

Working Together

Understanding student violence in schools

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An initiative of the Queensland
Schools Alliance Against Violence



Queensland Government

On 23 February 2010 the Premier announced the formation of the *Queensland Schools Alliance Against Violence* (QSAAV) to provide advice on best practice measures to address bullying and violence in Queensland schools to the Minister for Education and Training, the Honourable Geoff Wilson MP. QSAAV completed its term in September and provided a report for the Minister in October 2010.

QSAAV was independently chaired by Professor Ian O'Connor (Griffith University) and included representatives from:

- Education Queensland
- Queensland Catholic Education Commission
- Independent Schools Queensland
- Queensland Council for Parents and Citizens Association
- Federation of Parents and Friends Associations of Catholic Schools
- Queensland Independent Schools Parents Council
- Queensland Teachers' Union
- Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union
- Queensland Independent Education Union
- Catholic sector principals
- State sector principals
- Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (Queensland)
- Indigenous education representative
- Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian.

In September 2010, QSAAV endorsed the release of *Working Together: Understanding student violence in schools*.

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Introduction

The Queensland Government has been working hard to address the complex issues of bullying, cyber bullying and violence in schools. All members of the school community working together are critical for success.

Working Together: understanding student violence in schools provides information to assist school staff to understand the complexity of violence as well as the latest thinking about best practice in managing violence between students in schools. It focuses on long-term responses to preventing student violence. Dealing with individual violent incidents will not be discussed.

Overview

The booklet proposes a definition of student violence. It explores some myths and facts about student violence, and highlights numerous issues in how youth violence is reported and researched. The booklet then looks what is known about students who have been violent, and the importance of schools' influence on student violence. It concludes with a brief overview of research on what does and does not work in preventing student violence. The key message throughout is that sustainable and effective approaches to preventing student violence focus on the school culture.

The toolkit is part of a suite of resources developed by the *Queensland Schools Alliance Against Violence* (QSAAV). The role of QSAAV was to provide the Queensland Government with independent advice on strategies to address issues of bullying and violence in all state and non-state schools throughout Queensland. One task of QSAAV was to identify evidence-based best practice across Queensland education sectors, nationally and internationally, which may be implemented in Queensland schools.

A key achievement of QSAAV was the development of a framework which is based on national and international best practice to assist schools to take effective action against bullying *Working Together: A toolkit for effective school based action against bullying* and other resources produced by QSAAV are available at <http://education.qld.gov.au/student-services/behaviour/gsaav/index.html> Some anti-bullying resources referred to in the *Toolkit* may also be relevant for dealing with student violence in schools.

Defining youth violence and student violence

According to the Report of the National Inquiry into the Impact of Violence on Young Australians, *Avoid the Harm – Stay Calm*, there is no commonly-used definition of *youth violence* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010).

Youth violence usually refers to interpersonal violence of people between the ages of 10 and 24. Some definitions of youth violence include any violence committed against young people as well as that committed by young people.

Interpersonal violence is defined by Dahlberg and Krug (2002) as:

The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against another person or against a group or community that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.

This definition links the intention with committing the act, regardless of the outcome. There may be a considerable disparity between intended behaviour and intended consequence. The definition also includes all acts of violence whether public or private, reactive or proactive, or criminal or non-criminal.

This booklet will consider only interpersonal violence perpetrated by young people against young people at school, i.e. violence *between* students. While the focus is on student violence in schools, information pertaining to youth violence more generally will be referred where appropriate.

Research studies involving self-reporting by students indicated high levels of physical violence are common in schools, with a sharp decrease after Year 9. High levels of assault have been found in studies of school violence, both in Australia and overseas (Grunseit, Weatherburn & Donnelly, 2005). The types of violence students reported over the previous 12 months at school included:

- throwing items
- pushing
- grabbing
- kicking
- biting
- hitting with fists
- using a sharp instrument
- hitting with an object
- pulling hair.

Most authorities agree that schools are by and large safe environments and shape young people's positive development (Mazerolle, 2010b). However, practically all schools will experience violent incidents at different times. Minor forms of violence are common across all schools and sectors, while extreme violence is rare (Mazerolle, 2010b). The fact that minor violent incidents may be common among school students is concerning (Gottfredson, 2001). Student violence or threat of violence can undermine the educational process (Grunseit et al, 2005). Defiant, disruptive and violent behaviours decrease the effectiveness and relevance of teaching and learning for everyone involved (Sugai & Horner, 2001).

Avoid the Harm – Stay Calm (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010) suggested it was important to distinguish youth violence from both bullying and other antisocial behaviours, because of potentially differing causes, impacts and appropriate responses. This distinction is also relevant to understanding student violence.

Bullying is a type of aggressive behaviour; however it should not be equated with aggression or violence. Rigby (2010) defines bullying in the following way:

Bullying is a systematic and repeated abuse of power. In general bullying may be defined as:

- *dominating or hurting someone*
- *unfair action by the perpetrator(s) and an imbalance of power*
- *a lack of adequate defence by the target and feelings of oppression and humiliation.*

Not all student violence involves bullying, and not all bullying involves violence (Farrington & Ttofi, 2010). Bullying includes physical aggression, damaging another's belongings, verbal insults and abuse, social exclusion, lying or spreading rumours about another person, stalking or harassing someone, and sending insulting or degrading messages by phone or social networking sites. Some components of programs designed to reduce bullying may also reduce student violence, and *vice versa*. The school context and the individuals involved will determine the appropriateness of such programs (Farrington & Ttofi, 2010).

Antisocial behaviour includes a wide range of aggressive, intimidating and destructive behaviours. These behaviours range from non-criminal activities such as swearing, noisy behaviour and binge drinking to criminal behaviours such as the use and/or sale of illicit drugs, property damage and theft (Williams, Toumbourou, Williamson, Hemphill & Patton, 2009). It is thus a wider concept than violence.

Some myths and facts about student violence

Measuring actual levels of student violence in schools is problematic. In the absence of precise data and clarity about the nature and scale of youth violence, myths and misperceptions can take a disproportionate role in shaping views and responses.

The topic of youth violence engenders strong emotions, including fear, which can affect determining its actual prevalence and impact. Negative perceptions by adults can bias interpretations of young people's behaviour (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010). The issue of student violence is highly visible in the media, and is surrounded by myths that, if believed, cause some people to think no problem exists at all, and others to adopt ineffective policies and programs to combat it (SAMHSA, 2002). The facts about prevalence, impact and the best ways to manage youth violence in general are clouded by myths and misperceptions, which can make it difficult for schools to determine the best way to respond to student violence at school.

Myth or fact?	You have to consider ...
<i>Student violence in schools is a major problem</i>	<p>There are no national data available in Australia that could be used to reliably gauge the prevalence of or trends in student violence (Grunseit et al, 2005). Data gathering for 'youth violence' spans the ages of 12 to 25 year olds, thus does not apply specifically to students; nor does it separate the physical violence between young people from that perpetrated by adults on young people, or violence perpetrated at school from that in a range of contexts outside of school (including, e.g. assaults on young people at home).</p> <p>Individual jurisdictions' data indicating an upward trend in youth violence generally could indicate more violent behaviour or could indicate a greater willingness on the part of young people or school authorities to report violent incidents (Trimboli, 2010).</p>
<i>There is too much emphasis on defining and measuring student violence; we need action!</i>	<p>To respond effectively to the issue of student violence, clarity is needed around what behaviour is included and what is excluded in a definition, so the incidence and trends over time can be monitored and compared across jurisdictions. Currently the lack of a single shared definition means the true picture is not clear.</p> <p>A precise and consistent definition is also important to understanding the contributing factors, the nature and complexity of youth violence generally, to assess the effectiveness of programs and initiatives designed to prevent youth violence, to consider both short-and long-term approaches, as well as to determine what is required, both financially and non-financially, to respond effectively over the long-term (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010; Dahlberg & Krug, 2002). Simplistic responses, without a full understanding of the complexities, are unlikely to improve the situation (ARACY, 2010).</p>

Myth or fact?	You have to consider ...
<i>Kids these days are out of control and have no values</i>	<p>Consultation with young people reveals their violent behaviour did not stem from a lack of values but rather was grounded in a well developed set of values that holds such behaviour as a justifiable, commonsense way to achieve certain goals (Lockwood, 1997). Almost without exception, the young people in a survey conducted by Grunseit et al (2005) survey felt their violence was justified either because of ongoing provocation, or because the other person hit them first.</p> <p>This leads to an understanding of school fighting and violence as behaviour that has a social significance and a social impact with very real consequences for the daily life of young people in the school environment. Hemmings (2002) considered fighting to be an adaptive behaviour, i.e. violence was one means by which students could gain or lose social status within these realms. The school context itself can also shape the degree to which violence is taken up to achieve status.</p>
<i>Stories of youth violence are always in the media, it must be happening a lot</i>	<p>Coverage in the media may not be a reliable indicator of risk. In fact, people's assessment of the level of risk has been found to be related directly to the source of news, with talk back radio and commercial television news leading to the least accurate perceptions of real risk (Indermaur & Roberts, 2009). This applies to perceptions of student violence.</p> <p>The media may also contribute to negative images of young people by selective reporting. For example, <i>Today Tonight</i> on 14 June 2010 reported on 'youth' violence 'out of control' on the Gold Coast. In fact, the incidents did not involve youth at all, and even though there was violence occurring, it was being perpetrated by adults as part of an ongoing neighbourhood dispute (ABC 1, <i>Media Watch</i>, 19 July 2010). Thus the reports of youth violence in the media cannot be considered to be a reliable indicator of prevalence.</p> <p>Research reported to the National Inquiry into the Impact of Violence on Young Australians suggested that media reporting may in some cases increase anti-social behaviour, with some groups 'enjoying' the associated notoriety (ARACY, 2009)</p>
<i>Student violence is random and unpredictable and therefore we should be afraid</i>	<p>Grunseit et al (2005) found that, with few exceptions, students reported fights occurred after a prolonged history of conflict. The tension typically extended over weeks, months, and sometimes years. The initial falling out was often sparked by an identifiable event. Depending on the type of relationship they had with their opponent, students' conflicts had their genesis in such things as perceived betrayals, teasing, minor disagreements, and what could most appropriately be described as social clumsiness.</p>

Myth or fact?	You have to consider ...
<i>Alcohol causes youth violence</i>	The role of alcohol in youth violence is complex. Consumption of alcohol and other drugs is not itself a cause of violence, but rather a facilitator or catalyst (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010). While increasing alcohol consumption by young people may be concerning for its health implications, it is important to understand the real nature of this issue in order to address it. As an illustration of the lack of a direct link, research on alcohol consumption and violence in students younger than 15 years of age found very high variation across the 30 communities, and concluded that other factors in the community were likely to influence the level of violence (Williams & Toumbourou et al, 2009). Interventions thus need to identify and target these other factors to make positive differences (See page 13).
<i>Students just don't want to tell the school staff about violent incidents</i>	Only half of the students interviewed by Grunseit et al (2005) reported seeking outside help of any kind before the violence occurred, and only one third approached the school despite the many avenues available to do so. Reasons help was not sought from the school included: fear that informing the school would escalate the tension; a lack of faith that reporting would change the situation; a belief that previous appeals for help had been unsatisfactory; and failure to consider the option of telling the school. Since fear of repercussion or inflaming the situation is a reason some students did not report violence to school staff, ways to address this must be found.
<i>Risk factors tell us which students will end up being violent</i>	A 'risk factor' is a concept from biological or physical science and should be used with extreme caution in behaviour. In fact, many supposed 'risk factors' in behavioural research are merely those features researchers have looked for. The idea that particular 'risk factors' cause humans to behave in a certain way ignores choice in decision-making and the importance of modelling. Not every young person with so-call 'risk factors' (even those with many) exhibit violent behaviour (SAMHSA, 2002). The danger with 'risk factors' identified by research is that they may serve only to stigmatise certain groups of people (e.g. people living in poverty) or reinforce wider negative biases about young people (Watts, 2010). The resulting problem is that focusing on so-called 'risk factors' may lead to inappropriate or simplistic responses to youth violence.
<i>Violent behaviour results from certain student characteristics, such as learning difficulties</i>	Research about how strongly two behaviours or factors correlate does NOT provide evidence that one causes the other, just that they co-occur. This is a very common misperception about research (Gottfredson, 2001). For example, some research suggests that a student's learning problems lead to violent behaviour. However, the causal relationship may equally run the other way. Antisocial behaviour, for example, may make it harder to teach students and result in less than optimal learning. It may also lead to negative teacher-pupil interactions and allow less time for instructional interactions, thereby further compromising academic success (Grunseit et al, 2005).

Myth or fact?	You have to consider ...
<i>Watching violent media is linked to violent behaviour</i>	Although debated for an extended time, the most recent thorough review of research on media violence concluded there was unequivocal evidence that media violence increases the likelihood of aggressive and violence behaviour in both immediate and long term contexts (Escobar-Chaves & Anderson, 2008). The evidence strongly suggests that exposure to violent video games increases aggressive behaviour, aggressive cognition, and aggressive affect, as well as decreased empathy and prosocial behaviour (Anderson et al, 2010).
<i>Girls are becoming more violent</i>	The perception of an increase in violence in girls is a matter of unresolved controversy. While there is an increase in reported offending amongst young girls (e.g. in the NSW Children's Court, the proportion of girls appearing for violent crimes increased from 14% in 1998 to 29% in 2007) is not clear if the data reflect real changes in girls' behaviour, or changes in processing of girls by the juvenile justice authorities (Bellis, Downing & Ashton 2006; Najman et al, 2009).
<i>Fighting is just part of boys being boys</i>	Some aspects of pedagogy or opportunities for achievement may valorise dominating 'masculine' behaviours, including aggression. Masculinity might be demonstrated by being successful in fighting. Mills (2001) believed schools may inadvertently perpetuate an aggressive or violent definition of masculinity through their marginalisation of human relations curricula, failure to prevent the harassment of boys choosing non-traditional subjects, and through practices that reinforces or excuses domineering behaviour. Mills (2001) thought behaviours such as fighting and aggression could only be reduced if boys were provided with viable alternative ways to define themselves as men.
<i>Girls fighting is just unnatural</i>	Adams (1999) reported that, in contrast to teachers' views that fighting by girls was immature, unfeminine and/or the result of growing up in a violent environment, the girls (13 to 15 years) in her study considered fighting as a way to resist the dominant feminine standard of docility. For the girls, fighting was not related to immaturity or poor adjustment but, instead, their attempt to establish and preserve control over their lives.
<i>Boot camps or other severe punishment is the only way to sort out violent students</i>	Boot camps have not been found to be effective in reducing anti-social behaviour and violence (SAMSHA, 2002). They do make high rating TV programs though. Simplistic, punitive-based responses to violence have not been found to work (ARACY, 2010). While inappropriate behaviour warrants consequences and a requirement for changed behaviour, punishment alone does not work. Instead, it tends to reinforce or send the behaviours underground. 'Get tough' approaches alone can result in the creation of more negative, adversarial and hostile school environments (ARACY, 2010; Sugai & Horner, 2001).

Why is there such hype around student violence in schools?

How can schools make sense of the conflicting information about student violence? On one hand, images of schools as frightening and violent places feature regularly in the media; while on the other hand, many academics and authorities insist 'schools are generally safe'.

Violence is a serious issue if it occurs; determining just how common it is, why it occurs and how to deal with it effectively are difficult for several reasons.

The prevailing 'culture of fear' that Zinn (2008) describes can cloud understanding about student violence in schools. 'Fear culture' results from constant messages of risk/danger through media and entertainment to grab the attention of consumers. These constant 'fear' messages provoke emotional responses which may not be commensurate with the degree of risk, tend to give the impression there is an overwhelming problem, and fail to provide clear information to help accurately assess exactly what is happening (Zinn, 2008).

The Youth Violence Taskforce report (2007) reported an increase of 2% by 15-19 year old perpetrators of assault over the period from 2005/06 to 2006/07. This stands in contrast to media coverage of isolated incidents which creates the impression that youth violence is on a dramatic rise. The report actually states that this perception is not accurate.

The nature of some media coverage of violence in schools adds to the perception that schools are inherently unsafe and all students are at risk (Paine & Sprague, 2000). For example, *School violence at highest ever levels* (Sunday Mail 13 Sept 2009) contained the words 'riddled with violence' giving the impression that extreme violence is widespread, whereas the incidents ranged from poking and pushing up to rare cases of assault. Some media reports about youth violence have actually been found to be fabrications (e.g. Media Watch 19 July 2010). The accuracy of people's perceptions about crime in general has been found to be strongly associated with the main sources of media used, with the least accurate perceptions related to relying on talkback radio and commercial television (Indemaur & Roberts, 2009). Thus, humans' perceptions do not always align with the actual risk.

As the Queensland Commissioner for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2010) has noted:

I like to remind people that over 90% of our young people have no contact with the justice system and serious juvenile offending is decreasing. In fact children are more likely to be victims than offenders; however they are often portrayed negatively in need of greater control.

While school violence is a serious issue when it occurs, inflating the issue and engendering fear amongst parents, teachers and students can also have negative impacts.

Just as overstating risk can create problems, a response distorted by misinformation may mean some communities deny that certain violent behaviour is a problem. Violence maybe considered acceptable

or just a fact of life. Bullying and some types of violence have sometimes been viewed this way, yet have serious social consequences for victims and perpetrators alike (SAMSHA, 2002).

Commissioner for Children and Young People, Western Australia (2009, p2-3) cautioned:

While responding to this issue with due seriousness, it is also important to remember that the overwhelming majority of children and young people are not involved in violence either as victims or perpetrators. Overstating the risks can potentially lead to an increased risk for children and young people if they disengage from the community through fear of becoming victims or are further marginalised by the adult community through fear of them perpetrating violence.

Schools need to cut through the hype surrounding youth violence in order to plan proactively and to respond effectively to student violence in schools.

Characteristics of students who perpetrate violence in schools

Understanding why some children and young people are violent to others can suggest ways to intervene. Grunseit et al (2005) found that although schools clearly had a strong influence on violence, individual and family-related factors were also associated with violence perpetrated on school premises.

They found that children who had not learned how to control their impulses, who were poorly supervised or who had come from families where the discipline is punitive, were far more likely to assault another student at school than are students who did not experience these conditions. This was found regardless of the characteristics of the school that a student attends.

Impulsivity, as measured by affirmative responses to statements like "I generally do and say things quickly without stopping to think" has been found to be one of the most important correlates of early onset violent behaviour (Tremblay, Gervais & Petitclerc, 2008).

While some research points to the family make up as a contributing factor, Grunseit et al (2005) said other studies attest to the fact that the kind of parenting a child receives is more important than whether they grow up in a large or a sole parent family. Parental rejection, poor parental supervision, erratic or harsh discipline and/or exposure to high levels of parental conflict, for example, are all much more strongly associated with aggressive and antisocial behaviour than family size and type (Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986). Grunseit et al (2005) pointed out the importance of families in violence prevention because of the disjunction between some parents' attitudes to violence and the attitudes that schools are trying to inculcate.

A caution about research into 'risk factors' for student violence

Numerous studies provide profiles of characteristics of people who are more likely to be violent and label these as 'risk factors'. However, this is a misleading use of the concept of 'risk factors'. The concept of 'risk factors' comes from medical research and connotes a causal relationship; such causal relationships are valid when talking about biological or physical processes increasing the likelihood of an individual developing a disease or disorder (Gottfredson, 2001). For example, suggesting that obesity is a risk factor for developing cardio-vascular disease points to a cause and effect relationship between obesity and cardio-vascular disease.

However, in complex human behaviour, simple cause and effect relationships are not valid. The factors listed in profiles of those students who have been violent are just as likely to be the *results* of exposure to violence as the *causes* of violence (Gottfredson, 2001). For example, poverty may equally be a cause or a result of exposure to violence. Even more likely, poverty may be a result of a complex set of characteristics and circumstances that also leads to a higher likelihood to be violent. Choice, decision-making, motivations and modelling are all important in behaviour. The greatest danger of such lists of characteristics of so-called 'risk factors' is they may inaccurately suggest responses to student violence which target these 'risk factors'. Trying to change factors that do not actually cause violent behaviour is unlikely to have a positive outcome.

Watts (2010) suggested that the profiles of anti-social characteristics known as 'risk factors' reflect the biases of those doing the research, and contribute to the alienation of youth. Given how limited such information is in informing responses, it is surprising how commonly it features in research and reports. Schools must attempt to see beyond the narrow profiling of students most likely to be violent.

The issue of violent behaviour amongst young people should be taken in context. Gottfredson (2001) points out that most young people report behaviour that is considered criminal or grossly inappropriate, such as stealing, fighting, underage drinking and underage sexual activity. In fact the relation of crime to age 'appears nearly universal' (Gottfredson, 2001, p5), and has been viewed as strongly linked to the developmentally-appropriate reduction in parental supervision and control.

Alcohol and youth violence: a growing problem

The role of alcohol in youth violence is complex. Alcohol not only makes some individuals feel invincible, but fosters an inflated sense of ego, as well as a higher likelihood to interpret slights to that inflated self-appraisal (Mazerolle, 2010b). It inhibits sound decision making.

Over the past five decades, the average age at which young people report having their first alcoholic drink has fallen from 19 to 15.5 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). Williams et al (2009) reported that between Year 6 and Year 8 the proportion of students who had consumed alcohol increased from 39.4 to 57.4% for boys and from 22.9% to 48.2% for girls.

Pressure to drink is an aspect of peer pressure. Underage and risky (binge) drinking has become a 'glorified' social norm or 'rite of passage' amongst some groups of young people (Roche et al, 2008). However, research suggests that young people tend to overestimate their peers' drinking both in frequency and amount, and a strong relationship exists between perception of frequency of drinking among peers and self-reported frequency of drinking. So the picture is not clear; it may be that the data over-represent the actual prevalence of underage drinking (Perkins & Craig, 2006). Self-reported incidence of drinking therefore has significant limitations.

Williams et al (2009) examined the relationship between violent and antisocial behaviour and alcohol consumption in students younger than 15 years. The likelihood of engaging in violent behaviour was approximately three-and-a-half times higher for those who had used alcohol, but with very high levels of variation across the 30 communities they surveyed. They concluded (Williams et al, 2009, page ix) 'there are inherent, as yet unidentified, factors within communities that influence the level of violence.' It is apparent from their study that alcohol is implicated in youth violence, but is not clearly a cause; underage alcohol consumption and engaging in violent behaviour could both emerge from numerous other influences.

Numerous submissions to the *National Inquiry into the Impact of Violence on Young Australians* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010) commented that alcohol itself was not the cause of violence. Again, understanding the cause and result relationship is important, because a poor understanding can lead to responses which may be misdirected. It seems from the evidence that alcohol consumption by young people is a factor in situations blowing out of control into violent behaviour, but is not itself a cause of violence (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010).

Schools' influence on student violence

The perceived increase in student violence sits within a wider cultural environment in which the use of violence as part of being tough, settling differences and resolving conflict is strongly endorsed. Such endorsement occurs on football fields, on the roads, and as young people start to go out, at parties and clubs. This may be reinforced by a peer group in which alcohol and machismo are highly valued.

Students' understanding and attitude toward violence are thus shaped in contexts other than the school. Students may receive messages from the school of no tolerance for physical violence at the same time as receiving messages of its normalisation and acceptance outside the school context. Parents sometimes implicitly condone violence even if not directly promoting it (Grunseit et al 2005). For example, parents may caution their child 'not to look for a fight', but urge them if bothered by another student to 'make sure they give the other kid a good hiding'.

However, considerable evidence suggests that youth violence in schools is not merely a reflection of what goes on in the environment surrounding it. Beyond the influence of individual and cultural factors predisposing students to violence, factors associated with the management, organisation or culture of a school make a significant difference to the likelihood of a student becoming involved in violence or school misconduct (Grunseit et al 2005; Jenkins, 1997).

Welsh, Greene and Jenkins (1999) found that almost all the variation in school behaviour disorder rates in their study could be explained by various school-level factors, including perceived fairness of school rules, clarity of school rules and attachment to the school.

Important factors influencing the likelihood of being violent included students' knowledge of whether there was a school discipline policy, the formal teaching of school rules, and student attitudes regarding school rules, classroom culture, and racism and bullying in the school. The likelihood of attacking another student was higher among those who felt that students were uninformed about school rules, spent a lot of class time copying out of textbooks or the blackboard, or felt that good behaviour was not rewarded in the school. A lower likelihood was found among students who felt that their teachers were prepared for class lessons, who felt that they always got help with their schoolwork, and who felt that their teachers curtailed racism and bullying (Grunseit et al, 2005).

The efforts to work at the school level to prevent youth violence are based on the belief, supported by a growing body of research, that:

- Violence is a learned behaviour, and as such, can be unlearned
- Everyone can contribute to violence prevention; young people are part of the solution
- Partnerships and collaboration are more effective than isolated individual efforts
- Certain factors associated with a school's management, organisation or culture can significantly reduce the likelihood of violence.

Ways to think about student violence and schools

The role of schools as places where violent behaviour may occur is complex. Schools have the potential to effect positive change and be a supportive agent because of the extended time young people spend at school. School environments can be structured to minimise opportunities for violence. They also have the potential to influence violent and other anti-social behaviour that occurs outside of schools by providing a convenient setting for prevention activities (Gottfredson, 2001).

In recent years, views about student violence have changed. It is now recognised there are multiple factors operating at the individual, family, school, community and broader social level. Effective strategies need to operate at these multiple levels through integrated approaches which recognise the developmental needs of children and young people (ARACY, 2010; Farrington & Ttofi, 2010). The growing understanding that student violence is part of a broader school or community culture that endorses violence leads to a shift in the types of response schools can consider – responses that look at the overall culture or climate of the school. Young people, families, community groups, governments, local business and police all have a role to play in preventing student violence at school (Mazerolle, 2010b).

The following is a brief overview of how violence is considered at each level; resources with more comprehensive information are listed on page 22.

Individual

This is based on non-experimental research which has suggested personal characteristics, beliefs and attitudes are key factors in whether students engage in violent behaviour (Gottfredson, 2001). In the past this has been the dominant way to view violent behaviour, thus twice as much research has been conducted from this viewpoint. Programs to teach self-control and social competency skills have been found to be most effective, but most have not been found to have long lasting impacts.

This leads to responses including:

- Programs delivered to students which target individual risk factors for violence (Mazerolle, 2010a)
- Social-emotional development strategies which teach children how to handle tough social situations, and to learn how to resolve problems without using violence (CDCP)
- Behaviour modification programs focused on changing behaviours (Gottfredson, 2001).
- Mentoring programs which pair a young person with an adult who serves as a positive role model and helps to guide the young person's behaviour (CDCP)
- Counselling, social work, psychological or therapeutic strategies to explore the underlying causes of the violence with the individual (Gottfredson, 2001)
- Diversionary programs to provide fun alternatives to antisocial behaviour (Gottfredson, 2001).

Family

This perspective is based on the finding that exposure to attitudes and behavioural models endorsing the use of violence in the family has a strong impact on a young person's tendency to be violent. Schools trying to inculcate a culture of intolerance toward violence sometimes find themselves dealing with students whose parents condone violent behaviour (Grunseit et al, 2005).

This leads to responses including:

- Programs designed to improve family relationships (Mazorelle, 2010a)
- Parent- and family-based programs to improve family relations in which parents receive training on child development, skills for talking with their children and ways to solve problems in non-violent ways (CDCP).

Peers

This perspective is based on the finding that the most consistent characteristic of students who are violent is having friends who are violent. Peers have a significant effect on many aspects of youth behaviour, and when the peer norm is *machismo*, bravado, anti-authoritarian or violent behaviour this has a strong link with an individual's tendency to be violent. However the mechanism is not well understood. According to Gottfredson (2001) it could be that children rejected by prosocial peers for whatever reason do not experience opportunities to learn appropriate ways to interact; or it could equally be that a peer group in which antisocial behaviour is considered normal is more accepting.

This leads to types of responses including

- Programs involving mentoring by peers or by slightly older students.

Gottfredson (2001) cautions that peer programs have not been found to be effective; and in fact some research suggests there is potential harm in peer-based programs (Farrington & Ttofi, 2010).

School

This perspective is based on the concept of school culture or climate (Gottfredson, 2001; Sugai, Horner & Gresham, 2002) as serving to engender or minimise violent behaviour between students. Research suggests that improving the way schools are organised and managed can be more effective than providing special prevention programs and intervention services.

This leads to responses including:

- Programs to modify school characteristics, class structures and physical environment (Gottfredson, 2001)
- Focusing on highly visible and strongly reinforced school rules and discipline policies (Gottfredson, 2001)

- Broad, school wide approaches which contain an emphasis on behaviour management, social-cognitive development and clear expression of the expected behaviours or ‘norms’ (Gottfredson, 2001)
- Whole school programs such as *Positive Behaviour Support* (Sugai & Horner, 2001) which aim to improve classroom and school climate to maximise learning as well as to prevent violence.

Community

This perspective is based on the concept of the school culture as an expression of a wider community which Mazerolle (2010b) described as having ‘a disordered values framework’. It recognises the impact of wider issues (e.g. poverty, availability of drugs, acceptance of exposure to violence) in student violence. Schools may find their students are struggling with the disjunction of differing views on violence, and having to find a way to exist in the wider community in which other powerful “truths” about violence are promoted (Grunseit et al, 2005).

This leads to responses including:

- Changes to the physical and social environment to address the social and economic causes of violence (CDCP)
- Programs/efforts to modify the social and cultural climate which supports violence at the societal level (Mazerolle, 2010a)
- Social marketing responses targeting the whole community (Gottfredson, 2001).

Understanding student violence as part of a broader school or community culture that endorses violence allows a shift in the types of response that schools can consider – responses that focus on the overall culture or climate of the school. Such a view also means the young people, families, community groups, local businesses, the police and government each have a role to play (Mazerolle, 2010b).

What doesn't work in preventing student violence?

Many interventions aimed at preventing student violence are informed by ideology and what seems like 'common sense' rather than evidence (Mazerolle, 2010a). Despite their appeal to some members of the community, research shows that the following approaches to preventing violence in schools do not work (ARACY, 2010; Morrison & Skiba, 2001):

- Zero tolerance and 'get tough' suspensions and exclusions
- Rigid control of student behaviour
- Belief that students **must** receive punitive and negative consequences
- Increased security measures
- Unfair and inconsistent use of discipline
- Punishment without support

Despite their high media profile, approaches such as boot camps, 'Scared Straight', 'Three Strikes and You're Out' have not been found to be effective in reducing anti-social behaviour and violence (Mazerolle, 2010a; SAMSHA, 2002). One thing obvious in the research is that just 'coming down hard' **alone** on a student who is violent does not resolve the situation; in some cases it may actually aggravate the problem (ARACY, 2009).

Hyman and Perone (1998) cite the well established links between psychological and physical abuse and aggressive behaviour in non-schools settings as one reason for avoiding hostile and punitive disciplinary practices in schools. They suggest that psychological or emotional maltreatment, corporal punishment, and law enforcement-style behaviour management potentially feed resentment, distrust and aggression among affected students.

It may be difficult for some people to accept that the types of approaches listed above do not work (despite the solid research evidence to this effect) because they seem like to be grounded in 'common sense', but they are overly simplistic answers to a problem that is complex and multifaceted.

The types of programs listed above are a response to the fear that violence generates and a desire to see justice done which involves appropriate punishment for those who have done wrong (Beccaria (1764) cited in Groenewegen, 2002). While this may be a justifiable emotional reaction, it does not lead to effective responses. This tendency does, however, have implications for schools attempting to encourage productive responses in the community. Some community members may insist that simplistic, punitive approaches are the only way to deal with student violence in schools.

Grunseit et al (2005) suggested the reason these types of approaches do not work is that such practices undermine traditional forms of non-intrusive behavioural control, such as teacher authority and a supportive, nurturing school climate. Significant research suggests the key area on which to focus to prevent violence amongst students is the school culture, also called the school climate.

Principles of effective violence prevention approaches

The number of anti-violence and anti-bullying interventions available can be overwhelming, and not all have been evaluated with the same degree of rigour. The result is a potentially confusing array of interventions and programs at various stages of implementation and evaluation (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010). This can make it difficult for schools to select an approach or program suitable for their needs.

Research currently does not point to any particular program or practice for reducing problem behaviour (Gottfredson, 2001). The following principles are derived from research and academic opinion to assist schools to consider programs and to plan their own local programs to prevent student violence.

Be proactive. Avoid reactive responses based on exceptional events, and avoid developing a 'fortress' mentality (Mazerolle, 2010a). Proactively plan for a safe schooling context for all; plan also for adequate staff preparation and skilling.

Start young and tailor to student age. Patterns of student violence can begin in early childhood (Tremblay et al, 2008). Gottfredson (2001) points to the need to be alert to violent incidents from Year 4 onward and not to wait until high school to begin prevention programs, but to continue through schooling. It is vital to develop age-specific and developmentally-responsive programs. For example, Farrington & Ttofi (2010) reported that disciplinary methods work better for younger children (Year 4), while only two years later in Years 6, the non-punitive approaches seemed to work better.

Use whole school approaches. Whole school approaches entail delivering instruction in ways that promote learning for all and engagement with the school community. Specific foci can include behaviour programs and/or social emotional learning (Morrison & Skiba, 2001). Do not limit responses or preventative measures to those students considered 'high risk' (Crone, Hawken & Bergstrom, 2007; Mazerolle, 2010a).

Endorse a student support approach. Combine student support approaches with adequate supervision and disciplinary responses (Bradshaw, Reinke, Bevans & Leaf, 2008; Farrington & Ttofi, 2010; Morrison & Skiba, 2001).

Explicitly teach school rules and alternative dispute resolution skills and opportunities. Explicitly teach schools rules and expectations for behaviour, and enforce these with appropriate behaviour management. Given that young people report that, in the majority of cases, physical violence is used to resolve disputes, teaching alternative ways to resolve disputes may reduce violence. Opportunities to deal with interpersonal issues or friction before they escalate can also help (Grunseit et al, 2010; Newcomer & Lewis, 2004).

Ensure leadership is highly visible. Leadership is important and commitment to preventing violence is essential at all levels: the community, school, staff and student level (Bradshaw et al, 2008; Flannery, Sugai & Anderson, 2009).

Engage with the school and broader community. Trying to impose a violence prevention program on a school or broader community that is not ready or willing is unlikely to work (SAMHSA, 2002). Success at a community level requires engagement and collaboration, which can be very demanding and time consuming, but which ultimately provide the strongest support for violence prevention (Bradshaw et al, 2008; Crone et al, 2007).

Choose programs that have been shown to be effective. Schools' responses need to be informed by evidence; Gottfredson (2001) provides a comprehensive review of programs and approaches. Be alert to the misleading appeal of simplistic approaches which have no evidence of effectiveness, and the possible expectation from some amongst the wider community for punitive approaches (Mazerolle, 2010a; Newcomer & Lewis, 2004).

Ensure programs are implemented appropriately with sufficient intensity and duration. It is critical to implement anti-violence programs as intended, and with sufficient intensity and duration, in order to see change (Gottfredson, 2001; Mazerolle, 2010a). Programs found to be efficacious in research conditions did not have the same results in schools because they were not implemented as intended and for long enough; in fact, programs implemented inappropriately have been shown to have a negative effect (Gottfredson, 2001). This means schools must seriously consider their capacity to implement a program as intended; equally it means programs must be developed with the realities of school contexts and resources in mind (Bradshaw et al, 2008; Newcomer & Lewis, 2004).

Plan for sustainability. Schools are busy places and measures designed to prevent violence must be able to be accommodated within the available school resources and implemented on a sustainable basis. Building staff capacity is integral to success. Monitoring over time is critical to identify progress and to inform changes until improvement is seen (Mazerolle, 2010a).

Building school culture to prevent student violence

This booklet has explored the myths, misperceptions and challenges in accessing valid information about student violence in schools. Schools face a considerable challenge in understanding the problem and considering their options to effect positive changes in the local school community.

The current research supports the idea that sustainable and effective approaches to preventing student violence centre on the school culture or climate. Gottfredson (2001) said schools must address aspects of their school culture that, possibly inadvertently, support or endorse the use of violence to resolve conflict.

Building a positive school culture is not a product of inventing new approaches or radical anti-violence programs (Sugai & Horner, 2001). It involves building a culture of social competencies that supports prosocial behaviour and maximises learning. Audit tools which assist school staff and students to review their school's culture or climate as part of a response to student violence as well as other resources on school climate are listed on page 24.

Gottfredson (2001) said school level responses are aimed directly at enhancing the enduring capacity of the school to function effectively. They do this through reducing opportunities or dispositions of students to engage in problem behaviour by increasing their self control and their social bonds. Maximising student learning and engagement, modelling appropriate behaviour, and establishing a fair and just discipline system enhances student belief in the validity of rules and laws.

Mazerolle (2010a) suggested a long term strategic approach is needed to ensure schools are safe places for all. This includes the following steps:

- Develop school and community partnerships
- Undertake comprehensive needs assessment
- Develop a comprehensive school plan
- Identify strategies and programs and implement
- Conduct evaluation
- Share the outcomes and make adjustments as indicated.

Schools have a great deal to contribute to violence prevention but progress will be influenced by the extent to which violence is endorsed within the family and the wider community (Grunseit et al, 2005). Engagement with the wider community and local alliances against violence provide a way to challenge these views. (See *Working Together. A starter kit for developing local community alliances against bullying and violence.*)

Working Together

Resources

Resources and references

Websites with information about youth violence

Act Smart Be Safe: a gateway for parents/carers, students, teachers and the community to access information to help improve youth safety. <http://education.qld.gov.au/actsmartbesafe/>

Alannah and Madeline Foundation: a national charity protecting children from violence and its devastating effects. <http://www.amf.org.au/AboutUs/>

National Centre Against Bullying: a peak body working to advise and inform the Australian community on the issue of childhood bullying and the creation of safe schools and communities, including the issue of cyber safety. <http://www.ncab.org.au/>

National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center (2001). Community-based collaboration in the US with training and other resources. <http://www.safeyouth.org/scripts/facts/community.asp>

Positive Behaviour Intervention and Supports websites www.bpis.org www.cber.org
www.swis.org

Reach Out: an online resource that assists young people by providing information to improve understanding of the issues that relate to mental health and wellbeing. *Reach Out* also has information on how young people can get the best help from services, as well as opportunities to connect with other young people. <http://au.reachout.com>

State Wide Positive Behaviour Support Learning Community (Education Queensland)
<http://www.learningplace.com.au/deliver/content.asp?pid=28246>

Striving to Reduce Youth Violence Everywhere (STRYVE): US website with online training modules entitled Look for Warning Signs, Understand Youth Violence, and Protect Your Community, and other information. <http://www.safeyouth.gov/Training/Pages/Training.aspx>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA] *What You Need to Know About Youth Violence Prevention* <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov>

WHO Collaborating Centres for Violence: work to support and develop violence prevention internationally <http://www.nwph.net/preventviolence/default.aspx>

Working Together suite of resources for schools including *Working Together: A starter kit for establishing local community alliances against bullying and violence*.
<http://education.qld.gov.au/student-services/behaviour/qsav/index.html>

School climate audit tools

Oregon School Safety Survey v 2.0 (Sprague, J., Colvin, G. & Irvin, L. 1995, 2005)

http://www.pbis.org/pbis_resource_detail_page.aspx?Type=4&PBIS_ResourceID=243

The Oregon School Safety Survey was developed to obtain an efficient index of perceived school safety. This survey provides a summary of risk factors and protective factors that can be useful in determining training and support needs related to school safety and violence prevention. It covers:

- Assessment of Risk Factors for School Safety and Violence
- Assessment of Response Plans for School Safety and Violence
- Your Comments on School Safety and Violence

School Safety Survey Australian adaptation (2006)

<http://www.learningplace.com.au/deliver/content.asp?pid=28246>

The Oregon Safety survey was been adapted for use in Queensland schools by Nehrmann, Dawson, and Swayn in 2006. The purpose of the School Safety Survey (SSS) is to assess risk factors and response plans for school safety and violence. The survey is designed to help school leaders evaluate:

- The extent to which the school provides a safe learning environment
- Training and support needs related to school safety and violence prevention
- Responses to violence and the effectiveness of protective measures.

Reviews of anti-violence programs and approaches

Gottfredson, D.C. (2001). *Schools and Delinquency*. NY: Cambridge University Press.

Hemphill, S.A. & Smith, R. (2010) *Preventing youth violence – what does and doesn't work and why*. Report prepared for the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth.

http://www.aracy.org.au/index.cfm?pageName=preventing_youth_violence#Paper

This report was released in October 2010, after this booklet was published. It reviews many programs which may be of interest to schools.

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