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School-Based Victim Services

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- The risk of violent victimization is greater for a 12-year old than for anyone age 24 or older. (Snyder & Sickmund, 1995.)
 - More than 2,800 school-age children were killed by firearms in 1993. (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1994.)
 - One in five students and nearly one in three males among inner-city high school students have been shot at, stabbed, or otherwise injured with a weapon at or in transit to or from school in the past few years. (Sheley, McGee & Wright, 1995.)
 - In 1992, about 17,000 girls under age 12 were raped in the United States. (Langan & Harlow, 1994.)

Overview

School crime and violence have reached alarming proportions across the country, causing concerns among victims, their families and educators. From overt violent acts such as homicide and assaults, to concealed crimes such as child sexual abuse, violence in schools affects everyone teachers, parents, children and the whole community. School boards, criminal justice officials and concerned citizens are looking for effective ways to prevent victimization in schools and to address the needs of those who are victimized.

The creation of school-based victim service programs is proving to be an effective first step towards assisting victims, as well as developing crime prevention programs. Comprehensive school-based initiatives are geared toward elementary through college and university levels and are aimed at students, teachers and other professionals victimized in the school-setting. Effective victim assistance programs respond to chronic trauma or the victimization that occurs in everyday life as well as the critical trauma or violent incidents that occur on school grounds and campuses.

Juveniles who are victimized, or who repeatedly witness violence, and do not receive immediate support in understanding it, are more at risk of using violence as a means of dealing with their own conflicts. They also show traumatic stress symptoms that impair their capacity to succeed in school, to develop healthy relationships and to become productive adults. Psychological health services and victim assistance programs can help young crime victims and witnesses to violence deal with the trauma, thus stopping the cycle of violence, and preventing academic and emotional problems that victims and witnesses sometimes experience while trying to cope with the aftermath of violence.

Elements of positive school-based victim service programs include school-based crisis intervention counseling and curricula which include courses on victim assistance and violence prevention. The core of the program is crisis intervention and stress reaction training, which helps students and teachers better respond to their own stresses, as well as those of others around them.

Educators and schools have also begun to establish policies and procedures to ensure the safety of

all students, educators, and administrators. This includes the implementation of the following action steps:

- Establishing and enforcing discipline rules, policies and procedures on school grounds;
- Screening by metal detectors or some other reliable method all individuals for weapons before they enter the school;
- Designating schools as "drug free zones" and "gun free zones"; and
- Promoting and guaranteeing the privacy and safety of students, faculty, and all employees.

Today many schools are forced to respond to critical incidents that occur on school grounds, such as shootings, assaults, rapes, kidnappings or hostage situations. How a critical incident is handled affects the "healing" of the school population, the tone of the school, and the education of its students.

Training for educators to help them deal with critical incidents before they occur can improve the response to the incident and aid the healing process of both the primary and secondary victims of any critical incident. In addition, a school-based action plan focusing on three phases immediate, intermediate, and long-term needs is an important component of school-based victim services programs (National Organization for Victim Assistance, 1992).

Both students and teachers initially respond to critical incidents by demonstrating shock, disbelief and grief. Within the first one to four days, the school should address these immediate concerns and protect itself from further victimization or intrusion, particularly from the media. Staff or students may require emotional, psychological, and/or physical care. These services can be provided by outside professionals, school counselors, parents or other faculty members.

Following initial crisis intervention, the intermediate support and assistance needed by schools includes helping students and teachers deal with anxieties and concerns that emerge once the initial shock wears off. Those responsible for the care of school-aged children administrators, faculty and parents may require further assistance and support as they help students deal with their emotions, trauma and stress. Activities such as debriefings, small and large group discussions, information sharing and individual counseling and support are important components of this second phase.

The final phase of the school-based plan focuses on the long-term needs of students and faculty, which may range from one week after the incident through the criminal trial period. Schools, students and teachers may require occasional support to deal with the continued stress, anxieties and trauma of the incident. School counselors and professionals can provide these services in the school-settings. Support groups organized within the school environment can be conducted by trained parents, students and school personnel.

Finally, school-based plans should include provisions for providing crisis intervention counseling for persons victimized away from the school grounds. Since much of a student's time is spent in the school-setting, this should be a place where the student can easily and confidently access victim assistance and services whenever they become a direct or indirect victim of crime no matter where that crime occurs.

School-based victim service programs can be effective and meaningful in the lives of students and faculty. However, they should be set-up and administered by trained victim crisis professionals in order to be effective and not end up re-victimizing the victim. Efforts such as these require the support of parents, teachers, administrators, social workers, criminal justice professionals, victim services professionals and all the community leaders working together. Creating a safe place where

children can learn and grow depends on a partnership such as this to ensure success.

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