

Youth Violence Prevention

VIOLENCE: *violence is any physical, mental, emotional form of abuse, discrimination, or hate action that causes harm or hurt to someone else or yourself.* (Composite definition from 118 Coulee Region high school youth attending the Day of Diversity event held in La Crosse, WI. on Nov. 14, 2003).

Why Prevention? According to the Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, prevention enables people to stay healthy and enables communities to strengthen environments which promote health and to change those conditions which predispose individuals to develop problems. Over the past decade, survey results on a local, state, and national level are showing decreases in youth violence. This is a positive trend that can and should be carried into the future with prevention methods.

If we understand which risk factors contribute to violent behavior and which protective factors decrease the chances of violent behavior, then we can begin to make a difference. (For more information on risk and protective factors related to youth violence, please read *Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General.*) Though support from professionals and the public sector is needed, much of the responsibility and capacity for the healthy development of youth is in the hands of the people who interact with young people every day – families, friends, neighbors, seniors, law enforcement, businesses, religious institutions, and other citizens. In essence, youth violence prevention is the responsibility of every one of us.

The Search Institute January 2002 report, *Developmental Assets: A Profile of Our Youth*, surveyed 1,921 La Crosse district students to assess the self-reported health and well-being of middle and high school aged youth. In September 2000, 1,546 students in Crawford and Grant counties completed the survey; and in December 2000, 315 Viroqua Area School students completed the survey.

A sampling of survey findings include:

Risk-taking behavior/pattern	Crawford & Grant Counties Grades 6 - 12	La Crosse School District Grades 6, 8, 10, 12	Viroqua Area Schools Grades 6, 7, 9, 11
Hit someone once or more in the 12 months prior to the survey.	35%	31%	32%
Physically hurt someone once or more in the 12 months prior to the survey.	14%	12%	8%
Used a weapon to get something from a person once or more in the 12 months prior to the survey.	3%	3%	3%
Had been in a group fight once or more in the 12 months prior to the survey.	25%	20%	19%
Carried a weapon for protection once or more in the 12 months prior to the survey.	7%	8%	8%
Threatened physical harm to someone once or more in the 12 months prior to the survey.	28%	23%	22%
Have attempted suicide one or more times prior to the survey.	15%	16%	13%
Have engaged in three or more acts of fighting, hitting, injuring a person, carrying or using a weapon, or threatening physical harm in the 12 months prior to the survey	31%	25%	26%

Survey findings from the 1993 and 2003 *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* include:

Wisconsin & National Highlights	Wisconsin		National	
	1993	/ 2003	1993	/ 2003
Carried a weapon anywhere	19%	13%	22%	17%
Carried a weapon on school property	9%	3%	12%	6%
Carrying a gun anywhere	9%	5%	8%	6%
Threatened by a weapon on school property	8%	5%	7%	9%

Additional findings include:

Male students had a significantly higher prevalence rate than female students on nearly every measure of violence and weapon use, Wisconsin, 2003.		
	Males	Females
Carried a weapon anywhere	20%	5%
Carried a gun anywhere	8%	2%
Physical fight anywhere	39%	24%
Physical fight on school property	15%	8%

Listed below are a few tips to help prevent violence in schools, adapted from the American Psychological Association's *Raising Children to Resist Violence: What You Can Do*, and from the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice's *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools*.

For Parents:

- ★ Give your children consistent love and attention. Every child needs a strong, loving, relationship with a parent or other adult to feel safe and secure and to develop a sense of trust.
- ★ Children learn by example, so show your children appropriate behavior by the way you act. Settle arguments with calm words, not with yelling, hitting, slapping, or spanking. If you punish your children by hitting, slapping, or spanking them, you are showing them that it is okay to hit others.
- ★ Teach your children non-aggressive ways to solve problems by discussing problems with them, asking them to consider what might happen if they use violence to solve problems, and talking about what might happen if they solve problems without violence.
- ★ Listen to your children and respect them. They will be more likely to listen and respect others if they are listened to and treated with respect.

For Students:

- ★ Be a role model by never physically or verbally harming, bullying, teasing, or intimidating others.
- ★ When you are angry, take a few deep breaths, and imagine yourself on a lake or at the beach or anywhere that makes you feel peaceful. After you are more calm, identify what is making you upset. Decide on your options for handling the problem, such as talking the problem out calmly with the people involved, avoiding the problem by staying away from certain people, or diffusing the problem by resolving to take it less seriously. After you decide what to do (or not do) and act on your decision, be sure to look back and decide if what you did helped the situation.
- ★ If you feel intensely angry, fearful, anxious, or depressed, talk about it with an adult you can trust.

For School Officials:

- ★ Develop a comprehensive violence prevention plan that does not label or stigmatize children. Involve staff, parents, students, and members of the community in the creation and implementation of this plan.
- ★ Create a school environment that is safe and responsive to all children. Students should be able to share their needs, fears, concerns, and anxieties, and safely report threats.
- ★ Discuss safety issues openly. Schools can reduce the risk of violence by teaching children about the dangers of firearms as well as appropriate ways to resolve conflicts and express anger.

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References:

American Psychological Association www.apa.org

Center for Disease Control and Prevention, National Youth Risk Behavior Survey: 1991-2003 www.cdc.gov/yrbs

Developmental Assets: A Profile of Your Youth - School District of La Crosse, WI. Search Institute, 2002; Participating Schools in Crawford and Grant Counties, Search Institute, 2000; Viroqua Area Schools, Search Institute, 2001.

U.S. Dept. of Education www.ed.gov

Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/youthviolence

Wisconsin Dept. of Health and Social Services

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Youth Risk Behavior Survey www.dpi.state.wi.us/dlsea/sspw/yrbsindx.html