Introduction

Violence in American K-12 schools is a major issue in the 21st century for everyone. Obviously, it is an issue for students and their families, but it is also impacts teachers, staff, and administrators. Given the types of violent events spilling over into the surrounding areas of school grounds, the general public is at risk as well. This is not to state that school violence is at an epidemic level in the United States, but the issues of bullying, abuse, and neglect of children may very well be.

So what is causing all of these issues?

There are many factors which contribute to the onset of school violence and disturbance in schools. While debatable, there does seem to be a growing number of youth in America with very violent attitudes towards the world and each other. There are many families who have lifestyles and standards of living that does not allow them to be as involved in their children’s lives or appropriately supervise them. Early negligence and abuse sets many children on an inevitable track of depression and lack of bonding to the world. So many become overly reserved and introverted and may become victims of bullies or other abusers.

Depression and tension contribute greatly towards developing a violent attitude as well. So many children in American are given a great deal of responsibility, but no power to control their own lives. Children in the 21st century are also facing issues that past generations could never have imagined having to be faced.

Historically, the following list has been used to summarize the characteristics of juveniles who commit violent acts in general and more specifically in and around schools:

- A history of uncontrolled anger;
- Uses abuse language, curses, and name-calling;
- Habitually threatens others when angry;
- Has brought a weapon to school;
- Has history of serious disciplinary problems;
- Has history of substance abuse;
- On the fringe of normal peer group with very few friends;
- Preoccupied with deadly weapons and/or devices;
- Has history of truancy, suspension, or expulsion;
- Displays cruelty to animals and people;
- Has little or no supervision/support from parents/adults;
- Has been a witness or victim of abuse and /or neglect at home;
- Has been bullied or is a bully;
Blames other for his or her problems;
- Prefers entertainment with violent themes and acts;
- Prefers reading materials with violent themes, rituals and abuse;
- Displays or depicts anger, frustration and dark subject in school essays and projects;
- Involved with a gang, or anti-social group on fringes of peer group;
- Is often depressed, with significant mood swings;
- Has threatened or attempted suicide.

Although, there is empirical research that has supported the idea that the number of these characteristics present in a juvenile’s life is a more accurate outcome predictor of violent behavior than the type of characteristic present. The use of lists will never replace the intimate personal contact with students and children on a one on one basis.

Unfortunately, there are so many factors that increase the risk of violence in schools. Moreover, it seems as if they simply cannot be changed in order to increase the quality of a child’s life. In schools there is overcrowding in classrooms, lack of caring but firm discipline, student alienation, multi-cultural insensitivity, rejection of at-risk students by teachers and peers, and even anger and resentment among students toward school routines & policies.

It seems so easy to so many when they ask why we cannot have:

- Positive school atmosphere?
- Clear and high performance expectations?
- Inclusive values and practices?
- Strong student bonding to the school?
- High levels of student participation and parent involvement?
- Opportunities to acquire skills and develop socially?

There are also so many internal (or personal) characteristics of children which put them at risk for committing violent acts in schools. So many children have issues with intelligence levels, physical health, mental health, substance abuse, criminal tendencies or attitudes, and even their personality in general. This combined with family characteristics as a risk factor such as economic factors, violence/abuse in home, lack of a supportive parent/child relationship, and criminal activity with the family.

The goal of any prevention and intervention strategy is of course to stop school violence from occurring in the first place. Most would argue that there are at least four levels at which violence-prevention programs can have a positive impact. The first is the level of society in general. Society-level prevention strategies aim to change social and cultural conditions in order to reduce violence regardless of where the violence occurs. Secondly, there are efforts at the school community level. This level of intervention is designed to modify the school characteristics that are associated with violence to potentially of violence and incivility. There is also the family level. There are many efforts which are aimed at improving family relationships in general. Finally there are those efforts which are at the individual level. These programs which are aimed at students who exhibit aggression and violent behaviors or are at risk for engaging in such behaviors.
Introduction

A major factor when trying to determine possible solution efforts is that research on what works is sparse. Coordinated family and community efforts seem most promising in all areas. Meaningful activities for youth combined with increased parental contact and participation is also very effective. Treating juveniles as individuals and increasing communication between children and adults is another area of great hope and promise.

It is hoped with this work that those in positions to make changes in policies that impact, and even control, the lives of young people in the K-12 schools across the United States will look beyond the old beliefs and stereotypes. Instead of seeking scapegoats, seek common sense strategies which take into consideration potential impact on all factions of a school ~ students, teachers, staff, and administrators.