



School Social Work Association of America Position Paper

School Safety: The School Social Work Role in Violence Prevention

Introduction: The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) believes that all children and youth have a right to a quality public education delivered in a safe and supportive learning environment. SSWAA supports a comprehensive and collaborative approach to school safety that promotes the emotional and physical wellbeing of all education stakeholders: students, school personnel, families, and community members. This position paper focuses on evidence-based interventions that help School Social Workers reduce violence in schools, address the mental and behavioral health needs of all students, help develop healthy and safe school climates, train educators in early identification protocols, enhance school/family partnerships, and maintain community collaboration in creating a comprehensive support plan of action should a violent event occur.

School violence is defined as violent acts that occur in a school setting, at a school event, or on the way to or from school. Violence is not limited to physical harm, but also includes verbal and electronic aggression with the intent to cause emotional distress. “Being the victim of or even witnessing a violent act can have serious effects on students’ psychological development and may result in poor social functioning, low academic achievement, and a higher propensity toward violence and related criminal activity later in life” (Wagstaff & White, 2017, page.1). School social workers are well-postured to assist in the prevention of violent acts and ameliorate the effects of violence when it occurs.

Practice Recommendations:

Provide evidence-based education, behavior and mental health services

- Educate administration, staff, community shareholders, and parents as to current data-based trends relating to violence in schools, home, and the community at large and how these trends impact students. The following National Institute of Justice website has up to date research and data relating to school violence. [School violence | National Institute of Justice](#) Research suggests that simply adding more police in schools or a zero-tolerance program often correlate with increased negative interactions between law enforcement and students and passage from school to prison. [No Police in Schools: - A Vision for Safe and Supportive Schools in CA](#)
- Utilize a multi-tiered system of support to deliver prevention and intervention services to enhance safe and healthy school climates and increase students’ capacities to learn (Frey, et al, 2013; NASW, 2012). The following video explains how a multi-tiered system can work to help prevent youth violence: [Causes and Consequences of School Violence - NIJ Virtual Conference on School Safety](#) The multilayered model suggests a reallocation of school social work services to address schoolwide and small group interventions and encourages consideration of more intensive interventions for individual students based on their level of response to interventions at prior levels (National Association of Social Workers, 2012)

The article *Violence in Schools: An Overview* by Jan Wagstaff and Michael James White contains a social work treatment summary with recent evidence-based interventions that have proven effective including, but not limited to, educating youth about respectful relationships, anger management education, focus on character development, school-wide anti-bullying, and social emotional learning programs, which foster common goals and language, (Wagstaff and White, 2014, page 3).

- Provide trauma informed education to all staff members which will help them identify students at risk of violence and respond in ways that are helpful. This training will assist all staff members to identify symptoms to look for that may indicate a student is being impacted by violence they have suffered or witnessed. [Trauma-Informed Schools | NEA](#)
- Provide school based mental health services to regular and special education students impacted by violence including assessment, individual and group counseling, progress monitoring, and student support groups. Services often begin with a psychosocial assessment that should include input from the student, the student's teacher and family. If there has been physical injury, discomfort, or pain, a referral to a physician would be indicated. One must also assess for signs of mental distress, i.e., depression symptoms, somatic symptoms, nonattendance, school performance difficulties, emotion dysregulation, and/or presence of suicidal ideation.

Research demonstrates that interventions should be multidimensional, culturally sensitive, and work well for the individual, his culture, and family. (Ellis, Chung-Hall, & Dumas, 2013). School data should provide the basis for interventions and their evaluation and should include both school surveys and school maps which identify "hot spots" of violence. (Allen-Mears, 2014, p.293) Standards for any assessment are addressed in the following link: [Practitioner Guide Step 2: Plan the Role of Assessment - AWG](#)

- Coordinate parent/guardian input and training opportunities relating to violence prevention, amelioration, and asset building. Parents/guardians who understand the value of using effective communication skills and helping children develop healthy lifestyle habits can foster enhanced student performance and reduction of vulnerabilities. A strong parent-child relationship is a key protective factor in violence prevention. [10 Things You Can Do to Prevent Violence in Your School Community](#)

Promote a school climate and culture conducive to student learning and teaching excellence

- Collaborate with school counselors, school psychologists, school resource officers, and other specialized instructional support personnel to work towards nonviolent resolution of conflict (Mattaini, 2001). [The School Climate Challenge](#)
- Encourage essential gun safety and education legislation. The following policy brief explains that there are nonpolitical ways to make people safer in their use of firearms by using a public health approach. [Social Justice Brief](#)
- Encourage broad-based efforts to reduce exposure of children and youth to those factors which foster violence in the environments in which they live, play, and learn. Risks of harm may include a lack of supervision, unmonitored technology and media use, access to guns, exposure to parental interpersonal violence, or physical punishment. Protective factors include after school programs, access to sports programs, and use of restorative practices such as restorative justice circles. [Research Brief: Building a Positive School Climate Through Restorative Practices](#)
- Suggest the use of a discipline flow chart that clearly defines each staff member's role in the amelioration of student conflicts and risks of harm.

Maximize access to school-based and community-based resources

- Facilitate community partnerships by providing parents with referral information to help students presenting with more significant social, emotional, and behavioral concerns. Also consider creating a district website with links to current mental health psychoeducation, information, and resources. The following is an example of a school district's website: Jordan School District, West Jordan, Utah - [Jordan Health and Wellness](#).
- Develop partnerships and safety oversight committees involving school and community stakeholders. Regularly scheduled meetings with an oversight committee can help assess what is working and what needs refinement.
- Implement evidence-based grief and trauma support for students and families impacted by a suicide or acts of violence. [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#)
- Identify critical times for interventions, such as when school shootings, completed suicides, sudden and unexpected deaths of stakeholder(s), natural disasters, and/or heightened racial or ethnic unrest occurs (Frey, et al, 2013; National Association of Social Workers, 2012).

Conclusion:

SSWAA believes that school safety depends upon the establishment of a culturally competent and inclusive trauma-informed school community where each member feels welcomed, valued, and has a clearly defined role to play in the prevention of school violence. School social workers are well-postured to understand and address societal trends which foster and tolerate violence and abuse, use of peaceful means, and evidence-based research to help coordinate interventions that reduce and ameliorate the impact of violence upon our youth. SSWAA promotes the training of school community members to identify potential threats to safety. School social workers have the education and training necessary to assist educators in recognizing these potential threats and identifying warning signs, such as disturbing drawings or written commentary, while developing sensitivities to avoid profiling based on outward appearances. With training, teachers, administrators, other school staff, parents, and extended family members become integral parts of an early identification system. Additionally, they will promote how the effective teaching and application of essential social emotional learning skills can lead to post-traumatic growth and a reduction of violent tendencies, thus increasing a school's positive climate and levels of emotional and physical safety. This strength-based approach helps build and enhance internal and external assets for children and youth that research has shown will lead to greater academic outcomes and increased prosocial behavior (Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2003).

SSWAA is proud to offer school social workers and related professionals, training and tools to support their practice, as indicated in the recommendations above. Continue to access the SSWAA website, SSWAA professional development opportunities and SSWAA Board to meet your needs.

References:

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