

Violence, Youth & Gangs

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Psychology Month, Dufferin-Peel C.D.S.B.

The recent concerns about the growth of youth violence in communities and schools have generated many studies to understand why people become violent, and finding ways to improve school climate and prevent violence. One growing source of violence and aggression is youth gangs which have expanded during the past decade.

Gangs pose a serious problem for our schools. Students at schools with gangs are more than twice as likely to be victims of violent crimes, have greater access to illegal drugs, and more often report seeing guns at school. Gangs are self-formed groups who identify themselves by a name, are associated with a particu-

lar neighborhood or 'turf', and often engage in recurrent criminal activity. They display symbols of their group in dress (bandanas or hats), colors, tattoos, graffiti, hand signals, and language. Male gang members outnumber female gang members by 20 to 1, and the age of members ranges from 12 and 24.

Boys join gangs to gain respect, attention, power, material gain, self-defense, and a sense of belonging. They see membership in a gang as offering pride, friendship, increase in self-worth and status, and excitement. Although only a small percentage of youth join gangs, homicide and assault are more

likely to be committed by gang members than non-gang members. In addition, gang violence has increased in levels and in lethality in recent years with the availability of firearms. Girls join gangs for protection and are largely exploited by male gang members.

Gangs also offer an identity and social recognition to adolescents who feel powerless, frustrated or are lacking traditional support structures such as family and school success. Control of 'turf' is essential to the well being of the gang, and local schools then become part of a gang's territory and source of new members.

Managing and preventing gangs in school requires a balanced approach of prevention, intervention, and enforcement



strategies. Gangs are a community problem, but as schools are part of the community they must have close ties with the police and criminal justice system. Strategies that mobilize both school and community resources to offer viable alternatives to youth gang membership are most effective.

Schools are an important part of prevention strategies, and can teach skills that aid children in learning alternatives to violent behaviors such as problem-solving skills, peer negotiation skills, and anger management. Providing after-school activities, study groups to improve grades and assure graduation can all help to divert youth from crime. School wide educational programs about issues of violence, drugs, conflict resolution, cultural sensitivity, and racial discrimination are also important parts of a preventative strategy to deal with youth violence, delinquency and gangs.

Dufferin-Peel employs many of these strategies and programs as part of the Catholic school curriculum.

- Making schools welcoming and supportive helps to make youth feel they are valued members of society.
- Our secondary schools require students to wear uniforms, which discourages gang apparel.
- Enforcing policies on underage drinking, use of drugs, and weapons in the school are factors in suppressing gang activity.
- Moral and ethical education programs such as the Virtues Program help establish values.
- Anti-bullying and conflict resolution training provide alternative ways of coping with conflict.

- Mentoring, peer-tutoring, and other in-school supports help students vulnerable to gang recruitment.

Intervention may be needed for students that have been directly involved in gangs or apprehended by law enforcement. These students need to work closely with police and other law enforcement units, as well as social service and mental health agencies who can provide interventions with youth and their families to help them develop more acceptable ways of dealing with feelings.

We all need to continue to work together with our communities, law enforcement, and our students and their families to help prevent violence and discourage gang membership.



For further information contact your school psychology staff or Dr. Debra Lean, Chief Psychologist.

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