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## The implications of anger and school violence

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## The implications of anger and school violence

### Abstract

A series of highly publicized school shootings in the United States generated the misperception of an epidemic of school violence. Fears of school violence stimulated an ill-advised expansion of zero tolerance school discipline policies and the widespread distribution of profiles or warning signs of potentially dangerous students for use by school administrators. This paper presents that little is known about student threats of violence, although students in special education tend to commit disciplinary violations at a higher rate than regular education students according to some studies. Threats of violence pose a dilemma for educators, who must balance federal requirements, the IDEA: Individuals with Disabilities Act, protecting the rights of special education students against needs for school safety.

# The Implications of Anger and School Violence

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Ronda Hilbert

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## Abstract

A series of highly publicized school shootings in the United States generated the misperception of an epidemic of school violence. Fears of school violence stimulated an ill-advised expansion of zero tolerance school discipline policies and the widespread distribution of profiles or warning signs of potentially dangerous students for use by school administrators. This paper presents that little is known about student threats of violence, although students in special education tend to commit disciplinary violations at a higher rate than regular education students according to some studies. Threats of violence pose a dilemma for educators, who must balance federal requirements, the IDEA: Individuals with Disabilities Act, protecting the rights of special education students against needs for school safety.

## Is Anger a Component To School Violence

School violence has been an important topic in the realm of education in the last decade, and many different acts of violence in schools have been witnessed. Most acts of violence have been perpetrated by students of those schools. Schools are dealing with bomb threats, students bringing weapons to school, and, in some cases students using those weapons in the schools. These issues lead educators to wonder what are the thoughts and feelings of a child that would bring a weapon to school or make such threats. Our society wonders what the child that opens fire against his or her classmates might have on their mind. Are these children angry?

Schools are looking to find answers. Schools are scrambling to find ways to keep their students safe and their buildings intact. Some schools are making decisions to get metal detectors and have everyone that enters wear an identification badge and pass through security to prove that they belong there. Other schools are changing by teaching conflict resolution and peer mediation. No matter how it gets accomplished, students, staff, parents, and administrators want safe schools. The literature search focused on what school violence is, what anger is and its causes, as well as, prevention and intervention strategies for school violence and change.

### *School Violence*

School is a part of society, and as our society becomes increasingly violent, so do our schools (Saunders, 1994). According to Kenney and Watson

(1999): Forty years ago, surveys of public school teachers indicated that the most pressing classroom problems were tardiness, talkative students, and gum chewing. Complaints that are far more serious are currently heard from teachers, administrators, and students about the presence of drugs, gangs, and weapons on campus and the threat of assault, robbery, theft, vandalism, and rape (p. 1).

Juvenile violence was at one time considered a social problem, and was dealt with by law enforcement and the judicial system. Violence among youth has become more prevalent in the schools, and is now recognized as a major public health problem. This problem must be addressed by administrators, educators, family and community members, lawmakers, and health care professionals (Kopka, 1997).

According to Day, (1996) school violence is a problem that is growing. In a survey by the National League of Cities forty-one percent of America's large cities stated that students were seriously injured or killed because of school violence. Thirty-eight percent of the seven hundred cities surveyed said there had been a noticeable increase in school violence in the past five years. Only seventeen percent of the cities stated violence had decreased or was not a problem. One fourth of the cities reported deaths of students related to school violence or hospitalization of a student due to school violence in the last year.

Another aspect of school life that has been seeing more attention lately and is seen as a possible part of school violence is bullying. According to Grapes (2000): The National School Safety Center is now calling bullying "the

most enduring and underrated problem in American schools” (p. 11). Most parents and teachers downplay bullying, yet it is often very violent (Grapes, 2000). Grapes (2000) stated,

For example, Bill Head of Marietta, Georgia, thought little of the bloody noses and taunts his son Brian endured at school. “I thought it was normal kid stuff,” he relates, until the day in 1994 when Brian walked into his classroom, waved a gun around, and then shot himself in front of his classmates. Many observers feel that violent episodes will continue until educators and parents take a strong stance against all forms of bullying. (p. 12)

Most of the public is unaware of the prevalence of violent bullying that takes place in many schools. School officials are often to blame for the occurrence of bullying because those officials often look the other way when bullies physically confront other students, rather than taking measures to stop the violence (Kiger, 2000). According to a survey done by the National Center for Education Statistics, in 1995, seventeen percent of high school students admitted to being victims of intimidation, physical assault, or robbery in school (Kiger, 2000). Of suburban principals surveyed between 1988 to 1993, fifty-four percent said violence had increased on the school premises, not only in frequency of incidents, but also in the level of rage (Kiger, 2000).

Goldstein and Conoley (1997) found that in schools, seventh graders are most likely to be attacked when you correlate aggression and students. The

least likely to be attacked are high school seniors. The risk of physical attack tends to be the greatest at the age of thirteen. Forty-two percent of these attacks are interracial, and the other 58 percent of attacks involve victims and attackers of the same race. It was also found that the smaller the minority group the more likely its members are to be victimized by members of larger racial groups.

More than one million students report that they have avoided a part of their school building at least once during the school year out of fear that they will be attacked. Eleven percent of teachers and twenty-three percent of students have been victims of violence near or in their school. Over one-third of all students has known someone personally who has been injured or killed by gunfire (Saunders, 1994).

According to the American Psychological Association, the strongest predictor of future violence for a child is a history of violence, including being a victim of abuse. Home life is seen as one of the main causes for violence. The American family has changed. Day (1996) stated, "Currently, fifty percent of children under the age of six have two working parents or a single parent" (p. 19). Many of these children are unsupervised until a parent comes home. As stated earlier, juveniles are most likely to commit violent crimes and other criminal acts between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. (Kopka, 1997). Along with that, there are other family problems that may lead to violence such as, divorce, drug abuse, poverty, unemployment, illness, and family violence (Day, 1996).

Children can also learn to be violent. If they witness acts of violence on someone else or are abused themselves, they are more likely to model such behaviors in the future. These children may never see an adult restrain their anger, or control his or her impulses, and these children often do not experience nonviolent discipline, it is seen as a natural way of life (Day, 1996). "Teenage friends who model violent behavior are an even more powerful influence on young people than adult models" (Day, 1996, p. 21).

"Are some kids just born bad? Could there be a 'violent gene' or some other biological factor that determines who will achieve and who will get into trouble" (Day, 1996, p. 27)? There has been research conducted to determine if there is a connection between criminal behaviors and lower than average IQ. "The average IQ of convicted criminals is ninety-two, ten points lower than the average for law-abiding citizens. IQ scores are particularly low among repeat offenders" (Day, 1996, p. 28). Another indicator in children is fearless or impulsive behavior. When they show this in their younger years, they are more likely to be aggressive and violent as an adult. Are these things determined by biology or the child's environment? Some researchers feel that children who have low IQs and are impulsive may enter a downward spiral of failures and that may lead them to a life of crime. Most violence is caused by a small amount of men who are repeatedly violent. Five to six percent of young boys are committing half or more of all the serious crimes. As for having any biological basis, some researchers have suggested that some abnormal levels of

noradrenaline and serotonin might be to blame for some violent behaviors, and there may be a genetic defect that may cause a person's brain to produce excess quantities of these chemicals (Day, 1996).

According to Goldstein and Conoley (1997) the nature of governance and leadership in a school can have a major connection with the violence that takes place inside its walls. A principalship style of leadership that is firm and fair has been shown to be related to low levels of student aggression. Schools experiencing high levels of student aggression tend to be schools that have a high level of arbitrary leadership and severe disciplinary actions.

Some schools may say that the violence level is high because they no longer have the ability to discipline the students as they used to. In response to school violence, some teachers want better enforcement of school rules, more authority and more support from the parents, principals and other administrators to deal with the problem immediately in the classrooms. They would also like to see stiffer penalties for serious offenses and the use of alternative settings for students who are disruptive to the class and need to be removed (Wright, 2000). The National Education Association would like to see school officials, teachers and parents work together to show a kid who is in control at school and that no one is above the consequences of the rules. Schools do have to worry about how they are disciplining students. Administrations are fearful of parents. Parents have been given so much power that the administration is scared of a parent coming in so to avoid a conflict they do whatever the parent wants

(Wright, 2000). According to Wright, (2000) children are very shrewd about their legal rights, and the threat of legal action overshadows discipline approaches. The bottom line is that there are a number of kids in school that are good and they are losing out because of the segment of students that are bad, ill-behaved, irresponsible and they don't belong in public school, yet they are running the school (Wright, 2000).

School size is another connection to school violence. There is a higher per-capita violence rate in a larger school. According to Goldstein and Conoley (1997) this may come from the idea that it is easier to identify students in smaller schools, and that in larger schools may have more severe consequences, impersonality, and crowding. Crowding in schools has a big connection to school violence. Acts of aggression tend to take place in areas where it is more crowded such as stairwells, cafeterias, and hallways. Some other areas where violence tends to take place are in bathrooms, entrances and exits, and locker rooms.

A cause of violence in the schools may be sheer boredom of the student.

According to Day (1996):

If schools were always challenging, perhaps there would be less school crime, but as it is, many students are bored by school-either because the work is too hard or because it is too easy. Students then may seek other challenges-often illegal ones. One researcher

went so far as to say that the wonder is not why some students commit crime, but why many do not. (p. 90)

Students seem to agree that boredom can lead to school violence (Day, 1996).

Drugs are another cause for school violence. Where there are drugs and drug dealing there is a high risk for violence. Crime rates are highest at schools where illegal drugs and alcohol are easily obtained. There are some illegal drugs that are very strongly associated with displays of aggression and can trigger violent outbursts (Day, 1996). Kopka (1997) stated that many cite the availability of crack cocaine, which became readily available in the mid 1980s, as a key probable cause of youth violence both in and out of school. With the advent of crack, drug dealing became a well-paid and violent business for many juveniles. (p. 14)

There may also be a link between psychiatric drugs and school violence. There is some evidence that confirms a close relationship between the use of prescribed psychotropic drugs and the use of illegal drugs, including heroin and cocaine (O'Meara, 2000). "Twenty-eight years ago the World Health Organization, or WHO, concluded that Ritalin was pharmacologically similar to cocaine in its pattern of abuse and cited Ritalin as a Schedule II drug-the most addictive in medical usage" (O'Meara, 2000, p. 53). Many believe that there is sufficient evidence that connects prescription psychotropic drugs to violence being carried out by school-age children. Physicians rather than erring on the

side of caution by reducing their prescriptions, they are now even prescribing to infants and toddlers (O'Meara, 2000).

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention gathered statistics and found that the rate of gun-related juvenile homicide tripled between 1984 and 1994. Many believe that this high homicide rate is linked to the increasing availability of firearms. Most teenagers have excessively easy access to firearms (Grapes, 2001). Somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 guns are brought into the schools every day (Curwin & Mendler, 1997). Most teens say that they carry a gun for protection in the tough inner-city neighborhoods, but experts say that this is not the case, that the teens will use the gun to settle a personal dispute (Grapes, 2001).

“The statistics are staggering. More American young people have been killed by guns in the last thirteen years than were killed during the entire Vietnam War” (Day, 1996, p. 32). The number of American children killed by guns has doubled every year since 1950. Every three hours, a child between the ages of ten and nineteen is killed with a gun (Day, 1996). Fourteen United States children and teenagers are killed by a gunshot every single day (Curwin & Mendler, 1997). All incidents involving gun violence, only thirteen percent are accidental (Day, 1996). Nationwide, more than one in ten students stated that they carried a gun onto school property in the last month. Forty-three percent of officials stated in a national survey that access to guns was the cause of violence

(Day, 1996). "About one hundred and sixty thousand students stay home each day because they are afraid of guns and violence" (Day, 1996, p. 35).

"Countless studies have determined that there is an irrefutable link between violence in the media and violent behavior in children" (Bennett, 2000, p. 57). Most of us already know that too many of our movies, television shows, music, and video games are filled with grisly murder scenes, dismemberment, disembowelment, nonstop profanity, rape, and torture scenes. The questions are: does it matter, and if it does how much can be done about it? There are a small percentage of children who seem to be taken over by this popular culture. They see violent movies as a game plan, and hear pounding music as a hymn. There are also a small percentage of children that movies, music, television, and Internet make absolutely no difference in their lives, but for most kids the popular culture works as a desensitizer and dehumanizer (Bennett, 2000).

What society knows about the media's effects on us probably equals what society does not know. Some psychologists state that children will imitate what they see in the media; others state that the amount of violence in the media is more than what occurs in real life and leads children to believe that violence is the way to solve problems. Other psychologists stated that it might affect a child depending on if they see the violence as a punishment or a reward. It is also stated that the child's physiological and psychological make up is going to determine his or her response to the violence (Kopka, 1997).

## Anger

Anger not only has many definitions, but it also has many characteristics that describe it. Some definitions view anger in a positive light, while others see it as negative. According to The American Heritage College Dictionary (1993), anger is defined as “a strong feeling of displeasure or hostility” (p. 51). According to Capozzoli and McVey, (2000) the definition of anger is “a feeling of indignation and hostility that involves complex emotions and depends on how we evaluate events and/or situations. Our own thought processes perpetuate anger” (p. 125).

Anger is an attack. Anger is seen as an active emotion that is directed at someone, something, or at oneself. Some of the obvious threats are verbal attacks, insults, or physical violence. If anger is directed inwards, it can be seen as depression, reckless and dangerous behavior, or school failure. Anger also varies in its intensities. There are many different ways of expressing anger and some of the intensities may even frighten the child who expresses it. When a child is reacting to an intense situation, he/she will come back with an equally intense reaction (Murphy & Oberlin, 2001). Anger is not always appropriate. To determine if anger is appropriate, one should look at who the anger is aimed at, and the intensity of the anger (Murphy & Oberlin, 2001). Murphy and Oberlin (2001) stress that, “It is sometimes okay to be angry, but it’s never okay to be mean. Every angry reaction to a difficult situation has a line that separates the acceptable from the unacceptable” (p. 19).

Another definition of anger is that "It is made up of different reactions that cause us to be irritated, annoyed, furious, frustrated, enraged, and even hurt. A response to anger involves one's body, behaviors and thought process" (Luhn, 1992, p. 3). Luhn said that it is not the event that causes us to feel angry, but it is how we view the event and provocations that cause us to respond in a specific way (Luhn, 1992). Everyone has angry feelings at some time (Capozzoli & McVey, 2000). Parents and teachers tend to react differently when a girl or a boy gets angry. If a boy acts out aggressively, people are more likely to excuse it and even expect it, just as people would expect and excuse a tantrum of crying from a girl. Eastman and Rozen also stated that it is a reality that both sexes need to learn to handle their anger and not use violence or manipulation (Eastman & Rozen, 1994).

There are instances when anger becomes a problem. An example would be when a child cannot cope with the pressures of the anger, or if he/she cannot resolve conflicts peacefully. Another time when anger becomes a problem is when children do not develop the skills to be in charge of their own anger. An example of this would be if a child gets angry about something and is unable to soothe him- or herself when he/she is at the age that he/she should be able to do so on his/her own. If used correctly anger can move one to recognize certain needs and respond to them. Anger can be an effective release of tension, and can cue to correct wrongs. When used effectively, anger can get results and thus, it can force you to grow, adapt, and change (Eastman & Rozen, 1994).

The following list of characteristics can be used to determine if a child has an anger problem. The more characteristics that match the child, the more likely he/she will have a problem with anger. Some of these characteristics are: blow-ups when pressure builds, can't handle change or stress, shows rage when troubled by pain, loss, hurt, frustration, or disappointment, can't calm down when angered, fights with others frequently, uses words as weapons, blames others, turns anger into shouting, tantrums, or aggression, thrives on revenge, will not take responsibility, lacks self-control, has a low self-confidence, doesn't appear to care about others' feelings or rights, won't compromise, and can't negotiate (Eastman & Rozen, 1994).

Angry families have developed a pattern, a cycle of disobedience and violence, that is established early on and very quickly spins out of control in the home (Tavris, 1989). According to Carol Tavris (1989), there is a sequence of events that lead up to an angry family. Parents under particular stress become inept at being a parent—at managing the family, and specifically disciplining the children (Tavris, 1989). The parent's stress may result from a number of things such as divorce, unemployment, drug problems, illness, or other chronic issues. Sometimes the parent's stress comes from the difficult temperament of the child (Tavris, 1989).

In angry families, "children progress steadily from learning to be disobedient to learning to be physically assaultive" (Tavris, 1989, p. 307). It starts in a three-step process that happens almost every day. First, the child is

attacked, criticized, or yelled at by an exasperated adult or sibling. Then the child responds aggressively. By doing this, the third step comes into play and this is where the aggression is rewarded by the attacker withdrawing. Through this process, the child is learning manipulative and coercive tactics as a substitute for social skills (Tavris, 1989)

Tavris states this process starts with inept discipline. The author stated that these parents use a great deal of punishment, but they are not making it contingent on the child's behavior (Tavris, 1989). "They do not state clear rules, require compliance, praise good behavior, or consistently punish violations" (Tavris, 1989, p. 308). Instead of doing these things they threaten, nag, and scold at the child, but along with this, they seldom follow through with those threats. Because of this, the child will continue to misbehave because he/she can get away with it. Throughout this whole time, the parent will at any given time explode verbally and physically against the child (Tavris, 1989). "This pattern of parental behavior has been repeatedly linked to children's aggressiveness in elementary school" (Tavris, 1989, p. 308).

### *Preventions and Interventions*

School safety first and foremost involves an atmosphere of safety, a climate in which students feel happy and comfortable. Safe schools have the same problems as surrounding community, but they are quickly addressed and fixed. In a safe school the students, teachers, and administration care. The buildings and grounds are well maintained. The discipline policy is well known

and respected, drugs and weapons are kept out. Kids feel safe because they know if someone acts up, that he or she will receive a consequence for their actions. In safe schools, the students can concentrate on learning and not on staying safe or staying alive (Saunders, 1994). According to Wallace (2001), “You can’t yell “fire” in a movie theater or “bomb” in an airport and get away with it. And you shouldn’t be able to threaten violence in school and just chalk it up to humor” (p. 4).

Students who bring guns to school seem to be a serious problem.

Goldstein and Conoley (1997) developed some strategies that schools can put into effect to help reduce the incidence of guns coming into the schools. Allow the students to only have clear or mesh book bags or no book bags at all. Get rid of lockers all together. The school should have a coat check room, where they would leave their coats for the day. Give the students two sets of books, one set for at school and another for at home. By the student not having a locker, the school can reduce the time between classes. The school can also make the class periods longer so that there is even less travel time throughout the day. “These strategies represent the beginning of a continuing collaborative process to create safe schools for all U.S. children and youths. Making schools safe requires an ongoing commitment to the skilled and continuing implementation of such strategies” (Goldstein & Conoley, 1997, p. 89).

## Conclusion

One of the main problems associated with school violence is the abundance of bullying. A number of causes were looked at, including; family situations, schools lacking the ability to discipline, boredom of the students, drugs, weapons, and the media.

Schools are trying desperately to implement strategies and techniques to decrease the amount of violence and anger in the schools. This leads this researcher to believe that safety is very important to the schools. It is also this researcher's belief that schools, communities, and the federal government think that violence has gone too far. Examining the causes of anger and seeing that most of the students that are exhibiting anger problems are coming from homes that have anger problems has lead this researcher to believe that what schools need to do is teach students how to handle and respond to anger. In addition, this research has expanded the researcher's knowledge of how to work with children who have anger problems, and how to work with schools on reducing violence.

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