

Preventing Violence by Promoting Competence: A Developmental Perspective

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Point 1:

A key developmental task of the preschool years is the socialization of aggression.

Rates of aggression are at their highest during the preschool years.

Rates of physical aggression peak at age 3.

The challenge to prevention in the preschool years is not to keep children from learning aggression, but rather to teach children the skills and competencies that allow them to inhibit their aggressive impulses and replace them with socially acceptable alternatives.

Children who fail to learn aggression control during preschool:

- Enter school at risk for stable and escalating behavior problems
- Risk learning problems and academic delays
- Risk peer rejection and victimization
- Risk adolescent problems in areas of school failure, substance use, and criminal activity

Point 2:

In order to inhibit aggressive impulses, children need to develop competencies in areas of communication skills, emotional understanding, and self regulation.

The development of language, self control and social skills are intertwined:

- Children with delays in one domain often show delays in another
- There are many common risk factors, such as socioeconomic disadvantage

The development process of transactional:

- Language skills foster self-regulation and social interaction
- Self-regulation enables a child to learn from social interactions
- Social interaction provides a context and motivation for language and social learning

Point 3:

Prevention programs that include a comprehensive focus on promoting child competencies in cognitive and social-emotional skills are more likely to be successful than those that focus narrowly on the suppression of aggressive behaviors.

At the grade school level, research has demonstrated the preventive effectiveness of school-based curricula that promote the language, self-regulation, and social competencies that provide children with alternatives to aggressive behavior.

Children can learn social-emotional competencies in the same way they learn cognitive skills:

- Teacher-led instruction
- Multiple, guided practice opportunities
- Performance feedback and reinforcement
- A supportive classroom context

The preschool PATHS Curriculum uses teacher-led stories and discussions along with hands-on extension games and activities to teach skills in four domains:

- Self control and emotion regulation
- Emotion awareness and communication
- Friendship skills and positive peer relations
- Social problem-solving

Point 4:

The effects of direct instruction (child-focused curricula) may be greatest when coordinated with teacher training and parent training designed to enhance support for child competencies across settings.

Effective prevention programs have coordinated child-focused, parent-focused, and school-focused interventions:

- Montreal Longitudinal-Experimental Study
- Fast Track Program
- Early Alliance
- Incredible Years Program

Point 5:

By providing a cohesive set of preventive interventions that vary in level of intensity (universal, selective, indicated), children and families at varying levels of risk are provided a sufficient and appropriate level of preventive support.

Prevention programs may target:

- The population at large (Universal)
- Children and families with identified risk factors (Selective)
- Children and families with identified problems (Indicated)

Rather than viewing these levels of prevention services as competing options, prevention research suggests that different levels of preventive interventions may be coordinated and nested, providing a cohesive network of prevention services.

Conclusions:

- The prevention of social-emotional problems should begin in early childhood when learning to control aggression is a normative developmental task.
- The capacity to control aggression relies on a developmental foundation of supportive competencies, including language, self-regulatory, and social skills.
- Hence, strategies to promote the control of aggression should be integrated with strategies to promote these inter-connected cognitive and social skills.

Conclusions:

- School-based curricula that provide direct instruction and support for child skill development should be coordinated with teacher and parent training to enhance support for child competencies across settings.
- Preventive interventions may be most effective when they are organized to provide cohesive service across levels of intensity and child/family need (e.g., universal, selective, indicated.)