



## Oklahoma School Psychological Association Position Statement: School Violence

The Oklahoma School Psychological Association (OSPA) vigorously promotes and supports efforts to rid America's schools of the destructive influence of violence in all of its forms. OSPA believes that schools must continue to increase levels of safety and security that promote youth wellness and resilience.

Between 1992–93 and 2002–03, school districts have significantly reduced violence as demonstrated by a 50% reduction of school-associated homicides and a 53% reduction of student violent crime victimization on school campuses (DeVoe, Peter, Noonan, Snyder, & Baum, 2005). These are encouraging trends associated with vigorous, coordinated efforts by schools and communities to reduce school violence, as evidenced by the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative (Furlong, Paige, & Osher, 2003). Despite this welcome reduction in school violence, and even though schools have been and continue to be one of the safest places for children to be, violence that occurs in schools challenges assumptions that society holds about the role of schools. When parents leave their daughters and sons at the schoolhouse door each day, they trust that their children will be cared for and safe. They believe that schools will minimize exposure to all sources of harm, including school shootings, chronic bullying, name-calling, sexual harassment, or social exclusion. Violence that occurs at school violates trust and diminishes schools' efforts to educate all students. In fact, research clearly shows that victims of school violence are at increased risk of social, emotional, and academic problems (Jimerson & Furlong, 2006).

OSPA recognizes that all forms of violence at school, from chronic bullying to relational aggression, threaten the physical, psychological, and emotional well-being of students and school staff (Osher, Dwyer, & Jackson, 2003). Furthermore, between 1998 and 2003, 14 of every 1,000 teachers themselves reported being the victims of violent crimes (DeVoe et al., 2005). Schools must strive to ensure that no harm comes to anyone on school campuses at any time. To achieve this goal, efforts need to be made to eliminate obvious aggressive and illegal acts. Other behaviors are not illegal—such as mean-spirited teasing—but may nevertheless damage students' development and negatively affect school climate.

OSPA further recognizes that teachers and other educators, including school psychologists, have the potential to be resources for children and youth who experience

multiple, chronic risk factors in their lives. The relationships that these children form with adults in the school setting can help them cope with challenges and avoid violence perpetration, victimization, or both. Positive school engagement promotes and enhances school violence prevention efforts (Blum & Libbey, 2004; Greenberg et al., 2003).

## Role Of The School Psychologist

OSPA encourages school psychologists' to take a leadership role in developing comprehensive approaches to violence reduction and crisis response in schools. School psychologists are trained to:

- Participate with the entire school staff in developing and implementing positive behavioral interventions that promote students' social-emotional development and that use discipline-related incidents as potential learning opportunities
- Implement prevention and intervention programs that reduce aggressive behaviors among youths
- Consult with school staff in implementing social skills programs and other programs that teach peaceful ways to resolve conflicts
- Provide group process and consultation to help schools form effective safety and crisis planning teams
- Participate in program evaluation and the assessment of violence, safety, and crisis needs at the school and district levels
- Counsel victims of violence in all its forms: physical, psychological, and social isolation • Participate in and facilitate evidence-based procedures to respond to targeted threats of violence
- Help communities prepare for responses to crises spawned by violence
- Conduct informative socioemotional assessments of students involved with aggressive behavior at school

These are essential components of a comprehensive school safety plan. To ensure that school psychologists are well prepared to provide leadership in school violence prevention, NASP supports efforts to provide school psychologists with the requisite knowledge and skills to design and implement violence prevention and school crisis preparation programs that are supported by rigorous empirical research (Brock, Lazarus, & Jimerson, 2002; Cornell & Sheras, 2005). These knowledge and skills are specified in NASP's training standards, and NASP advocates for their inclusion in training and practice standards of all state credentialing bodies.

## Creating Safe Schools

Efforts to reduce school violence can be successful when they use multiple strategies selected to be appropriate for each school's needs (Derzon, 2006; Larson, Smith, &

Furlong, 2002; Osher et al., 2003). These efforts should include the following elements: Creating school–community safety partnerships. No school district or individual school can implement a comprehensive, multitiered, school violence prevention program without engaging in a systematic planning process to understand its school safety problems and opportunities. School psychologists help schools engage in such systematic team building and problem identification process.

OSPA further recommends that these plans be based on objective data derived at the school level and not based on regional or state databases. Establishing comprehensive school crisis response plans. The importance of meeting the needs of victims appears self-evident. However, research shows that many schools respond to antisocial and aggressive behaviors through disciplinary action against the perpetrators, while neglecting to provide appropriate support and counseling for victims. Children who have been the victims of school violence perceive schools as failing to protect them, and as a result they may feel threatened, unsafe, and disengaged while at school. These children display many characteristics common to individuals with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, including functional impairments such as impaired learning and symptoms of traumatic stress such as reexperiencing the event, emotional numbing, and hyperarousal. OSPA strongly supports targeted counseling and recovery interventions for the victims of school violence.

Enhancing classroom climate, school climate, and promoting positive school discipline and support. Some programs do not focus directly on specific violent behaviors, but alter the conditions that are conducive to violent acts. Individualized instruction and remedial support can reduce academic failure and frustration. Programs to decrease racism and other forms of intolerance also increase appreciation of diversity and improve trust within the school community. Such programs can also improve relationships among and between students and staff to create a climate of acceptance and understanding. In particular, schools should strive to ensure that all students have caring adult connections at school. Although school violence may engender a desire to discipline the aggressors harshly, OSPA encourages balanced disciplinary responses with efforts to promote cooperation, positive social skills, and peaceful means of resolving conflicts rather than increasing campus security and punishing students who have violated school rules.

Using nonstigmatizing school violence prevention programs. Attention to early behavioral and emotional distress signals makes it possible to provide prevention and support services early in students' school careers and prior to the need for extreme disciplinary response. NASP does not support assessment procedures that claim to identify students who are at risk of committing acts of violence. These profiles have the

potential for high false identification rates. Many students have emotional or behavioral difficulties, but relatively few commit serious violent acts; conversely, some of those who commit violent acts have no such history. Instead, schools must respond to all threats that students make on school campuses. The vast majority of these threats are not substantial, but they provide opportunities to explore, better understand, and respond to special needs of the students making the threat and the students being threatened. Such targeted threat response efforts at school should be sensitive to students' developmental levels and based on positive, research-validated procedures such as solution-focused approaches that include the application of behavior management principles and strategies.

## Promoting Antiviolence Initiatives That Include Prevention Programs For All Students.

OSPA advocates the use of a multilevel model of school violence prevention such as discussed in the federal document, Safe, Supportive, and Successful Schools: Step by Step (Osher et al., 2003). At the most general level, interventions include school-wide violence prevention programs. These activities encourage the positive emotional development of students and teach them to use nonviolent means to resolve their personal conflicts. Peacemaking, peer mediation, and conflict resolution programs are natural bridges between interventions that focus on individual change and those seeking to change the ecology of the school.

Providing support for students exhibiting early warning signs of disruptive behavior. Not all students respond to school-wide programs; therefore, violence prevention efforts also must target students who have shown early evidence of aggressive behavior at school. As a result of public demands for "zero-tolerance" programs, schools often focus disciplinary actions on the perpetrators of aggression. Policies that focus only on catching and punishing violent behaviors fall far short of the goal of creating a safe school environment. NASP supports schools efforts to thoughtfully consider the context in which these threats occur, as described in Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence (Cornell & Sheras, 2005).

Intervening with students who experience significant school behavioral adjustment problems. Schools must also modify the behavior of students who have engaged in violent behavior. OSPA strongly supports systematic efforts to implement strategies that teach social skills and self-control to violent children and youth. In addition, the complex problems faced by many of these students require the coordination of interventions across school and community agencies, including cooperative agreements with community mental health, juvenile probation, child welfare services, alcohol and drug treatment, and other youth and family-serving agencies.

## **Summary**

OSPA recognizes that serious violent acts at school, although rare, have complex origins and profound consequences. In addition, less extreme forms of aggression, such as bullying, sexual harassment, and fights, are much more common, occur on every school campus. Left unaddressed, these can erode the climate of the school, diminish the protective influence of schools, and leave many students to suffer in silence with diminished personal wellness and resilience capacity. Therefore, efforts to reduce violence at school must be multifaceted. A successful program will ensure the ongoing safety of all students and staff both by creating conditions that discourage violence and by responding quickly and effectively when violence occurs. Violence reduction programs must also influence student attitudes toward violence, teach students and school staff effective conflict resolution skills, and create a climate that promotes tolerance and understanding among students and staff. School safety programs are most effective when integrated with other violence prevention efforts involving local law enforcement, juvenile probation, public health personnel, and other parent and community groups. When an entire community commits to reducing violence, the health and well-being of its children and youth are enhanced.

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