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Intervention in School and Clinic 1999 35: 67
DOI: 10.1177/105345129903500201

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The Path to School Failure, Delinquency, and Violence: Causal Factors and Some Potential Solutions

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AND JEFFREY R. SPRAGUE

This article addresses the issues associated with the path to school failure, delinquency, and violence that increasing numbers of our children and youth are following. Causal factors are identified and described, and the developmental nature of the path leading from exposure to risk factors to short- and long-term destructive outcomes is discussed. Prevention strategies for diverting at-risk children and youth from this path are also described and illustrated. These strategies include but are not limited to supporting families, developing and implementing school-based prevention approaches, supporting schools, improving academic and social competence, and achieving prevention goals through true collaborative arrangements between schools, families, and communities.

Some years ago, we were developing a program for intervening with very aggressive children (Walker, Hops, & Greenwood, 1988) who teased and bullied others during school recess. Ritchie, a second grader, was referred as a likely candidate for the intervention. During a playground recess period, he was being observed to see if he qualified for this program. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, Ritchie attacked a kindergarten boy about two thirds his size. He knocked

the smaller boy to the ground and proceeded to choke him. The playground supervisor quickly broke things up and called the principal and school counselor, who escorted Ritchie into the school to call his parents. We wanted to know what was in Ritchie's mind that prompted the attack. "Can you tell us why you were choking that little boy like that?" he was asked. Ritchie looked up in utter amazement and said, "Well, it was recess!"

Sarah was a fourth-grade girl who was commonly regarded as a terror by her teachers and peers. Sarah was aggressive, smart, a natural leader, able to manipulate others, charming—and a pain in the neck. Billie Webb was a school psychologist who served Sarah's school part time and visited her school several times weekly. Sarah was a regular customer of Billie's each time she came to the school, and they were on a first-name basis. One day, the principal and counselor were waiting for Billie at the school's front door to tell her the latest things Sarah had done on the playground. Billie called Sarah into a conference to hear her side of things. The following exchange ensued.

"Sarah, I understand you've been having problems on the playground again." Sarah just stared at Billie, saying nothing. Trying to engage Sarah in a problem-solving process, Billie asked another question. "What do you think people will say about that?" Sarah thought a min-

ute, looked at Billie, and said: "Well, Billie, some people might say *you're* not doing your job!"

These true case examples illustrate how aggressive, antisocial children and youth tend to think about themselves and the world in which they live. They are often self-centered and very inconsiderate of others. The standards they have learned for governing their behavior are different from those of others. Children like Ritchie and Sarah are reluctant to assume responsibility for their actions (Walker, 1998). In very young children, these social characteristics are generally not destructive and can occasionally be amusing, even cute. However, in adolescents, they are highly destructive and anything but amusing.

Our society is producing thousands of children like Ritchie and Sarah who come from backgrounds in which they are exposed to a host of risk factors that can be very damaging over time (Loeber & Farrington, 1998). There are strong and clearly established links between these risk factors, the behavioral manifestations and reactions that result from exposure to them, the short-term negative effects on the developing child that flow from this exposure, and finally, the destructive, long-term outcomes that (a) too often complete this developmental progression and (b) ultimately prove very costly to the individual; to caregivers, friends, and associates; and to the larger society (Vance, Fernandez, & Biber, 1998). Figure 1 illustrates the connecting links in this chain, which defines a clear path from early exposure to risk

factor(s) to the later development of destructive, longer-term outcomes.

As more and more young children experience a broad array of risk factors from the moment of birth, we are seeing increasing numbers who are following this unfortunate path, which too often ends in school failure and dropout, delinquency, adult crime, and sometimes violence.

INFLUENCE OF RISK FACTORS

Risk factors operate at differing and sometimes overlapping levels. The contexts in which these risk factors exist include the family, school and neighborhood, community, and, finally, the larger society (Hawkins & Catalano, 1992). Across these contexts, key risk factors can include poverty, dysfunctional and chaotic families, drug and alcohol abuse by primary caregivers, incompetent parenting, neglect, emotional and physical abuse, negative attitudes toward schooling, the modeling of physical intimidation and aggression, sexual exploitation, media violence, the growing incivility of our society, and so on. These risk factors provide a fertile breeding ground for the development of antisocial attitudes and coercive behavioral styles among the children exposed to them.

The longer one is so exposed and the greater the number of risks involved, the more likely it is that a young

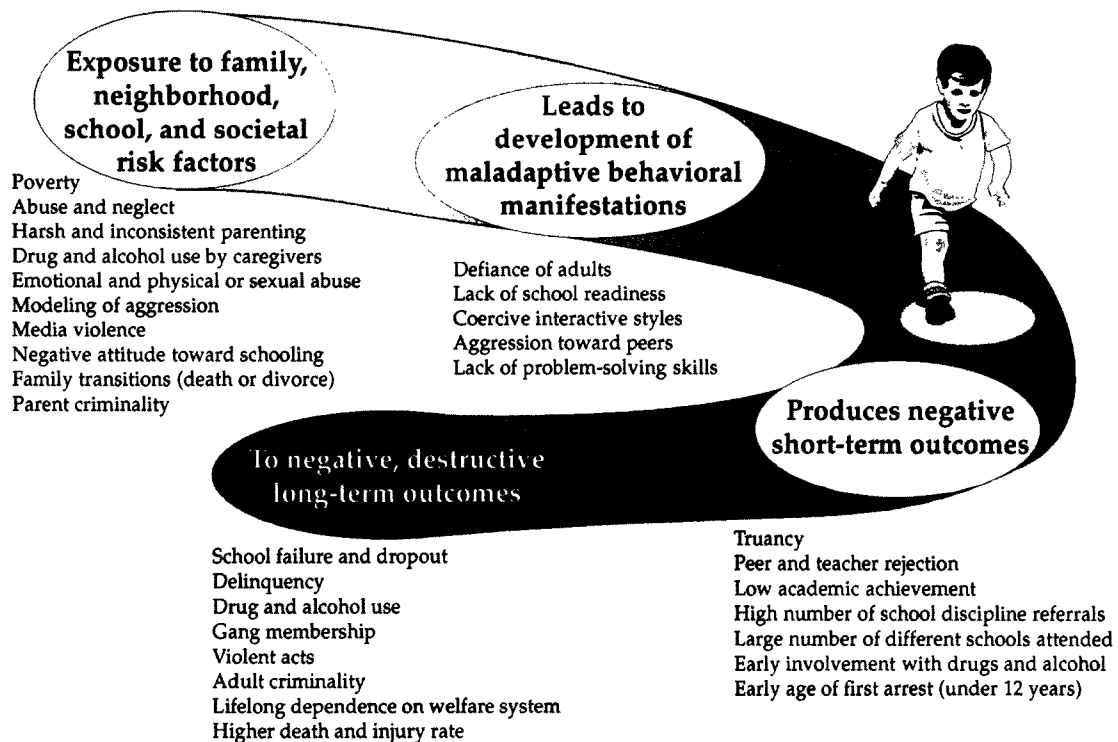


Figure 1. *The path to long-term negative outcomes for at-risk children and youth.*

child will develop an aggressive, self-centered, and dysfunctional behavioral style. Taunting and provoking others, mean-spirited teasing, bullying, hitting, yelling, tantruming, defying adults, and being cruel are examples of the early behavioral signs of long-term exposure to such risk factors. Too many children are coming to school with this behavior pattern already established; they are sometimes referred to as "early starters" (Moffitt, 1994). That is, antisocial behavioral characteristics are manifested early in their lives primarily because of their early onset exposure to a host of such risk factors. These children tend to overwhelm teachers and peers with their destructive and highly aversive behavior. In adolescence, their behavioral characteristics often bring them into contact with the law from such activities as fire setting, cruelty to animals, burglary and robbery, assault, vandalism, drug and alcohol abuse, and so on.

Five specific risk factors have been identified through longitudinal research for both delinquency and youth violence. Adolescents who are involved in multiple risk conditions—(a) the mother and/or the father has been arrested, (b) the child has been a client of child protection, (c) one or more family transitions has occurred (death, divorce, trauma, family upheaval), (d) the youth has received special education services, and/or (e) the youth has a history of early and/or severe antisocial behavior—are at severe risk for adoption of a delinquent lifestyle. The Oregon Social Learning Center and the Lane County, Oregon, Department of Youth Services (DYS) jointly developed this profile of risk factors on the basis of careful research and analysis of severely at-risk adolescents referred to the corrections department of Lane County. Any combination of three of these five risk factors puts the youth at an elevated risk for chronic delinquency and a host of associated problems. DHS has reported that a number of youth they see have all five of these risk factors.

The American Psychological Association, in its 1993 seminal report on youth violence, identified four factors that seem to propel at-risk youth toward violent acts:

- Early involvement with drugs and alcohol;
- Easy access to weapons, especially handguns;
- Association with antisocial, deviant peer groups; and
- Pervasive exposure to violence in the media.

These conditions combine destructively far too often among youth who come from at-risk backgrounds. Furthermore, we find that larger and larger numbers of at-risk youth are in states of rage and carry high levels of agitation because of the myriad abuses they've experienced. Such youth are more likely to react aggressively to real or imagined slights and act upon them—often with tragic consequences. They are also more likely to misjudge the motives and social intentions of others toward them because of the hostility and agitation they

carry. As a result, they are frequently engaged in hostile confrontations, and they sometimes issue threats of bodily harm to peers, teachers, and others (Coie, 1994).

SHORT-TERM EFFECTS OF EXPOSURE TO RISK FACTORS

Several negative short-term outcomes are produced by antisocial behavior patterns resulting from exposure to the above risks. In the short term, they include lack of school readiness, antisocial attitudes, high levels of aggression and agitation, rejection by peers and teachers, affiliation with deviant peers, inability to regulate emotional behavior, severe tantrums, refusal to abide by school rules and adult expectations, and so on. Very often the academic engagement levels and academic achievement of severely at-risk students also lag well behind those of their classmates as well as grade-level expectations. These factors set the at-risk child up for school failure and eventual dropout. If school dropout does occur, the risks for delinquent acts skyrocket. It is estimated, for example, that 80% of daytime burglaries across the United States are committed by out-of-school youth (Crowe, 1995).

Thus, the risks to which larger and larger numbers of our children and youth are exposed tend to put them on a path leading to very negative, destructive outcomes. Unless they are diverted from this path relatively early in their lives and school careers, severely at-risk children are very likely to adopt antisocial behavior as a lifestyle choice during their later development.

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES OF AN ANTISOCIAL LIFESTYLE

The long-term outcomes of investment in an antisocial behavior pattern are very destructive and extremely costly to our society. These longer term outcomes quite often include the following: delinquency, school failure and dropout, dishonorable discharges from the military, severe depression, alcohol and drug abuse, violence toward others, lifelong dependence on social service systems, appearance on community mental health registers, incarceration, and higher hospitalization and mortality rates (Kazdin, 1985; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992).

We find that severely at-risk youth have a high frequency of discipline problems in school, with many referrals to the front office initiated by their teachers. By the later elementary grades, they tend to have chronic disciplinary problems. These same students often begin having contacts with law enforcement in the middle and high school years (or earlier). There is a moderately strong relationship between a very high level of conduct

problems in school and arrestable offenses committed outside school (Loeber & Farrington, 1998). To the extent that this relationship is consistent, it may allow for the earlier identification of at-risk students who are likely to become offenders outside the school setting.

For example, we've found in our longitudinal studies of antisocial youth that it is possible to make relatively accurate long-term predictions about the arrest status of at-risk fifth graders by using three simple school measures:

1. The number of discipline contacts the student has during the school year,
2. The amount of negative behavior a student typically displays with classmates on the playground and that is reciprocated by peers, and
3. The teacher's impression of the student's social skills as reflected in teacher ratings.

These three measures, recorded on our 80-member longitudinal sample of antisocial boys when they were in the fifth grade, correctly identified approximately 80% of these same at-risk boys as either arrested or not arrested when they were in the 10th grade (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995; Walker & McConnell, 1995).

We have the ability to find these at-risk children and youth early, but we generally prefer to wait—to not do anything—and hope that they grow out of their problems. In far too many cases, in the absence of intervention and appropriate supports for their emerging behavior problems, they grow into and adopt an antisocial behavior pattern during their school careers (Reid, 1993).

It should be noted that some students adopt an antisocial behavior pattern during adolescence but *do not* come from an at-risk background. These youth are referred to as “later starters.” Although such students can become delinquent, they are much less at risk, as a general rule, than “early starters.” Most will come out of this behavioral aberration within a few years. Occasionally, however, some of these youth will become severely delinquent and/or violent and retain their at-risk status into adulthood (Lynam, 1996; Moffitt, 1994).

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

What can be done to reduce and offset the effects of the risk factors to which more and more of our youth are being subjected? First and foremost, we need to reduce and eliminate as many of these risks as possible. As a society, we must recommit ourselves to raising our children safely and effectively. We seem to have lost our capacity to do so on a broad scale. Thousands of families are currently in crisis because of the stressors to which they are exposed (i.e., poverty, unemployment, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and so on). The resulting chaos negatively affects their children and provides a

fertile breeding ground for the development of antisocial behavior.

Providing Parent Training and Supports

A very powerful knowledge base exists regarding parent-child relationships and the forms of parenting behavior that produce positive and negative outcomes in children. This knowledge base has provided the foundation for the development of a number of parent training modules, materials, and courses of instruction designed to teach positive and effective parenting practices. Providing supports, delivering respite care, and developing competent parenting skills are huge challenges that we as a society must confront in order to address this complex problem.

Patterson and his colleagues have spent decades identifying the parenting practices that produce healthy, well-adjusted children (Patterson et al., 1992). Such practices involve consistent, fair discipline that is never harsh or severely punitive; careful monitoring and supervision of children's activities, peer associates, and whereabouts; positive family management techniques; involvement in the child's daily life; daily debriefings about the child's experiences; and the teaching of problem-solving techniques. We have to find ways to provide opportunities for families to become aware of these parenting skills and to learn how to master them. Insuring that family resource centers are attached to “X” number of schools across a school district to provide parental access to this information is an increasingly viable option for addressing family needs in this regard. We should also teach these parenting techniques to all our youth prior to their becoming parents.

School-Based Prevention Applications

We need to make the school's role in the prevention of disruptive, antisocial behavior patterns an effective reality. We, as educators, tend to give lip service to prevention strategies but are generally unwilling to invest in them at the necessary levels because of suspicions about their effectiveness and worries about their long-term costs. Walker and his colleagues (Walker et al., 1996) have described an integrated model for the prevention of antisocial behavior patterns within the context of schooling that involves primary, secondary, and tertiary forms of prevention. Primary prevention strategies use universal interventions, such as schoolwide discipline and behavior management systems, grade-level teaching of violence prevention skills, and effective instruction, which are designed to keep problems from emerging. Secondary prevention strategies are more costly, intensive, and designed for addressing the problems and skill deficits of children and youth who are already showing clear signs of their at-risk status. Primary prevention strategies are not of sufficient intensity and strength to effectively re-

mediate the problems of children and youth who require secondary prevention strategies. Finally, tertiary prevention strategies are designed for the most severely at-risk children and youth whom schools must attempt to accommodate. Generally, their problems demand resources, supports, interventions, and services that cannot be provided by schools alone (i.e., wraparound services and interagency partnerships are necessary to accommodate the needs of these students and their families).

Figure 2 illustrates these three prevention approaches and the approximate proportion of the student population that will require and likely respond to each type of prevention. We currently have a pipeline literally filled with at-risk students who are experiencing traumatic behavioral events and outcomes as they progress through it. If we respond only reactively and rely exclusively upon secondary and tertiary strategies, applied after these destructive events and outcomes are manifested, we will continue to invest larger and larger amounts of our resources in return for weaker and weaker therapeutic effects and outcomes. There will always be students who come to school with such severe behavioral involvements that secondary and even tertiary supports and interventions will be necessary from day one of their school careers. That said, however, we can make much greater and more effective use of primary prevention strategies in the school setting than we traditionally have.

As noted, universal interventions are used for achieving primary prevention goals. It is estimated that 80% to 90% of a school's student population will respond positively, at some level, to these universal intervention

strategies. Those who do not respond to primary prevention approaches (anywhere from 5% to 15% of the school's population) select themselves out as candidates needing secondary and/or tertiary prevention strategies and approaches. However, for those students who require more intensive, individualized interventions (approximately 1% to 7% of all students), the existence of a well-designed and carefully implemented primary prevention base in the school setting provides a powerful context for their effective application.

Developing Academic Competence

As noted, academic failure and especially difficulties in reading are strong correlates of delinquency in adolescence (Maguin & Loeber, 1996). The evidence is overwhelming as to the existence and consistency of this relationship. An intense focus on developing the academic skills of at-risk youth is an essential part of any comprehensive strategy to address their needs and to divert them from the path that leads to antisocial behavior and often later delinquency. All students, and especially at-risk students, should be taught to read as well as they possibly can in the primary grades.

The Importance of Supporting Schools

As a society, we have to give greater support to our public school systems, which are struggling to educate an increasingly diverse and at-risk student population. Our schools are expected to compensate for the damaging ef-

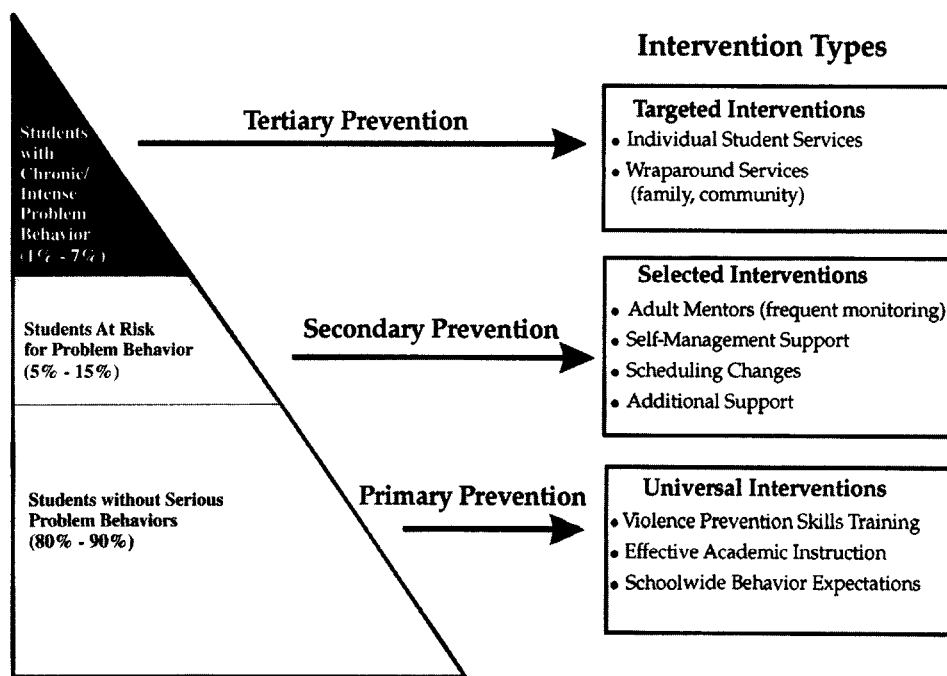


Figure 2. Preventing violent and destructive behavior in schools: primary, secondary, and tertiary systems of intervention.

Home - School - Community Collaboration

- ➔ **Early Intervention Services**
(more cost-effective than later interventions, e.g., prison)
- ➔ **Proactive Family Support Systems**
(e.g., parenting skills, prenatal care, employment support, home management skills, substance abuse counseling)
- ➔ **Proactive Community Support Systems**
(e.g., supervised care/rec. programs during nonschool hours, strengthened community organizations, economic revitalization in low-income areas)
- ➔ **Proactive School Support Strategies**
(e.g., schoolwide discipline system, social skills curriculum/training, education relating to substance abuse & firearms)
- ➔ **Ensuring Academic Competence**
(e.g., academic competence contributes to self-esteem)
- ➔ **Full-Service Schools**
(e.g., mental health, health, social services, juvenile justice)

Figure 3. Key elements of a comprehensive approach to prevention.

fects of the background risks to which so many of our students are now exposed; those unfortunate effects spill over into the school setting. At the same time, we seem to be withdrawing fiscal resources from basic school operations and making it increasingly possible for nontraditional schools to access those resources and to pull the better students away from public education. Weakening the ability of our public schools to accommodate a diverse student population is a dangerous movement in our society.

Near the end of his life, in a speech delivered in upstate New York, Mark Twain spoke eloquently and perceptively about the issue of investing in public schools. He related a true story about a Missouri township that was considering closing several of its schools because they were too expensive and regarded as not needed. A farmer who had heard of this planned move attended a town meeting where the issue was being debated at length. After listening to the discussion, the farmer observed that he didn't see how the township would save any money because for every school that was closed, they'd just have to build a new jail. A century later, this prophecy is coming true as our society systematically underfunds public schools and builds jails at a rate unprecedented in our history.

Collaborative Interagency Prevention Approaches

In our view, a far better solution is to create full-service schools that (a) have an expanded capacity to address the complex needs of today's school population and (b) can address true prevention goals through effective collaborations forged between schools, families, and communities.

Figure 3 contains the key elements that are necessary to create such full-service schools and to address prevention goals, strategies, and outcomes in a manner that will be sufficient to arrest and turn around the rising tide of at-risk children and youth we see at the schoolhouse door. We need to build effective partnerships between families, schools, social service systems, public safety departments, churches, and other agencies to create the socializing experiences that will give all our youth a chance to develop along positive lines. Metzler et al. (1998) have recently described the elements of a comprehensive approach to the prevention of child and adolescent behavior problems that integrates family and community-based approaches to strengthening the application of universal as well as individually targeted behavior management programs in schools. We need to carefully research prevention models of this type and learn how to scale them up so they can be adopted and implemented in a cost-effective manner by school systems.

CONCLUSION

We have a violent history as a country, and many experts argue that we are, by nature, a violent culture. As a society, we should hold up a mirror and examine ourselves in this regard in order to take a good look at what we have become, how we got here, and how we might change for the better. Grossman (1995) has made a compelling case that we are now the most violent developed society in the world. The tragic spate of school shootings during the 1997–1998 school year offers grim testimony as to how the social toxins and violent images that increasingly pervade our daily lives are registering their negative effects upon our children and youth.


In spite of this grim picture, there are a few encouraging trends. According to recent annual reports of crime indices, adult crime seems to be on a downward spiral. It is imperative that we discover why this is the case and figure out how to make this trend continue. As we embark on a new century, we have the occasion to make a fresh start in this regard. We can ill afford not to.

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