Making the Smart Choice: a systemic response to school-based violence

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This paper reports on a school-based intervention in which a family therapist, serving as a consultant to a high school, worked with that school to reduce the level of school-based violence. The primary intervention reported in this paper is a conflict skills training programme called ‘Making the Smart Choice’. While designed for the families of students suspended for physical violence, this intervention also impacts upon the school’s disciplinary system and the climate of the school itself. The context or responses to school-based violence, the strategy to gain access to the school, the politics of developing such a programme, the programme itself and the infrastructure needed to maintain it are described. For four years, suspensions for school-based violence were halved compared to the four years prior to the start of the programme.

Introduction

Throughout American society, there is a growing movement to challenge violence as unacceptable, and to develop strategies to address and eliminate it. Family therapists have made major contributions to this movement, particularly in the areas of domestic violence and child abuse (Asen, 2002; Gil, 1990; Madanes, 1990; Rivett and Rees, 2004; Serra, 1993; Trepper and Barrett, 1989;
Family therapists have also tackled the epidemic of youth violence, and have produced salient research and developed model programmes (Alexander and Parsons, 1982; Barton et al., 1985; Henggeler et al., 1996, 1998; Patterson et al., 1992; Tolan and Guerra, 1994).

One manifestation of youth violence is school-based violence. In its most lethal form, school-based violence results in terrible carnage, such as that occurred at Columbine and Santee in America. Less lethal forms of school-based violence such as fighting, intimidation and bullying have also come under intense scrutiny. School administrators are recognizing that violence in schools impacts upon the victims, who are not only injured but also sometimes retaliate with even worse violence, the perpetrators, whose punishment can derail their development, and the school itself, which becomes a less safe context for learning. An outraged nation has called for extensive measures to make schools safer, and schools have responded with comprehensive violence prevention efforts. These efforts are designed to place a blanket of protection over the school to keep violence at bay and to deal with it swiftly and decisively if violence does occur.

School-based violence prevention

Comprehensive violence prevention efforts in schools are a blend of approaches that fall into three categories: improved security, punishment, and school-based violence prevention programming.

Security approaches keep lethal violence out of schools with means such as security guards, metal detectors, surveillance cameras, identification badges, locked campuses, and checks of lockers and book bags. Another security approach is profiling, which seeks to establish the characteristics of potentially violent youth in order to identify and get them help before they erupt with violence (O’Toole, 2000). Security measures do deter lethal violence, but they can also make a school feel like a fortress, and fail to deter physical fighting.

The second category, punishment, has long been a staple to deter violence. The most common form of punishment has been out-of-school suspension for an extended period of time. Many schools have gone further and adopted zero-tolerance policies which result in expulsion (Skiba and Peterson, 1999). Significant concerns exist for suspension (Dupper and Bosch, 1996; Rendall and Stuart, 2005). First, suspension often does not deter future violence (DeRidder, 1991; Henderson and Friedland, 1996; Mayer, 1995). Second,
suspensions are seldom applied uniformly, as some groups of students, including males, minorities and academically and behaviourally challenged students, are suspended in disproportionate numbers (Foster, 1986; Kunjufu, 1986; Townsend, 2000; Uchitelle et al., 1989). Third, suspension creates serious negative consequences for suspended students (Coben et al., 1994; Cunningham, 1996; DeRidder, 1991; Gaddy and Kelly, 1984; Stretch and Crunck, 1972) who often have their tenuous commitment to school damaged and thus become increasingly alienated and often drop out of school or are expelled (Black, 1999; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Mayer, 1995).

The third category, violence prevention programmes, offers solutions to violence. These programmes range from school-wide climate improvement strategies to peer mediation programmes and programmes that provide skills-based training in problem-solving and/or conflict resolution skills. Most of these programmes have been designed for elementary schools, leaving limited choices for high schools, very few of which have been empirically tested (US Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS), 2001).

A school’s comprehensive violence prevention effort must address the question of which approach to apply in relation to which violent acts and which violent students (Bemak and Keys, 2000; Thorton et al., 2000). While the subject of youth violence is enormously complex and beyond the scope of this paper, one distinction which differentiates violent youth is that of early versus late onset of violent offences. The majority of seriously violent acts are committed by a small percentage of adolescents who first evidenced violence before the age of 11. Violence preventionists classify these youth as early onset offenders (USDHHS, 2001). Early onset offenders commit acts of violence that are often psychopathological or predatorial, and include assault with a weapon and rape (Tolan and Guerra, 1994). These youth have been violent in other contexts such as home and/or community, have also engaged in some level of delinquent acting out, and have already come to the attention of the juvenile justice system. Comprehensive multi-systemic programmes are needed to help these youth eliminate violence from their lives (Alexander and Parsons, 1982; Barton et al., 1985; Henneggeler et al., 1996).

Security approaches, while blanketeting all students, are really designed to avert the lethal violence of early onset offenders. Likewise, punitive approaches, particularly zero-tolerance and profiling, while also targeting all students, are aimed at removing an early onset offender from the school.
Another group, constituting 40 per cent of violent youth, are known as late onset offenders. Those categorized as part of this group do not commit their first act of violence until they reach adolescence (Tolan and Guerra, 1994). Their acts of violence are more often contextual, occurring in specific situations or as part of a conflictual relationship. The acts of violence in question are often the garden variety of physical fighting, intimidation and bullying. These adolescents may never become chronically violent or delinquent, but in the current climate of zero-tolerance they can pay a heavy price for their violence. The adolescents committing these acts of violence cannot be ignored. Programmes that target at-risk students who are late onset offenders who engage in acts of situational and/or relational violence are therefore critically needed (USDHHS, 2001).

This article describes a programme designed by family therapists to reduce the school-based violence committed largely by late onset offenders. Known as ‘Making the Smart Choice’, the programme is a multi-levelled larger systems intervention. The programme itself is a psychoeducational conflict skills programme taken by the violent youth and his or her family. At another level, as described below, the programme impacts upon the school’s disciplinary subsystem and practices. At yet another level, because the programme is nested in a much larger violence prevention initiative known as the Peaceable Schools Initiative (PSI), it impacts upon the larger climate of the school. Finally, at the level of the community, the programme impacts upon the attitude of a group of parents and community members who hold strong negative feelings about the school.

The programme is one of five interventions comprising a more comprehensive systems intervention known as the Peaceable Schools Initiative (PSI), which is designed to personalize the high school climate (Bluestein, 2001). Making the Smart Choice targets the disciplinary subsystem. The other four interventions of PSI are: (1) classroom practices training and implementation to enable teachers to personalize the classroom subsystem; (2) youth leadership training and practices to enable students to impact upon the student body subsystem; (3) a leadership group that addresses tensions in the administration/faculty subsystem; and (4) a community advisory council to give the parents and concerned citizens an official channel of communication to the administration and school board. A complete description of PSI and a four-year research study that documents climate improvement may be found elsewhere (Breunlin et al., 2002, 2005).
The context of Making the Smart Choice

The presenting problem: Out-of-school suspensions

Making the Smart Choice grew out of an invitation extended to the senior author by the superintendent of the pilot high school to offer consultation on a persistent complaint by a group of parents who believed too many students were receiving ten-day out-of-school suspensions. Out-of-school suspensions could be viewed as the school’s presenting problem. The consultant’s first task was to determine the extent of the problem and what function this problem might have for the school (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989).

During the school year in which the invitation was extended (1995 to 1996), the rate of out-of-school suspensions was 25.1 per 100 students. These rates were high compared to two databases, one from Colorado (Colorado Department of Education, 1998) and one from Virginia (Henderson and Friedland, 1996), which reported 7 and 9 per cent, respectively. Moreover, a disproportionate number of minority students were represented (Townsend, 2000; Uchitelle et al., 1989), and their parents were among the most concerned. Many suspensions were issued for violence, which included physical fighting and intimidation among students as well as verbal altercations between students and teachers.

Suspensions, therefore, were the consequence of how violent students dealt with conflict, and how the school reacted to that style of conflict. The concerned parents felt their children were too often targeted for suspension. The administration listened patiently to the parents’ complaints, but changing the suspension policy for violence was not on the bargaining table. Like any presenting problem in a system, the questions were: Did the practice of suspension serve a function for the school? How was the process of suspension maintained in the school? What kept this process from being modified?

The context of the high school

The pilot high school is a large comprehensive high school located in the western suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. With 3,700 students and 240 faculty members, the high school is typical of most suburban high schools across the United States. It has enjoyed a long-standing reputation as a well-run and successful high school: 92 per cent graduate and 86 per cent attend college. The student body is drawn from eleven communities. The majority of these communities have...
middle- and upper-middle-class families; a few have working-class families. The student body is about 10 per cent non-white, including 3 per cent African American and 6 per cent Hispanic. The racial make-up of the faculty matches that of the community and the student body. The average years of teaching experience is nineteen, and most teachers spend their entire career at the school.

Prior to the pilot study, several factors negatively affected the climate of the school. While the school’s size was one contributing factor, a number of factors were not unique to this particular school, mirroring conditions encountered in most large high schools. First, historically, the school culture was somewhat dictated by the concerns of the faculty. While talented and dedicated, the faculty was characterized as more subject- than student-centred in their teaching philosophy. Second, the school has a two-campus system, with ninth and tenth graders attending a south campus and eleventh and twelfth graders attending a north campus about a mile away. This system isolates younger students from older students, limits school spirit and complicates communication. Finally, the student body was somewhat cliquish and strong tensions existed among students from different social classes, and to some extent among different racial groups. These factors began to be addressed in 1992 with the hiring of a new superintendent, and in 1994 with the hiring of a new principal committed to the welfare of all students.

These facts contributed to two perspectives on the high school. The majority perspective, held by administration, the faculty, and the dominant and more affluent members of the community asserted that the school was a well-run premier high school that prepared serious students well for college and was in no need of change. While unspoken, this majority perspective also held that trouble-makers should not disrupt the serious academic focus of the school.

The minority perspective, held by a small but vocal group of concerned parents, focused more on how the aforementioned facts impacted upon less successful students. This group held several negative views of the school: that the school was too centred on the academic success of its best students, and focused too few resources on struggling students; that the subject-centred focus of the faculty disadvantaged less successful students and rendered them invisible; and that at-risk students with substantial disciplinary records were labelled as trouble-makers and punished to the point where they too often left the school. It was felt that these students became marginalized and alienated, lost their tenuous attachment to the school, and
were therefore at increased risk to act out their frustration and be suspended.

The minority perspective held that the harsh discipline approach was a product of the school’s culture, designed to reward successful students and to control and even eliminate less successful students. The majority perspective saw suspension as a natural consequence of bad behaviour, and was somewhat unaware of how suspension policies might be embedded in a school culture in need of modification. The challenge was how to bring the two perspectives together.

**Reaching consensus and deciding on a path**

To study what the problem of suspension signified about the school and whether anything should be done about it, the superintendent created a task force consisting of the associate principal, the director of pupil support services and the consultant. Since both school members ascribed to the majority perspective of the school, the consultant was cautious not to polarize the early conversations by identifying overly with the minority perspective. He listened and provided literature on school climate, suspension and violence prevention in schools. The consultant also retained a nationally renowned consultant in conflict resolution in high schools. Together they conducted a day-long assessment of the school climate in which focus groups of teachers, students and concerned parents were interviewed.

Based on the findings of the assessment, the two consultants suggested that a school climate survey be administered and that the results of this survey be presented in a summer retreat attended by a group of school stakeholders who represented both the minority and majority perspective on the school. The week-long summer retreat brought together a group of teachers, administrators, students, parents and community leaders to examine the climate of the school and to plan any needed interventions. These constituencies had rarely had a frank discussion about the school, so tensions were necessarily high.

At the retreat, the findings of the climate survey were presented, revealing aspects of the school climate that would be important to target for improvement. These climate findings challenged the majority perspective about the high school, and stimulated a less defensive dialogue with those holding the minority perspective. A significant number of students who completed the climate survey gave negative ratings of important climate variables. Their dissatisfaction
went beyond their views of the disciplinary system and included perceived deficits in teacher/student relationships, student/student relationships, and how the high school was perceived by and communicated with the community. By the end of the retreat, all participants agreed that not only did the original problem of suspension require attention, but school climate as a whole also needed attention. A subgroup of participants, including administrators, teachers, students, community members and consultants, formed a steering committee to plan and implement the interventions that would become the Peaceable Schools Initiative. The programme targeting the problem of suspension for violence was named ‘Making the Smart Choice: Tools for Conflict Resolution’.

The theory, structure and content of Making the Smart Choice

Theoretical underpinnings

The efforts undertaken in creating and executing the Peaceable Schools Initiative have been guided by systems theory, which holds that social groups can be conceptualized systemically, and function in nested levels (Capra, 1982, 1996; Koestler, 1978; Von Bertalannfy, 1968). To believe both renders essential the application of multi-levelled interventions to solve a problem. Violence prevention research now seems to embrace this stance, having come to define the use of multi-levelled approaches as necessary for good outcome (Coordinating Council on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1995).

While systems theory has been questioned by branches of the family therapy field, it has been retained by the authors, who have packaged it as an integrative therapy known as the metaframeworks perspective (Breunlin, 1999; Breunlin et al., 1992, 1997). Using Bateson’s theory of negative explanation (Bateson, 1972; White, 1986), this perspective argues that problems are embedded within a complex web of constraints, and that a problem can be resolved by lifting those constraints. Further, the synergistic impact of interventions at multiple levels is believed to be more impactful than a single intervention targeted at just one level. Moreover, the complete intervention package selected is pragmatic in its recognition that change in human functioning occurs through changes in action, meaning and emotion, and recognizes the importance of considering all three of these domains when developing interventions.
In the problem of school-based violence, violence is associated with two systems with interlocking multi-levelled webs of constraints, each keeping the violent student from abstaining from violence. One of these is the school, which includes the levels of the student, the disciplinary system and the school as a whole. The other is the family, which includes the levels of the student, his or her family, and the family’s community. The interventions targeting the school included all of the PSI interventions designed to improve climate, the change of disciplinary attitude and practice, and the incorporation of Making the Smart Choice as an alternative to suspension. The interventions that target the family include the family-based format of the programme and specific interventions within the Making the Smart Choice programme itself.

The specific skills taught in Making the Smart Choice target the meanings, actions and emotions that keep a student from adopting a non-violent approach to conflict. The theoretical underpinning for meaning is the theory of conflict resolution grounded in the practice of mediation (Fisher et al., 1991; Lieber, 1998, 2002). The theoretical underpinning for emotion is the theory of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1997), with a particular emphasis on the physiology of emotional flooding (Gottman, 1999). The theory underpinning action is social learning theory which postulates that violence is largely learned; consequently, it can be prevented through learning alternatives to violence (Eron and Slaby, 1994; Kellermann et al., 1996; Rotheram, 1982).

Having the student and family participate together in the programme recognizes the need to lift both the individual constraints of the students regarding violence as well as those of the family (Dowling and Osbourne, 1985; USDHHS, 2001; Stouthamer Loeber et al., 1993). Having one or both parents participate in the programme has several advantages. First, many adults hold beliefs about conflict that condone violence in some conflict situations. These beliefs are often internalized by their adolescent children. It is much more difficult to change an adolescent’s beliefs about violence if a competing belief remains in the family. Having the parent(s) grapple with their own beliefs about conflict and the role of violence can lead to a change in those beliefs (Reed, 1981). Second, having a parent participate with the adolescent in the exercises not only gives the adolescent practice with the skills, but it can also change the parent/adolescent conflict, which leads to an increased likelihood that the skills will be generalized. After all,
the myriad parent/adolescent conflicts provide a rich and continuous soil for practice.

Programme structure

The structure and format of the programme emerged from a series of negotiations with the administration that created a fit between the changes in disciplinary policy the administration was willing to make, and the consultant’s recommendations about the programme content deemed essential to reduce violence. As such, Making the Smart Choice is both a politically and research driven programme. It represents a compromise between the tremendous pressures that schools are under to deliver on their primary mission, the education of students, and this school’s commitment to find a means to address the problem of suspension for violence.

Seven compromises were reached with the administration: (1) The consultant requested that the suspension be waived. The administration countered that the community could object to this change and agreed to halve the length of suspension. (2) The consultant lobbied to require parental involvement. The administration maintained it could not have a school-sanctioned programme that excluded students because parents would not participate. The compromise was that the deans would strongly encourage parents to participate. In the end, most cases included at least one parent. (3) The administration wanted an off-campus programme. Making the Smart Choice is therefore offered at a satellite office of The Family Institute located near the high school. (4) Administrators felt families would accept the quid pro quo of a reduced suspension in return for taking the programme if the demands of the programme were not excessively onerous. Since the consultant, too, wanted to engage as many families as possible, a format of four ninety-minute sessions was set. (5) The consultant wanted the student to meet briefly with the Dean upon completing the programme. The administration felt this placed an unreasonable time burden on the deans. Instead, deans learn of the student’s success when a summary contract is completed by the student and mailed to the Dean. (6) Both the consultant and the administration felt a fee should be charged; however, like most schools, the administration wanted to limit the fiscal impact of the programme. Given the demographics of the community, the fee was set at $125. The consultant agreed to slide the fee where appropriate, and the school agreed to provide scholarships to the few students with
serious financial need. (The economics of implementing a programme like Making the Smart Choice will vary based upon the community within which and the type of school where it is offered.)

(7) The consultant wanted the programme to be offered to all students suspended for violence. While the administration agreed in principle, it would prove difficult to deliver this in practice. Sometimes deans would have a history with a student and believe he or she deserves the stiffest punishment. At other times, teachers would pressure deans to exclude a student from the school for a few weeks. It would take a semester of experience with the programme, the change of two deans and persistent pressure from the consultant before uniformity was achieved.

The success of a programme collaboration between a school and an agency depends on the structures each creates to administer their respective parts and to link the parts together. Making the Smart Choice requires the school to convince a large pool of suspended students to enrol in the programme, efficiently connect them to it, readmit them after the programme, and arrange for them to have a follow-up session eight weeks later. These functions were the responsibility of the deans and the school-based coordinator. The latter must be someone who has an investment in students with troubling records, and who can deal with them compassionately. The agency must have a coordinator who administers the programme, including liaising with the school to take the referral, talking to families at the point of referral, assigning cases and providing back-up for the trainers.

The protocol for referral is as follows: When a student is disciplined for school-based violence, that student and his or her parent must meet with the assistant principal, who offers the disciplinary options, which include serving a full suspension or having the suspension halved in return for also enrolling in the programme. If the family agrees to participate, the student and a parent must sign a contract and then contact the programme coordinator within forty-eight hours to have a trainer assigned. The student is allowed to return to school immediately after the reduced suspension is served. If a student fails to complete the programme, the balance of the suspension must be served.

Each family is assigned its own trainer, who is a graduate student in The Family Institute’s MFT programme. Each trainer learns a manualized approach to violence prevention treatment. Initial training sessions, booster sessions, and ongoing supervision were built into the programme to assure its fidelity (Thornton et al., 2000). Having
the programme offered by someone other than school personnel affords both parents and students the opportunity to express negative feelings about the suspension incident, and how the school handled it, without fear that it will be passed back to the school.

**Programme content**

To create the programme, Making the Smart Choice, the authors identified more than a dozen published programmes that offer violence prevention programming to high schools. After a careful review of these programmes, three prevalent content areas were identified: the theory and skills of conflict resolution, anger management training, and skills of effective communication. A psychoeducational format that uses a thirty-six-page manual was developed to provide training in these areas. The content is broken up into four two-hour sessions, each of which enables the student and his or her family to explore and modify their beliefs, feelings and interactions related to the skills of violence prevention. Each session has a didactic component covered with the manual, structured exercises to work on the skills, and homework. The skills are billed as tools for dealing with conflict before it becomes violent.

In the first session, the trainer gathers a detailed description of the violent incident. Frequently the student and parents feel justified about the violence, and consider the school’s punishment to be unfair. The trainer empathizes with these positions, but also highlights the fact that in the post-Columbine Zeitgeist, schools do not tolerate any violence. The family then completes a brief questionnaire, designed to reveal which of three conflict styles they employ: confrontational, avoidant or communicative. The family is helped to see that a confrontational style easily leads to violence, and is offered the prospect that conflicts can be resolved without violence using the communicative style grounded in conflict resolution theory. These tools are essentially those used in mediation (Girard and Koch, 1996; Johnson and Johnson, 1995). While family therapists often know and use these skills intuitively, there is a dearth of research about conflict resolution in the family therapy literature (Heitler, 1990).

With some curiosity engendered, the trainer offers a brief primer on conflict resolution theory. Conflict theory postulates that conflict is inevitable and healthy because the needs of two or more people are frequently at odds. Conflicts escalate when the parties adopt irreconcilable positions to get their needs met, thus creating a win-
lose outcome. Violence is employed to ‘win’ or as a reaction by the loser.

Glasser (1984) classified four kinds of needs that apply to most interpersonal conflicts: the needs for belonging, power, freedom and fun. In a family, consider the example of who comes to dinner. An adolescent needs freedom and adopts the position of not wanting to eat dinner. The parents, needing belonging, adopt the position that the adolescent has to eat dinner. These positions, to eat dinner or not to eat dinner, are irreconcilable. Given these irreconcilable positions, conflict can erupt when the adolescent says he or she is not going to be there for dinner. To resolve the conflict, both sides must step back from their positions and instead state their needs. Negotiation then takes place around needs. So long as both sides have their needs met, they can drop their positions and both can have a satisfying outcome to the conflict. The conflict about dinner can be resolved with any of the following solutions: changing the hour of dinner, finding another time for the adolescent to spend time with the parent, inviting friends to join the family for dinner, and so on.

The manual contains schematic drawings for normalizing conflict, understanding needs and positions, and the typical pattern of conflict when needs are not met. Each schematic is a tool the trainer uses to draw the family into a discussion about conflict styles and how to modify them. Exercises help the family gain skills in recognizing and distinguishing positions and needs. Role-plays and enactment bring the conflict to life. The final page of this first section is a worksheet that may be done in session or as homework.

The second session begins to build the nuts and bolts of a good communicational style by focusing on the skills of anger management, beginning with regulation of emotion, a skill which many adolescents do not possess (Goleman, 1997). Many adolescents approach conflict with escalating anger that triggers psychophysiological flooding and impairs rational thought processes. Moreover, their anger is frequently a secondary emotion that masks far less acceptable primary emotions such as shame, humiliation, embarrassment and fear. Two overall goals of this section are to increase emotional vocabulary beyond happy, mad and sad, and to provide an introduction to anger management skills. A variety of schematics and worksheets are used in this section to meet these goals. Trainers are encouraged to highlight information on the neurophysiological experience of anger and flooding. In order to help make this information more memorable, it is presented in the context of an image referred to as ‘Anger
Mountain’. Anger Mountain is the most often remembered psycho-educational piece of the programme reported by students in follow-up. This schematic shows the importance of avoiding physiological flooding by using time-outs at home and at school. Relaxation, understanding anger triggers and listening to bodily cues are all presented as important anger management skills. Scaling is also presented in this section as a powerful cognitive behavioural tool for managing emotions, specifically anger. This section also ends with a homework worksheet.

Communicating effectively is the focus of the third session. The goal here is to provide ways of speaking that foster listening and understanding in order to help participants articulate their needs. The first exercise introduces common road-blocks to communication (e.g. blaming, generalizing, preaching). These road-blocks are normalized as common to most families, but problematic nevertheless. Family members share their preferred road-blocks, and can usually discuss with humour how counterproductive they are. To fill the gap created when road-blocks are abandoned, the techniques of perspective taking, active listening and I-messages are introduced, discussed and practised. Exercises, worksheets and role-plays are used towards learning and consolidating this information.

The fourth and final session summarizes conflict resolution guidelines. These are detailed and then presented as a conflict resolution toolbox where family members are encouraged to know they have these skills and to use them where appropriate. Students complete a conflict resolution contract within which they describe what they have learned. This contract is then mailed to the assistant principal to confirm that the programme has been completed.

Finally, six weeks after completion, the trainer visits the student at the school to discuss the use of the skills taught by the programme over the two-month period and what progress the student has made in changing his or her behaviour. The follow-up acts as a ‘booster shot’ to extend the length of the treatment and to further solidify gains made in the intervention.

Case example

Matt, a 15-year-old student in his second year of high school, was referred to the programme when he received a ten-day suspension for a second incident of fighting. The fight started when another student approached Matt and his girlfriend and started making fun of
them. Matt immediately shoved the student against a locker and punched him in the face. The other student returned the punch and a fistfight ensued. The suspension was reduced to five days when the family agreed to take the programme.

The family comprises Matt, his parents Melody and Steve, and two siblings, 7-year-old Brian and 4-year-old Anna. The family is Caucasian, and resides in one of the predominantly working-class communities that feed the high school. Matt was described as a marginal student in the social scene at his school. Both Melody and Steve described Matt as well behaved until the bullying began in high school. Based on this background, Matt would be classified as a late onset offender.

The first session was attended by Matt, his mother and two siblings. The topic was how conflict is handled in the family. Conflict frequently involved screaming and yelling, and often ended with someone (either Matt or Steve) leaving the home for several hours. Melody also reported that Steve had slapped Matt in the face during extreme arguments.

Matt completed a conflict styles questionnaire, which revealed his conflict style to be primarily confrontational with some avoidant qualities. The trainer then presented conflict resolution theory, and used Matt’s fight at school as an example. Matt and his family discussed what needs Matt and the other student had during the fight. Together, the family decided that the other student needed power, or to feel superior. After some reflection, Matt decided that the fight was about taking back the power he felt he lost after the student made fun of him. To regain power Matt said he needed to feel respected both by the student and in the eyes of his girlfriend. The trainer then talked with Matt and his family about how both Matt and the other student could have found a win-win solution to the conflict. The family decided a more mature dialogue was needed, but was somewhat sceptical that this could actually happen.

The whole family attended the second session, which explored how emotions influence conflict, and how emotional flooding can lead to harmful words and physical altercations. Steve was quick to voice his scepticism about attending therapy to solve conflict. He explained that he felt his son did the right thing, and that he would probably have done the same thing had he been in the same situation. The trainer listened to Steve, empathized with his position and asked him to keep an open mind.
After summarizing the material from the first session, the trainer opened the topic of the role of emotion in conflict. The trainer asked how emotion influenced conflict in the immediate family and in the families of origin of Steve and Melody. In both families, anger was usually the most acceptable emotion and any other feelings were viewed as evidence of weakness. Matt explored the emotions he was feeling during the altercation at school. He reported feeling powerless and humiliated when he heard the student making fun of him and his girlfriend. The only way Matt felt he could change those feelings was to ‘put the kid in his place’.

At this point, the trainer presented Anger Mountain as a visual aid for exploring emotion. The family came to see that when either Steve or Matt leave the family home during a fight, as described in an earlier session, they are on top of the mountain, and are releasing the tension they feel by taking a break. Steve recalled many fights he had been in as a teenager, as well as times he has ‘lost it’ as an adult. For example, Steve said he became very angry and physiologically flooded with road rage. He explained how only time allowed the rage to subside. After learning about Anger Mountain and listening to his father’s story, Matt said that during his fight he saw that he was emotionally flooded when he ran up and hit the other student.

Matt and his father attended the third session, which covered communication styles. Steve explored alternative ways to solve conflict and began to step back from his previous stance that ‘a good fight between men can usually solve the problem’. The trainer and family began exploring models of good communication during conflict. Steve mentioned that he is often required to solve conflict through good communication when he is at work. The family compared Steve at work to Matt at school. In order for Matt to avoid getting suspended, he would have to find a more productive way to resolve conflict. With this comparison and with the skills learned in the previous sessions, Matt was able to see that he could have walked away from the other student before he reached the top of Anger Mountain. Matt went on to say that he could have approached the student later that day to talk with him about the situation and how it made him feel.

In the final session, Melody attended with Matt and his siblings. The group reviewed what was covered throughout the four weeks of treatment. Matt completed his conflict resolution contract, which was to be mailed to his dean, and reviewed the things he learned about conflict, emotions and communication. The family reviewed the ways
they might handle conflict differently at home, and Matt reviewed his fight at school again, explaining how he might have done things differently.

When the trainer contacted the family for a follow-up interview, Matt reported proudly that he had not been suspended again, despite having been involved in several confrontations that could have resulted in physical fights. He largely attributed this change to his participation in the programme. Steve and Melody said they were very proud of their son and that he is working on being a good role-model for his younger siblings.

**Outcome**

The programme was inaugurated at the outset of the 1997 to 1998 school year. Data for out-of-school suspensions for all infractions and for physical violence for the four years before and the four years since the programme has been in existence are shown in Table 1. A sevenfold decrease in all suspensions and a fourfold decrease in suspensions for physical violence have occurred since the programme was inaugurated. For the four years prior to the programme, the number of out-of-school suspensions and suspensions for physical

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<td>711</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>1.97</td>
</tr>
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<td>1996–1997</td>
<td>3046</td>
<td>15,926</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.64</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997–1998</td>
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<td>15,149</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>37</td>
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<td>1999–2000</td>
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<td>16,418</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>.69</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000–2001</td>
<td>3282</td>
<td>14,809</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes**

- Total enrolment: spring enrolment of the school year.
- Total incidents: all the incidents that required space and time in the dean’s offices.
- Outside suspension: students who were suspended out of school for at least one day.
- Suspensions per 100 students: suspensions per 100 students enrolled.
- Code 10 suspensions: suspensions for fighting, physical conflict.
- Code 10 suspensions per 100: suspensions for fighting per 100 students enrolled.
violence averaged 22.19 and 2.14 per 100 students, respectively. For
the four years since the inception of the programme, these averages
were reduced to 7.00 and 1.08 per 100 students, respectively. The
findings of a pilot study on Making the Smart Choice are published
elsewhere (Breunlin et al., 2002).

Conclusion

One wing of the family therapy field has long contended that its
purview extends beyond individuals and their relationships within a
given family (Dorherty and Carrol, 2002; Hardy, 2001; Imber-Black,
1988; Johnson, 2001; McGoldrick, 2001; Sluzki, 2001). These so-
called ‘larger systems therapists’ venture forth from their consulting
rooms in the hope that their work with systems in which families are
embedded will benefit both the system and the families. By tackling a
major social problem, such as school-based violence, with interven-
tions that include the violent youth, his or her family and the school
context, Making the Smart Choice constitutes a multi-levelled inter-
vention of the type that violence prevention research defines as
necessary for good outcome (Coordinating Council on Juvenile
Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1995).

References

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