

Before (and After) the Active Shooter Drill: Peer Mediation and Peaceful Conflict Resolution

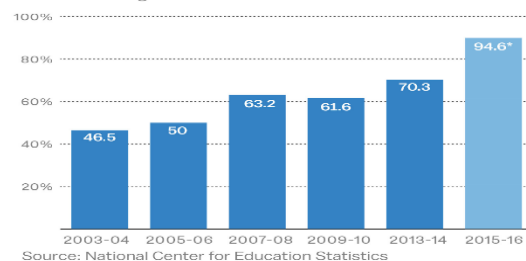
By Darcy Thompson and Cynthia Morton

The carefree and safe school environment that many generations of Americans took for granted is no longer a foregone expectation. American youth enter today's classrooms with more than algebra and science on their minds. "Why did 17 families have to receive the news their children didn't make it home from school?" asked Olivia Covington, a New Jersey high school senior, regarding the Marjory Stoneman Douglas 2018 shooting in Parkland, Florida (Covington, 2018). When the now familiar active shooter drill alarm sounds, how do today's students and teachers know that it truly is a drill and not someone armed with an AK-47 assault weapon coming down the hallway, aiming at children? When a school shooting does tragically occur, the headlines that follow show the images of the victims followed by the face, home and social media posts of the assailant. Reporters interview peers, family, school staff and mental health experts. They ask, "Why did the suspect target this campus?" "What was their motivation?" "Were there any warning signs?" "How could this tragedy have been avoided?"

What are we currently doing to prevent school violence? Active shooter drills are standard

routines on most campuses, as indicated in Table A. Metal detectors and armed resource officers are becoming more commonplace on school campuses. California State University Professor Stephen Brock stated, "If you create a place where kids feel that adults care about them as a person and want to connect with them, it increases the probability that if there is going to be an act of violence, then adults will know about it and act to stop it" (Brodsky, 2016). One approach to preventing gun violence is to create a change in mindset from reactionary to prevention policies (Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence, 2018). It's important to first identify and then address the causative factors.

The rise of mass shooting drills at US public schools
The percentage of public schools that drill students to respond to mass shootings has doubled in the United States



Source: National Center for Education Statistics
Note: Because of a change in how NCES collects data, the 2015-16 figure represents "lockdown drills," a broader designation that includes – but is not limited to – active shooter response. (NCES surveys from 2003 to 2014 collected data on emergency drills specifically involving "shootings")

Vox

Table A

Who are these active shooters? "In general, people do not switch instantly from non-violence to violence. The path toward violence is an evolutionary one with signposts along the way," states New York attorney Kaila Eisenkraft (2015). Rita Cantrell Schellenberg, a school counselor, noted in her doctoral dissertation on school violence that several studies found peer aggression has its origins in middle childhood. It is during this period of childhood development that children begin to conform to peer interactions, either negatively or positively, develop patterns of reacting to conflict, and create cognitions for future interactions (Schellenberg, 2005).

Researchers believe this is the period in which skill development for conflict and aggression are

imperative. A “very small number of bullied children might retaliate through extremely violent measures. In 12 of 15 school shooting cases in the 1990s, the shooters had a history of being bullied” (“Effects of Bullying,” 2017). “(A)lmost 30%, or 5.7 million, of United States youth either bully or are the target of bullying, or both” (The Kids, n.d.). Educators must address the various causal issues and create a more positive school climate for all children.

How do schools build more positive social emotional learning (SEL) environments; i.e., school climates, that reduce bullying and negative peer interactions? A wide variety of studies have found that peer mediation is a promising strategy for improving school climate. According to attorney and mediator Jeanne Asherman, (2002), conflict resolution skills, like peer mediation, should be included in school curriculum and discipline protocols to decrease potential violence. In the peer mediation process, students are trained as neutral parties who facilitate a conversation between their peers to peacefully resolve a conflict. Students sit down with the peer mediators and address their concerns, such as name-calling, rumors, isolation, or destruction of property. There is evidence that mediation can lead to fewer fights, a reduction in office referrals, and decreased rates of suspension. Also, mediation has been shown to increase self-esteem and academic achievement. It is critical to remember that the goal of peer mediation is to teach youngsters how to resolve their own conflicts before they escalate to bullying, violence or a school shooting. Richard Cohen, a pioneer in the field of peer mediation and the founder of School Mediation Associates, cautions that bullying and cyberbullying are not appropriate issues to be handled by peer mediators (2002). All children should know how to safely and anonymously report bullying to a teacher, counselor or other responsible adult. Every sound peer mediation program should have an intake process that screens for reports of bullying and threats of harm to oneself or others. Staff and students must report bullying, serious and violent threats to the campus administration or appropriate authorities as outlined in the school district code of conduct.

Why should schools include peer mediation as a critical part of their overall strategic plan? Texas, along with many other states, has passed legislation including “[David’s Law](#),” S.B. No. 179 (2017), that mandates schools address suicide prevention and anti-bullying. “The (peer mediation) program fosters feelings of belonging, ownership, and control over school life. It decreases the tension that results from unresolved and escalating conflicts. It improves communication among students and between students, teachers, administrators, and parents. It preserves old friendships and begins new ones when former adversaries become friends. All of this helps make schools safer and more productive places” (Cohen, 2005). Therefore, schools must make a financial commitment to research available public and private grants and dedicate a portion of their campus budget allotments to incorporate peer mediation programs for the benefit of their students.

American youth depend on us to make their hallways and school grounds safe. Rather than relying on reactionary policies, we must move forward with prevention strategies and empowering students to create a positive school climate. It's time to implement peer mediation programs, in addition to metal detectors and active shooter drills, as part of a comprehensive plan to prevent school violence. Youngsters should be spending time planning for prom, playing football, and going to anime or coding club, not wondering whether today's active shooter warning is not really a drill!



About the Authors



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