosenberg. 'I think it's an area that has yet to be tapped, but it's one that [with the help of behavioral and social science] will soon reach its potential.'

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