

ASK THE CHILDREN

YOUTH & VIOLENCE

STUDENTS SPEAK OUT FOR
A MORE CIVIL SOCIETY

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

the **ASK**
THE
CHILDREN
SERIES



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Each time young people have turned weapons on their parents, their teachers, or their classmates, we as a nation have asked ourselves, how could these acts of senseless violence have occurred? And what can we, what should we, do about it?

To help answer these questions, Families and Work Institute and The Colorado Trust, with additional funding from the Open Society Institute, joined together to produce **the first nationally representative study to specifically ask young people to say—in their own words—what they would do to stop violence in any aspect of their lives.** We also partnered with the National Conference of State Legislatures to help frame the study questions so that the findings are relevant to policy and action. A parallel study was conducted in Colorado. These results and videos of the findings of both studies are also available.



OVERALL FINDINGS

We asked a nationally representative group of 1,001 young people in the fifth through twelfth grades this question: **“If you could make one change that would help stop the violence that young people experience today, what would that change be?”** Their responses inform the following **three major findings:**

- Although public discussion about violence has focused on **extreme violence**—such as school shootings—as emblematic of a major societal problem, the largest proportion of young people talk about teasing that goes beyond being playful; about cruel put-downs and gossip; and about rejections as *very real violence* to them. They say this **emotional violence** hurts, and they say it triggers more extreme violence. In the words of one young person, in order to stop violence: *“The one thing I would change is gossiping/talking behind people’s back in a negative way. That tends to start 90% of the violence at school.”*
- While blame and remedies for youth violence have been focused on parents and/or the schools (and these relationships are indeed important), many young people have a larger focus: **a seemingly inescapable culture that celebrates sameness**, the one right way to be “in.” They feel they need to join in,

in order to protect themselves. One 14-year-old girl’s wish is, *“that kids got along and didn’t care about appearances, money, or ethnic backgrounds. It’s usually something like that which makes kids fight.”* The meaning of what young people are saying is complex because they are advocating for accepting the commonality, the basic humanity of all people, while accepting each of our differences. A student says, *“Help students understand that we are all different and should be treated equally.”*

- **Relationships are important.** Young people with better relationships with mothers, with fathers, with teachers, and with friends are much less likely to experience violence, either as victims or as aggressors. Positive support from important people in kids’ lives is a defining quality of civil society. As one young person explains, *“Support is a big thing. I think one person matters more than a group or clique. Knowing they’re going through the same things you’re going through. [Then] you’re not struggling by yourself.”*

In addition, a large proportion of students—26 percent—call for measures to keep them safe, such as gun control, better security, and stricter punishments for offenders. Students are clearly speaking out for a more civil society. They are also saying they **need** and **want** appropriate help in combating these problems.

SELECTED FINDINGS

Young people were also asked how often in the past month they had experienced some type of violence—either because someone had done it to them *on purpose* or they had inflicted violence on someone else *on purpose*.

Many young people experience emotional violence

- Two-thirds of young people (66%) have been teased or gossiped about in a mean way *at least once* in the past month and 25 percent have had this experience *five times or more*. Over half (57%) of young people have teased or gossiped about someone else *at least once* and 12 percent have done so *five times or more* in the past month. There are no overall differences between boys and girls in how often they experience this kind of meanness.
- Almost one third (32%) have been bullied *at least once* and 12 percent have been *five times or more* in the past month; 23 percent have bullied someone else *at least once* and 6 percent *five times or more*.

Almost half of young people experience physical violence

- 46 percent of young people have been hit, shoved, kicked or tripped *at least once* and 18 percent have been hurt physically *five times or more* in the past month. Almost two in five (37%) have carried out this behavior *at least once*, and 11 percent have done so *five times or more* in the past month.

And one in 12 experiences extreme violence

- 8 percent of young people have been attacked with a weapon *at least once* and 4 percent have had this experience *five times or more* over the past month; 4 percent have done this to others *at least once* and 2 percent *five times or more*.
- Similarly, 8 percent of young people have been forced to do sexual things *at least once* and 3 percent have had this experience *five times or more* in the past month. Three percent have forced someone else to do sexual things *at least once* and 1 percent have done this *five times or more*.

In a hypothetical classroom of 25 kids, this means that two or more of them could have been attacked by a weapon or forced to do sexual things at least once in the past month.

Emotional and physical violence go together

- Victims of emotional violence are more likely to be victims of physical violence. Likewise, aggressors of emotional violence are also more likely to be aggressors of physical violence. For example, 59 percent of young people who have rejected or ignored someone else *at least once* have also hit, shoved, kicked, or tripped someone—compared with 20 percent of those who have not rejected or ignored others.

Young people who have been harmed are much more likely to harm others

- There is a clear and strong connection between being hurt and hurting others. Those young people who have been victims are much more likely than non-victims to be aggressors. For example, 35 percent of those who have been attacked with a weapon *at least once* attack others—compared with only 2 percent who have not had this experience.

Our statistical analysis reveals that there are connections between being harmed and harming. Violence seems to create a vicious cycle—it's hard to know where blame and

responsibility begin and end.

Young people with supportive relationships with mothers, fathers, teachers, and friends are much less likely to be either victims or aggressors.

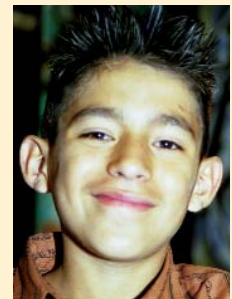
- Specifically, our analyses show that features of supportive relationships that make a difference are: paying attention to, monitoring and communicating well with young people, encouraging their interests, and helping them learn to solve problems constructively.

SPECIFIC IMPLICATIONS

As authors of this study we recommend the following implications be considered.

For **PARENTS:**

- Help children see the commonalities in people that go beyond how we look, where we live, and what we wear. Be a role model by treating others with respect and being respectful of differences, so that children grow up knowing that it is unacceptable to make fun of or exclude others, and are instead encouraged to appreciate, and in fact celebrate, diversity.
- Set aside regular and predictable times to be with each of your children individually, so that you can really focus on them without being rushed. In those times, create open channels of communication so that children feel known, understood, listened to, and respected.
- Discipline young people in ways that will help them learn coping skills. Discipline also involves handling your own angry feelings in constructive ways.
- Make every effort to not only know what is going on with your kids, but to be engaged and involved in their lives.
- Find out what captures your child's interests and build on it—whether these interests are exploring science, performing in a rock band, baseball, skateboarding, or volunteering.



For **TEACHERS:**

- Try to find ways to get to know each of the young people in your classroom as individuals.

- Whenever possible, set aside time on a regular basis to give young people experiences that truly engage them. In addition to classroom activities, engagement can take place through service-learning projects or youth leadership programs.
- Set examples of civility and respect in your classroom and discipline young people in ways that will help them learn coping skills.

For **SCHOOLS**:

- Promote civility in the school and a respect for differences.
- Work toward reforms that let children feel known and understood in school such as smaller schools and classrooms, “schools within schools,” better teacher-student ratios, more counselors and mentor programs.
- Improve student-adult communication in schools, possibly by designating a teacher who has good skills in this area to offer support and advice to other teachers.
- Provide training for educators in violence prevention and begin violence prevention efforts in the early childhood years and continue them for kids of all ages.

For **COMMUNITIES**:

- Offer good quality support groups and parenting programs for parents with children of all ages—beginning in the pre-natal period and continuing into the pre-teen and teen years—that help families develop and maintain effective parenting skills.
- Create positive community-wide youth development initiatives. Establish and invest in youth centers where young people can gain leadership skills, express themselves in a variety of ways, and are listened to.

For **GOVERNMENT AT ALL LEVELS**:

- Invest in raising awareness of the importance of emotional violence and discrimination as potential triggers for more serious violence. Provide a range of good mental health services for young people who are involved in violence, either as victims or aggressors.

- Invest in violence prevention efforts for children of all ages; ensure that promising practices are evaluated.
- Invest in programs that provide constructive activities during out-of-school time for children of all ages, including youth community centers and other positive youth leadership development efforts.
- When a policy is presented that pertains to young people, ask: “How can young people provide input on the planning and implementation? How can they help their communities improve and reduce violence through formal and informal youth leadership efforts?”

AND IMPORTANTLY, for EVERYONE:

- **Listen to children—and include them in the process of stopping violence.** Ask them what they think. Do something with what they tell you. Create processes where kids can find their own solutions to problems and work on implementing them. As one young person said, “If we are PART OF THE PROBLEM, then we need to be PART OF THE SOLUTION.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) What would your answer to the following question be?
“If you could make one change that would help stop the violence that young people experience today, what would that change be?”
- 2) What action steps would you recommend for parents, teachers, schools, communities, and government at all levels?
- 3) How can young people become more involved in preventing violence in your setting?

SHARE AND LEARN ABOUT WHAT WORKS

If you have been involved in an effort that has involved young people in the process of stopping or reducing violence, share it with others by submitting a brief description of what you have done to www.askthechildren.org. Check out what others have done or post questions that others can answer.

To order a full copy of *Youth and Violence: Students Speak Out for a More Civil Society*, please contact Families and Work Institute at 212-465-2044 or go to www.familiesandwork.org.