COMMENTARY

Building on Youth’s Strengths: A Call to Include Adolescents in Developing, Implementing, and Evaluating Violence Prevention Programs

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Objective: To review the challenges and potential benefits of involving adolescents in the development and delivery of prevention programming. Key Points and Implications: Adolescent violence prevention programs are typically designed and delivered by adults in school-based settings. However, research has highlighted a number of problems with the effectiveness and sustainability of adult-designed prevention models. In this commentary, we consider the possibility that program effectiveness might be improved if innovative, evidence-based prevention strategies could be developed to help guide adolescents in developing and delivering prevention materials themselves. To inform our discussion, we surveyed 14 adolescent peer leaders about their experiences developing and delivering violence prevention in their schools and communities. Using their input, we critically review the limitations of adult-delivered prevention, discuss the potential benefits and challenges of involving adolescents in designing and delivering violence prevention content, and suggest a number of future directions for researchers and program developers.

Keywords: violence, victimization, prevention, peer leaders, positive youth development

Key Points

• With a few exceptions, violence prevention efforts designed and implemented by adults for adolescents is largely ineffective at reducing rates of violence; one reason for this ineffectiveness is adolescents’ resistance against the influence of adults and/or a manualized curriculum that could interfere with adolescents’ autonomy.
• Although anecdotal evidence suggests that youth-led violence prevention efforts are happening across the U.S., little is known about how this work is organized, supervised, and structured. There is also no data on the effectiveness of youth-led violence prevention efforts.
• Based on anecdotal evidence from youth and grounded in diffusion of innovation and social norms theories, there could be benefits to involving adolescents in designing, implementing, and evaluating violence prevention efforts.
• However, a number of potential issues also exist, such as lack of adherence to evidence-based delivery methods, financial and time investments in training adolescents leaders who inevitably age out of the program, in addition to other issues regarding ethics and feasibility.
• Empirical data on youth-led violence prevention initiatives is sorely needed. A first step is nationally representative documentation of the extent to which adolescent-led prevention efforts are taking place, a more focused study and immersion in specific programs to learn what these efforts look like, and systematic evaluations of their efficacy. The research could inform the creation of adolescent-friendly toolkits and guidelines for adolescent-led development and delivery of prevention programs that provide some flexibility and innovation while adhering to evidence-based “best practices.”

There’s a radical—and wonderful—new idea here . . . that all children could and should be inventors of their own theories, critics of other people’s ideas, analyzers of evidence, and makers of their own per-
sonal marks on the world. It’s an idea with revolutionary implications. If we take it seriously. — Deborah Meier

Decades of research have documented the concerning rates and negative outcomes of interpersonal violence for adolescents (e.g., bullying, dating violence, sexual assault), underscoring the critical importance of primary prevention. Our understanding of what works in youth violence prevention is growing; however, reducing rates of violence among youth has been an elusive goal, particularly for older adolescents. One promising direction for improving prevention program efficacy is to draw on the natural strengths and resilience of adolescents, and test and promote models in which they play a larger role in developing prevention program content and implementation strategies. This proposed model extends the current prevention model by involving youth more actively than is currently typical, building on their ability to use their own peer group narratives around violence in real time, and offers a clear direction for empowering the peer culture to prevent violence from within (Cham, Hollingsworth, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2016). Interest in peer-led prevention is already underway: there have been efforts to find ways to include adolescents in developing, implementing, and evaluating violence prevention efforts (Weisz & Black, 2010). Even more development on youth-led prevention has occurred in substance abuse prevention and sexual health education fields.

Discussions with educators and crisis center advocates also suggest that informally, many adolescents are already involved in—and even sometimes leading—violence prevention efforts in their schools and communities in a number of different capacities across the United States; however, there is no documentation of these efforts. It is likely that these settings use a very wide range of strategies and achieve varying levels of quality and effectiveness. Nonetheless, the fact that such efforts have developed organically within so many schools and organizations suggests that the use of peer-led education is a comfortable strategy for building resilience within these settings (Shaw et al., 2016). Moreover, involving adolescents as coconstructors of prevention work is consistent with the growing focus in the field on positive youth development and well-being (Howell et al., 2015; Shek, Sun, & Merrick, 2013). It is possible that with better guiding structures and resources, engaging adolescents as partners in violence prevention efforts could make important strides in adolescent violence prevention by drawing directly from school and youth cultures.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss at more length how directly involving adolescents in the development and delivery of violence prevention could be a promising avenue for improving traditional adult-developed and facilitated prevention curricula. We consider some of the challenges of adolescent-led prevention models, and suggest some creative ideas for overcoming these challenges. To reinforce the potential value of including adolescents and drawing from their expertise, we include the voices and ideas of adolescents who have been involved in violence prevention efforts. We have focused our discussion mainly on adolescents in high-school (13–18) since violence prevention efforts have struggled to show consistent effects with this age group in particular. Below, we have organized the discussion around: (a) a review of adult-developed and delivered primary prevention violent initiatives for adolescents and a discussion of some of the limitations of these initiatives, (b) a discussion of why adolescent involvement in designing and delivering prevention to their peers might enhance program effectiveness, (c) a consideration of various models for involving adolescents in program development and delivery, (d) challenges with involving adolescents in effective prevention, and (e) recommendations for the field in moving forward to develop innovative, adolescent-led strategies that can be rigorously evaluated.

Review of Adult-Developed and Facilitated Primary Prevention

Primary prevention efforts that have been rigorously evaluated are generally school-based, developed by adults (practitioners and/or researchers), and are commonly delivered as part of a curriculum in a health or wellness class. Research has shown a number of successes in prevention strategies seeking to improve children’s social-emotional skills such as emotion-regulation and problem-solving (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schell-inger, 2011). However, programs seeking to reduce violence among adolescents have had a harder time showing consistent success. For example, although programming efforts directed toward dating violence are generally effective at shifting attitudes and promoting knowledge, there is less compelling evidence that these programs lead to actual behavioral changes, a critical component to reducing rates of violence (see De La Rue, Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2014 for a review). A few programs (Safe Dates, Shifting Boundaries, Green Dot, Steps to Respect) have shown promising behavioral findings, albeit equivocal at times (e.g., Shifting Boundaries evaluation showed reductions in sexual dating victimization among middle school adolescents, but not in sexual dating violence perpetration; Taylor, Stein, Mumford, & Woods, 2013). These promising programs are fairly intensive, actively involve adolescents to some degree (e.g., in Safe Dates, adolescents develop social marketing posters; Foshee et al., 1996), and/or broadly focus on community- and school-level variables, which are possible reasons that they have been more effective in reducing rates of violence than other prevention programming. These programs also, to varying extents, rely on youth to take leadership roles in their schools and communities to impact other peers (e.g., through modeling of antiviolence attitudes and positive bystander actions) to reduce violence.

Despite some encouraging findings, there is still a great deal of room for innovative strategies that improve outcomes for adolescents. Indeed, a few recent studies find that violence prevention programming is less effective with adolescents than with younger children. In a recent meta-analysis, for example, Yeager, Fong, Lee, and Espelage (2015) found that although antibullying programming was effective in reducing bullying among middle school students, there was no positive impact for high school students. In fact, Yeager noted that there were even some iatrogenic effects of violence prevention programming among teens, raising ethical concerns about implementing programming that could actually increase violence. Moreover, in a national survey of children and adolescents, Finkelhor, Vanderminden, Turner, Shattuck, and Hamby (2014) found that adolescents who had received a prevention program were less likely to report that they learned new information or found violence prevention programming helpful than younger children who had received a prevention program.

Although there are a number of reasons (e.g., atheoretical, lack of sufficient dosage) that violence prevention efforts may be
ineffective (see Edwards, Neal, & Rodenhizer-Stimpfl, in press for a review), Yeager and colleagues (2015) suggest the possibility that traditional, adult-delivered prevention efforts may clash with adolescents’ increasing desire for autonomy and increasing influence of friends and peers. Hamby, Nix, DePuy, and Monnier (2012) also note that violence prevention programming with adolescents is often not culturally relevant, potentially limiting its effectiveness (also see Chan et al., 2016). In our discussions with adolescents and their mentors and teachers, we similarly found that some adolescents describe adult-developed and facilitated programming as boring (especially if lecture-based), repetitive, canned (especially if the content is manualized), and condescending (i.e., adolescents report feeling as if they are being talked down to). In our observations implementing and evaluating our own violence prevention efforts, this has been especially true for older high school students compared to younger high school adolescents.

Arguments for the Potential Value of Adolescent-Developed and Facilitated Programming

Several theories, namely diffusion of innovation theory (Rogers, 1995, 2002) and social norms theory (Berkowitz, 2002; Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenbach, & Stark, 2003), suggest a theoretical foundation for why the involvement of adolescents in the development and delivery of program content could be particularly impactful in enhancing violence prevention outcomes. According to Rogers, creator of the diffusion of innovation theory, widespread behavioral change occurs when leaders within a given community adopt and promote a new set of ideas and behaviors and then share them with others within the community who subsequently change their behaviors. Applied to violence prevention, if adolescent leaders (i.e., students) within a school community adopted and promoted nonviolent and prosocial attitudes and behaviors, they could diffuse this learning to other peers in their school through program development and delivery. Similarly, social norms theory posits that perceived social norms affect behavior, and therefore, to change behavior, researchers should target what students believe is widely accepted among their peers. When applied to violence prevention, social norms theory would suggest that adolescents who perceive their peers as unaccepting of and unlikely to engage in violence would themselves be less tolerant of and less likely to engage in violence.

Consistent with research demonstrating peers’ especially strong influence on ideas and behaviors during the teen years (Brown, Bakken, Ameringer, & Mahon, 2008), practitioners (e.g., Truong, 2008) and adolescents have also argued that teens are much more likely to listen to prevention messages coming from other adolescents than from adults. For example, a peer leader involved in violence prevention efforts told us: “Teens will always listen to their peers before adults” and “It works better to have teens present prevention education because it is more likely that a teen will hear out another teen more so than they will another adult.” Further, adolescents can often access and diffuse prevention messages among hard-to-reach groups, such as homeless adolescents and sexual minority adolescents (Truong, 2008).

Moreover, in our discussions with adolescents who have been involved with such work, they have conveyed that they can contribute ideas to prevention curricula that are more relevant and grounded in adolescents’ lived experiences than what adults can offer: “When I took the lead for a lesson, I noticed that the younger kids paid much more attention” and “[Teens bring] what’s happening on the ground and what the realities and nuances [are] of living as a teen experiencing violence and/or fighting it. Teens also have a tendency to make things more accessible and less abstract for their peers.”

Additionally, the first author and her colleagues have found in their current evaluation of the Bringing in the Bystander—High School Curriculum (BITB-HSC) that adolescents’ positive feelings toward the program facilitators, often a college student, increase adolescents’ positive evaluations of the BITB-HSC. Notably, in the current BITB-HSC evaluation study, the most common response to an open-ended question asking adolescents what they liked most about the facilitators is that they were young and relatable.

Finally, in addition to benefiting the program recipients, adolescent-led prevention efforts benefit the adolescent leaders themselves (Truong, 2008; Weisz & Black, 2010). Adolescents echoed this in our discussions: “Having the ability to stop younger kids from experiencing any kind of violence helps me move forward from my damaged childhood” and “My training in high schools has made me more equipped to handle these types of situations” and “When I’m giving a lecture or helping another peer educator, I remember back to when I was experiencing these things. Knowing how much it hurt [me], I use that pain and turn it into my passion to change the social norm.” Processing and sharing past experiences of violence through narrative might have an important healing effect (Pasupathi, Fivush, & Hernandez-Martinez, 2016). Thus, participating in prevention efforts appears to promote resilience among adolescents by allowing them to make meaning of past adversities through helping others, and also aligns with the growing focus in the field on positive youth development (Shek et al., 2013).

Models for Involving Adolescents in Prevention Program Development and Delivery

There are a variety of ways in which adolescents can be involved in developing or leading violence prevention. In a study of adult practitioners involved in violence prevention efforts, many of whom reported involvement youth violence prevention efforts, Weisz and Black (2009) documented that “peers as educators” was the most common method of adolescent involvement. These typically involve peers serving as facilitators or cofacilitators of adult-created content. There is less information on models for involving youth in developing actual program content and delivery strategies. In our experience, the degree to which adolescents contribute to the curriculum varies extensively. Adolescents may serve on an advisory board related to violence prevention, as well as be involved in more community and social action-oriented projects, such as designing social marketing and media campaigns around violence prevention (Weisz & Black, 2010). The National Center for Victims of Crimes (NCVC, 2007) created a toolkit with guidelines for creating adolescent-adult partnerships in community assessment, public awareness and outreach, policy and advocacy, and peer victim services, all related to interpersonal violence.

There are numerous organizations and groups that involve adolescents in violence prevention activities including: Stand and Serve (Arizona), Youth 360 (Ohio), Framingham High School

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Peer Leadership (Massachusetts), Youth over Violence (California), and the LGBTQ Youth Partner Abuse Prevention Program (Massachusetts). Many of these organizations focus on peer violence broadly (e.g., dating violence, bullying, sexual harassment) and often include a focus on other public health (e.g., alcohol misuse) and social issues (e.g., homophobia). The roles that adolescents play in these organizations appears to vary greatly, ranging from creating and/or delivering classroom-based violence education in schools, serving on advisory boards related to violence prevention within the community, participating in community and social action-oriented projects, such as designing social marketing and media campaigns around violence prevention.

To our knowledge, however, there has been no published evaluation of these various adolescent-led violence prevention models or of the NCVC toolkit. Nevertheless, researchers in other health-behavior fields, such as substance abuse, have conducted more evaluation research of adolescent-led models of prevention. Research in substance abuse prevention suggests that adolescent-led efforts can be more effective than adult-led efforts (Cuijpers, 2002; Mellanby, Rees, & Tripp, 2000). On the contrary, in the area of sexual and reproductive health, findings for the efficacy of adolescent-led efforts have been more mixed and less promising (see Chandra-Mouli, Lane, & Wong, 2015 for a review). Violence prevention efforts may have more similarities with substance abuse prevention since social norm and social-emotional skill deficits (as opposed to information deficits) tend to be critical causal factors. For sexual and reproductive health education, there may be more of a need for delivering factual reproductive health information to youth, and thus adult-delivered models show more efficacy compared to youth-led models. At this point, both the substance abuse fields and the sexual health fields provide important guidance for developing innovations in youth-led prevention and highlight the importance of evaluating a range of different models.

There are other reasons to draw directly from public health prevention models, especially substance abuse, in violence prevention work with adolescents. There has been documented co-occurrence of substance use and violence (Dardis, Dixon, Edwards, & Turchik, 2015; Ellickson, Saner, & McGuigan, 1997) and there are similar risk and protective factors (Dardis et al., 2015; Fabiano et al., 2003; Wambach, Cane, Linkenbach, & Otto, 2014). As we stated above, many adolescent-led programs naturally combine these issues in education and prevention. The substance abuse and sexual health fields are also clearly ahead of the violence prevention field in developing and researching these programs, and are likely able to provide ideas for creative solutions to some of the challenges inherent in guiding adolescents to develop their own prevention content and strategies discussed below.

Potential Challenges to Guiding Effective Adolescent-Led Prevention Efforts

While there are clearly many potential advantages to involving adolescents in developing and leading violence prevention, there are a number of challenges that complicate the development of effective models. First, there is a necessary balance that needs to occur between allowing adolescents to develop new content that remains socially and culturally relevant to their peer groups while also making sure they are including accurate and sensitive information about adolescent violence and utilizing effective and evidence-based educational strategies. Adolescents complain that manualized prevention programs are stilted and boring, but manualized programs increase the likelihood of consistent delivery and sufficient dose, both critical elements in effective prevention programming (Bond & Carmola Hauf, 2004; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Jones, Mitchell, & Walsh, 2014; Nation et al., 2003). Furthermore, while adolescents are likely good at developing content that interests and resonates with peers, it is likely that they will not have access to research-based information on victimization, and they may lack the experience and training to be sensitive to victim experiences. In our work with peer leaders who develop prevention materials, while they create very compelling content, we have, at times, observed issues such as an overreliance on extreme and rare examples, false causal links, and subtle victim blaming. Models to guide adolescent-led violence prevention will need to be designed to balance the need for unique input and content-development; offer guidance on including research-based, sensitive content; and use evidence-based prevention strategies. We offer different possible models for incorporating these goals in the final section of the commentary below.

Second, there are several logistical and ethical challenges for implementing and sustaining adolescent-led prevention programs in school or afterschool settings. Adolescents who volunteer as peer educators might have personal experience with violence and victimization, which raises issues of confidentiality, self-disclosure, and potential triggering of trauma by skits or other program features (Paciorek, Hokoda, & Herbst, 2003; Weisz & Black, 2010). It is both critical and challenging to recruit a diverse group of peer leaders that can effectively engage peers from a wide range of ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Weisz & Black, 2010). Further, peer educators eventually graduate, grow up, and move on to new things, so maintaining these types of groups can be a challenge (Truong, 2008). Sustaining adolescent-led efforts is often dependent on the availability of grant or other funding. Training adolescents to become engaging presenters and teachers—providing them with sufficient knowledge so that they can present this type of information in a sensitive manner—can be expensive and time-consuming (Mellanby et al., 2000).

Third, adolescents are not immune to the challenges that adults face when facilitating such programs. For example, one peer educator told us “getting people to care at the start is very difficult and that often makes it harder for people to stay [engaged].” Another teen involved in violence prevention complained that there is a lack of concern about issues of violence among students and that they are oftentimes more focused on “popularity, school dances, and what not.” Even more, one peer educator told us “the biggest challenge is trying to change the ideas that my peers already have, the ones that [they] get from the rape culture we live in, or their parents who weren’t taught about how important these issues are.”

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, just because adolescents may prefer peer-developed and facilitated programming, this does not necessarily mean that it will be more effective than adult-developed and/or facilitated programming. Indeed, a meta-analysis of college sexual assault prevention programs found that professional presenters had more positive program outcomes than did graduate students and peer presenters (An-
derson & Whiston, 2005). Although this meta-analysis was specific to programming on only one type of violence (i.e., sexual violence) among an older demographic (i.e., college students), it does point to the critical need for the empirical assessment of outcomes associated with adolescent developed and/or facilitated violence prevention efforts.

Recommendations for Advancing Innovation in Adolescent-Led Violence Prevention Efforts

Taking into account both the potential benefits and challenges, we believe that developing and testing more prevention models that involve adolescents as partners in creating, implementing, and evaluating violence prevention efforts is an important direction for the field for a number of reasons: (a) the scholarly literature suggests that so far, adult-developed and facilitated violence prevention programming for youth has limited effectiveness; (b) many of the common complaints about adult-developed and facilitated violence prevention efforts (e.g., boring, canned, repetitive) could be attenuated by including adolescents as collaborators in such efforts; (c), there are theoretical bases (social norms and diffusion of innovation theories), as well as anecdotal evidence from this field and evaluation research from other fields, to suggest that adolescent-led and youth-involved violence prevention efforts could lead to increased effectiveness of violence prevention efforts; and (d) adolescents who have been involved with prevention efforts report personal benefits (e.g., enhanced confidence, meaning-making) to their involvement (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2015) and perceptions that their work benefits other students.

So, how do we move forward? There are a variety of adolescent-led violence prevention efforts already happening across the United States. We propose that a first step is documenting, on a nationally representative scale, the extent to which this work is taking place (e.g., where; in what capacity; for how long; the extent to which it has been evaluated, if at all; etc.). This will provide data on promising models for evaluation and adaptation. Alongside this large-scale documentation effort, we suggest that researchers engage in more ethnographic-based studies of existing adolescent-led models of prevention by immersing themselves in this type of work as observers and participants, and allowing themselves to learn firsthand from adolescents and their mentors and teachers while concurrently documenting the extent to which adolescent-developed curriculums look similar and different to adult-developed, manualized programming, especially the few programs (e.g., Green Dot, Safe Dates, Shifting Boundaries) that have documented reductions in violence among adolescents.

Following this, we encourage researchers to conduct quasi-experimental and experimental evaluations of various adolescent-led models. This critical research would allow us to determine the extent to which adolescent-led prevention models reduce the incidence and prevalence of violence, and would also allow for empirical comparisons with traditional adult-developed and facilitated models. Cost-analysis and cost-effectiveness research will also be an important consideration in future research, since both inform critical issues of sustainability and scalability. Ultimately, given what appears to be the inclusion of adolescents in violence-prevention efforts in a number of capacities across the U.S., if this type of work really is not effective, schools and community agencies need to know this information so as not to put time and resources into something that is either ineffective, or worse, iatrogenic. Alternatively, if some models of peer-led prevention are, indeed, effective, this type of programming should be encouraged in schools and communities throughout the U.S.

We also believe that there is a need to develop innovative and creative models and strategies that bring together the strengths and expertise of adolescents, their teachers and mentors, and researchers. Toolkits and handbooks, especially those that use electronic and multimedia platforms, are promising possibilities. Although the NCVC has created a book-style toolkit with guidelines for creating adolescent-adult partnerships in community assessment, public awareness and outreach, policy and advocacy, and peer victim services, all related to interpersonal violence, it does not yet fully address some important aspects of curricula development. For instance, it is prohibitively long for an adolescent audience (i.e., 168 pages). Furthermore, while it offers guidelines for creating new measures, we believe it would be more efficient to encourage the use of existing, validated measures, and to help adolescents and their mentors select and use these in their evaluation efforts. Also, while a strength of this toolkit is its focus on social action and community-based interventions, it misses a critical target population by not also addressing classroom-based violence prevention efforts. Finally, the NCVC toolkit provides a wealth of information, yet it does not include a discussion of likely barriers and challenges that adolescents may face, nor does it offer suggestions for interfacing with such challenges.

We believe there could be great utility in the development of a guidebook that would allow adolescents, under the supervision of their teachers and adult mentors, to create and deliver evidence-based programming. The guidebook could be created by a collaborative team of researchers, adolescents, and their mentors, and would provide information on: (a) important topics (e.g., local prevalence, red flags) to address in programming, (b) effective delivery techniques, (c) brief measures to evaluate the effectiveness of efforts, and (d) additional strategies for managing issues and challenges that may arise in the process. A guidebook could also provide adolescents with suggestions for both fixed (e.g., presentation of factual information) and flexible (e.g., method [e.g., skits, video clips] of skill-building role plays, tailoring scenarios so that they are relevant to the specific group of adolescents) components.

Alternatively, it might be possible to take widely used evidence-based programming (e.g., Safe Dates) and create a less manualized version of the curriculum so that adolescents have the flexibility to adapt it in ways that they think will make it most relevant for their communities. For example, adolescents themselves might develop companion multimedia pieces using new technology to engage more with standard prevention program materials and adapt learning for their own peer culture. It would be important to test modifications and adaptations under controlled environments to understand their impact on program effectiveness. Ideally, these youth-modified programs would offer opportunities for bridging the current gap between researcher-developed manualized violence prevention programs that may be missing opportunities to more actively engage older adolescents, and purely adolescent-developed violence prevention programs with little to no grounding in prevention sciences.
We started this paper with a quote by Deborah Meier, a progressive and pioneering American educator. Meier said that adolescents “should be inventors of their own theories, critics of other people’s ideas, analyzers of evidence, and makers of their own personal marks on the world.” Although Meier was not commenting specifically on adolescent-led violence prevention efforts, it could not be more appropriate for the points we have made in this paper. Adolescents have important and novel ideas, as well as notable criticisms of our well-intended work. We should listen to them, really listen to them. As one adolescent said: “Adults alone cannot define adolescents’ experiences. So, why not let us give our opinions on prevention?” Indeed, adolescents’ opinions might just be one key to reducing violence in our society.

References


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