PROTECTING our FAMILY and COMMUNITY

Youth Violence: Seeking Solutions

(Second in a Two-Part Series on Youth Violence in Kansas)

Although the public is deeply concerned about juvenile violence and victimization, many Americans do not know how they can help. Because the effects of juvenile violence are felt by entire communities, the search for solutions must be a community-wide effort, and every citizen needs to be involved.

— Attorney General Janet Reno
United States Department of Justice

LESSON OBJECTIVES

At the conclusion of the lesson, participants will be able to:

- *Better understand violence prevention.*
- *Recognize community youth issues.*
- *Illustrate the diversity of solutions available to a family, organization and community.*
- *Make an investment in the health and safety of their community.*
- *Collaborate with law enforcement, prevention specialists, educators and other professionals in addressing youth violence.*

To conduct this lesson you will need:

1. **Copies of the Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services (SRS) / Alcohol and Drug Abuse Services (ADAS) brochure, "It's Not Just One Thing It's Every Thing," for everyone in your group.**
2. **Copies of the response sheet for all participants.**
3. **Copies of the case studies and handout, "Risk Factors for Five Youth Behavioral Issues," for all participants.**
4. **Writing materials such as a flipchart, newsprint, markers, etc.**
5. ***(optional)* Copies of the 1996 lesson, "Youth Violence: What's Happening & Why," for resource.**

Note to the Leader: "Youth Violence: Seeking Solutions" uses a participant brochure from SRS/ADAS titled, "It's Not Just One Thing It's Every Thing," a handout titled, "Risk Factors for Five Youth Behavioral Issues," and two case studies. Do NOT distribute them to your participants until beginning the discussion of risk and protective factors. Premature distribution will distract the participants' attention away from the discussion.

Preparation should include contacting your local regional prevention center staff. Let them know you will be teaching the lesson, and inquire if they would like to co-teach. Ask for additional handouts specific to their centers' services. The Kansas Regional Prevention Center system has done a study of the risk and protective factors in each Kansas county. Ask your center for a copy of your own county findings, or contact Elaine Johannes. After a thorough review of the following teaching information and the participant brochure, present the key concepts in your own words. Following the lesson, ask each participant to complete the response sheet. Review responses for possible community service activities, and then return the sheets to: Elaine Johannes, KSU Extension Community Health, 148 Waters Hall, Manhattan, KS 66506. Fax: (785) 532-7733 — Phone: (785) 532-7750.

Questions to Ask Prior to Beginning the Lesson: *Ask participants if they are acquainted with youth violence. Are they aware of Kansas' Juvenile Justice Reform? Have they participated in the "Youth Violence: What's Happening and Why" program? Explain that this is the second in a two-part series, and its purpose is to create awareness and motivate active involvement in seeking solutions.*

Juvenile Violent Crime is on the Rise

Violence (acts against a person that involve physical harm or the threat of physical harm) is a pervasive national problem, more serious in the United States than in the rest of the industrialized world. In response to rising youth crime and violence, Kansas implemented Juvenile Justice Reform in 1997. This shifts the focus from rehabilitation of youth offenders to community safety. Across the nation, as in Kansas, citizens are demanding that youth be held accountable for their crimes through the criminal/juvenile justice system, which responds after a violent event occurs.

Tougher laws and increased use of prisons can reduce violent crime in two ways. First, prisons prevent some potential violent crimes by isolating offenders from society. Second, tougher laws discourage youth from committing crimes. Potential crimes which are prevented, however, are being "replaced" by more violent crimes. Overall crime rates have stopped rising–some have even dropped–but violent crime has become worse. Juveniles are committing more and more serious crimes such as murder, rape, robbery and assault. This suggests that by itself, the criminal or juvenile justice system response to violence is not adequate. An effective control strategy must include preventing violent events before they happen.

Risk Factors and Prevention

Every violent event is a chance occurrence. There are no specific human characteristics, set of circumstances, or chain of events which make violence happen. It seems reasonable to assume that some intervention might have prevented each violent event, but the specific intervention cannot be known in advance for every individual case. As starting points for exploring prevention, there are well-documented risk factors which increase the odds of violence occuring. Some risk factors can be changed to reduce those odds. For prevention purposes, it is important to view youth violence as the result of a long chain of preceding events which may have been broken at any link. *Youth violence is not just one thing, it's everything.*

Distribute the participant brochure, "It's Not Just One Thing It's Every Thing," and the handout,"Risk Factors for Five Youth Behavioral Issues."

Risk-focused prevention is based on the work of J. David Hawkins and Richard Catalano from the University of Washington. Their review of over 30 years of delinquency research and youth substance abuse identified risk factors which are interrelated: adolescent drug abuse, violence, delinquency, school dropout and teen pregnancy. These risk factors, as listed in the brochure, are categorized in four areas (or "domains") of a child's life.

Youth Risk Factors

Within each domain, some risk factors have a distinct relationship to violence. The domains are:

- **COMMUNITY**
- **FAMILY**
- **SCHOOL**
- **FRIENDS**

Call attention to the handout, "Risk Factors for Five Youth Behavioral Issues," and emphasize the risk factors for violence within the four domains. For example, included under the community domain is the availability of firearms. Next, draw attention to the brochure, "It's Not Just One Thing It's Every Thing." Have participants investigate the brochure, the four domains, and the risks that accompany each. Highlight a few of the risk factors that are related to violence. Ask participants if they have noticed any of these risk factors in their own community, neighborhood or family.

Generalizations about risk factors

1. Risks can exist in all areas of life. Prevention efforts should focus on reducing risks across several areas or domains.
2. The more risk factors that are present, the greater the risk. Even if a community cannot eliminate all risk factors, reducing or eliminating even a few may have a positive outcome.
3. Since many risk factors predict multiple problems, the reduction of risk factors is likely to affect a number of different problems in the community.
4. Risk factors are consistent across race, culture and class. The way the risk factors work does not vary.
5. Protective factors buffer young people from the negative exposure to risk.

If you have obtained your county's risk factor profile from the regional prevention center, discuss it here.

Protective Factors— Interventions and Processes

If we are aware of the risk factors leading to youth problems, it will be easier to focus on solutions for prevention. This knowledge allows us to act, rather than react. Much like knowing the risk factors that lead to heart disease, knowing the risk factors of youth problems helps us prevent problem behaviors before they become established. The risk factors tell us what to pay attention to, but not how to reduce risk. Some research has identified **protective factors** which appear to "protect" children against the effects of risks. Some children have individual characteristics which give them a protective edge, such as gender, temperament, intelligence and a positive outlook. However, there are two protective factors that can be more important than those individual characteristics.

The most important protective factors are:

- **Bonding**. Establish strong, warm and supportive relationships with pro-social family, friends and significant adults.
- **Healthy Beliefs and Clear Standards**. Communities, families and schools work together to promote clear, healthy standards and expectations.

To encourage these protective factors, youth must have:

- **Opportunities for significant involvement**. Opportunities to make contributions to and feel part of the community, family and school.
- **Social, emotional, behavioral and thinking skills.** Children must be taught the skills—problem solving, task performance, cooperation, interaction, etc.—which are necessary to take advantage of the provided opportunities.
- **Appropriate recognition for skillful performance.** Along with opportunities and skills, children must be recognized and acknowledged for their efforts. Recognition can provide an incentive to make continued positive contributions.

Ask participants to give an example of how their family, community and school encourage the protective factors.

Case Study Examples and Discussion

Introduce the case studies located on the back of the handout. Select either one case study for group review and discussion, or divide the participants into two groups and let each group analyze one case study.

The following case(s) are an opportunity to apply risk and protective-focused prevention to real life. Read the case study and use newsprint or a flipchart to list: **1.** Existing risk factors which provoked the violent behavior. **2.** Protective factors and interventions which might have kept the incident from happening.

If there are two sub-groups, allow 15 minutes for case review and logging of possible risk and protective factors and/or interventions. If the group has stayed together, have all participants brain-storm the risk and protective factors and/or interventions. List these ideas on newsprint or a flipchart. Allow time for discussion of what the groups have identified.

Keeping in mind that risk factors for violence are not "ranked in order of importance," we must search for interventions that might break some link in a chain of events. Either case has evidence of multiple risk factors. Luckily, when multiple risk factors are present there are multiple intervention points for preventing violence before it occurs. For example:

Conceivably, Jason's death might have been prevented if Dave had been raised with greater self-esteem, or if Evelyn had sought help when Dave first slapped her. Regular home visits by a health nurse, social worker or community volunteer might have saved Jason's life if they had noticed the destructive family functioning. Dave's poor parenting skills would have been noticed, and he might have received the help he needed to deal with his problems more constructively. Jason might still be alive if his neighborhood had more social networks or more accessible child care services.

Andy's death might have been avoided if Bob's early adolescent patterns of drinking and fighting had led to successful alcohol abuse treatment. If someone had thought of a recreational alternative to the usual Saturday night party, or if Andy's family had not encouraged the use of their farm for parties, then Andy might still be alive. The point is, no single strategy will eliminate all violence. Violence can be reduced by a variety of individual, family and community decisions and policies.

Where to Start

Risk and protective-focused prevention provides many promising violence prevention opportunities. Violence prevention requires small investments in efforts that work. Families, organizations, communities and schools should start their prevention work where they can make a realistic impact. After identifying the current risk factors which can be influenced, they should then try to strengthen the protective factors through simple, but sustainable efforts.

Short-term efforts that alter or eliminate the immediate opportunity for violence include working with law enforcement and businesses to identify and remove the risk factors in "hot spots." These areas are the addresses or telephone locations that generate unexpectedly high volumes of "911" emergency calls dealing with violence. "Hot spots" for alcohol abuse and the illegal sale of drugs and firearms can also be identified, and situational violence prevention can be implemented.

In the long-term, a variety of efforts which strengthen protective factors are helpful. For example, child development programs for parents, caregivers and law enforcement personnel are promising prevention efforts. Programs which include regular home visits following childbirth, preschool enrichment, and early-grade tutoring not only reduce risk, but booster protective factors. Programs which teach children social skills for avoiding violence, provide instruction on viewing television critically, and educate non-violent ways of expressing anger are made available to parents, teachers and children. In addition, school-based mentoring and anti-bullying programs help reduce risks and also strengthen protective factors.

The National Academy of Sciences Panel on the Understanding and Control of Violent Behavior, the United States Department of Justice, (1994) recommends that communities formulate violence prevention strategies that include:

- Housing policies to reverse the geographic concentration of low-income families.
- Programs to strengthen community organizations, social networks and families that promote strong pro-social values.
- Economic revitalization in neighborhoods to restore opportunities for self-advancement through nonviolent activities.

- Stronger community policing programs and stronger community-based violence prevention initiatives.
- Programs to reduce violence associated with prejudice and with the activities of some gangs.
- Strategies that reduce the community risk factors often associated with transition, such as moving, loss of jobs, change in schools, etc.

Ultimately, violence prevention requires long-term collaboration across all organizations, neighborhoods and families. Using risk and protective-focused prevention, our communities have an opportunity to make a difference. We can start here and now. From the risk factors we have discussed, which ones do you think we might begin working on? What programs already exist? What more do we need to know?

Follow brief discussion with information related to resources available, for example, National Issues Forum program, regional prevention center systems, etc. Ask participants to complete the response sheet and return it to you for review before they leave.

Community Service Activities

After completing the lesson, consider participating in community service activities such as:

- Volunteering in schools, youth clubs, law enforcement departments, regional prevention centers, mentoring programs and youth detention facilities.
- Developing a public recognition of the positive things local youth do.
- Distributing copies of the brochure, "It's Not Just One Thing It's Every Thing," and other violence awareness and/or prevention information to schools, churches, youth clubs and businesses.
- Conducting parent education forums, writing newspaper columns, and leading discussions for other groups.
- Becoming active in your community's juvenile justice planning process.

Resources

Coordinating Council on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (1996). Combating Violence and Delinquency: The National Juvenile Justice Action Plan. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.

Developmental Research and Programs, Inc. (1994). The Communities That Care Community Planning Kit. Developmental Research & Programs, 130 Nickerson, Suite 107, Seattle, WA 98109.

Marans, S., and Berkman, M. (1997). Child Development-Community Policing: Partnership in a Climate of Violence. Juvenile Justice Bulletin, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.

National Issues Forums (1994). Kids Who Commit Crimes: What Should Be Done About Juvenile Violence? Available through Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 4050 Westmark Dr., P.O. Box 1840, Dubuque, IA 52004-1840 (complete program includes video).

Roth, J.A. (1994). Understanding and Preventing Violence, National Institute of Justice, Research in Brief, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.

Appreciation is expressed to:

SRS/ADAS and the Communities That Care coalition, with support from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services /Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, for contributing to the content of this guide and supplying the participant brochures.

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MF-2286 September 1997

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, as amended. Kansas State University, County Extension Councils, Extension Districts, and United States Department of Agriculture Cooperating, Richard D. Wootton, Associate Director.

File Code: Human Development and Family Relations—5 CS 9/97—2M