Can SEL Reduce School Violence?

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A researcher says teaching empathy, problem solving, and self-control could lead to safer schools.

In light of recent highly publicized and tragic incidents, such as the February 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, school communities are increasingly concerned about student and teacher safety. School leaders, politicians, and community members are frantically seeking solutions to the problem of school violence. Many of the ideas proposed have focused on security and "hardening" schools, and some lawmakers have even suggested arming teachers. One strategy that is more likely to work, if used as part of a comprehensive public health approach, is improved social-emotional learning (SEL).

A Proactive Approach to Violence Prevention

Although it may be hard to believe given recent tragic events, fewer than 3 percent of all youth violent deaths occur at school, and this statistic has been stable after actually decreasing in the early 1990s (Zhang, Musu-Gillette, & Oudekerk, 2016). However, the loss of even one student in schools is unacceptable—as is the climate of anxiety and fear that school shootings have created. In addition, other forms of school violence, including bullying, fighting, gang violence, use of weapons, and sexual harassment and abuse, can also have devastating effects on student victims and bystanders.

All forms of violence in schools are important to recognize and prevent. But to decrease their prevalence in schools, we need to change our mindset from reaction to prevention, guided by a public health approach. In particular, we need to teach self-control, empathy, and problem solving through difficult situations.

Research has found that social-emotional skills can lead to safer schools. A landmark meta-analysis by Durlak and colleagues (2011) examined 213 studies of K–12 school-based SEL programs and found that students in schools that implemented such programs had significant improvements in social-emotional skills (such as identifying emotions, perspective taking, and conflict resolution) and fewer conduct problems. These schools also reported less aggression and delinquent acts, showing a direct link between SEL and safer schools.

School SEL programs can also reduce bullying. Today, all 50 states have anti-bullying legislation, and a wide array of programs and strategies have been developed to reduce bullying. But while studies have shown that bullying-prevention programs have had mixed results, there is growing evidence that SEL approaches may address the problem more effectively. Much of the research on SEL and bullying has been conducted on the Committee for Children's curriculum called Second Step (previously Steps to Respect). After two years, schools implementing the Second Step curriculum saw decreases in bullying, victimization, and other aggressive behaviors (Frey et al., 2009) and less frequent homophobic name-calling and sexual harassment (Espelage, Low, & Jimerson, 2014).

In addition, in a recent study we conducted at the Alberti Center for Bullying Abuse Prevention, where I am director, we found a direct relationship between students' reports of the school staff members' use of SEL techniques and decreased bullying and personal victimization at school (Nickerson et al., 2018). More specifically, students who said they were taught to understand how others think and feel, control their behavior, take responsibility for their actions, and solve conflicts said there was less bullying in their school. We also found that students in schools that regularly employed SEL techniques had higher levels of social-emotional competencies, which thereby reduced bullying and victimization (Nickerson et al., 2018).

For educators, just being aware of students' social-emotional potential can make a difference in their trajectories. In one study, my colleague and I asked members of multidisciplinary teams in schools to read a psychoeducational evaluation report on a student with emotional disturbance (Donovan & Nickerson, 2007). One group's report included data on the student's social-emotional skills and the other did not. Interestingly, the team members who read the report that included social-emotional strengths had higher expectations and predicted more positive academic and social outcomes for the student. Although this study did not address violence or bullying directly, it showed that attending to social-emotional strengths of students can lead teachers to expect more positive outcomes, which in turn could lead students to behave in more positive ways that contribute to a safer school climate.

Finally, social-emotional skills may curb future violent behavior. Research has found that learning social and coping skills can protect bullying perpetrators from negative life outcomes such as escalating aggression or violent behavior (Ttofi et al., 2014). In other words, if a middle school student is bullying others, but is taught more positive behaviors such as sharing, donating, cooperating, and volunteering instead of being disciplined and punished in traditional ways, he is less likely to continue on a path of violence.

Youth are also less likely to become involved in bullying if they feel like they belong and are connected to their schools (Goldweber, Waasdorp, & Bradshaw, 2013)—school climate qualities that SEL instruction can foster. Likewise, students

are more likely to "see something, say something" if they feel connected to the adults in their school. We do not often hear about the times that violence has been stopped, but many school shootings or other violent events have been prevented because a concerned student or adult noticed an issue of concern and brought it to the attention of the proper authorities.

Programs and Techniques

Schools can use assessments of SEL to identify skills and strategies to target for particular classrooms or individual students. The Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA) is a strength-based measure that can help with this process (LeBuffe, Shapiro, & Naglieri, 2009/2014). In addition, the Evo Social/Emotional Assessment and Intervention System provides growth strategies for each competency that teachers and schools can implement with the whole school, groups, or individual students. The strategies include interactive lessons to teach students SEL skills; select approaches from research-based SEL curricula, such as Second Step and the 4Rs Program; and foundational practices, including targeted classroom routines and rituals, that establish a positive SEL culture and climate throughout the school year. Although careful selection and implementation of sequential, active, and explicit programs is important, there are other ways that SEL techniques can be used with students, both formally and informally. Many schools have dedicated circle time or advisory periods during which students have a chance to discuss and share feelings about events, issues, and concerns. Some teachers integrate themes about relationship skills, empathy, problem solving, and conflict resolution into their instruction on literacy, social studies, or health. A great resource for elementary educators interested in this approach is Building Social Skills with Books, which offers books and corresponding lesson plans for teaching social-emotional learning through children's literature. Teaching Tolerance, part of the Southern Poverty Law Center, also provides classroom resources to bring social-emotional learning into the curriculum.

There is less research on the impact of these more informal approaches, although based on the findings of the recent study we conducted (Nickerson et al., 2018), students' reports of teachers' use of SEL techniques (not necessarily structured SEL curricula) were associated with reduced bullying and victimization. More research is needed to fully understand the type of programming and frequency needed to impact school safety outcomes.

Part of the Plan

Violence in schools is a complex societal issue and must be addressed in comprehensive ways. Schools need to implement universal approaches to promote physical and psychological safety. In addition to incorporating SEL into the curriculum, this includes having clear and consistent codes of conduct for behavior, as well as comprehensive safety and crisis plans that are exercised regularly (through drills, tabletop exercises, and other means), so that everyone can know how to respond to violence and other crisis events.

Nor can schools do it alone. There are multiple individual, family, community, and school influences that interact to support or inhibit violence. School leaders must collaborate and partner with community-based service providers (mental health, law enforcement, and emergency responders) to promote protective factors for youth who are at risk for violence. Trained threat-assessment teams can identify which threats are likely to be carried out. There are also wider social, political, and cultural issues that must be addressed to prevent and target violence.

But one step that should not be overlooked in the quest for safe and respectful schools is the proactive approach of teaching social-emotional skills that will equip students with the competencies to solve problems with others, regulate their emotions, and develop healthy interpersonal relationships. There is promising evidence that this component of school-safety plans may be the most important.

Guiding Questions

› Does your school or district include SEL in its school-safety plans. Why or why not?

› Nickerson says that educators' awareness of students' "social-emotional potential can make a difference in their trajectories." What does this mean for you?

› Nickerson explains that students' sense of belongingness or connectedness at school can reduce bullying and violence. What steps could you or your team take to foster this sense among students?