

WHITE PAPER  
Recent Advances in Understanding and Preventing Youth Violence:  
Top 5 Lessons Learned, Examples, and Best Practices  
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**Overview**

Over the past several years we have been haunted by highly publicized examples of youth violence in the U.S. Almost every week we hear new stories that make us gasp at the severity of the act, the age of the perpetrator, or the random and purposeless nature of the crime. A 14-year-old Miami student is charged with murder for stabbing and killing another student with an 8-inch knife. A 44-year old man is beaten in downtown Seattle by eight teenage boys, the youngest being 11 years old. Near Tampa, two boys viciously attack llamas being raised as pets with golf clubs and a meat cleaver, killing one llama and severely injuring another. Childhoods are routinely torn apart by gang violence—a 4-year-old waiting for ice cream is caught in neighborhood crossfire. The list goes on.

The most dramatic stories involve youth perpetration of multiple shootings in schools, churches, and shopping malls. The less dramatic stories involve a regular dose of bullying, fighting, harassment, and violence that have come to define youth culture in many schools and communities across the nation and worldwide. Still, although highly publicized events may have sensitized us to the urgency of the problem, youth violence is not a new phenomenon but has been a cause for concern for several decades. This concern has led to a wide array of prevention and intervention programs—parent training and education, family counseling, mentoring, tutoring, recreation, cognitive-behavioral interventions, social skills training, gang prevention efforts, and more—provided in schools, after school, in homes, and in communities. With so much energy invested in youth violence prevention for so many years, the two most important questions we must now ask are: Is youth violence preventable? What programs are effective?

The answer to the first question is “yes”—but that does not mean the solution is simple. In a recent book, *Murder is no Accident*, Dr. Deborah Prothrow-Stith, a prominent physician and public health advocate, describes how Boston created an interdisciplinary citywide movement that brought youth violence rates down across the city. As she discusses in her book, some programs were particularly critical to the success of the Boston Model. This leads to our second question: What programs are effective? The answer to this question is that evidence supports certain youth violence prevention programs and strategies but not others—support is greatest for comprehensive programs that begin early, involve families, provide positive role models, and address individual and contextual risk and protective factors.

In this paper, we will consider five of the most important lessons learned over the past two decades that help us understand what we need to do to prevent youth violence and how best to do it. These are:

- Violence is Adaptive
- Aggression and Violence are Multiply-Determined Behaviors
- Earlier is Better (but late can work)
- Use Evidence-based Programs and Principles
- Build Strengths in Youth

### **Violence is Adaptive**

One of the main reasons that violence is difficult to prevent is that “it works”—in other words, violent behavior in humans (and primates as well) often serves a purpose. Unlike illness and other forms of injury, outcomes which most everyone wants to prevent, violence can provide clear advantages to the perpetrator and serve a social purpose. From an evolutionary perspective, aggression and violence help us solve adaptive problems in specific contexts. Two leading evolutionary psychologists, David Buss at the University of Texas and Todd Schackelford at Florida Atlantic University, have described several “functions” of violence including (a) co-

opting resources of others (b) defending against attack; (c) negotiating power and status hierarchies; (d) inflicting costs on rivals; and (e) deterring rivals from future aggression.

Advances in brain research also suggest that we are “pre-wired” for some types of aggression—for example, certain areas of the brain that indicate satisfaction light up when we inflict actual punishment on others in response to violations of social norms.

This does not mean that aggression and violence are inevitable. Just as we are capable of acting aggressively, we are also capable of peaceful and cooperative solutions to the problems of everyday life—which path we take depends, in part, on what we see and learn as we grow up. Violence is *less* likely when youth learn skills and have opportunities to effectively navigate their social worlds, learn how to adjust or “calibrate” their behavior to accurately match the demands of the environment, and spend time in settings where aggression is not adaptive.

Understanding the functions of aggression and violence provides clear directions for preventive efforts. One strategy is to reduce or minimize the “functional” value of aggression in a given context. For example, a well-known intervention approach for aggressive children and their families developed by Gerald Patterson and colleagues at the Oregon Social Learning Center ([www.oslc.org](http://www.oslc.org)) stresses the importance of providing rewards for positive behavior while at the same time not allowing children to shape family processes through coercive actions that result in attention and reinforcement. At the school level, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program ([www.clemson.edu/olweus/](http://www.clemson.edu/olweus/)) is an example of a comprehensive approach to changing support for bullying in the school context—bullying is less likely when shared norms discourage rather than promote this behavior. Another strategy is to teach individual skills and provide opportunities for personal, social, and career development that encourage prosocial and responsible attitudes and behaviors. An example of this strategy is a widely-used program, Life

Skills Training ([www.lifeskillstraining.com](http://www.lifeskillstraining.com)) developed by Dr. Gilbert Botvin of Cornell University. Life Skills Training teaches cognitive and behavioral competencies and skills and has been found to reduce both violence and substance use in youth.

### **Aggression and Violence are Multiply-Determined Behaviors**

Another reason that it is difficult (but still possible) to prevent youth violence is that there is no single “cause” of this behavior. Indeed, research over the past few decades has identified multiple factors that contribute to aggression and violence including characteristics of individuals, their relationships with friends and family, schools, and communities. What are some of the most important characteristics to take into consideration?

- **Individual characteristics** include temperamental qualities such as impulsivity, hyperactivity, attention deficits, and irritability, biological influences such as the effects of testosterone, early aggression, attitudes that support violence, and characteristics patterns of thinking such as a tendency to attribute hostile intent to others in ambiguous situations.
- **Peer characteristics** include rejection and victimization by peers, unsupervised activities with peers, association with deviant peers, and gang membership.
- **Family characteristics** include child abuse and neglect, insecure attachment, single parent families, father absence, low supervision and monitoring, family conflict, and low social support.
- **School characteristics** include poor academic performance, early school leaving, negative bonding to school, and low educational goals.
- **Community characteristics** include poverty, high rates of community violence, limited opportunities, and low levels of social capital or collective efficacy.

One of the challenges in youth violence prevention is that no single cause is most important; rather, it is the accumulation of risk over time and across settings that most directly leads to aggression and violence. This complex interplay is echoed in the voice of a teenage offender.

Why did I get into trouble? I wanted attention, to be in the spotlight. I made bad decisions and didn't listen to my mom after my dad left. I also saw a lot of violence all around me, like my mom getting beat up when I was 6 years old, so I learned to react with violence. Then I just started kicking it with the homies—they were in a gang, so I joined too. (From Hoge, Guerra, & Boxer, *Treating the Juvenile Offender*, 2008).

How many risk factors are there in this story? Lack of attention, single parent, father absence, family violence, community violence, learning violence, bad decisions, lure of gangs—and just from a brief recollection. What this story illustrates is that risk comes from many sources and has cumulative effects over time. The complexity of risk suggests that solutions must also be equally complex. In other words, interventions should cut across multiple levels of an individual's social ecology. The best evidence suggests that combining individual cognitive-behavioral programs that help youth navigate social settings with family programs that improve family functioning and parenting skills is an effective prevention and intervention strategy.

### **Earlier is Better (but late can work)**

Because risk escalates over time and because early aggression is perhaps the single best predictor of later aggression and violence, the “earlier is better” dictum is important to keep in mind. Early risk factors can set in motion a downward spiral of events that continue to increase the likelihood of aggression and violence. Consider the following scenario:

A young boy with a difficult temperament is physically abused by adults, learns that hitting is an effective strategy and becomes hypervigilant to threat. His father is absent, he enters school with few role models and poor social skills. He acts aggressively toward peers leading to early peer rejection that also triggers more aggression. His aggressive behavior leads to academic failure resulting in school drop out and lack of job skills. He is drawn to social groups marked by violence, joining a juvenile gang. He has no investment in a conventional lifestyle.

This pattern is slightly more elaborate than the previous story of our young offender. But the similarities in the developmental course of aggression and violence are unmistakable. How could this pattern have been interrupted? Here are some suggestions.

- **Home visitation, enhanced preschool, and parent training** programs have all been shown to be effective in helping parents and preventing aggression. The most well-known program is Nurse-Home Visitation (now called Nurse-Family Partnerships) that consists of intensive and comprehensive home visitation by nurses during a woman's pregnancy and the first two years after birth of her first child. This program has been certified as a "blueprint" program for effective violence prevention, with preventive effects in childhood and adolescence (<http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/model/programs/NFP.html>)
- Programs for elementary school children should **optimize learning, teach social and cognitive-behavioral skills (self regulation, social problem solving)** and provide special attention for children with early aggressive behavior. At the same time it is important to continue with parent training and family interventions and provide needed resources and supports. One example of an effective school-home partnership for parents of infants, preschool and elementary school children is Families and Schools Together, a nationally-recognized program ([www.wcer.wisc.edu/FAST](http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/FAST)). FAST is a family-strengthening and parent involvement program that builds relationships between parents and schools, empowers parents to become "protective agents" for their children, and helps parents learn family management and parenting skills.

Although early prevention and intervention programs are recommended, this does not mean that it is too late to have any impact with older youth. A number of studies and reviews of programs for teenage youth have found that certain types of programs work better than others. These include highly structured interventions (rather than unstructured programs) that involve a cognitive component linked to specific skills, interventions that engage families and reduce familial risk, and interventions that are more comprehensive and address multiple risk factors across different contexts. Interventions that group deviant youth together and involve harsh treatment (such as boot camps) have been found to be ineffective and even harmful.

### **Use Evidence-Based Programs and Principles**

Another advance in preventing aggression and violence has been the identification and packaging of evidence-based programs. Evidence-based programs provide a structured approach for preventing aggression and violence, and typically offer technical assistance services for implementation. Perhaps the most well-known listing of evidence-based (and promising) programs is the *Blueprints for Violence Prevention* project at the University of Colorado ([www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints](http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints)). Another listing of proven and promising programs is available from the National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center ([www.SafeYouth.org](http://www.SafeYouth.org)).

In this paper, we have mentioned a number of programs considered evidence-based or promising youth violence prevention programs based on carefully conducted research studies. These include the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, Life Skills Training, Nurse-Family Partnerships, and Families and Schools Together. Several other family-based programs round out this list, including The Incredible Years parent training program for families of young children ([www.incredibleyears.com](http://www.incredibleyears.com)) and Multisystemic Family Therapy for older youth ([www.mstservices.com](http://www.mstservices.com)).

However, it is important to keep in mind that evidence-based programs may only be appropriate and effective with individuals, families, and/or communities similar to participants in the original program as evaluated. The evidence-base is often particularly limited for certain groups, for instance, incarcerated delinquents or some ethnic groups. This means that some evidence-based programs will be relatively easy to adapt if the “fit” is a good one. In other cases, programs can be adapted or developed in line with evidence-based principles for effective programming. We have mentioned a number of important **evidence-based principles**. To recap:

- Prevention should begin early and provide enhanced services for the more aggressive children.
- Preventive interventions should be multi-component and multi-context, addressing individual, peer, family, school, and community risk factors—families are particularly important from infancy through adolescence.
- Preventive interventions should incorporate cognitive-behavioral skill-building programs that address multiple cognitive factors most closely linked to risk.
- Structured interventions are more effective than unstructured approaches that only provide counseling and social work.
- Deviant peer influences are particularly important during adolescence—programs should redirect youth and their peer groups to prosocial engagement.

### **Build Strengths in Youth**

Although we have emphasized the role of multiple and cumulative risk factors over time in the learning of aggression and violence, this does not mean that prevention of risk precludes building strengths in children and youth. In practice, there has been a certain amount of dissatisfaction with risk-focused approaches to prevention because they tend to emphasize what

is “wrong” instead of what is “right” with children and their families. In other words, youth are seen as problems to be fixed, and development is portrayed as a process of overcoming deficits. As supporters of strength-based models have noted, a risk-focused approach can obscure the fact that the teenage years are also a time of mastery linked to each child’s unique talents, strengths, skills, and interests. An emphasis on the positive and adaptive features of adolescence (often called assets, protective factors, promotive factors, strengths, or competencies) has been incorporated into a number of different models generally considered to represent “positive youth development.”

Although risk-focused versus strength-based approaches often have been viewed as opposite and somewhat incompatible ends of a continuum, at this juncture it is more useful and cost-effective to emphasize their commonalities. Communities that want to embrace the talents and strengths of all youth also must address the very real problems of some youth that interfere with their own development as well as the lives of others. The question then becomes how promotion of healthy development can also be an effective prevention tool against not only violence but other common youth problem behaviors. One strategy is to consider the most important strengths or competencies for healthy social and emotional development that also have been identified (at low levels) as risk factors for these youth problem behaviors.

In our own recent work, we have identified a set of “core competencies” for healthy development that have also been linked to risk for violence, substance use, early school leaving, and high risk sexual behavior. We describe these in detail in a forthcoming volume, *Core Competencies to Prevent Problem Behaviors and Promote Positive Youth Development* (Guerra, N. G., & Bradshaw, C., Eds., New Directions in Child and Adolescent Development). We emphasize the importance of programs that build strengths in five key areas:

- **Positive sense of self**, including an accurate assessment of strengths and weaknesses, positive identity and sense of purpose, hopefulness, self esteem based on actual strengths, and “agency” or the ability to exert influence over relevant life events.
- **Self control**, including emotion regulation of internal feeling states (such as anger) and behavioral regulation of actions in service of goals (for instance, delay of gratification).
- **Decision-making skills**, including coordinating information, imagining future outcomes and their likelihood, and learning from negative consequences.
- **Moral system of belief**, including normative beliefs that discourage violence and harm to others and the development of a moral identity where moral action is linked to one’s self evaluation.
- **Prosocial connectedness**, embedded in a psychological state of belonging where youth perceive they and others are cared for, acknowledged, trusted, and empowered within a given context.

Some of the more comprehensive youth prevention programs available incorporate some of these core competencies. For example, Aggression Replacement Training (ART) emphasizes decision-making skills, impulse and anger control, and moral reasoning development ([www.aggressionreplacementtraining.org](http://www.aggressionreplacementtraining.org)). ART focuses primarily on aggression reduction and has shown some evidence of being effective for more seriously aggressive juvenile offenders. However, it is also important that the next generation of comprehensive strength-based programs incorporates a broader set of core competencies for healthy development and moves beyond prevention of violence alone to include prevention of multiple problem behaviors.