

Health Talk & You: Preventing youth violence

Written by Linda Bearinger
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As we learned from the shooting in Red Lake, MN, youth violence permeates U.S. communities of every description. The problem of violence infects our towns, neighborhoods and schools — every aspect of the daily lives of our children. What strategies can we use to help curb this problem?

A research project conducted by the Center for Adolescent Nursing at the University of Minnesota School of Nursing sheds light on how we can be most effective in promoting the healthy development of young people. The project involved Native American youth in six Minneapolis schools over four years — but the lessons learned may be instructive to all parents, schools and communities.

The research showed that three factors put young people at higher risk for violent behavior. The experience of being victimized can create the highest risk, but we also found that young people are two to three times more likely to engage in serious violent behavior when they regularly use alcohol and other drugs or have emotional distress leading to a suicide attempt. When all are present, the risks for violent behavior climb exponentially.

We made a hopeful discovery, too. We found that even when both substance use and suicide were part of their lives, youth involvement in violence could be greatly reduced — if the community established strong connections among schools, youth and families, and if it adopted strong positive expectations for youth behavior.

The reason for this lies in the science of human development. We know that all young people need at least one positive adult role model in their life, someone they feel they can confide in, particularly with sensitive and personal issues. Young people need to feel connected to the community — to schools, families, peers, mentors and other positive role models — in order to grow up healthy.

Schools are in an ideal position to nurture healthy youth development. In situations where young people lack support in other areas in their lives, this connection is absolutely critical and an important reason for us to make sure that schools have the resources to identify and respond quickly and appropriately to signs of student distress.

We have all seen youth violence unfold heartbreakingly in communities rich and poor, urban, suburban and rural. The circumstances may vary, but the underlying cause—disconnectedness and alienation—are the same. In the case of the urban American Indian youth we worked with, their prospects are affected by a number of factors, including their health and their socioeconomic situations.

By supporting our schools and communities, programs can be implemented that have a positive impact on young people. The future of our communities depends on the investment in young people.

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