

Back-to School Part III: Busara: Practical Wisdom for Healthy Development

Written by BraVada Garrett-Akinsanya, Ph.D., LP
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Kids do not go to school just to learn reading, writing and arithmetic. They also go to school to learn how to be socially well by getting along with others. Just think of it. There are a lot of smart people who lose jobs simply because they do not know how to work well with others.

Just as an adult's vocational success may be impaired by their interpersonal relationships, so can a child's academic success be impaired by her social skills and interpersonal relationships. This article will briefly explore the challenges of normal child development and what parents and educators can do to assist youth in making appropriate gains in this area.

Erikson's Stages of Development. Many psychologists refer to the work of Erik Erikson whose model of school-aged child development proposed that they have different skills or tasks that must be gained as they grow up. While his model spans the lifespan from birth to death, our focus in this article will be on pre-school aged children (ages 3 to 5), school-aged children (ages 6-11), and adolescents (ages 12-18). In his model, Erikson believed that the main task of pre-school children was to learn how to assert control and power over their environment. Their primary challenge in order to successfully master this stage is to explore or "test out their limits." Success in this stage leads to a sense of purpose so that children who try to exert too much initiative and power experience disapproval, resulting in a sense of guilt. Thus, at this early stage children began to clarify their understanding of boundaries--where they stop and others begin. As you may guess, this lesson provides a necessary foundation for healthy interpersonal and socio-cultural relationships. As the child moves to school-age, her challenges shift from primarily exploring her environment to understanding how to be in school. Children at this age have a new-found need to cope with both social and academic demands. Their success leads to a sense of competence, while failure results in feelings of inferiority. Therefore, the ability to feel good about knowing how to do new and different things competes with their feelings of shame, incompetence and inferiority when they can not master new information or experiences. This stage often forms the foundations for future attempts at healthy risk-taking and the development of self-confidence in later life.

As children approach adolescents, we all know that their bodies began to change. Their perceptions of who they know themselves to be are challenged. Thus, a perfectly loving, thoughtful and respectful 9 year old girl suddenly appears to start talking back and getting inconsiderate and self-absorbed. The challenge at this stage shifts from focusing on mastery of school to mastering social relationships. Teens at this age have a need to develop a sense of self and personal identity. They are not grown, but they are not little children. They struggle with issues of identity versus role confusion. At this stage, Erikson concludes that success leads to an ability to stay true to themselves while failure leads to a weak sense of who they are based on confusion about their roles and who they should be. African-American youth and other youth

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of color are particularly impacted by peers, their environments and the development of a sense of belonging and fitting in. Depending on their home and school environments, African American youth may find it difficult to organize and claim their Black identities.

When it comes to violence prevention, educators have posed that children encounter four major stages during their developmental years that impact their attitudes about aggression. In each of these stages there are key violence-related tasks that must be addressed. The first stage is Early Childhood (ages 2-5). Early childhood is recognized as a key stage in the development of aggressive violent behaviors because during this stage, the development of self-regulation appears to be important. Caregiver-to-child ratios and the quality of these adult/child interactions are key environmental influences in the development of self-regulation. Adults model and teach children to learn pro-social skills such as sharing and playing fairly. Thus, two key tasks for children in this stage involve learning how to help and share with others. Conversely, another key task is learning not to give in to impulsive behaviors such as hitting, kicking, punching, pushing or spitting on others. Being able to modulate one's impulses is causally linked to other processes that lead to aggressive-violent behavior.

The second stage occurs in Middle Childhood (ages 6-11). It is during this period that key tasks include the development of children's normative beliefs about aggression and the development of children's interpersonal negotiation skills. Therefore, at this stage children begin to understand social beliefs about conditions when aggression occurs and how to avoid them. They learn lessons such as "Don't hit younger kids" and "Boys should never hit girls." They also learn that it is better to talk things out than to "box or fight." Key school factors that can influence development at the middle childhood stage are: interpersonal relations with peers and classmates, teachers' perceptions of children's aggression, and the probability of exposure to antisocial youth. If children are not perceived by teachers as being "bad, mean, dangerous or violent," they will most likely be treated with increased humanity and receive greater considerations when their misbehaviors do occur. Sadly, researchers have noted that African Americans are often seen as "less than human," by members from the majority culture, consequently assuming that Black youth (especially boys) are more "animalistic and brutish" in their behaviors that leads to more punitive outcomes for their misbehaviors.

The third stage of violence prevention occurs when youth are in Early Adolescence (ages 12-14). A key task of early adolescence is the development of a stable peer group. What determines whether a youngster does well during this phase or not is whether that stable peer group is primarily pro-social or antisocial in orientation. If your child get "in with the wrong crowd" it will significantly affect the probability of aggressive and violent behavior. Consequently, it is critical during this stage that parents and teachers avoid feeling like children are "old enough" to make their own decisions. Setting up opportunities for youth to engage in supervised, pro-social (positive) behaviors that involve trusted adults, parents and positive peer influences. It is not good enough to send your child to church, the library or the Girls and Boys club if you have not made arrangements for adult supervision and positive role-models (including you) to be present. During this phase at school, encouraging youth to join teams, activities or clubs that highlight their strengths and abilities will assist youth in their developing pro-social (versus gangster) relationships.

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The final stage of violence prevention involves Middle-to-Late Adolescence (ages 15-18). During this phase of adolescence, school demands require that young people learn to include the practice of changing classes with their homeroom class and being instructed in a smaller, more personalized classroom. Here, they learn that in the face of their new found independence, they have to learn to focus on setting boundaries in interpersonal relationships (stop talking and go to class). They also learn that they have to negotiate conflict with an increased number of people with whom they have more contact throughout the day. Another key task of this stage is the formation and consolidation of an identity, including a personal identity (e.g. Who am I and what do I want out of life? What does it mean to be a young man or woman? What do I want out of school?) and racial ethnic identity (e.g. What does it mean to be African American)?

As youth struggle through these stages, parents and teachers alike must learn to listen, support, nurture, correct and guide their youth. Kids must learn to trust they we have the ability to help them make good judgments. For example, the kids I see in my clinic often complain that they can not rely on the adults in their lives to keep them safe or to teach them how to make good choices. Let's say, for example, that a group of girls threaten to beat up your daughter. Instead of helping your daughter rely on adults to come to her aid, perhaps you are the type of parent that argues that "the fight was not fair," rather than arguing that the fight should not have occurred in the first place. Perhaps you are the type of teacher that would tell the girl to "just ignore" the threats or bullying. In any event, neither remedy is an acceptable way of keeping a student out of trouble. In other words, if we (as adults) do not know how to make very good decisions ourselves, it will be very difficult to point students in the right direction. Free programs like Project Murua: Pre-Meditated Parenting Boot Camp help parents guide their children in making better decisions when it comes to violence. For more information call: 612-302-3140 or 763-522-0100.

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