

School Safety Problems and Trends

Safe schools don't just happen. Understanding the roots of aggression can help eliminate violence in schools.

DARE Officers — Keeping Schools Safe

When D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) was first introduced into the schools in 1983 in Los Angeles, California, the main focus was the delivery of a comprehensive 17-week curricula to students. Since then, the D.A.R.E. program has grown to offer many types of community-based policing services in schools.

D.A.R.E. is a collaborative program in which local law enforcement and schools join together to educate students about the personal and social consequences of substance abuse and violence. The curriculum is designed to be delivered sequentially from kindergarten through twelfth grade.

One of the most significant attributes of the D.A.R.E. program is that it is taught by law enforcement officers who have witnessed first hand the effects of drugs and violence. In an effort to update the curricula being taught in schools, the D.A.R.E. program has taken a new direction by providing each officer with training on becoming a D.A.R.E. School Resource Officer. In this capacity, the officer assists the local school districts in not

By Dale Yeager

School Safety has become a significant part of education over the past ten years in America. Until a rash of school shootings in the mid 1990s, suburban and rural school districts placed little emphasis on safety procedures and training. School safety was seen as an urban problem.

After the Columbine shooting, however, schools began to ask questions about their own vulnerability to violence. National conferences and local school board meetings buzzed with demands for change in school safety. Training, assessments and policy development became the norm.

The attacks on September 11 doubled the concern. School safety became an even greater priority. Because schools and children were affected by the attacks in New York, Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C., money from public sources grew and more attention was given to security concerns by local school districts.

In early 2003, a change occurred. School safety was placed on the back burner while schools focused on meeting the demands of the No Child Left Behind Act. School districts have diverted funding, training time and staff focus to meeting the educational mandates, not the safety mandates, of NCLB.

But the issues of school safety continue to grow. Old issues like student-to-student aggression and new problems such as sexual aggression threaten the safe management of schools. This article is intended to provide current information on school safety problems and trends as they relate to the work of school board members. It is based on information from the report, *The State of School Safety in American Schools*, which was written by the SERAPH research team for key members of Congress. The report consists of two sources of data—research studies on school safety and child-on-child aggression, and data collected by SERAPH. The collected data included internal assessments of school policies and their effectiveness on safety, and interviews with more than 1,200 teachers, 320 administrators, and 925 law enforcement professionals in rural, suburban and urban school districts.

Young Children and Aggression Educators interviewed unanimously agreed that aggression and violence by young children is on the rise. This issue was predicted many years ago by experts in the criminal psychology field. A 1990 study by Dr. Susan Campbell found that 67 percent of 6-year-olds with significant behavior problems met the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders III criteria for an externalizing personality disorder by the age of 9. A 1993 study by Dr. R. Loeber found that children who became violent

only keeping schools drug and violence free, but also safe. Schools today are facing many more challenges. Unfortunately safety has become the number one concern.

The mere presence of a D.A.R.E. officer in a school building does not mean that the particular school is dangerous. Quite the opposite is true. The presence of an officer means that the local community is taking an aggressive and affirmative approach to securing schools and keeping them safe.

D.A.R.E. officers play a major role assisting school districts in making informed decisions about identifying at-risk students, controlling bullying, monitoring gang activity, and understanding and evaluating security features within the school facility.

A majority of districts in New Jersey have D.A.R.E. officers in their schools. The program has evolved through grassroots efforts and has become a model in the state. One individual or one entity cannot control the safety in our schools; a team effort is needed. With law enforcement officials, school board members, municipal leaders, parents, and educators working together, we can ensure the safety of our youth.

While we have all heard the horrific news stories that have surfaced over the years, it is more important to consider what you have not heard. Over the years, more than 2,000 D.A.

could be identified with almost 50 percent reliability as early as age 7.

A report by *USA TODAY* titled, *School Violence Hits Lower Grades*, details death threats, biting, punching and kicking by children toward teachers.

Richard Barbacane, who chairs disciplinary hearings for the Lancaster, Pennsylvania School District, says more children are arriving at school from stressed, single-parent homes. He also suspects that many of these children have medical problems, such as fetal alcohol syndrome. "Children now are surviving pregnancies and births that ten years ago weren't possible, and they're coming to school with minimal brain dysfunction and growing needs," said Barbacane. "We're just now seeing these children in our schools."

School violence happens on all grade levels and it is important that district staff have proper training on how to identify and manage aggressive children. Social workers, counselors, teachers and principals need a more accurate scientific understanding of how aggression increases in children and how this relates to family dynamics and the management of school environments.

This training should focus on scientific research from credible sources, not theoretical ideology. Meetings with lead teachers, principals and school board members should be held to discuss the aggressive child interaction philosophies used in the district. This meeting should require participants to explain the effectiveness of the current procedures and philosophies.

Parenting and Aggression According to psychologist, Dr. G.R. Patterson, "Parenting plays a critical role in the development process of children. Early discipline failures are a primary causal factor in the development of conduct problems. Harsh discipline, low supervision, and lack of parental involvement add to the development of aggressive children."

When the SERAPH team surveyed educators about parents, they identified emotionally immature parenting as the most crucial problem they face. These parents are detached from their children academically and developmentally. Emotionally immature parents will also defend their child's bad behavior to the point of denying them counseling for severe learning or emotional problems.

But these parents also pose another threat to school safety. They are in many cases violent toward school personnel. According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention at the Department of Justice, each year 320,000 teachers are victims of violent crimes in schools throughout the U.S. Of this number, 70 percent are in suburban and rural schools, and most assaults are by parents, not students.

Dr. Laurence Steinberg, a professor of psychology at Temple University and the director of the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice, says parents are less likely now to side with school officials. "I think in the past the threat of getting in touch with a kid's parents was often enough to get a kid to start behaving. Now, kids feel parents will fight on their behalf," said Steinberg.

R.E. officers in New Jersey have worked hard to provide the best possible program statewide. Unfortunately, we only hear about the time a student moves in the wrong direction. D.A.R.E. is at the forefront of education against drug abuse and violence, but our success is contingent upon our coming together as a state and as a community to keep our schools safe and drug and violence free.

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A recent study by the University of Chicago found that many people do not believe a person reaches adulthood until the age of 26. The study conducted by Tom W. Smith, a nationally recognized expert in survey research, found that people believe that finishing school, getting a full-time job and raising a family qualifies someone as an adult. Many child experts have identified delayed adolescence as a major factor in developmental issues in young adults. This extended adolescence philosophy by many parents creates serious behavioral problems in high school children because of its lack of accountability for personal conduct.

Family structures can also have an effect on childhood behavior. Numerous studies over the past two years have found that children growing up in single parent homes are twice as likely to have serious psychiatric illnesses, addictions and aggression as their counterparts.

An extensive 2003 survey of parents by the nonprofit research organization, Public Agenda, found that critical issues such as good money management, honesty and manners were not being taught to children. By their own admission, only 38 percent of parents in the survey admitted to teaching their children critical life skills and morality.

Discipline and violence problems in schools can be directly traced back to parenting problems in our society. Parents must be held accountable for their actions if educators are to teach effectively in a safe environment. The use of parental responsibility statements (a list of rules given to parents at the beginning of the school year, which outline their responsibilities), school resource officers, and truancy laws have been shown to effectively change immature behavior in parents and aggressive behavior in their children.

Health Issues and School Safety Over the past ten years, schools across America have found themselves becoming de facto social services agencies. Inadequate city and county social services agencies have placed schools in a precarious situation in their effort to curb aggression and assist troubled youth. One of the primary areas where this has become a serious problem is with health-related issues.

Sleep and Diet The SERAPH research on school aggression has shown that most aggression by 12- through 18-year-olds occurs in the early morning hours of the school day and aggression by 5- through 11-year-olds occurs mid- to late afternoon. Medical research points to two factors that influence this aggression —sleep deprivation and low blood sugar.

The National Institutes of Health has determined that teens need nine and a half hours of sleep per night to function properly. Younger children also need an average of seven hours of sleep per evening.

Food consumption during the day is also a critical factor. Again NIH points to sugar and caffeine as major factors in the lowering of blood sugar in children and teens. When blood sugar drops, the body reacts with adrenaline to power up the endocrine system. This rush of hormones could create low-level

aggression.

Exercise programs and reminders to students and parents about sleep discipline are crucial in the management of a safe school. School counselors must make sleep discipline a part of the discussions with parents who have children with academic performance problems and absenteeism / lateness issues. Lastly, a plan of action should be designed to provide extra coverage by hall monitors or security personnel who can be made aware of these factors so that there is proper coverage during these critical times of the day.

Sexually Transmitted Diseases Syphilis, gonorrhea, human papillomavirus (HPV) and chlamydia have become a daily nightmare for school health workers. In our work with over 7,400 middle and high schools nationwide, we have found that all have reported increased cases of these diseases among their female and male populations.

For several decades the numbers of these diseases in children under the age of 17 were nominal. Beginning in the late 1990s that situation changed. Today, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, sexually transmitted diseases have grown to epidemic levels among teenage males and females. The dramatic increase can be linked to specific behaviors by teenagers, including multiple sex partners, the popularity of oral sex among middle school children, and the increase of students involved in same sex relationships.

A study by the University of Texas Health Science Center concluded that teenage females were nearly three times as likely to have chlamydia as males. A recent study in the state of Mississippi in tandem with the CDC found that HIV-infected teens had initiated sex at a younger age than their uninfected counterparts and the young women infected reported having had sexual partners much older than themselves, at least 10 years older.

All school districts have problems related to sexual aggression. It is imperative that school staff be trained to understand sexual issues and adolescents. It is also important that administrators and department directors be trained to understand how sexual aggression by students and adults affects the management of a safe school. School officials must be alert to dating relationships that may involve statutory rape and must notify law enforcement officials.

Piercing and Tattoos Over the past five years, piercing and tattooing have become commonplace among American youth. Influenced by motorcycle gangs, the drug culture, and alternative lifestyles, young people have created a craze. What is the down side to this phenomenon? Research by pediatrician Dr. Timothy Roberts for the Infectious Diseases Society of America found that:

- Serious infections and permanent disfiguration are increasing with the piercing craze.
- Females with tattoos have higher rates of chlamydia.

- Females with body piercing were about two and a half times more likely to have had sex, smoked, used marijuana and skipped school.
- Boys with piercing were five times more likely to have skipped school in the past year and had high risks for smoking and drinking.

Schools must address these issues as safety concerns for the students who are involved in this behavior and the students they interact with each day. Dress codes should address the exposing of tattoos and the wearing of piercings outside of the ear area, and parents should be told about the health and emotional risks of piercings and tattoos.

Dress Codes Dress codes have always been an issue of contention between schools and parents. Schools seek to have a disciplined learning environment, which can be difficult if students are wearing inappropriate clothing that distracts from the business at hand.

Dress codes create a professional attitude among students and staff. Sloppy or distracting clothing creates a casual atmosphere, which does not aid in the management of a disciplined school. Revealing attire on the other hand can create the potential for sexual harassment of females or outright assault. A study by Dr. Nicholas Rizzo, adjunct clinical instructor of medicine at Midwestern University Medical School in Downers Grove, Illinois, supports the belief that uniforms are the best way to resolve this potential threat. In 1991, 1998 and 2000, Rizzo surveyed psychiatrists who treat male sexual offenders. The studies do not blame the victims for being assaulted, but point to the thought processes of male sex offenders, many of whom are in their teens.

- Female attire that appears to the male to invite direct attention tends to increase the risk of sex crimes.
- A male may interpret sexually teasing attire as uncaring and unfair, subjecting him to temptation, while rejecting him. This may result in thoughts of revenge against the female who brought on the distress and sometimes expand to hostility against females in general.

Dress codes properly designed and aggressively enforced do reduce these problems, but can create a management nightmare for principals.

Sexism and School Safety Male aggression has been the focus of most of the anti-bullying programs and school safety conferences throughout the U.S., even though female aggression has been a growing problem in America's schools for more than ten years, according to studies and statistics gathered by various agencies within the U.S. Department of Justice. The question is, why?

A political attitude has existed for many years among the national educational organizations, which has focused on correcting the inadequacies of education and extracurricular activities for girls. This focus has placed girls in the victim role and boys in the predator role; however, this is not supported by existing

research or crime statistics.

In studying female aggression, Dr. Wendy Craig, associate professor in the Department of Psychology at Queen's University in Canada, found that girls are just as aggressive as boys. Unlike male aggression, which is physical, female social aggression is covert and difficult to detect. "Girl aggression tends to be social in nature—that is, emotionally rejecting, dismissive and verbally abusive," said Craig. "This kind of aggression has as many negative consequences as physical aggression. The victims of social aggression become anxious, depressed, fearful, and have a lower self-concept. The implication is that, as future parents, socially aggressive females have the potential to inflict great harm, which can go undetected by society."

Staff members must be trained to understand how sexism can affect school safety. This training should include the development of personnel assessment skills to uncover bias, which affects policy development and implementation. Policies and discipline must be deliberately balanced when dealing with aggression by males and females.

Conclusion Being a school board member today is demanding. Social issues like violence and aggression create hurdles for the safe management of a school environment. But these issues can be predicted, understood and reduced with the correct information, training and management. A safe school does not happen in a bubble; it requires the interaction of school staff and the community at large. SL

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