School Safety #3:
Creating Genuine Safety in American Schools

The first article, "How Safe are American Schools?" explored our recent history of violence in American schools. It concluded that while school safety is a very real issue, the two primary ways American schools have responded -- by installing new physical security measures and by enacting rigid zero-tolerance discipline policies -- have proven to have limited effectiveness. The second article, "Bullying in American Schools," explored bullying as a threat to the physical safety and emotionally security all students deserve. Bullying can be physical or verbal, relational or cyber, but it is always intentional and repeated harm-doing, committed on a target with less verbal, physical or social power. Over time, it has tremendous negative impact not only on victims, but on bystanders and on the bullies themselves.

This final article will describe five elements of school-based programming which have proven to be successful in creating safe, positive, and bully-free school environments.

For more information about this topic, visit www.TACT2.com or contact Dr. Steve Parese at SBParese@aol.com.

APA Response

The greatest threat to the sense of safety and security necessary for effective learning is the culture of fear created when schools and teachers ignore daily physical intimidation, regular verbal derogation, deliberate social rejection, and dehumanizing cyber-assaults, all injustices visited upon the most vulnerable of our students. These everyday acts of abuse and neglect require a systemic preventive approach at the school, classroom, and individual level.

In the mid-1990's, the American Psychological Association released two important volumes, *Violence and Youth: Psychology's Response*[1] and *Reason to Hope: A Psychosocial Perspective on Violence and Youth.*[2] The latter described a three-tiered approach to adolescent violence prevention. The APA's recommendations have been supported by 20 years of empirical research, and are the foundation of the U.S. Department of Education's efforts toward creating safe schools.

These three levels of interventions include:

Primary strategies targeting all students (e.g., bullying prevention programs, social emotional learning, conflict resolution classes).

Secondary strategies targeting at-risk students (e.g., anger management classes, mentoring programs, academic remediation).

Tertiary strategies targeting students already involved with serious problems (e.g., restorative justice, individual therapy).

Effective school safety programs

A substantial body of literature has revealed that the most effective school safety and anti-bullying programs use a whole-school approach consisting of five key components, incorporating many of the APA recommendations.[3]

Safe Schools Element #1:
Assess Safety and Security Risks
To ensure safety and security, school leaders must first gather information to assess risks. Among other questions, we should ask:
a. Which behaviors or threats should be taken as serious safety and security concerns?
Some distracting or disruptive behavior problems are developmentally normal at various ages, and can be tolerated or redirected without the need for serious intervention plans. The second grader who threatens "I'm gonna nuke this school!" certainly does not have the intent or means to

commit such an act; giving him serious consequences would be an overreaction. On the other hand, a different dynamic exists when a high school student with known gang affiliations threatens "I'm gonna bust a cap in your @$$ after school." Knowing students' backgrounds and histories allows an administrative team to make quick and accurate assessments of actual danger, then respond accordingly.

b. When/where are the greatest risks to security? When/where does unsafe or unkind behavior take place? Research suggests that the majority of fights and bullying takes place in hallways between classes, in cafeterias, in bathrooms, on playgrounds or parking lots, or on school buses -- places where fewer staff are present and students are poorly supervised. Planning for an increased staff presence during these times and places may significantly reduce harmful behavior.

Planning for increased staff presence during high-risk times and places may significantly reduce harmful behavior.

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c. Which students (and perhaps staff) are the greatest perpetrators of physical and emotional bullying? What situations or people seem to provoke this behavior? There is no "typical bully" profile, but experts observe that many bullies are easily frustrated and have poor impulse control, are often egocentric, non-empathetic and intolerant of others, and are frequently motivated by both popularity and power. [4] Being especially attentive to the precursors of bullying and the warning signs of crisis will help staff intervene earlier. Identifying the greatest perpetrators of bullying will allow schools to plan not only discipline but also remedial interventions.

d. Who are the most common victims of physical and emotional bullying? Bullying victims are often physically and socially different from their peers, including students from stereotyped religious and ethnic groups; those whose sexual identities are (or appear to be) GBLTQ; students with special education needs, academic gifts, and/or social skills deficits needs; and loners or unpopular youth. [4]

Keeping a special eye on these students allows staff to not only protect them from on-going bullying, but to provide them with proactive skill-building opportunities that may ultimately reduce their likelihood of being targeted.

Safe Schools Element #2:
Establish School-Wide Expectations
To create a school culture which ensures safety and security, educators and students must agree on clear, positive expectations of acceptable behavior, with a mutual understanding of the consequences of unacceptable behavior.

a. The first component is clear, positively stated expectations. The school-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) [5] approach has proven highly effective in helping schools define, teach, and reinforce socially-appropriate behaviors which reduce bullying. The major components of PBIS include: (1)Identifying expected behaviors, (2)Actively teaching those behaviors, (3) Praising appropriate behavior, privately or publicly, and (4) Measuring outcomes to determine successes and overcome barriers.

The Therapeutic Aggression Control Techniques (TACT2) [6] and Therapeutic Behavior Management for Schools (TBM) [7] training programs suggest that such expectations be grounded in terms of school values. For example: "Every child deserves to be able to walk around without fear of being bullied, so we will not tolerate harmful bullying or teasing." (Value: Physical and emotional safety, freedom from fear).

When students ultimately leave our schools, they will forget our rules, but we hope they will remember our values.

b. The second component is providing firm, fair consistent consequences for deliberate behavior problems. Our goal in using consequences is not simply to punish students, but to create an impression upon them which will encourage better decision-making in the future. But if consequences seem like threats, they can often lead to increased resistance and resentment.

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Therefore, it is essential that consequences be as reasonable and as logical as possible. Logical consequences are directly tied to specific misbehaviors, and so they make more sense to the student than a punitive consequence. For example: the student who leaves a mess in the lunch room must return to clean it up; the one who destroys another student's property must pay to replace it. Schools may use in-school suspension to deal with seriously disruptive behavior, but could make such a consequence more logical by requiring students to complete academic work, crisis counseling, and/or restitution projects while there.

Safe Schools Element #3:
Train Staff in Behavior & Crisis Management
Staff who are in direct contact with students on a daily basis play a vital role in school safety. Classroom teachers, instructional aides, guidance counselors, social workers, security staff, and bus drivers provide the first line of intervention when problems occur, so they must have strong skills in threat assessment, behavior management, and crisis de-escalation. The TACT2[6] and TBM[7] programs teach staff:

a. Threat Assessment Skills: Staff must be trained to accurately assess and calmly respond to potentially dangerous situations.   Effective staff learn to observe the setting, the youth involved, the availability of weapons, the number and strengths of staff, then ask: "Is this situation immediately dangerous, or not?"

Specific questions to consider might include:
- How truly dangerous is the situation? E.g., is this an idle threat? is there clear intent to harm? are weapons readily available?
- How large and/or irrational is the student? Are others involved as well?
- What do I know about his/her history of violence or current circumstances?
- Are other students or staff in danger, or adding stress?
- Is physical intervention needed for protection, or can this still be talked down?
- Do I have the strength and skills to safely restrain this youth in this setting without causing additional harm? Should I wait for back-up?

Depending on the answers to these questions, staff might choose one of four options:
1. *Redirection* by calmly, clearly, and firmly requesting a safer behavior.

2. *Removal* of the aggressor, target, antagonist, and/or audience.

3. *Restriction* to a safer setting or from a dangerous one.

4. *Restraint*, using the minimum force necessary, if trained and prepared to do so.

b. Behavior Management Skills: To be effective in responding to non-dangerous situations, staff must have strong behavior management skills, the ability to judiciously use rules and consequences to redirect minor deliberate problems. Skilled staff can intervene early enough to keep minor issues from turning into major disruptions, unsafe incidents, or intense power struggles.

Deliberate problems are defined as intentional actions which meet the student's social needs, but at the expense of others and usually in violation of the rules. Most teasing, taunting, and ridicule is deliberate, as is much of physical intimidation or bullying. Behaviors such as these often respond well to friendly reminders, fair warnings, or firm applications of pre-established consequences.

c. Crisis De-escalation Skills: Some problems involving misbehaving students are not deliberate, but emotional instead. An emotional crisis is defined as an overreaction to a stressful problem or misperception, usually characterized by irrational thinking. Emotional misbehaviors are usually fueled by underlying issues, such as upsetting situations still on a student's mind, or trauma or abuse issues which have been triggered. Students dealing with serious problems at home (such as abuse or neglect), or at school (such as physical bullying or social rejection) often become overwhelmed by stress and may eventually act out against rules and staff. Youth under the influence of drugs, alcohol or extreme stress may be highly irrational, so the enforcement of strict rules and consequences is often ineffective.

In fact, warnings of punishment generally escalate emotional issues into major crises, so in addition to behavior management skills, truly effective staff must have strong de-escalation, active listening and problem-solving skills. These skills not only keep emotional situations from becoming unsafe, but allow staff to build strong relationships with students who are often in desperate need of trustworthy adults in their lives.

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Safe Schools Element #4:
Create Opportunities for Social Emotional Learning

A safe and effective learning environment is easier to establish and maintain when the entire student body is competent in social emotional skills such as self-awareness, emotional self-management, social awareness, relationship-building, and responsible decision-making. These skills strengthen positive bonds between peers, increasing resiliency to resist bullying. They improve empathy and communication skills, allowing outsiders to become friends. They teach and reinforce the value of self-control and assertiveness, making bullying less acceptable and kindness more desirable, turning by-standers into up-standers. They offer ways to fit in better and get along with others, skills especially important to frequent victims of bullying.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning[8] has led a great deal of research on the effectiveness of using a social-emotional learning framework. The Second Step [9] violence and bullying prevention programs have had a long history of success in teaching all students prosocial skills through modeling, role playing, and reinforcement. Other successful skills-based cognitive behavioral programs (more often used directly with challenging adolescents include the Aggression Replacement Training program [10] and the EQUIP program, [11] both of which not only teach interpersonal skills, but challenge the negative mindsets used to justify harmful behavior such as bullying.

Safe Schools Element #5:
Provide Individual interventions for Bullies and Targets

Finally, safe schools are invested in the long-term well-being of their students, and recognize that physically and emotionally unsafe behavior is often part of a deeper set of problems. These issues require more than behavior management or on the spot crisis intervention, so effective schools provide individualized interventions for chronic bullies or targets of bullying.

Bullying victims often struggle with low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression, often leading to chronic tardiness and absences, poorer grades, higher drop out rates, increasing criminal behavior, escalating drug and alcohol use, and self-destructive behaviors such as self-harm and suicide. [12, 13] School bullies often have delinquency and criminality issues in the community as well as school, and they also show higher rates of depression and peer rejection over time. [14] Both bullies and their targets can benefit from conflict-resolution training, empathy building, assertiveness skills and individual counseling.

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Summary

Since the tragedies at Columbine High School in 1999 and Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012, the prospect of a school shooting has terrified parents, children, educators, and administrators. As a result, many schools have invested in greater physical security measures to protect children inside their buildings (with some success) and implemented rigid zero-tolerance discipline policies to punish or remove disruptive students (with no positive impact).

The greatest threat to safety and security is not a random shooter, but the bullying, humiliation, degradation, and social rejection experienced by 13 million school children each year, and all but ignored by many school personnel. The impact of regular bullying is staggering, and includes not only low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression, but chronic tardiness and absences, poorer grades, higher drop out rates, increasing criminal behavior, escalating drug and alcohol use, and self-destructive behaviors such as self-harm and suicide.

A 2006 APA Task Force noted that "despite the removal of large numbers of purported troublemakers, zero tolerance policies have still not guaranteed safe school climates that ensure school learning." [15]

However, an overwhelming body of research has supported the effectiveness of a multi-tier preventive approach to school safety.   This approach first identifies high-risk times, areas, and individuals, then establishes clear school-wide guidelines for physical and emotional safety. Third, teachers are provided with advanced training in threat assessment, behavior management, relationship-building, so that crises can be skillfully de-escalated. Next, all students are offered training in social-emotional skills needed to respond assertively rather than aggressively to difficult situations. Finally, students who have had or are targets of serious behavior problems are offered individual interventions to manage issues and recover from emotional wounds.

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