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Spotlight On: **School Violence Prevention**

By Paige Steffen

The National Association of School Psychologists (“NASP”) is a professional organization for school psychologists that provides standards, guidance, and education to “improve students’ learning, behavior, and mental health.”

The NASP provides guidance on how to create safe and peaceful schools, free from violence in all of its forms. In addition to providing advice regarding active shooter drills, as discussed in *School Shooting Simulations: At What Point Does Preparation Become More Harmful than Helpful?*, the NASP provides recommendations as to how schools can create and implement purposeful, coordinated, evidence-based policies and strategies that promote the safety of their students. Research shows that these strategies help protect students’ safety by both fostering conditions that discourage violence and by enabling schools to respond quickly and effectively when violence does occur.

School Violence & Its Effects

Students should feel safe at school, and parents should feel confident that schools will properly care for and protect their children from violence. School violence exists, however, and remains prevalent in schools all across the country. School violence comes in many forms, including threats, name-calling, verbal attacks, bullying, cyberbullying, physical assault, sexual harassment, and school shootings. According to research, school violence victims are at a greater risk of academic and social-emotional problems. Additionally, school violence can “erode the climate of the school, damage the resilience promoting influence of schools, and leave many students to suffer in silence with diminished personal wellness and resilience capacity.” As such, schools must ensure that they are ready and able to properly address and respond to school violence.

Important Role of School Psychologists

Teachers and school staff have the potential to prevent violence by fostering relationships with students that help students cope with challenges and avoid violence perpetration and victimization. More specifically, school-based mental health professionals, such as school psychologists, can play a central role in school violence prevention and can be an important resource to help respond to violence if it occurs. Not only does the NASP recommend that school psychologists participate in school violence prevention, Principle IV.1 of the NASP Principles for Professional Ethics explicitly states that “school psychologists use their expertise in psychology and education to promote school, family, and community environments that are safe and healthy for children.”

School psychologists can assist with school violence prevention programs in several ways. They include the following: school psychologists can help create and form safety and crisis planning teams; implement prevention and intervention programs

designed to reduce aggressive behavior among students; counsel and support victims of violence; and help students respond to crises created by violence.

In order to better assure that school psychologists are well-equipped and able to help create and promote a safe school environment, the NASP has developed school violence professional training standards in hopes that these standards will be adopted by all state education credentialing bodies.

NASP's Strategies for Successful Violence Prevention Program

Although the NASP does not promote a single school violence prevention program, it does provide nine strategies that help create a successful program:

1. *Create a School-Community Safety Partnership:* School violence prevention programs must utilize collaboration across disciplines. This collaboration should be among administrators, teachers, school psychologists, parents, students, and community partners such as local law enforcement, public health personnel, and other community groups.
2. *Establish a Comprehensive School Crisis Plan:* Crisis plans can help schools respond to crisis situations. The plans should focus on the importance of mental health response in order to minimize the traumatic impact of the situation. In general, the plans should provide procedures for ensuring perceptions of safety and security, re-establishing social support, and evaluating psychological trauma risk.
3. *Enhance the Classroom and School Climate:* Classroom and school climate are both conditions that can unintentionally foster violent acts. By intentionally creating a climate of acceptance and understanding, the nature and quality of the relationships among students and staff will improve, which can decrease frustrations that ultimately lead to violence.
4. *Promote Positive School Discipline and Support:* Schools should balance disciplinary responses to violence with efforts to promote cooperation, positive social skills, and peaceful conflict resolution. Successful school violence prevention programs go beyond simply increasing security and punishing students who violate the rules. The program must also incorporate efforts to increase support, trust, and caring among students and staff.
5. *Use Non-Stigmatizing School Violence Prevention Programs:* Schools should use a threat assessment approach in order to better understand students' potential for violent behavior. All threat response efforts should be based on research-validated procedures.
6. *Promote Anti-Violence Initiatives For All Students:* School-wide initiatives should be adopted in order to address pervasive school safety challenges, such as bullying. These programs can promote both personal, individual change and larger, social change in the school.
7. *Provide Support for Students Exhibiting Warning Signs of Disruptive Behavior:* Some students will not respond to school-wide programs. Those students, who

- have displayed aggressive and violent behavior at school, must be provided with additional support and guidance.
8. *Intervene With Students Who Have Significant Behavioral Adjustment Problems:* Oftentimes students who have engaged in or are at risk of engaging in violent behavior are concurrently experiencing social or psychological distress. This distress will generally require coordinated efforts between the school and community agencies, such as community mental health, child welfare services, and alcohol and drug treatment agencies.
 9. *Support Policies that Reduce Access to Firearms by Youth:* Supporting policies that reduce access to firearms by youth and others who are of immediate danger to themselves or others can decrease school violence. Such policies include improving awareness of safe gun practices and restricting the presence of guns in schools to only commissioned school resource officers.

In summary, to be a comprehensive school violence prevention program, the program must positively influence students' attitudes towards violence, teach effective conflict resolution skills, promote tolerance and understanding, integrate with outside violence prevention efforts, and involve the community.

Coordinated, comprehensive school violence prevention plans that follow these recommended strategies have been largely successful, as documented by recent national reports. For example, there was a forty-nine percent reduction in students reporting that they are "fearful of being attacked or harmed on their school campus," and a fifteen percent reduction in student reports of both "carrying weapons and fighting at school."

The NASP is committed to improving the safety of students. The NASP provides extensive resources on school safety and crisis resources that include materials on talking to children about violence, identifying seriously traumatized children, and managing strong emotional reactions to traumatic events. Please visit their website, <http://www.nasponline.org/>, for more information and to learn more about their organization.

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