ThE role of schools in violence prevention: an evidence review

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# Summary

The purpose of this review is to provide evidence for how schools can contribute to preventing youth violence, and to consider the implications for the kinds of schools-based prevention which might be effective in the contexts of Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland.

There is a large volume of international evidence relating to youth crime including a growing amount on school-based approaches. However, not all the research is necessarily transferable to a UK context and there is little evidence relating to what should be done in any particular location. However, there are some consistent themes which provide useful lessons for the development of a school- based project in Leicester/shire/Rutland.

First, it is important for schools to be aware of the contextual factors which shape the nature and level of youth violence in their area. For some schools in parts of Leicester, the impact of social deprivation and inequality will be all too apparent, and schools will need to understand how these factors affect the likelihood of their students becoming either victims or perpetrators of youth violence. The contextual factors will be different in more rural areas.

Gender and race are hugely significant factors in understanding the risks for young people of being affected by violence – either as victims or perpetrators. Youth violence is often discussed with little reference to gender, yet an understanding of how gendered expectations impact on young people is fundamental to tackling the different ways in which boys and girls respond to adversity and conflict. For boys in some communities there can be a strong investment in forms of masculine identity which dramatically increase the likelihood of involvement in violence. The risks of involvement are also different for white, black and Asian young people and these factors need to be considered in conjunction with their interaction with social inequalities and the range of risk and protective factors arising from family, community and individual characteristics.

Schools can play an important role in ameliorating some of the risk factors in young peoples’ lives and in promoting their resilience. However, they are more likely to be effective in this when approaches are based on a thorough understanding of the challenges (and strengths) in the lives of their young people.

All this matters when planning school-based approaches because there can be a tendency to assume that prevention ‘packages’ can be delivered across schools without differentiation, when in reality some approaches are likely to be more relevant in some contexts and with some groups than others. Schools who know their students and their communities well are often best placed to understand what is most likely to work in their context and to design approaches which are tailored to the needs of their student groups.

The role of schools in preventing violence is vital. The very fact of providing education and constructive activities for children and young people is important. Engagement in school reduces the likelihood of young people’s involvement in violence and good quality education which contributes to higher levels of attainment is a major factor in supporting young people to build positive futures. Schools are also ideally placed to influence children and young people’s values and beliefs. Skilled teachers can offer positive role models and can provide young people with the skills and strategies to resolve conflicts without violence. Schools can forge alliances with parents and the wider community and can provide a safe, non-violent environment and a counter-culture to some of the social norms which serve to tolerate or encourage violent or aggressive behaviour.

The very best evidence on what schools can do concerns the provision of social and emotional skills development. There is a robust evidence base for the ability of life skills education to help young people increase their self-awareness, understanding of social situations, ability to avoid risky behaviours, and capacity to resolve conflict without violence. Ideally, this education should start early. Schools are already providing life skills education through the curriculum, it is part of the inspection framework and guidance for providing it most effectively is available.

There is less evidence for the effectiveness of short-term, topic-specific preventive programmes delivered in schools (e.g. Prevent, healthy relationships workshops etc) although these can be popular with both staff and young people and provide safe spaces for young people to talk about issues that matter in their lives.

The consensus in the literature is that schools are most likely to be effective in their role in preventing violence if they take a whole school approach which combines curriculum based activities with strong leadership, consistent policies, skilled and confident staff and good partnership working with parents and the wider community.

This reflects overall evidence on the prevention of youth violence in society which strongly suggests that what is required for impact is a multi-level, multi-mode approach which reduces risk and promotes protective factors at individual, family, school and community levels. This requires approaches that address the multiple roots and forms of violence, and acknowledge their interrelatedness, rather than single issue interventions.

The lives of children and young people stretch across families, schools and communities. The most effective projects do the same. Effective projects act as a bridge between these areas of life and adapt over time to take account of their changing influence as young people grow up. Approaches (such as mentoring) especially if they can provide consistent relationships from childhood well into young adulthood can be effective and are hugely valued by young people.

Schools can be a very important partner in public health approaches to prevent youth violence and create protective communities. They can use their position as a source of influence in the community; they can use their knowledge of young people to help to identify those at greatest risk and they can play their part in offering both incentives and sanctions. Schools are also well-placed to identify windows of opportunity to intervene with young people – their ‘reachable moments’. These can be times of transition (e.g. from primary to secondary school) or at points of particular vulnerability (e.g. when a family member is imprisoned, a young person is first ‘in trouble’ or after an assault).

## Implications for a school-based initiative in Leicester/Leicestershire & Rutland

1. Understand the different contexts. This review provides information on the overall evidence but needs to be complemented by an analysis of the local contexts, needs and current responses of schools in the area.
2. Take a targeted approach based on the following two key criteria: those schools which have the highest levels of risk for youth violence within their student population, **and** can demonstrate their commitment to tackling the issues and have at least some capacity to do so in partnership.
3. Work with individual schools to develop a bespoke support package based on an analysis of their current strengths and requirements in taking a whole school approach. The role of an outside agency is a challenging one. It is rarely possible to impose a whole school ethos from the outside. However, they can play an important role in extending capacity, including by:
	* Mentoring and supporting school leaders and fostering leadership at different levels (e.g. with students and parents)
	* Increasing staff knowledge and confidence in addressing the issues
	* Supporting the school to gather more in-depth knowledge of the issues and how to address them e.g. via peer research projects, teacher action learning set etc
	* Acting as a bridge to the wider community and other agencies e.g. linking students into community-based activities, mentoring programmes etc
	* Providing direct support to individual students at reachable moments
	* Providing additional support to targeted groups of students
4. Ensure that schools are effectively networked into the VRN programme so that a school-based programme is not a ‘bolt-on’ project but part of the overall public health initiative.

# Background and Purpose

* 1. The Violence Reduction Network

The VRN was established in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland in September 2019 following the Office of Police Crime Commissioner’s successful application for a Home Office grant. The core function of the VRN is prescribed by the Home Office as: *‘To offer leadership, establish a core membership and, working with all relevant agencies operating locally, provide strategic coordination of the local response to serious violence’.*

The initial focus of the VRN is to prevent and reduce violence, including knife crime, among those aged under 25, particularly serious youth violence in public spaces.

In recognition that schools can play a critical role in violence prevention, the VRN Programme Board commissioned Barnardo’s to undertake a project on their behalf with a specific focus on the role schools play/need to play in violence prevention.

## Purpose of this review

The purpose of this review is to provide evidence for how schools can contribute to preventing youth violence, and to consider the implications for the kinds of schools-based prevention which might be effective in the contexts of Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland.

The main questions for the review were:

* What learning is there from existing evidence on school approaches to preventing youth violence (internationally and within the UK)?
* What approaches for addressing serious youth violence have been used in schools, and what is the evidence for their effectiveness?
* What relevant examples of good practice are there and how transferable might these be for the Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland contexts?

## The nature and strength of the evidence

There is a large volume of evidence that relates to youth crime and violence, both in terms of published research and more ‘grey’ material (policy documents, project reports etc), reflecting the extent of concern about the issues in recent years. There is also a growing body of material on schools-based approaches, though fewer of these have been fully evaluated. In completing this review, we have tried to select material likely be of most relevance to the VRN but there are some ‘health warnings’. First, whilst there is quite a lot of international research in this field, not all the evidence is easily transferable to the UK context. Second, because youth violence is a complex issue, the evaluation of interventions is rarely straightforward: measuring the impact of a school-based programme is challenging when young people are subject to such a wide variety of other influences at home and in their communities. Nevertheless, there are some consistent themes which emerge from this review about more effective approaches for schools in fulfilling their role in preventing youth violence.

The most important message from across a range of studies, is that single interventions carried out in isolation are less likely to have an impact than programmes which combine measures to tackle youth violence in different ways, and at different levels, in order to address the risk factors for violence in children’s lives and to bolster the protective factors. For school-based programmes there is some consensus in the literature that this means taking a whole school approach to violence prevention. However, it may be important to differentiate between initiatives which are primarily aimed at preventing violence *within* schools (which if successful would hopefully have a beneficial impact on young people’s behaviour outside school as well), and initiatives which have a broader focus on violence prevention in the community. In the former, schools themselves will take the lead responsibility, whilst in the latter, schools may play a role in partnership with other organisations. For the purposes of this review we’ve considered the evidence both for programmes which are school-led and for those where schools do, or potentially could, play a key role.

# Youth violence in context

Schools are part of wider social systems and whilst their role in children and young people’s lives is vitally important, they are only one of many influences. We therefore start with a brief overview of some of the key contextual issues pertinent to an understanding of youth violence.

## The extent of youth violence

The Government’s 2018 serious violence strategy[[1]](#footnote-1) reports that whilst crime in general (including violent crime) continues to fall, homicide, knife and gun crime rose across virtually all areas between 2014 and 2018. Although some of these increases may be due to improved reporting and police recording of these crimes, the rising trend is supported by other data such as hospital admissions.[[2]](#footnote-2) Between 2013/14 and 2016/17 admissions due to assault by a sharp object showed an increase of 18%, giving credence to the concerns about rising knife crime. There are links between knife and gun crime and robbery, with a sizeable proportion of robbery offences (21%) involving the use, or the threat of use, of a knife. Drugs are an important factor with 57% of homicides involving either a victim or suspect known to be involved in using or dealing illicit drugs.

Trends in the data about serious violence suggest a shift towards younger victims and those crimes involving the most violence being committed by young men on other young men.

More positively, the most recent figures for youth crime show that there were 4,500 knife and offensive weapon offences committed by children in 2019 - a slight decrease compared to the previous year and 31% lower than in 2009.[[3]](#footnote-3) This reminds us that concerns about youth violence need to be seen in context. Violent offences make up only 1% of total crime in the UK which remains a comparatively safe place to live.[[4]](#footnote-4)

However, when it does occur, violent crime is devastating for individuals, families and communities. And the risk of becoming a victim of such crime varies according to where you live. Violent crime rates are higher in urban areas and in common with other inequalities, disproportionately affect people living in poverty.[[5]](#footnote-5) So in some areas, including in parts of Leicester, people are living with the daily reality of violent crime.

## Gender and race

That the problem of serious youth violence is a gendered issue is often taken for granted rather than discussed and analysed. That some boys use violence to solve conflicts – or join gangs to gain status or protect themselves – is seen as reprehensible but quite ‘normal’. As the authors of a report on addressing knife crime in London put it:

*“The aspiration of holding, possessing, and brandishing what only the adult, brave and qualified soldier is entitled to carry legally is part of many young boys’ childhood, whatever their social background.” [[6]](#footnote-6)*

Gendered expectations are powerful shapers of behaviour and help explain why serious youth violence is much more frequently perpetrated by boys than it is by girls.[[7]](#footnote-7) The use of knives and other weapons by teenage boys can be seen as a means of living up to a particular version of masculinity and thereby strengthening their gender identity. However, most young men do not ‘big up’ their masculinity through these means, and it is in the intersections between masculinity, marginalisation and a range of risk factors that the causes of serious youth violence lie.

A high proportion of those involved in serious violence in some major cities are young black men.[[8]](#footnote-8) And young black men are more likely to grow up in poverty, to be cared for by a single parent, to be excluded from school and to be NEET – all of which are risk factors for a range of poor life opportunities and outcomes, including involvement in offending.

In the last few decades, many families living in poor neighbourhoods have become trapped in poverty. In particular, black and minority ethnic young people have found themselves at the bottom of the economic ladder, shut out from the aspirations of more privileged parts of society but often blamed for their own disadvantage. This social marginalization of many black young people has led to anger with, and mistrust of, mainstream society and the creation of alternative cultures that provide a sense of belonging, identity and status, some of which normalise gang membership and the use of violence.[[9]](#footnote-9)

## Gangs and youth violence

There has been some debate about the use of the term ‘gang’: about what constitutes a gang and whether serious youth violence is always linked to gang membership. There have been accusations that concern about ‘gangs’ is out of all proportion to the evidence that incidents of serious youth violence are gang related, and concerns that stereotyping of ‘black rapper gangsters’ has been part of a media-fuelled moral panic which has led to the demonization of any teenager hanging out on the street with their peers.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The street-based groups to which young people belong are not always gangs, and gangs themselves range from small, often temporary, neighbourhood networks of young people involved in low-level delinquency all the way up to international criminal gangs with a track-record of murder.[[11]](#footnote-11) There is now a general consensus that whilst tackling gangs is important, particularly the ‘draw’ of gang membership for young people, gangs are only part of the overall picture of youth violence.

A review of young people’s views and experiences of gang involvement[[12]](#footnote-12) highlighted some of the challenges of tackling gangs. Young people reported that they felt unable to ask services (particularly the police) for support and protection. The barriers for young people accessing support included: the risk of increased danger (being a “snitch”), lack of trust in professionals’ and institutions’ information sharing processes, not knowing where to go and loyalty to other gang members. This affected their ability to leave a gang especially when gang culture and risk of violence from gangs penetrated into institutions designed to safeguard young people, such as supported housing. For some young people who did leave gangs this was less a straightforward choice and more to do with other life changes, such as becoming a parent. The authors also noted that from the point of view of young people, not all experiences of gang involvement were negative. For some, the gang provided them with a sense of belonging, love, protection and “family” that they had not experienced in their lives before. For some boys, joining a gang provided them with status and a sense of power and freedom.

## Violence and social media

Another contextual issue is the growing concern about the role of social media in the spread of youth violence. A report by Catch 22 summarises how this occurs.[[13]](#footnote-13) Because social media is commonly perceived to be hidden from adults, they argue that a virtual free-for all space has emerged in which a minority of young people share material that both displays and incites serious incidents of violence in real life. The spread of smartphone use has massively increased the potential for this and also means that on-line material can reach large audiences in a very short time. Intense exposure to this kind of social media content may be damaging in itself and it also adds to the social pressure on young people to retaliate in the face of violence in order to protect their perceived status and reputation.

# Risk and protective factors

Research on youth violence identifies a range of factors which either increase the risk of involvement (as either a perpetrator or victim) or which appear to protect against it.

## Risk factors

The following factors are commonly identified as contributing to involvement in youth violence:

* **Individual factors**: past exposure to violence, impulsiveness, low school achievement, poor problem-solving skills
* **Relationship factors**: delinquent peers, parental conflict, limited parental monitoring and supervision
* **Community factors**: housing instability, poor neighbourhoods, gang activity, crime
* **Societal factors**: norms about the acceptability of violence, limited education and economic supports and opportunities[[14]](#footnote-14)

Risk factors are complex and multilayered, involving multiple individual factors, as well as neighbourhood, family, school and peer factors.[[15]](#footnote-15) Hahn et al (2007) highlight low socio-economic status, poor parental supervision, harsh and erratic discipline and delinquent peers as risk factors, but point out that offending young people often have additional problems, like drug abuse, difficulties at school and mental health problems.[[16]](#footnote-16)

A review by the Early Intervention Foundation (2015)[[17]](#footnote-17) summarises the evidence on the strongest risk factors for both youth violence and gang involvement at different ages (in brackets in the table below):

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Domain**  | **Strong risk factors for youth violence (by age)** | **Strong risk factors for gang involvement (by age)** |
| **Individual**  | Troublesome (7-9; 10-12) High daring (10-12) Positive attitude to delinquency (10-12) Previously committed offences (7-9) Involved in antisocial behaviour (10-12) Substance use (7-9) Aggression (7-9) Running away and truancy (7-9; 10-12; 13-15; 16-25) Gang membership (13-15; 16-25) Low self-esteem (13-15) High psychopathic features (13-15)  | Marijuana use (10-12) Displaced aggression traits (13-15) Anger traits (13-15) Aggression traits (13-15)  |
| **Family**  | Disrupted family (7-9; 10-12; 13-15) Poor supervision (10-12)  | No strong risk factors identified  |
| **School**  | Low commitment to school (13-15) | Low academic achievement in primary school (10-12) Learning disability (10-12) |
| **Peer group**  | Delinquent peers (7-9; 10-12; 13-15) |  No strong risk factors identified |
| **Community**  | No strong risk factors identified | Marijuana availability (10-12) Neighbourhood youth in trouble (10-12)  |

Source: Early Intervention Foundation, 2015 p. 8

## Protective factors

There are many young people who have the above risk factors in their lives who do not get involved in youth violence.[[18]](#footnote-18) Consequently, there is a growing interest in the protective factors which help prevent involvement in violence.[[19]](#footnote-19)As with risk factors, protective factors can occur at the individual, family and close relationship, community, and societal levels; and, the more protective factors that accumulate, the lower the likelihood of youth violence. Identified protective factors are:

* Above-average intelligence
* Low levels of impulsiveness
* Pro-social attitudes
* Close relationships to parents
* Intensive parental supervision
* Medium socioeconomic status
* Strong ties to school
* Having non-deviant peers
* Living in a non-deprived and non-violent neighbourhood.[[20]](#footnote-20)

A review for the Early Intervention Foundation (2015)[[21]](#footnote-21) identified the following protective factors for preventing involvement in youth violence, and drew on longitudinal studies to highlight the factors for which there is the strongest evidence:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Domain** | **Protective factors (strong factors in bold)** |
| Individual | **Belief in the moral order****Positive/prosocial attitudes****Low impulsivity**Intolerant attitude towards deviancePerceived sanctions for transgressionsLow ADHD symptomsLow emotional distressHigh self-esteem |
| Family | **Good family management****Stable family structure****Infrequent parent–child conflict**Supportive relationships with parents or other adultsParents’ positive evaluation of peers |
| School | **Academic achievement**Commitment to schoolSchool recognition for involvement in conventional activitiesHigh educational aspirationsBonding to school |
| Peer | Friends who engage in conventional behaviourLow peer delinquencyProsocial bonding  |
| Community | **Low economic deprivation**Neighbourhood interactionNeighbour support |

Source: Cordis Bright Consulting (2015) p37

## Promoting resilience

In recent years there has been considerable interest in how some young people, despite having many risk factors in their lives, seem to ‘beat the odds’. What are the resilience factors which enable some young people to do well despite adversity, and how can these features be strengthened?[[22]](#footnote-22)

The evidence suggests that there are some key factors which influence resilience. It is generally agreed that the most important factor is having a stable, supportive relationship with a parent or caregiver.[[23]](#footnote-23) Where these attachments are weak or negative, resilience can still be supported via positive, consistent relationships with other adults.[[24]](#footnote-24) Other key elements are the development of good personal life skills and providing resources and interventions to ameliorate or prevent the effects of ‘set-backs’ and supporting young people to sustain positive connections with their community.[[25]](#footnote-25) As Ann Masten puts it, resilience is built by ‘ordinary magic’: ‘*Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities.’[[26]](#footnote-26)*

Resilience has become an important concept for those working with children and young people and now underpins many initiatives to promote wellbeing. This thinking has also been applied to young people vulnerable to involvement in violence. For example, Guerra and Williams (2002) highlight the importance of ‘healthy youth development’. ‘*Rather than focus on selected risk factors and how to reduce them, a youth development approach emphasises strengthening the capacity of youth to become healthy and successful adolescents and adults through skill building and development of opportunities for engagement and support.’[[27]](#footnote-27)*

The challenge for those working with young people involved in or on the edge of youth violence is that some of the early building blocks of resilience are often absent or damaged. This reinforces the importance of early intervention with young children. However, adolescence is also a critical period of development, and offers a window of opportunity. As the Association for Young People’s Health (2016) points out, it is worth investing in resilience at this age because:

* Human brains develop and change more during the teenage years than at any other time apart from the first three years of life. This means that this is a time when there is huge potential for the development of new skills and capabilities.
* The environment has a key role to play for teenage brain development. Enriching environments can enhance development while restrictive ones do the opposite.
* Young people who are not resilient will be more likely to respond to stress by developing anxiety and depression, which in turn often leads to other disadvantages e.g. young people with mental health problems are more likely to be not in education, employment and training in their early 20s, and are more likely to need additional welfare support
* The more opportunities we can offer teenagers for learning coping skills, and the more support and endorsement we can provide, the more chance there is of healthy development.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Between the ages of 10 and 24, a number of significant life events and challenges occur in the transition from being a child at home to being a self-supporting adult. Each of these can be a critical learning moment when a timely intervention can be a life-changing experience. However, strategies to promote resilience should not just be focused on the individual. Focusing on building individual life skills is not a replacement or substitute for action to tackle the causes of stress and inequality. Therefore, school and community-based resources, services and interventions are a critical part of promoting resilience – and reducing inequalities is a major part of the picture.[[29]](#footnote-29)

# 4. What works to address youth violence?

Serious youth violence is not a problem that exists in isolation. The risk and protective factors for being a perpetrator or a victim of youth violence overlap with those for other kinds of violence and abuse such as child abuse and neglect and for sexual and domestic violence. Young people who are abused and neglected are much more likely to be in physical fights, become involved with gangs, and attempt suicide than those who are not. Furthermore, the causes of youth violence are multiple - and risk factors can accumulate across childhood and adolescence. The use of any single strategy is therefore unlikely to have much effect on an entire community’s level of violence.[[30]](#footnote-30) The evidence strongly suggests that what is required for impact is a multi-level, multi-mode approach which reduces risk and promotes protective factors at individual, family, school and community levels. This requires approaches that address multiple forms of violence and acknowledge their interrelatedness rather than single issue interventions.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Strategies to prevent youth violence commonly adopt a combination of three types of approach – prevention, disengagement and suppression:[[32]](#footnote-32)

* **Prevention** - aims to prevent children and young people from getting involved in gangs or youth violence. Such programmes can begin very early (e.g. pre-birth and early childhood interventions) or attempt to prevent children and young people getting involved through support and diversionary activities (e.g. extra curricula activities)
* **Disengagement** - aims to divert or help young people withdraw from crime by providing alternatives (e.g. detached workers or providing alternative opportunities, such as after-school programmes, counselling and job training).
* **Suppression** - uses enforcement tactics that identify, isolate, and punish offenders (e.g. law enforcement, legislation targeting offenders)

Evidence suggests that effective strategies combine all three components and are tailored to specific communities and the age groups of young people involved. For the purposes of this review we are focusing on the first two of the above. However, it is worth bearing in mind that any county-wide strategy also needs to include enforcement as well as prevention and disengagement: preventive projects are less likely to work in a context where there is inadequate policing or community safety.

Interventions to reduce youth violence for which there is some evidence of effectiveness fall broadly into six main areas:

* Early intervention: Parenting and early childhood development
* School-based social and emotional skills development
* School-based prevention programmes on issues such as bullying or unhealthy relationships
* Mentoring
* Diversionary activities
* Community and Public health approaches

## 4.2. Early intervention: Parenting and early childhood development

There is strong evidence that intervention in early childhood is effective for improving later outcomes for children, including for preventing violent and anti-social behaviour. Schools can play an important role in both supporting parents and parenting and in increasing children’s access to high quality early education.

### 4.2.2. Parenting

There is plentiful evidence of the critical role of parenting in significantly lowering the risk of young people being involved in violence and offending. Research consistently highlights the value of an ‘authoritative’ parenting style which combines warmth and nurturing with age-appropriate expectations, consistent boundaries and monitoring of children’s activities.[[33]](#footnote-33)

The two main approaches to promoting this kind of positive parenting are early childhood home visiting schemes and parent training. The best known and best evidenced of the former is Family Nurse Partnership for vulnerable, young, first-time mothers.[[34]](#footnote-34) US evaluations have shown the effects of this time-limited intervention to be considerable. However, the UK evidence is weaker, and a 2016 evaluation concluded that it was not cost-effective in a UK context in terms of immediate outcomes such as smoking cessation and increased breastfeeding. This may be partly accounted for by the different healthcare systems in the US and UK.[[35]](#footnote-35) There are other home visiting programmes that may work for different communities, depending on available resources and the context in which they are delivered, but almost all the evidence comes from the US.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Of greater relevance to schools, is the evidence relating to parent training. There is good evidence of the value of parent training and support both internationally and in the UK. Multiple systematic reviews have demonstrated impacts on offending as well as risk and protective factors for youth violence.[[37]](#footnote-37) A programme that has a particularly strong evidence base is The Incredible Years.[[38]](#footnote-38)

**The Incredible Years** series is a set of interlocking group training programmes for parents, teachers and children with the goal of preventing, reducing and treating behavioural and emotional problems in children aged 2 to 12. The evidence for effectiveness is strong with randomised control group evaluations[[39]](#footnote-39) showing reductions inconduct problems atschool and at home and reduction of internalising and depressed mood symptoms.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Of particular relevance to primary schools are the Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management (IY Teacher) programme and the Incredible Years Child Training Programme (IY Dinosaur) designed for children between the ages of two and eight. These are targeted interventions for small groups of six to eight pupils with behavioural problems who attend weekly two-hour sessions where they learn strategies for managing their feelings, friendships and behaviour at school. This programme employs strategies to promote children's non-aggressive ways to solve common conflicts, appropriate classroom behaviours, and positive social skills with other children and adults. IY-TCM's most rigorous evidence comes from three RCTs, which were conducted in Wales, Ireland and the USA.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Another well-evaluated programme originating in the US is the **Raising Healthy Children programme**, an elementary-school-based intervention, designed to improve family bonding with the school while also building children’s competencies for resisting risk. Long-term evaluation showed positive programme effects. There were improvements in school bonding and achievement and reductions in grade repetition, lifetime violence and heavy alcohol use at age 18; there was improved positive functioning in school and/or work, more high school graduates, better emotional and mental health, fewer with criminal records, fewer involved in selling drugs, and fewer females who had been pregnant or had given birth by age 21; there was improved educational and economic attainment, improved mental health and reduced lifetime sexually transmitted infections, but no significant effects on crime or drug use at ages 24 and 27.[[42]](#footnote-42)

### 4.2.3. High quality early years education

Quality early childhood education can improve children’s cognitive and socio-emotional development and increase the likelihood that children will experience stable, nurturing relationships, academic success and lower rates of behaviour problems, aggression, and crime.[[43]](#footnote-43) Parental involvement is emphasised as critical in such programmes. Examples of effective programs in the US are Child Parent Centers (CPCs), Early Head Start (EHS) and Highscope which have been evaluated in multiple, long-term studies.

**The HighScope pre-school programme** has evidenced particularly powerful effects. The HighScope curriculum is based on the promotion of active learning, which enables children to initiate their own activities and take responsibility for completing them. Most children attend the programme for two years at ages 3 and 4. The classroom programme is supported by weekly home visits by pre-school teachers. The staff to child ratio is 1 adult for every 5 or 6 children. Positive effects include reducing the likelihood of children being placed in special education programmes, reduced crime and delinquency in the teenage years, significantly better educational outcomes, being employed at age 19, significantly fewer lifetime criminal arrests, and higher average earnings at age 27.[[44]](#footnote-44)

In the UK, the development of **Sure Start** drew heavily on this evidence from the US, but as there was no single intervention model delivered across children’s centres and poor targeting of those in need, there were limitations to what the national evaluation could measure. However, the evaluation team reported four positive effects of Sure Start local programmes at age 7, two of which applied across all children involved with the programme. Mothers were found to be engaging in less harsh discipline and were providing a more stimulating home-learning environment for their children. They were also providing a less chaotic home environment for boys (though this was not a significant finding for girls) and those who were lone parents and/or in workless households reported having better life satisfaction.[[45]](#footnote-45)

## 4.3. School-based cognitive, social and emotional skills development

Skill-development has a robust research base, which shows building young people’s interpersonal, emotional, and behavioural skills can help reduce both youth violence perpetration and victimization.[[46]](#footnote-46) These life skills can help young people increase their self-awareness, understanding of social situations, ability to avoid risky behaviours, and capacity to resolve conflict without violence.

### 4.3.1. Primary school programmes

The following are examples of evidence-based classroom-based programmes aimed mainly at primary aged children (although there are some which can also be used in secondary schools). Four which originated in the US are Good Behaviour Game (GBG), Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS), Positive Action and Life Skills Training (LST).

**The Good Behaviour Game** (GBG) is classroom management strategy that encourages good behaviour and co-operation in children in primary school classrooms. Teachers initiate Good Behaviour Games by dividing children into small teams that are balanced for gender and child temperament. Teams are rewarded with points for good behaviour in short games that take place several times a week. The Good Behaviour Game’s most rigorous evidence comes from two RCTs, which were conducted in the United States and the Netherlands. These provide evidence of reduced aggressive and shy behaviour in children and long-term reductions in antisocial behaviour and in alcohol abuse/dependence at 14-year follow up.[[47]](#footnote-47)

**PATHS** is a universal primary-school-based intervention promoting emotional and social competencies and reducing aggression and behaviour. PATHS is designed to be taught two to three times per week across the primary years with daily activities to support behaviour. Multiple high-quality evaluations of PATHS (including from 10 RCTs) conducted since the early 1980s have shown positive results including a lower rate of conduct problems and externalising behaviours; lower internalising scores and depression; improvements in social problem solving, emotional understanding and self-control; better ability to resolve peer conflicts; and greater empathy for others. However, the evidence from UK primary schools is more tentative—the quality of implementation appears important for outcomes but is challenging to achieve given busy timetables.[[48]](#footnote-48)

**Positive Action** A school-based curriculum developed to support children’s prosocial behaviour, school performance and family functioning. Different versions of the Positive Action curriculum are available for different age groups, beginning with reception and ending with Year 9. Positive Action has good evidence of short-term reductions in bullying and antisocial behaviour and some long-term effects on reducing serious violence-related behaviours and adolescent substance misuse.[[49]](#footnote-49)

**LifeSkills Training**: a classroom-based universal prevention programme designed to prevent adolescent tobacco, alcohol, marijuana use and violence. It involves 15 sessions taught by teachers over 3 months. The programme focuses on improving cognitive-behavioural skills (problem solving, decision making, stress management, communication), drug prevention (anti-drug norms), peer pressure resistance), and anger management/conflict resolution. Across several studies, the intervention group showed significantly greater improvement than the control group in life skills knowledge, substance use knowledge, and perceived adult substance use, both at short-term and longer-term follow-ups. Evaluations have shown some medium-term impacts on both youth crime and drug use.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Two other programmes that have evidence of effectiveness from the US but have not been evaluated in the UK are **Second Step** (a curriculum-based violence prevention intervention) whose evaluations indicate significant positive findings in relation to improved prosocial behaviour and reduced externalising behaviour, and **PeaceBuilders**, (a whole school approach to creating a positive school climate between teachers, students and the broader community). Again, the evaluations of Peacebuilders show the positive impact on children’s social competence, prosocial behaviour and reduced levels of aggression over a two-year period.

Many interventions and their evaluations emanate from the US, although some of the parent-training programmes and PATHS have been evaluated in the UK too[[51]](#footnote-51) and there are some other school based programmes widely used in the UK, notably SEAL. Most UK programmes have not been subjected to the same level of evaluation as those in the US, but this does not mean they are not positive interventions. Examples of support to children in the primary years include school-based initiatives to promote emotional well-being such as **nurture groups** for children with social, emotional, behavioural and learning difficulties. A national study found statistically significant improvements in social, emotional and behavioural functioning for nurture group pupils.[[52]](#footnote-52) Another example is support to primary aged children provided in some schools by **Place2Be**,which provides an open access lunchtime drop-in service with a counsellor open to all pupils in the school, and weekly counselling for those with higher levels of need.[[53]](#footnote-53)

**SEAL:** The most common programme used in UK schools is SEAL (Social and emotional aspects of learning). Only the primary groupwork element of SEAL has been rigorously evaluated but the programme as a whole draws on evidence based US programmes such as PATHS and Incredible Years translated for a UK context.[[54]](#footnote-54)SEAL has a curriculum element addressing constructs such as self-awareness, motivation, empathy, and conflict resolution, among others. SEAL also has a major emphasis on the ways in which the whole school community as a setting can promote positive social and emotional development, including resources relating to staff development, school organisation, management and leadership, family and community relations, and school ethos.

Pilot versions of the SEAL programme were introduced into English primary schools in 2003, with an adapted version for secondary schools following in 2005. It was estimated that as many as 90% of primary schools and 70% of secondary schools had introduced at least some elements of the programme by 2007. A review of the programme at secondary level found SEAL to have had hardly any impact on the mental well-being of pupils.[[55]](#footnote-55) However, in primary schools, a far more positive set of findings continued to emerge. The national evaluation of group work in SEAL found that ‘*there is statistically significant evidence that primary SEAL small group work has a positive impact*.’[[56]](#footnote-56)

The Education Endowment Fund in Partnership with the Early Intervention Foundation have recently published research[[57]](#footnote-57) and guidance[[58]](#footnote-58) for primary schools which covers both specific Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) intervention programmes and the types of strategies or practices that teachers can integrate into their everyday teaching. In addition to the evidence review, the EEF and EIF commissioned a survey of what primary schools in England are currently doing to support children’s social and emotional development and to identify where there are gaps between current practice and the evidence. The guidance sets out six sets of recommendations, aiming to support primary schools to:

1. teach SEL skills explicitly

2. integrate and model SEL skills through everyday teaching

3. plan carefully for adopting a SEL programme

4. use a SAFE curriculum: sequential, active, focused and explicit

5. reinforce SEL skills through a whole-school ethos and activities

6. plan, support and monitor SEL implementation.

In relation to the selection and implementation of specific programmes the EEF/EIF guidance emphasises four core practices which feature in the more successful programmes.[[59]](#footnote-59) Referred to through the acronym SAFE, the four identified practices are:

•Sequenced – A set of connected learning activities that teaches social-emotional skills through a coordinated, step-by-step approach

•Active - learning methods such as role-play or behavioural rehearsal with feedback

•Focused - the inclusion of at least one programme component that focuses specifically on the development of social-emotional skills through devoting sufficient instructional time to it on a regular basis

•Explicit - teaching of clearly identified skills with clear and specific learning objectives, as distinguished from a programme goal on general skill enhancement.

### 4.3.2. Secondary school programmes

As in primary schools, violence prevention related initiatives in secondary school tend to involve SEL education through the PHSE curriculum and less frequently include short-term ‘brought-in’ interventions linked to external community-based projects. Some of the programmes described above have also been implemented in secondary schools.

For older children, Ireland has developed the **MindOut** programme, a universal SEL programme for 15-18 year old students recently rolled out as part of the SPHE curriculum.[[60]](#footnote-60) The programme consists of 12 sessions with structured interactive activities and resource materials and aims to promote social and emotional skills and competencies. Interactive teaching strategies, including collaborative e-learning, structured games and scenarios are incorporated to engage students in exploring current issues in a more interactive manner together with the use of multi-media resources. A menu of whole school strategies is provided for use by school staff, including guidelines for cross-curricular and community-related supports and activities. Whole school strategies are also embedded in the programme through “practice-at-home” activities, and a “Teacher Reflection” section encourages teachers to strengthen their own social and emotional skills. The programme is undergoing evaluation in a national RCT involving 34 ‘disadvantaged schools’. A report of preliminary findings indicates effectiveness in improving students’ social and emotional skills development, mental health and wellbeing.[[61]](#footnote-61)

## 4.4. School-based prevention programmes on radicalisation, knife crime, bullying, unhealthy relationships

Most SEL programmes are aimed at improving children’s social and emotional well-being and enhancing their capacity to learn. They are not specifically about crime or antisocial behaviour although they can and do have an impact on these. Alongside these programmes there is also a growing number of school-based initiatives aimed explicitly at reducing young people’s involvement in violence, but there is limited evaluation evidence relating to these. Such initiatives often take the form of educational programmes delivered in schools by external organisations. These may include workshops, performances or creative projects and are often delivered by children’s charities or theatre in education companies. They may be linked to projects focussed on preventing radicalisation, gangs and knife-crime, sexual/criminal exploitation or abuse in relationships.

Initiatives vary in their scale from quite small local partnerships between a voluntary organisation and a school or group of schools through to large government funded initiatives such as the Prevent programme. Such interventions are often positively evaluated in terms of their acceptability to children, parents and schools but can rarely demonstrate impacts on changing behaviour.

### 4.4.1. Prevent in schools

Over the last decade in England, DfE has engaged in a range of Prevent-related initiatives to tackle radicalisation and extremism. Following consultation with headteachers and local authority children’s services in 2008, the Department published a toolkit to help schools prevent what was described as ‘violent extremism’. This was accompanied by government funding of around £5 million to support local authorities, schools and the police to implement it. In 2010, ACPO produced guidance entitled ‘Prevent, Police and Schools’[[62]](#footnote-62) to help police officers work more effectively with teachers and school staff; an initiative called ‘Act Now’ which helps stimulate debate on violent extremism, and a DVD ‘Watch Over Me’, which went to every secondary school in England along with training events for police officers, teachers and community leaders.

Research conducted in 2011 suggested that this investment contributed to greater awareness of Prevent in schools.[[63]](#footnote-63) 84% said they knew at least something about their role in preventing violent extremism, and only a minority (20%) regarded this role as unimportant. Three quarters of schools obtained information about preventing violent extremism and the take-up of information was particularly high in secondary schools in urban areas and those with the highest BME populations or the most ethnically diverse students. However, despite this level of funding, most schools (70%) still said they would like more information about preventing violent extremism and three quarters of schools felt that their senior leadership team and teaching staff needed more training related to preventing violent extremism. This indicates just how difficult it can be to develop and maintain the confidence of schools in tackling these very challenging issues.[[64]](#footnote-64)

### 4.4.2. Knife-Crime

Home Office guidance to schools and colleges on preventing youth violence and gang involvement was issued in 2013. In 2019 the Home Office along with the Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) Association and teachers created improved school curriculum materials on knife crime and sent new lesson plans to 20,000 PSHE secondary school teachers to equip them to challenge myths and communicate to their pupils the realities of carrying a knife. The lessons explore how role models can influence young people’s attitudes, decisions and behaviour in positive ways and signpost young people towards support services and the #knifefree website.

More education resources are being developed to tackle knife crime than ever before – these include for example: a street crime toolkit from Fearless (KS3/4)[[65]](#footnote-65); lesson plans from The Ben Kinsella Trust which include Choices & Consequences resources for KS2 [[66]](#footnote-66) and ‘The Playing Safe’ resources for KS2 from No Knives, Better Lives (Scotland).[[67]](#footnote-67)

Many organisations, large and small, offer workshops in schools. For example: My Voice, a six-week programme delivered by the Children’s Society in schools and colleges in the North-East. It is designed to improve young people's well-being, resilience and self-reliance and is for 11 to 19 year olds who may be at risk of social exclusion, youth offending, going missing from home, in the process of leaving care or considered ‘on the edge of care’. Young people are supported to participate and talk about the issues or challenges that are important to them. These may include risk taking behaviours including knife crime, online safety, healthy/unhealthy relationships, budgeting and diet and exercise.

In the wake of tragic deaths of young people, some small charities have emerged including Knifecrimes.org founded by Ann Oakes-Odger following the murder of her Son, Westley Odger which delivers Westley's Weapons Awareness in Essex schools or Billy’s Wish set up in memory of Billy Dove murdered in 2011.

There is no robust evaluation of the effectiveness of these interventions. One project that has been evaluated in the UK is Street Aware -a series of educational talks delivered to all Year 6 primary school children in the City of Nottingham on the topics of knife, gun and gang crime. The evaluators concluded that while it raised awareness at the time of delivery this was lost by year 10, and it was not possible to map any identifiable impact on those most at risk of being drawn into gangs and knife crime.[[68]](#footnote-68)

### 4.4.3. Anti-bullying programmes

For many years now there have been anti-bullying programmes run in schools either by schools themselves or in partnership with external organisations. The evaluation of these has been variable, but a Campbell systematic review of evaluations published in 2009[[69]](#footnote-69) found evidence that anti-bullying interventions can be effective in reducing both bullying behaviour and victimization – on average by about 20%. A later systematic review of a further 32 evaluations conducted between 2009 and 2013 found that around half reported significant effects on bullying behaviour and victimization.[[70]](#footnote-70)

The impact of effective programmes is dependent on the following key features:

* Parental involvement through training/meetings
* A whole-school bullying policy
* Playground supervision
* Effective and firm disciplinary responses to bullying
* Duration and intensity of programmes for both children and teachers (they need to be long-lasting)
* Quality of implementation

The Campbell review found one programme element (work with peers) was significantly associated with an *increase* in victimization.

Of the 44 studies identified in the review only three were conducted in the UK. Only one of the three, the Sheffield Antibullying Project, evaluated a whole school approach that had some similarities to the Kiva programme (see below).

The Anti-Bullying Alliance promotes a whole-school approach to bullying prevention. It provides resources including lesson plans and as part of their All Together programme[[71]](#footnote-71)  an audit and action planning tool to help schools assess their practice from a whole school perspective. They also promote Kiva – one of the best evaluated European programmes. Kiva has been shown to reduce both self- and peer-reported bullying and victimization significantly and to have positive effects on school liking, academic motivation and achievement.[[72]](#footnote-72) It has been piloted in the UK [[73]](#footnote-73)and is currently being evaluated in a UK RCT.

A specific initiative to increase knowledge of how best to tackle homophobic bullying in schools was initiated and funded by the Government Equalities Office in 2015 and involved a range of organisations delivering different projects around the country.[[74]](#footnote-74) A programme evaluation report provides useful detail on the initiatives and the effective elements. The findings showed little change in student attitudes (largely because these tended to be positive and empathic at the outset) but survey data consistently suggested substantial effects on school staff, including an increase from 25 to 85 percent of teachers who agreed or strongly agreed that they had sufficient knowledge of strategies they could use to address homophobic and biphobic bullying (a 60 percentage point increase). Building capacity among teachers to prevent and tackle HB&T bullying and to cascade their learning were very successful parts of the programme.[[75]](#footnote-75)

Preventing and responding appropriately to bullying is a key component of school inspections and schools are rated by Ofsted on providing an environment in which pupils feel safe, and in which bullying, discrimination and peer-on-peer abuse are not accepted and are dealt with quickly, consistently and effectively whenever they occur. Information schools must provide to OFSTED includerecords and analysis of bullying, discriminatory and prejudiced behaviour, including racist, sexist, disability and homophobic/ biphobic/ transphobic bullying, use of derogatory language and racist incidents. The pupil and staff surveys used in inspections contain questions about safeguarding, behaviour and discipline, bullying, how respondents feel about the school and how well supported and respected they feel they are in the school.[[76]](#footnote-76)

### 4.4.4. Gender-based violence and healthy relationship programmes

Many women’s organisations and young people’s services have developed school programmes with a focus on preventing sexual and domestic abuse including sexual harassment and exploitation. Comic Relief funded six such projects working to prevent violence against women and girls through secondary school education over the course of two years in 2011/12. The projects were developed and delivered by Respond, Nottinghamshire Domestic Violence Forum, Victim Support Cornwall, Tender, Off the Record and Southall Black Sisters, and AVA produced an overview of key learning from the project.[[77]](#footnote-77) A ‘whole school approach’ involving parents, leadership from heads and governors, effective policies, training for teachers, and co-production with students was identified as an effective model for influencing school culture and promoting attitudinal change.

In 2012 Rape Crisis Scotland developed a Sexual Violence Prevention intervention based on seven themed sessions covering: consent; defining sexual violence; gender; how we can help prevent sexual violence; impacts and supporting survivors; sexualisation and pornography and social media. Evaluation across schools in nine areas of Scotland showed that the delivery of three or more workshops had a statistically significant impact on both knowledge and attitudes.[[78]](#footnote-78) The findings show that in relation to a number of attitudes, a third of young people changed their opinions in a positive direction and that in most cases boys were more likely to change their views than were girls[[79]](#footnote-79). Students and teachers reported high levels of satisfaction with the workshops and the programme is now delivered throughout Scotland by a network of prevention workers based in local Rape Crisis Centres.[[80]](#footnote-80)

Several children’s charities including Barnardo’s and the NSPCC run programmes in schools aimed at raising children and young people’s awareness of healthy relationships. Many of these have been developed in response to concerns about child abuse and child sexual exploitation.

The NSPCC Schools programme includes ‘Speak Out Safe’ for children aged 4–11. It is available throughout the UK and delivered by trained volunteers. It involves a 30–minute assembly, with an additional hourlong workshop for 9–11s. The programme aims to teach pupils what abuse is in all its forms and how they can keep themselves safe.

In Northern Ireland an NSPCC Keeping Safe preventative education package covering bullying, abuse and neglect through an assembly and three lessons has been delivered to 7,000 children and is the subject of an RCT evaluation which ‘has some promising preliminary findings’ but isn’t yet published. The package trains teachers to deliver the resource and some findings on what constitutes effective CPD in this context are available.[[81]](#footnote-81)

Barnardo’s programme Real Love Rocks has versions for both primary and secondary aged students covering a wide range of issues from friendships through to consent, awareness of sexual exploitation, grooming, and safe use of social media. The programme was most extensively delivered and evaluated as part of the Reachout project in Rotherham. Feedback from young people and teachers was very positive with a high proportion of students reporting increased levels of knowledge and awareness.[[82]](#footnote-82)

Reviews of such programmes have found considerable variety of content and overall, there is little evidence of impact on actual episodes of relationship violence. [[83]](#footnote-83) However, this may be asking too much of such initiatives, and some evaluations have found that high quality programmes can raise awareness among young people and influence the attitudes that underpin behaviour.[[84]](#footnote-84)

## 4.5. Mentoring

Young people’s risk for violence can be buffered through strong connections to caring adults and involvement in activities that help them grow and apply new skills.[[85]](#footnote-85) Relationships with caring adults, in addition to parents or caregivers, can influence young people’s choices and reduce their risk for involvement in crime and violence, alcohol and other substance use. Schools can play a vital role in this regard by offering supportive relationships with trusted adults. And whilst the boundaries required of school staff mean that there are limitations to these relationships, schools can also act as key intermediaries in identifying young people who might benefit from mentoring programmes and acting as an enabler for these to take place.

Mentoring is the most common approach to building connections between young people and supportive adults outside their family and systematic reviews of mentoring programmes indicate improvements in outcomes across behavioural, social, emotional, and academic domains.[[86]](#footnote-86)

**Big Brothers Big Sisters of America** (BBBS) is the oldest and best-known example. This provides one to one mentoring by volunteer adult mentors to young people following careful screening, training and matching. Meetings are usually 3-4 hours and happen 3 times a month, for at least a year. BBBS has shown positive effects on substance use and involvement in violence.[[87]](#footnote-87)

Mentoring programmes have become increasingly popular in the UK and are now one of the most common community-based interventions aimed at tackling youth crime. However, their impact depends heavily on the quality of the scheme and they have potential to do harm as well as good. For example, some peer mentoring programmes are very effective, but there can also be negative ‘peer-contagion’ effects if they are not well run.

A systematic review of 46 studies[[88]](#footnote-88) found that mentoring is an effective intervention for troubled young people which can help high-risk youth avoid criminal behaviour and improve their performance at school. The review also found some data suggesting mentoring reduces drug use and aggressive behaviour.

But there was a catch. The overall effect of mentoring programmes is modest and there is substantial variation in the effectiveness of different programmes across studies. The researchers struggled to determine which aspects of mentoring are most effective because most of the studies do not provide details about the mentoring relationship or programme structure. The authors were able to find evidence that mentors who offered emotional support and helped advocate for young people were more effective. Other than that, there is little solid information about how and why mentoring works.

Another systematic review[[89]](#footnote-89) identified other mentoring programmes with some evidence of effectiveness. This included a number developed in the UK which have some limited evaluation evidence of impact on outcomes that are relevant to preventing violence such as communication skills, attitudes to offending behaviour, decision making and negotiation skills, relationships and conflict management. These included Getting it Together, Quarrel Shop, Volunteer Mentoring Scheme, Friends of the Children, HEART, MAPS and Chance UK.

Programmes developed or delivered in the UK that have a more specific focus on addressing the risks that lead to anti-social and criminal behaviour include: Conflict Resolution Uncut, Fight for Peace, Urban Stars, Mentoring Plus, Plusone Mentoring, Young Leaders for Safer Cities and Coaching for Communities.

It should be noted that evidence regarding the effectiveness of specifically school-based mentoring interventions is weak. Transition Mentoring and Formalised Peer Mentoring are two programmes that have had some limited evaluated but there are too few studies overall to draw strong conclusions about programme impact. A meta-analysis[[90]](#footnote-90) which examined the impact of school-based mentoring for young people aged 11-18 years, reported that school-based mentoring programmes did not reliably improve young people’s social and emotional skills, academic achievement, attendance or behaviour.

The characteristics of the more effective interventions are: a structured approach to programme implementation; the provision of proper supervision for mentors; they are multi-component and most include a residential element, structured sessions and education or training alongside mentoring. These features are highlighted in guidelines for commissioners from the Early Intervention Foundation.[[91]](#footnote-91) These notes that the positive effects of mentoring tend to be stronger when it has the following features:

•emotional support is a key part of the mentoring provision

•mentors are motivated to participate as part of their own professional development rather than just wanting to volunteer

•mentors and mentees meet at least once a week and spend more time together at each meeting

•the mentoring takes place over a prolonged period: studies suggest that the benefits of mentoring are less likely to be maintained after the mentoring ends

•the mentoring is part of a wider suite of interventions: mentoring on its own may not reduce re-offending

•the programme is well-run with effective training and support for mentors and careful monitoring of contact.

**Mentors in Violence Prevention (Scotland)[[92]](#footnote-92)**

Mentoring can operate at a number of levels, from one to one mentoring with young people at very high risk of involvement in violence though to a more preventative level in schools and other settings. Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) is a peer education programme that gives young people the chance to explore and challenge the attitudes, beliefs and cultural norms that underpin gender-based violence, bullying and other forms of violence. It addresses a range of behaviours including name-calling, sexting, controlling behaviour and harassment, and uses a 'bystander' approach where individuals are not looked on as potential victims or perpetrators but as empowered and active bystanders with the ability to support and challenge their peers in a safe way.

MVP was introduced to Scotland in 2012 and has been delivered in over 100 secondary schools in 19 local authorities from Shetland to the Scottish Borders. School mentor support teams raise awareness with staff and pupils, train mentors and support mentor delivery of sessions to younger learners. As more schools are brought on board within the authority, experienced members of the Mentor Support team are invited to become trainers in the programme, thereby facilitating sustainability.

According to the 2017 report on MVP, schools have recorded some positive results from the programme including increased awareness of the issues related to violence, gender based violence and bullying and an increase in young people reporting that they would act if they saw particular behaviours occurring. Following staff training in MVP, more school staff feel that they have the necessary skills to educate others about gender-based violence and to challenge incidents. Staff report an increase in pupils who alert them to safety concerns, enabling them to put support in place as necessary. Pupils and staff have also related examples of pupils intervening on the school bus or in the community when they have witnessed violence or bullying. Both pupils and staff refer to an improved ethos within school and a reduction of barriers between older and younger pupils. Mentors and staff identify a positive impact on mentors’ confidence and the enhancement of a range of skills such as leadership, team-work and presentation skills.

## 4.6. Diversionary programmes

Another commonly used approach, sometimes run alongside mentoring, are diversionary programmes which aim to get young people involved in positive activities as an alternative to crime and anti-social behaviour. These can include extra-curricular activities run by schools themselves or they can involve schools playing a role in supporting programmes run by partner agencies and/or encouraging young people to attend. There is increasing evidence of the importance of out-of-school activities and other resources for young people to draw upon. This includes both after-school provision but also activities provided completely separately from education, including opportunities to take part in creative activities, music and sports and volunteering. This is not just about keeping people occupied and promoting safety, but about opportunities for life-skill development.

After school recreation offers young people the opportunity to engage in and learn skills in a range of activities including non-academic ones. This is assumed to be particularly beneficial for those who may struggle with schoolwork and risk low self-esteem and/or alienation from school. They have been popular partly because they occupy young people at peak crime times (late afternoon and early evening) but they have not been extensively evaluated. There is therefore much less evidence of effectiveness of diversionary activities – but some specific schemes have shown positive results. Reviews of youth development programmes, including approaches such as participation in creative arts, physical activity and mentoring, show that these interventions can impact positively on young people’s emotional and social wellbeing, academic performance, and range of social and health outcomes.

However, after school recreation is only effective if the programme is well- structured and includes proper supervision. It is clear from meta-analysis of evaluations that the more effective programmes are those which like SEL programmes in school, are SAFE (sequenced, active, focused and targeted).

One US example with demonstrated outcomes is the Los Angeles’ **Better Educated Students for Tomorrow** (LA’s BEST) program.[[93]](#footnote-93) There are currently no UK programmes that have been evaluated to a similar standard although there have been, and continue to be, many initiatives aimed at diverting young people from crime and violence.

These include **Positive Futures** programmes which were long term projects in which sport was used to establish relationships with socially marginalised young people (aged 10-19). Projects also included outreach work; training and mentoring; education programmes; and leadership training. Positive Futures projects were originally targeted at the 50 most ‘at risk’ young people aged 10 to 19 in neighbourhoods identified as being amongst the 20% most deprived in the country. There was evidence in most projects of a correlation between the development of the project and youth offending – with a decline in youth offending by between 14% and 77% for different projects. However, in many cases the Positive Futures programme was only one of a number of interventions, including Youth Inclusion Programmes, aimed at decreasing youth offending, making it difficult to assess the specific role of Positive Futures.[[94]](#footnote-94)Central funding ceased in 2013. Suffolk Positive Futures is one scheme that is still operating in 2020.[[95]](#footnote-95)

For young people involved in, or on the edge of youth crime, such activities can be a means of establishing positive relationships and draw them into constructive engagement. Many are sports based, and many people instinctively believe that engagement in sport protects against involvement in anti-social behaviour. This may well be true, although the impact of such initiatives on the actual incidence of crime and violence is a hard thing to measure. A synthesis study by Project Oracle included evaluations of 11 sports-based programmes in London aiming to prevent youth crime and violence. All reported some positive impacts, but because most of the studies had small sample sizes and lacked control groups, it is difficult to determine whether these programmes genuinely caused the outcomes measured.[[96]](#footnote-96) However, studies do suggest that participating in sport can improve self-esteem, enhance social bonds and provide participants with a feeling of purpose. The introduction of an education element can improve outcomes following completion of the programme, providing participants with a pathway towards employment and effectiveness may be enhanced through a combination of other services such as assistance with housing.[[97]](#footnote-97)

The National Lottery Community Fund has drawn together insights from projects it has funded to prevent serious youth violence.[[98]](#footnote-98) These include both targeted individual interventions with young people and holistic whole community and whole system approaches:

**LEAP** – helping young people with a history of violence to develop skills and confidence to manage conflict.[[99]](#footnote-99) Leap Confronting Conflict is a national youth charity that provides conflict management training and support to young people. They support children and young people who face high, sustained levels of conflict, such as violence. Half have a history of offending and/or have been involved in violent behaviours. They give young people an insight into the causes and consequences of conflict, develop their skills and confidence to manage such situations and teach them to take responsibility for their actions. Interventions address topics such as danger, space and territory, status and reputation, enemies and revenge. Social media, sexual abuse and violence are also discussed. The approach was developed in collaboration with young people with lived experience of violence and is delivered as a five-day training course using interactive methods including role play, drama, games and discussions. Independent researchers interviewed 35 former participants who had taken part in the charity’s activities 20 months earlier. They concluded [note the small sample] that the approach was helping to reduce arrest, offending and violence.

**Headstart** - A ‘whole-community’ approach to training staff and volunteers in trauma informed approaches.[[100]](#footnote-100) HeadStart is a National Community funded programme that explores and tests ways to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people aged 10-16 in six communities across England. The partnership in Cornwall works with Trauma Informed Schools UK and the Centre for Child Mental Health to deliver training to schools, statutory agencies and community organisations so that their staff can recognise and respond to the early signs of mental health problems. The training covers developmental deficits and ACEs and is designed to help staff identify the needs that might lie behind behaviours which interrupt a child's learning and development. The training also provides all school staff – including sports coaches, catering staff, and teachers - with the conversational and relational tools that help practitioners to hold structured conversations with a young person. This training has been extended to adults in local community groups, to create a ‘whole-system approach’, designed to give all local children access to an ‘emotionally available adult’ in order to boost their resilience. Staff report that it has given them the skills and confidence to be effective in an area where they have often felt inexperienced and anxious.

**Side Step, Action for Children, Scotland** – A whole system approach to diverting young people from serious organised crime. Side Step is a three year early intervention and diversion service delivered by Action for Children together with Police Scotland, Glasgow City Council’s social work department and the Scottish Government. Side Step works with 12-18 year olds in Glasgow who are at risk of, or already involved in, serious organised crime. They may be involved in selling and distributing drugs, distributing counterfeit money and goods, violence and anti-social behaviour. Around 95% are misusing drugs and four out of ten have been in secure care/custody. Side Step is a product of partnership-working between charities, community groups and youth justice. Support is provided in a variety of formats: one-to-one, peer mentoring and group work and the level of intensity varies depending on the needs of the individual. Peer mentoring is a key component of the activity - peer mentors have relevant lived experience, knowledge of the local area/issues and are now living a crime-free life. Support is also available for the whole family. A small, independent evaluation found that after six months on the programme 75% of young people are considered to be living a more stable life and haven’t re-offended. The evaluation also suggested that engagement can lead to a ‘ripple effect’ such that as one young person moves away from organised crime, others such as friends and siblings may follow.

## 4.7. Public Health and Community approaches

The current evidence supports the argument for taking a public health approach to preventing youth violence. A public health approach starts from the basic premise that living without the fear of violence is a fundamental requirement for health and wellbeing. Like any other public health issue, the causes of violence lie at many levels and are interrelated, so its solutions need to address the same layers. This is illustrated by the diagram below.[[101]](#footnote-101)



Bellis et al (2015) argue that much like many infections, violence is contagious.[[102]](#footnote-102)For instance, exposure to violence, especially as a child, makes individuals more likely to be involved in violence in later life. This suggests the need for interventions with individual children and young people at risk. But taking a public health approach means that interventions at the individual and family level need to be accompanied by measures to reduce social inequalities and change the cultural norms that accept violence. Key elements of a public health approach are:

* The use of data to establish the nature and extent of violence in the target area
* Using evidence to understand underlying risk and protective factors
* The involvement of all key agencies in developing plans
* The implementation of interventions for which there is good evidence
* Action at all levels, from media campaigns to raise awareness and provide public information, steps to reduce situational risks such as the availability of alcohol, policing and enforcement measures, interventions to promote the resilience of young people, through to individualised support for those at greatest risk
* The engagement of communities

None of this is new, but viewing youth violence through a public health lens has helped shift the emphasis from a narrow focus on ‘problem youth’ towards actions which can help to address underlying causes. The Government endorsed a public health approach in its 2011 ‘*Ending Gang and Youth Violence’* report[[103]](#footnote-103) which emphasised the role of the public health system and local health and wellbeing boards, in tackling gang and youth violence.

### 4.7.1. Examples of public health approaches

Initiatives described as public health approaches in the US include **Cure Violence** and **Safe Streets.** These are aimed at reducing violence, particularly shootings and generally have three main elements:

1. *Detect and interrupt potentially violent conflicts*: Trained violence interrupters and outreach workers prevent shootings by identifying and mediating potentially lethal conflicts in the community and following up to ensure that the conflict does not reignite. They work to prevent retaliations – whenever a shooting happens, trained workers immediately work in the community and at the hospital to cool down emotions– working with the victims, friends and family, and anyone else is connected with the event. They also identify ongoing conflicts by talking to key people in the community about ongoing disputes, recent arrests, recent prison releases, and other situations and use mediation techniques to resolve them peacefully. They keep conflicts ‘cool’ – workers follow up with conflicts for as long as needed, sometimes for months, to ensure that the conflict does not become violent.

2*. Identify and treat highest risk*: Trained outreach workers work with the highest risk to make them less likely to commit violence by meeting them where they are at, talking to them about the costs of using violence, and helping them to obtain the social services they need – such as job training and drug treatment. They develop a caseload of clients they work with intensively, establishing contact, developing relationships and work with the people most likely to be involved in violence – seeing several times a week.

3. *Mobilize the community to change norms*: Workers engage leaders in the community as well as residents, local business owners, faith leaders, service providers, and the high risk, conveying the message that the residents, groups, and the community do not support the use of violence. Whenever a shooting occurs, workers organize a response where community members voice their objection to the shooting; they coordinate with existing and establish new tenant councils, and neighbourhood associations to assist. The programme also distributes materials and hosts events to convey the message that violence is not acceptable.

Such initiatives have also been implemented in the UK. One example is that run by Chaos Theory in Waltham Forest.

**Chaos Theory**

Chaos Theory is a grassroots charity aiming to reduce serious violence, working in partnership with families, the community, the third sector and statutory organisations. Chaos Theory have three projects dedicated to the prevention of violence: Violence Interruption Programme, Prison/Resettlement Support and Community Outreach.

The Violence Interruption Project (VIP) is comprised of Full-time/Part time Violence Interrupters and Outreach Workers. The staff team all have first-hand knowledge of ‘street life’ and offending behaviour. Violence Interrupters use their credibility, influence and street relationships to detect brewing conflicts and de-escalate and mediate them before they erupt in violence. Whenever a violent incident happens, the team immediately work in the community in order to attempt to ‘cool down’ emotions and prevent retaliations – working with the victims, friends and family of the victim, and anyone else is connected with the event. The team identify ongoing conflicts by engaging key people in the community about ongoing disputes and use mediation techniques to resolve them peacefully. All conflicts and mediations have to be discussed with the team and strategies to address them are put in place. Sometimes, this can take months, depending on the seriousness of the conflict. The team follow up with conflicts for as long as needed, sometimes for months, to ensure that the conflict does not become violent. This may mean spending a great deal of time with individuals, mentoring and guiding them.

Source: http://chaostheory.org.uk/

The best-known UK example of a major public health approach is **Glasgow’s Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV).** CIRV is a multi-agency, community-centred project designed to reduce violent behaviour amongst gang members. It consists of three basic components: Enforcement; Services and Programmes and The Moral Voice of the Community.

The enforcement element of CIRV aims to disrupt the dynamics within gangs involved in violent activity. A clear message is communicated to the group: ‘stop the violence’. If an individual within the gang commits an act of violence, enforcement is focused on the whole gang.

Enforcement is combined with a range of services and programmes available to gang members who agree to alter their lives. CIRV uses a network of services and programmes specifically tailored to meet the needs of gang members. These include a four-week personal development programme delivered by Kan-do Sports by instructors who themselves have had previous personal involvement in gang life. The course includes inputs from role models, sports coaching and group work sessions. Following their graduation from the course, and provided they have not re-offended, clients can progress to a four-week CIRV Employability Programme. CIRV also includes mentoring for clients considered to be at the highest levels of risk of involvement in youth crime, and a range of other preventative/diversionary support run by partners in Glasgow, such as football clubs and schools.

 The implementation of CIRV also requires communities affected by gang violence to both receive and deliver the following messages: ‘Stop the violence’; ‘We care about our young people and don’t want to see them become either victims or offenders as a result of gang violence’ and ‘We won’t tolerate violence in our community’.

An evaluation of CIRV in East Glasgow[[104]](#footnote-104) compared rates of criminal offending (including violent and non-violent offences) for the 167 male youths (aged 16-29) who engaged with the initiative with data for age-matched gang-involved youths from an equally deprived area. Violent offending reduced over the time of the CIRV intervention. In the cohort followed for 2-years, the rate reduction was greater in the intervention group (52%) than the comparison group (29%). The reduction in the rate of physical violence was not significantly different between intervention and comparator group; however, the rate of weapons carrying was reduced more in the intervention group (84%) than the comparison group (40%) in the 2-year follow-up. The evaluators noted that their study suggests that adopting a public health approach with gang-related youth was associated with reduced weapon carriage, which can prevent consequences for victims, offenders, and society.

Key components of these approaches include the combination of incentives and sanctions/enforcement; the targeting of those at highest risk of violent offending and the engagement of the wider community in speaking out against violence. Schools can clearly play a role in these components: they can use their position as a source of influence in the community; they can use their knowledge of young people to help to identify those at greatest risk and they can play their part in offering both incentives and sanctions. However, to be effective, schools need to be well linked into any local public health initiatives.

Another element of many public health approaches is the use of ‘reachable moments’ in the lives of offenders. The concept of a reachable moment is a simple one. It is based on the premise that there are key times in all our lives when we are particularly susceptible to influence, often times of crisis or major change. Initiatives which seek to use these reachable moments include projects based in A&E in which workers can rapidly respond to someone who has been injured in a violent incident and follow them up with support to make changes in their lives. Three key factors appear to be important: first, the workers access people at a time of crisis and when they are most aware of the need for something to change; second, they follow up into the community which helps to reinforce peoples’ resolve to change their lives; third workers provide routes into a range of practical, social and emotional support which helps people to enact that change. The links between these emergency department projects and what goes on in schools may not seem obvious, but for many young people facing a crisis in their lives or a time of change, schools may be in the best position to identify and respond to such reachable moments. Examples might include times of transition, the moment when a young person has been arrested for their first offence or when they are at the point of school exclusion.

### 4.7.2. Creating protective communities

Creating protective community environments is central to a public health approach to achieving reductions in youth violence. ‘Communities’ can mean whole towns or areas, neighbourhoods or even ‘school communities.’ The two main approaches are making changes to the physical environment through design, lighting, cleaning and initiatives to use and improve waste-land and empty buildings, and community development approaches to change norms about the acceptability of violence and build more cohesive communities.

**Changes to the physical environment** can be very effective in reducing crime and violence in specific places and have beneficial impacts on local people’s perception of crime, community pride, and their mental and physical health. Studies have shown that factors such as the availability of greenspaces and good street lighting are important. Other community safety initiatives include steps to reduce the situational factors which can increase the risk of crime and violence, such as bans on alcohol in public spaces and measures to control the opening hours of late night venues where trouble can occur.

**Community development approaches** have a long and diverse history and it is not possible to do justice to them in this review. However, there are some well-evaluated programmes from the US which have a particular focus on youth which have migrated (often in an adapted form) to the UK context. One of these is **Communities That Care (CTC**), which works with communities to equip them with the tools to address the problems in their own area by focusing on identified risk and protective factors. CTC provides a structure for engaging community stakeholders to create a shared community vision, tools for assessing levels of risk and protection in communities, and processes for setting community goals. CTC supports stakeholders to develop a community prevention plan and to select what will work for them.[[105]](#footnote-105)

CTC is guided theoretically by the social development model (SDM), which posits that bonding to prosocial groups and individuals and clear standards for healthy behaviour are protective factors that inhibit the development of problem behaviours. The SDM hypothesizes that bonding is created when people are provided opportunities to be involved in a social group like a coalition, family, or classroom, when they have the skills to participate in the social group, and when they are recognised for their contributions to the group. This theoretical framework is applied in CTC in two ways. First, CTC encourages community stakeholders to adopt the SDM in their daily interactions with young people as a strategy for promoting healthy development. A goal in CTC communities is to ensure that all young people are provided developmentally appropriate opportunities, skills, and recognition, as well as healthy standards for behaviour, by adults and organizations in the community. Second, CTC seeks to create opportunities for all interested community stakeholders to participate in developing a shared vision for positive youth development.

Studies of CTC in the US have shown reduced levels of delinquency and substance misuse although findings vary according to the level of problems in communities, the degree to which plans are implemented and the way in which communities are supported (or not) by professionals and organisations working in them.[[106]](#footnote-106)

In the UK, a 5 year trial of the scheme was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation between 1998 and 2003.[[107]](#footnote-107) The evaluation concluded that although the model was strongly supported by those involved, it was difficult to measure the impact the programme had on risk and protection without taking a much longer view. An evaluation of three Scottish pilots[[108]](#footnote-108) drew similar conclusions. The complexity of communities, the wide range of contextual factors and the numerous challenges to implementing the programme with sufficient fidelity to the model, makes the evaluation of community-based initiatives extremely difficult.

By 2010, Communities that Care had largely slipped off the radar in the UK. However, there is considerable commonality between their approaches and more recent public health approaches to tackling violence. Many of the core elements of the approach also live on in initiatives such as Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) which is based on the principle of capitalising on the assets of a neighbourhood and the people that live in it (rather than exclusively focusing on their problems) and harnessing those assets to enable communities to map out their own issues and generate their own solutions. People referred to as ‘community connectors’ are important. These are the members of the community who act as the ‘social glue’ of the community, nurturing the relationships that enable solutions to be found and to succeed. Asset based approaches are currently underpinning policy and planning across health and social care in a number of local authorities.[[109]](#footnote-109)

The Social Development Model which underpins the CTC approach also has strong resonance with the principles of taking a whole school approach.

One UK initiative which developed a holistic community based approach in a neighbourhood with high levels of youth violence and gang involvement was Full Effect funded by the Royal Foundation in the St Ann’s area of Nottingham.[[110]](#footnote-110) Full Effect aimed to develop the resilience of children and young people most at risk of being drawn into violent crime by identifying them early and providing them with support in school, extra curricula activities and community based mentoring. It was a partnership between two local organisations with deep and longstanding roots which were trusted in the community and a group of local schools with support from police, probation and a range of creative organisations. Vanguard Plus Children were identified in primary school and the project aimed to provided consistent relationships from childhood well into young adulthood and to ‘grow’ affected young people into mentors and role models for younger children.The Full Effect model recognised that: *“the most effective strategies for entrenched and marginalised young people are high intensity interventions, which have been customised for the young person and their context, occurring over a sufficiently time period to allow embedding of skills, and which include a ‘joined-up’ approach between home, school and community.”[[111]](#footnote-111)*

# A Whole School Approach to violence prevention

Schools play a vital role in preventing violence. The very act of providing education and constructive activities for children and young people is important. Engagement in school reduces the likelihood of young people’s involvement in violence and good quality education which contributes to higher levels of attainment is a major factor in supporting young people to build positive lives into adulthood. Schools are also ideally placed to influence children and young people. Skilled teachers can offer positive role models and can provide young people with the skills and strategies to resolve conflicts without violence. Schools can forge alliances with parents and the wider community and can contribute a safe, non-violent culture to counter some of the social norms which serve to tolerate or encourage violent or aggressive behaviour.

At the same time, preventing and responding to violence can have important pay offs for schools’ educational goals. Experience of violence is a barrier to young people’s learning for both victims and perpetrators, contributing to a range of difficulties including absenteeism, lack of concentration and challenging behaviour. Many of the life skills taught in violence prevention, such as communication, managing emotions, resolving conflicts and solving problems, are the same skills that can help children succeed in school and protect against other issues that affect learning, such as alcohol and drug use.

## What is a whole school approach and why is it important?

There is now a good degree of consensus in the literature about the value of taking a whole school approach to violence prevention.*[[112]](#footnote-112)*A whole school approach means taking account of how all those involved with the school (e.g. leaders, teachers, other staff, students, parents, community members) can play a role in preventing violence and how all aspects of school life can make a contribution (e.g. school policies, the curriculum, the building and environment, the school’s relationships with community groups). A whole school approach is based on the premise that as the causes and consequences of violence are multi-faceted, strategies to prevent youth violence also need to address multiple factors in a co-ordinated way. To give an example, a school may have a behaviour policy in place but if staff lack the confidence and skills to manage behaviour in the classroom, then the policy is unlikely to be effective. Taking a whole school approach means that rather than only focusing on delivery of awareness raising sessions with young people, the programme should also include support to staff in how to prevent and respond to behaviour, attention to school policies and procedures for identifying and recording incidents and the engagement of parents and families, as illustrated in the diagram below: 

Source: Tender’s Healthy Relationship Education in Schools funded by Comic Relief Final Evaluation, DMSS Research & Consultancy[[113]](#footnote-113)

As the World Health Organisation puts it, a whole school approach ‘*works towards making sure that the whole school shares the same vision towards reducing violence, and that the school head, teachers, administrative staff, students, parents and the community work together towards this shared goal’.[[114]](#footnote-114)*

The WHO Handbook sets out several core components of a whole school approach to prevent violence, including

* school leadership, co-ordination and policies
* school culture and staff skills and confidence
* identifying, recording and responding to incidents of violent behaviour
* preventing violence through the curriculum
* creating a safer school environment
* involving parents and the wider community

## Leadership, co-ordination and policies

For a whole school approach to work, a school needs to have committed and effective leadership to develop a shared vision, establish co-ordination, ensure the delivery of action plans and maintain the strategy over the longer term so that violence prevention becomes embedded in the school’s day to day functioning.

Much has been written about school leadership and what makes it effective. In this context, WHO suggests that important attributes are: strong communication and interpersonal skills; the ability to take on board many different points of view and work with different stakeholders who sometimes might have competing needs and interests; the ability to adapt to emerging and changing needs; staying focused on outcomes and helping others to look for and share innovative solutions.

Whilst many of the important responsibilities of leadership are invested in the head and school leadership team, it is often the case that changes in school culture can only be achieved when there is also leadership at other levels – for example: supportive and active governors, teachers willing to be champions for violence prevention and a source of expertise for their colleagues; students who are prepared to be peer advocates and mentors for violence prevention; and parents and community stakeholders willing to take the messages out into the wider community. An important starting point, therefore, is to create awareness in the school community and beyond about the school’s stand on the unacceptability of violence and its intention to tackle it. The WHO handbook suggests that a formal event to launch a violence prevention initiative can be a good way of helping to raise awareness about the problem of violence and create a sense of responsibility among teachers, students, parents and the community. They also suggest that separate events for staff and parents may be helpful in allaying any anxieties and clarifying expectations.

Another way of helping to harness leadership across the school community, is the establishment of a coordinating team to help develop the strategy and action plan to address violence prevention. WHO suggests that it is important that this team includes all relevant stakeholders: teachers, school administrative staff, students, parents and, if possible, members of the local community. Ideally, team members should be selected by the group they are representing and work to terms of reference which are understood across the school community. The co-ordinating team needs to be provided with the capacity to fulfil their role including some training to build their knowledge and awareness of the risk factors for violence, and the evidence on what works to prevent it. It should be clear what resources are available to implement a violence prevention initiative in the school and the timeframe over which it is expected to occur. Where such initiatives are being implemented across several schools in an area, co-ordinating teams could be encouraged to work together on some core elements.

The third element of work that needs to be undertaken at an early stage is a review and refresh of relevant school policies. WHO suggests that schools should develop a clear policy that condemns violence and is enforced fairly for everyone. Developing such a policy can help the school to agree on a shared vision and overall plan to tackle violence. The policy should be in line with national guidelines but also reflect the perspectives of the school community. It should be clear about the rules and expected standards of behaviour and the sanctions if these are not complied with. It should be well communicated to everyone including staff, students, parents and partner agencies.

In addition to developing an overall violence prevention policy, schools will already have a range of other policies and procedures which play a role in preventing violence. These include bullying policies, behaviour policies, school exclusion policies etc all of which need to be checked for consistency of message. All of these are areas included in Ofsted’s inspection framework. [[115]](#footnote-115)

In order to implement its policy, WHO suggests drawing up an action plan and timetable. For some schools, a violence prevention initiative may be started as a time-limited project, perhaps linked to the delivery of a preventive educational programme in school. However, for such initiatives to have lasting effects, plans need to be developed to make violence prevention an integral part of the day-to-day work of the school so that it becomes embedded as part of the school’s culture and regular routines.

## School culture and staff skills and confidence

School-based approaches to preventing violence are heavily reliant on the attitudes, confidence and skills of staff. Staff play a pivotal role in establishing and maintaining a positive school culture which promotes equality and respect, in providing the day to day support to students including the management of behaviour and in being the first point of call in dealing with incidents when they occur. It is therefore critical that school staff are supported to increase their own awareness, confidence and skills. Issuing a violence prevention policy without preparing staff is likely to be unsuccessful.

A central part of school-based violence prevention is creating safe learning environments that promote learning and are based on equality and respect.[[116]](#footnote-116) This means that poor behaviour is dealt with constructively and good behaviour rewarded.[[117]](#footnote-117) It is important to ensure that school staff share values which promote a positive school culture and where necessary to address any harmful attitudes or beliefs which may be held by school staff.

Teachers as well as anyone else can be influenced by social, cultural and gender norms as well as their own experiences and beliefs. Social and cultural stereotypes based on gender, ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation can influence teaching practices, making certain groups of students more vulnerable to violence, bullying and unequal treatment by other children and school staff.

The WHO Handbook suggests that training and awareness-raising for staff should include: awareness of social, cultural and gender norms and their influence on teaching practices, violent behaviour and school attendance; the role that teaching practices and materials can have on reinforcing social, cultural and gender norms; how to recognize violence based on social, cultural and gender norms and to challenge and deal with this behaviour among students. Teachers also need a good understanding of school policies and be trained in how to respond to violent or aggressive behaviour when it happens.

School staff may also need skill-based training on positive discipline and classroom management as part of their continuing professional development. This could also include awareness of how traumatic experiences and neglectful or abusive home lives can affect children’s behaviour and learning. Trauma-informed approaches recognize this link and the important role that teachers have in building safe, trusting relationships with children outside of the home.

It is also critical for school staff to be supported in their role. Teachers can become demoralised and undermined in schools where they don’t feel adequately supported by managers. Peer support is also important, particularly where teachers are being asked to do something new or to adapt their usual practice. It is also important for schools to be vigilant about the safety of its staff and provide support to staff who are themselves victimised. Teachers may hesitate to report incidents through fear of possible negative effects on their career or because they feel they should have been able to control the situation themselves. It is therefore important that the schools have easily accessible support mechanisms for teachers and other staff.

## Identifying, recording and responding to incidents of violent behaviour

Schools have an important role to play in identifying, recording and responding to incidents of violence that occur in school. Although schools are only one of many places in which violence happens, the nature and level of incidents in school are an important indicator of the scale of the problem in the community. Furthermore, how schools respond to incidents not only has an impact on how young people perceive the acceptability of violence in school, it also helps to signal to victims and perpetrators that violent and aggressive behaviour in general is not OK.

For schools intending to participate in violence prevention initiatives, it is an important starting point to have a good understanding of the scale and nature of the issue for their student population. Sources of data include local crime statistics available from the police or local authority. There may also be survey data or research carried out at a local level (e.g. community safety surveys; consultations carried out with young people etc). For Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland the Violence Reduction Network will be a good source of local data for schools.

There is data available at school level, including information collected routinely collected data, such as exclusions, and reports of violent incidents, bullying etc. However, it is worth bearing in mind that existing records can under-estimate the level of the problem in a school because incidents are only recorded if they are identified by school staff. If students don’t report incidents or if staff don’t perceive an incident to be significant, they can easily go unrecorded. It is not unusual for the number of recorded incidents to go up when staff and students’ awareness of violence increases.

Other data that can be collected by schools include information gathered directly from students and/or staff by survey, focus groups and interviews. This can collect more nuanced information about how safe people feel in school and whether some groups feel more vulnerable than others e.g. disabled students, LGBT students.

* + 1. Recording and monitoring incidents

Whilst all schools will have systems in place for recording incidents of school-based violence, it is worth reviewing these to make sure that they capture the information needed to understand what is going on in school and to monitor changes in patterns over time. For example, records not only need to capture the basic details of an incident but also information about when and where it occurred, who was involved, what if anything led to the incident and how did the staff member respond. It is important to make sure that all staff and students understand the reporting system and how it works, as well as their responsibilities in reporting violence and in maintaining confidentiality of students and staff. It is important to consider the effect that collecting data on violence can have on students. For staff, the most important element of a recording system is to be clear about what sort of incident should be recorded so that there is consistency in recording across the whole staff team. Staff training may be needed to achieve a shared understanding of what constitutes a recordable incident. For example, acts of physical violence are easier to identify as requiring recording than, say, psychological bullying behaviour.

Regular analysis of the records can be a useful tool for monitoring changes in violence over time. Monitoring can help to identify and deal with emerging problems as well as help to assess how effective preventive activities are. It can be useful to look at any trends in incidents e.g. are they occurring at certain times or places, are some groups of students more likely to be reported as victims etc. This can help to inform priorities for preventive work.

* + 1. Responding to incidents

Part of an overall violence prevention strategy by schools needs to include effective responses to incidents when they do occur. When violence happens in schools, schools need to react quickly and offer appropriate help and support to children affected – both victims and perpetrators – to help make sure it does not happen again. Often, schools place a strong emphasis on encouraging students, teachers and parents to report incidents of violence, but this will only work if there are plans in place to support victims and perpetrators

The WHO Handbooks suggests that responding to violence in schools includes the following steps:

* ***Identifying victims of violence in schools***: Few children actively ask for support from adults or report cases of violence to school staff. It can be difficult for children subjected to ongoing bullying for example to report their experiences to staff. Staff therefore need to be alert to signs and symptoms that are often present in victims of violence and to be able to ask them about it a way that is confidential, empathetic and does not judge. Victims of violence frequently do not trust the existing methods for reporting their experiences. They may be worried about confidentiality and they fear repercussions, further victimisation and stigma. Children are especially unlikely to tell anyone about their experience if they do not receive any support. It can be helpful for schools to consider different ways for students to report concerns, such as telephone helplines, chatrooms, online reporting, boxes for posting confidential messages, and reporting points in schools.
* ***Supporting victims of violence***: For children who have been victims of violence, schools should first provide support that is gender sensitive and child-centred, and ensure that all staff have the ability to: listen respectfully and with empathy; ask about the student’s worries or concerns and needs, and answer their questions; recognize their feelings and respond without judging them; provide information appropriate to their age about what you will do and whether and with whom you will need to share the information they give you; take action to keep them safe and minimize harm, including harm that might arise from them sharing their experience and the likelihood of the abuse continuing. Schools will mostly have designated staff with additional training in responding to the support needs of students and it is likely to be these who play the biggest role in providing emotional and practical support in school and helping them to access other psychosocial services provided by other agencies.
* ***Responding to young people who exhibit violent behaviour***: As well as supporting victims, schools play a vital role in responding appropriately to young people who perpetrate violence. The WHO Handbook highlights the importance of responses being swift and consistent. It is important for both perpetrator and victim to be met with separately so that they can speak openly and without intimidation. A positive discipline approach focuses on repairing the harm caused, understanding why the violence happened and helping the young person to learn from their mistakes. Trauma-informed approaches in schools recognize that a child’s home life and life experiences often affect their behaviour and indicate the root causes as to why they are aggressive or violent. Children that demonstrate violent behaviour have often been victims of violence themselves in the past. Working with children to understand why they have behaved in a certain way, and providing support or referral where needed, is important.
* ***Working with children and young people who are bystanders:*** Violence and bullying often take place in the presence of other students who can be bystanders to incidents. Most bystanders are unlikely to intervene. Some perpetrators might even feel encouraged by an audience. Giving bystanders the skills to take action against violence including bullying can help to prevent violence and make sure that victims get help and support. The WHO Handbook suggests that effective actions for bystanders include working with students to help them to: give perpetrators less attention; show support to the victim, even in a safe situation after the incident has taken place; redirect the perpetrator to a different activity; help the victim to get away; get support from a trusted adult; report the incident to a trusted person; set a good example.

## Preventing violence through the curriculum

One of the most important roles schools can play in preventing violence is to build knowledge and skills into the curriculum. Although some bespoke time-limited interventions delivered by outside agencies can be effective (particularly on some topics), the ‘spadework’ of preventing violence can be done in schools with a curriculum which provides young people with the skills to recognize violence, to stay safe, to resolve conflicts in non-violent ways, to manage emotions, to access help and support and to support someone else who may be experiencing violence.

The WHO Handbooks sets out three key strategies to be applied in schools:

1. ***Develop life skills***: These are cognitive, social and emotional skills used to cope with everyday life, including: problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, decision-making, creative thinking, relationship skills, self-awareness building, empathy, and coping with stress and emotions. These skills allow children to manage emotions, deal with conflict and communicate effectively in non-aggressive ways, reducing the risk of violent behaviour. They can also impact positively on young people’s ability to learn, and ultimately contribute to the most significant protective factors in their life – better educational and employment outcomes.
2. ***Teach children about safe behaviour***: This includes the ability to recognize situations in which abuse or violence can happen and understand how to avoid potentially risky situations and where to find help. This knowledge can make children less vulnerable to abuse and reduce the risk of violence happening again (through telling a trusted adult, for example).
3. ***Challenge social and cultural norms and promote equal relationships:*** Social and cultural behaviour and stereotypes around, for example gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity and disability, increase the risk of bullying and violence. Challenging harmful norms and strengthening those that promote nonviolent, positive and equal relationships can reduce any justification for violent behaviour. Promoting political, religious and ethnic tolerance is also likely to be important in preventing hate crimes as well as violent extremism and radicalization.[[118]](#footnote-118) Challenging perceived social norms around young people’s use of substances is also an important part of preventing substance abuse[[119]](#footnote-119) that helps address risk factors for violence.

These strategies can be used alone or in combination and can be employed throughout children’s school lives (Table below). The earlier you begin, the more potential there is to have a positive effect on children’s attitudes and behaviour. Preschool is therefore an ideal place to begin working with children, before their behaviour and ways of thinking become deeply engrained. As children progress through education, they may begin to be exposed to more types of violence (for example, bullying, cyberbullying, gang violence and dating violence). These need more tailored forms of violence prevention, but the underlying strategies are still the same.

**Key topics for a violence prevention curriculum for each age group[[120]](#footnote-120)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Preschool**  | **Primary school**  | **Secondary school**  |
| **Develop life skills**  |
| 1. Identifying own feelings and feelings of others
2. Listening to others and paying attention
3. Asking for own needs
4. Getting along with others
5. Managing disappointment
 | 1. Communication skills
2. Awareness of moral reasoning
3. Controlling anger
4. Skills for social and academic success
5. Preventing bullying
6. Understanding perceptions
7. Showing compassion
8. Problem-solving
9. Dealing with peer pressure
10. Dealing with gossip
 | 1. Self-regulation
2. Sexual harassment
3. Managing serious peer conflicts
4. Addressing harmful use of alcohol, drugs
 |
| **Teach safe behaviour**  |
| 1. Identifying abusive situations
2. Avoiding risky situations
3. Getting help from adults
 | 1. Internet safety
2. Helping classmates; safe bystander behaviour
3. Preventing gang enrolment
 | 1. Safe dating behaviour
2. Internet safety
3. Helping classmates; safe bystander behaviour
4. Preventing gang enrolment
 |
| **Challenge social and cultural norms and promote equal relationships**  |
| 1. Gender norms
2. Attitudes towards violence
3. Accepting differences
 | 1. Gender norms
2. Attitudes towards violence
3. Accepting differences
 | 1. Addressing social and cultural behaviour around dating and intimate-partner violence
2. Positive relationship norms
 |

## Creating a safer school environment

As for neighbourhoods, the physical environment of schools can have an important impact on violence prevention. Opportunities for violent incidents are increased in environments which are badly lit, where there is little surveillance and where there are ‘hidden’ corners. These are fairly obvious factors to take into account when reviewing the environments that young people occupy. There are also some less obvious ones. For example, there is evidence to suggest that violence and anti-social behaviour reduces in environments that are well looked after, where children and young people have some sense of pride and ownership. Bradshaw et al (2015) identify common features which can increase risks of violence, including litter, vandalism, disorderly appearance of buildings or grounds. [[121]](#footnote-121)

Schools can play a role in improving the safety of their environment and that of their surrounding community by identifying hotspots for violence (including places on the way to and from school) and finding solutions in these areas. This can be done by working with partner agencies to make use of local data about where and when incidents occur and by consulting directly with students.

For some students, the scariest part of their day is the journey to and from school. Routes to school can be made safer, by, for example, putting community patrols on common routes, working with partner agencies to improve lighting and modifying hidden areas, providing school transport or subsidies for public transport, and encouraging parent-led ‘walking school buses’ collecting children who share the same route to school.

Whilst CCTV and other visible security measures (metal detectors; security officers) can be useful ways of increasing surveillance, these can also have a negative impact,[[122]](#footnote-122) particularly in the absence of more positive symbols of shared pride and responsibility in the school such as displays of awards, artwork etc.

## Involving parents and the wider community

Schools are only one influence on a children’s values, attitudes and behaviour. For most children, parental influence is the most important factor, and this remains the case throughout the teenage years although as the child gets older other influences such as the wider community and peer group become more significant.

Any school initiative to prevent violence can be either enhanced or undermined according to the level of support from parents. The WHO Handbook suggests that schools can get parents more involved in several ways. First, it is important to tell parents about school policies on violent behaviour and violence prevention activities. Parents need to understand why the school is addressing violence, the strategies it is using, the messages it is giving, and how parents can talk about violence with their children and support them. Schools can involve parents through learning events for parents, support groups, websites and written information.

A parent’s interest in their child’s school life can help improve the child’s behaviour and academic achievement. Talking to parents about school life can get them more interested and can increase opportunities for parents and children to discuss and practise the skills and messages learned at school. Good two-way communication is key. The WHO Handbook cites a variety of examples of ways in which schools have engaged parents. These include making use of the role of parent governors or parent/teacher associations to reach out to parents; holding regular school and community gatherings to share information; overcoming some of the barriers to engagement by providing incentives for taking part, for example, offering food or refreshments; helping parents to attend meetings by providing free childcare or transport or offering meetings at different times to cover different needs; using different methods of communication, for example, word of mouth, written materials, newsletters; encouraging parents to stay involved through regular reminders or flyers; training teachers and other school staff in how to communicate with parents and how to get them more involved.

If schools are concerned about violent and aggressive behaviour it is very likely that many parents are too. And whilst a minority of parents may be ‘part of the problem’, most are a potential part of the solution, but may themselves need support and skills development in managing challenging behaviour and positive parenting. Harmful parenting practices can increase the risk of violence among children and schools can help by providing sessions on positive parenting, parent-child communication skills, and non-violent strategies for dealing with challenging behaviour. Parents may be more willing to take part in these initiatives if they realize that doing so they will be enhancing their relationship with their children and through this helping to make the school’s violence prevention measures a success.[[123]](#footnote-123) Schools can also engage with parenting initiatives run by partner agencies and play a role in encouraging parents to take up these opportunities.

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