

# PREVENTION IN COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY:

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## PREVENTING SCHOOL VIOLENCE THROUGH ESTABLISHING SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS

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School violence has always been existent in our high schools, but the highly publicized shootings in the 1990s in Littleton, Colorado, Jonesboro, Arkansas, and Paducah, Kentucky received extensive media attention resulting in a dramatic increase in public awareness and concern that such violent acts could occur in their community. In 2001 the Surgeon General put out a call to recognize and confront the concern of youth violence in the United States (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Research has shown increasingly high rates of adolescents are engaging in violent behavior (Farrington, 2004). Adolescents commit more violent crimes than any other age group (Pastore & Maguire, 2002). In fact, 27% of serious violent crimes and victimizations that occur in the United States are committed by individuals under the age of 18 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1999). Thus, it is no surprise that many of these violent behaviors take place in school considering adolescents spend a significant portion of their waking hours in this very social, and often diverse, environment.

School violence in this context refers to taking part in a physical fight and/or using or threatening another person with a weapon. Hence, although seemingly obvious, school violence is considered a “problem” because it has negative impacts ranging from psychological (e.g., posttraumatic stress) to physical (e.g., death) at the individual and institutional levels (McNeely & Falci, 2004; Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006; Smith & Sandhu, 2004). Furthermore, the prevalence and concern about school violence is not a secret or unknown fact (see Jimerson, Morrison, Pletcher, Furlong, 2006). However, “what to do,” or how to prevent violence is a little more ambiguous. Within the past

decade the problem has been studied from multiple perspectives in an effort to understand the causes and how to prevent traumatic and sometimes deadly school violence. There are now some signs of promise with research beginning to show trends that seem to be efficacious in preventing school violence. One area that has received a great deal of attention, and appears very robust, is research demonstrating that the more students feel connected to their school, the less likely they are to commit acts of school violence (Derzon, 2006; Karcher, 2002).

### School Violence & School Connectedness Link

The quality of relationships between students and the faculty, staff, and administration of the school is often referred to as school connectedness. This approach focuses on positive individual traits, thoughts, emotions, and strengths that can be fostered by key groups of individuals within schools, and even the community. Rather than being simply problem-focused, fostering school connectedness utilizes a positive approach to school violence through preventative, systemic effects. Research has shown that students who feel connected with school personnel through established trusting relationships appears to not only positively affect academic achievement, socio-emotional well-being (ranging from effective interpersonal skills to feeling less alienated), and resiliency (Karcher, 2004; Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998; Shochet et al., 2006; Smith & Sandhu, 2004; Townsend & McWhirter, 2005), but also appears to have a vital role in preventing school violence (Brookmeyer, Fanti, & Henrich, 2006; Henrich, Brookmeyer, & Shahar, 2005; Karcher, 2002). Figure 1 highlights some of more salient and significant relationships often associated with school connectedness. Overall, purposefully

enhancing school connectedness is significantly more effective than other approaches that emphasize harsh discipline for misbehaving students (e.g., “zero tolerance”) or training to notice warning signs by way of profiling students, which can actually decrease school connectedness (McNeely, Nonne-maker, & Blum, 2002; Smith & Sandhu, 2004).

The need to belong, or feel accepted, is very powerful and can significantly affect emotional adjustment and related cognitive processes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Stated differently, interpersonal attachments can be a significant motivational factor in making decisions and corresponding behavioral responses. Subsequently, the more connected students feel within their school the less likely they are to engage in unhealthy behaviors. For example, in a sample of high school students, Resnick, Harris, and Blum (1993) compared students with high connectedness scores to those with low connectedness scores. Those students reporting high levels of school connectedness were found to have significantly lower rates of emotional distress, suicidal behavior, and violence. Resnick et al. (1997) found similar findings with regard to lower levels of distress, risk behavior, and aggression based upon cross-sectional analysis of interview data from over 12,000 adolescents (grades 7-12) that participated in the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health. In fact, students with high levels of school connectedness have been found to be less likely to be perpetrators of violence (or victims) in both positive and negative school climates (Wilson, 2004). Furthermore, Herrenkohl, Hill, Chung, Guo, Abbott, and Hawkins (2003) found in their prospective study that even youths who experienced aggression at a young age had a lower probability of violence at age 18 if they were later exposed to such protective factors as school connectedness. These high levels of school connectedness seem to largely come from students’ perceptions of being supported, cared for, and respected by school personnel (McNeely et al., 2002).

The premise here is that school personnel, especially counselors and teachers, play a vital role in this process. Targeting these individuals as a main component of enhancing this construct comes

from recent literature indicating that relationships with school personnel is vital in increasing the likelihood of preventing violent acts by students (Daniels, Bradley, Cramer, Winkler, Kinebrew, & Crockett, 2007a, 2007b). For example, the Safe School Initiative, a joint project between the U. S. Secret Service and the U. S. Department of Education, suggest that incidents of targeted school violence rarely are sudden or impulsive non-targeted acts (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). Often times perpetrators, or would-be perpetrators, share their plans of a school violent act with other students before it takes place (O’Toole, 2000). However, students who would normally feel uncomfortable to “rat out” a peer, and keep this information to themselves, are more prone to inform an adult of a potential plan for school violence if they trust and feel connected with this individual. In other words, students are more likely to break the “code of silence” with another adult role model. This is a vital, almost necessary, behavior of the students considering the majority of shooting incidents are stopped by methods other than law enforcement intervention (Vossekuil et al., 2002).

Fostering strengths and providing hope and personal insight through connectedness has also been shown to improve overall psychological well-being (or at least minimize the chances of experiencing mental health distress in the future) based upon longitudinal studies (e.g., Ozer, 2005; Shochet et al., 2006). Thus, not only are students able to identify specific individuals that they feel comfortable with to break this code of silence, they also have the “mental stamina” to take responsibility for speaking up and being able to accept/cope with any social repercussions from other students for not being quiet.

### Conclusion

This research linking the connection between establishing student school connectedness and school violence should be viewed as a call to school personnel (e.g., counselors, teachers, and administration) to recognize that they can have a significant impact on preventing school violence simply by establishing trusting relationships. In other words, the concept of preventing school violence can often be

perceived as a daunting macro-level problem to be handled by formal protocols – e.g., “what can I, one counselor/teacher, really do to prevent school violence?” Although such formal protocols are important, the message here is that the consistent application of fostering trusting relationships and meaningful interactions with students can be done at the micro-level. Of course, if school personnel are individually effective at enhancing their students’ level of school connectedness then this could ultimately result in macro-level effects.

There is no denying that there are significant acts of school violence occurring in the schools of the U.S. and that these acts can cause significant emotional and physical trauma. What has been presented here is a review of the robust literature demonstrating a significant micro-level relationship between school connectedness and school violence. Counselors can play a significant role in contributing to minimizing school violence. A practical approach for counselors is training and psychoeducation of school personnel that have frequent contact with stu-

dents. Such skills counselors should be aware of in their own interactions and in training school personnel include: providing dignity and respect, trust and acceptance of each student, separating negative behavior from the student, providing positive-reinforcing feedback of desired behaviors, genuine empathy, reflecting feelings, not being afraid to ask questions, and observation of non-baseline student behaviors, which can then be followed up on (Daniels et al., 2008).

In sum, it is vital for counselors to explicitly convey to school personnel and individuals within the community the importance of school connectedness. Due to the seemingly “simple” nature of establishing school connectedness with students, this concept may be perceived as superficial and overlooked. However, establishing school connectedness is not an easy task to achieve with every student and the possible positive consequences (e.g., improved psychological well-being, seeking alternatives from violent behavior) are too significant to ignore. It is not about coming down hard on stu-

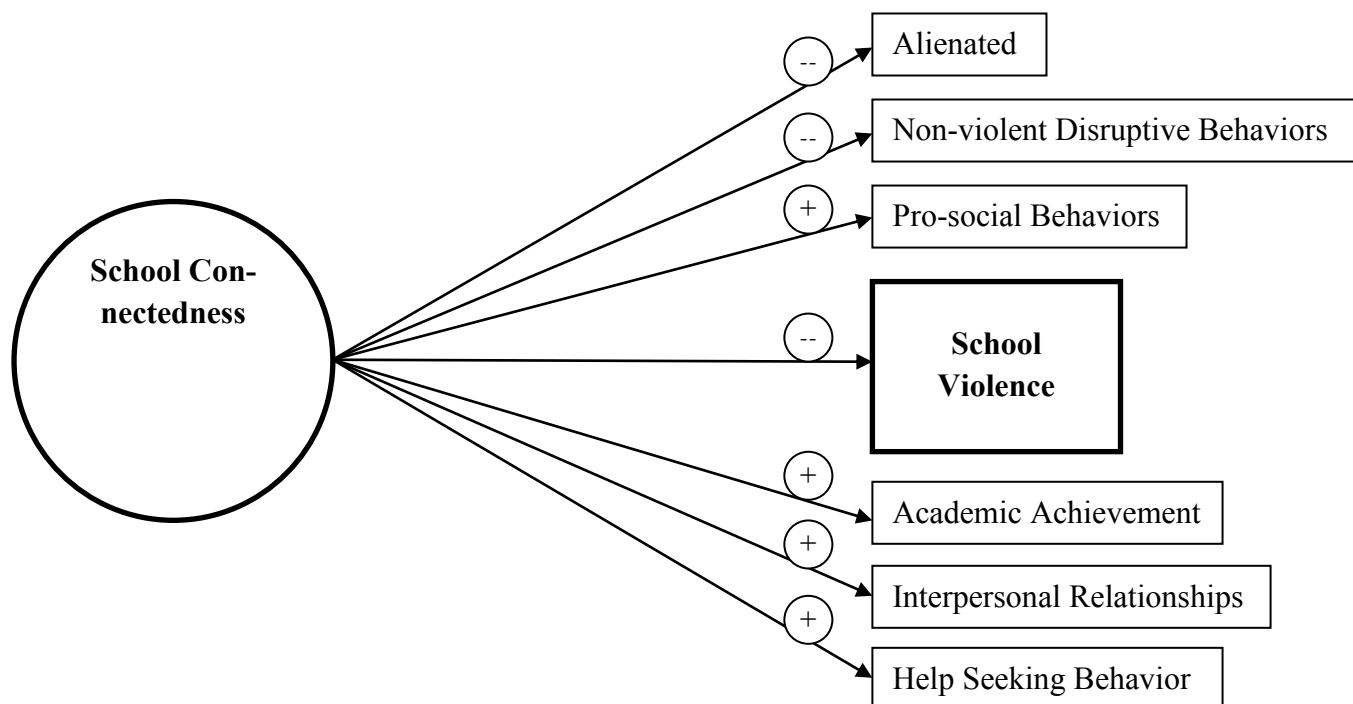


Figure 1. Common School Connectedness Relationships

dents for their mistakes or looking to identify problem students. It is about establishing healthy and trusting relationships with school personnel in the first place, so it is not even necessary to contemplate punitive punishment or weeding out high risk students. In the end, it appears that it comes down to a fundamentally important, but often neglected, relational approach to students that can have one of the greatest impacts in preventing school violence.

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