

**DO SCHOOLS HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY IN CRIME
PREVENTION?
USE OF THE PROTECTIVE BEHAVIOURS PROGRAM IN SCHOOLS AS A PRIMARY
PREVENTION STRATEGY**

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Do Schools Have a Role to Play in Crime Prevention?

Quite simply, the answer is yes. Why? Due to the central role that schools have to play in the socialisation of youth. This paper seeks to identify some of the risk factors associated with criminal behaviour and establish the important part schools can play at the level of prevention. The Protective Behaviours program is proposed as one primary prevention strategy that might be utilised by schools to address some of these social issues. One existing model of crime prevention is briefly acknowledged in order to highlight areas in which the potential for the involvement of schools in crime prevention aims is under-utilised. Finally, a more inclusive model involving key stakeholders is proposed to illustrate how schools might provide a unified approach to crime prevention through the Protective Behaviours program.

Many variables have been identified as risk factors associated with antisocial and criminal behaviour. Some of these factors include maltreatment and neglect (O'Hanlon, Kosky, Martin, Dundas and Davis 2000), bullying (National Crime Prevention 1999) and social disadvantage that can lead to early vulnerability to mental health problems (O'Hanlon et al 2000).

Schools are often considered a logical place for the early intervention of a variety of social ills. Morrison (2002) for instance, argues, "*Schools may be the most appropriate institutions to focus on reducing antisocial and criminal behaviour patterns in children, while promoting health, resilience and social responsibility*" (pg. 1). Likewise, Prilleltensky, Nelson and Peirson (2001) argue that "*No one community institution plays a larger role in the lives of children and youth than schools.....as primary structures that can provide children and youth with experiences that can enhance their self-esteem and develop intellectual and social competence, thereby strengthening resilience*"(p.109). In addition, of the four factors identified by Fuller (1998) as promoting well-being including: peer connectedness; fitting in at school; having an adult outside your family take a positive interest in you and feeling loved by your family to the extent that they help you understand yourself better, schools clearly have a part to play in the first three.

Schools can provide a strong foundation for student wellbeing. *The Framework for Student Support Services in Victorian Government Schools* outlines a comprehensive conceptual and operational framework for the provision of student welfare that supports schools in responding to the wide variety of issues facing young people as outlined at the beginning of this paper. *The Framework for Student Support Services in Victorian Government Schools* argues that any response needs to be a multi-faceted one that acknowledges the complexity of the issues and addresses the following four levels of activity:

- Primary Prevention
- Early Intervention
- Intervention
- Restoring well-being

The major emphasis, on the first two levels of prevention and early intervention, is aimed at preventing problems before they occur and responding to emerging difficulties before they become acute. This approach to primary prevention is supported by authors such as Prilleltensky et al (2001) who argue that even those at most risk can benefit from proactive universal interventions that aim to promote wellness.

One example of a prevention program designed to build resilience is the Protective Behaviours program. While the program may be utilised at any of the four levels of intervention it is presented in this paper largely as a tool that can be utilised by schools at the level of Primary prevention. The author acknowledges the usefulness of other prevention programs but has chosen the Protective Behaviours program due to its potential for adaptation to a range of social issues and delivery to a wide audience.

An Example of School-Inclusive Violence Prevention and Crime Reduction Utilising the Protective Behaviours Program

While the Protective Behaviours Program saw its beginnings in child abuse prevention, it is now well established in many different fields ranging from bullying and social skills development to sex and drug education. In a broad sense, the program is based on principles of empowerment that increase resilience and advocate a non-violent approach to our physical and verbal interactions with others.

In terms of secondary and tertiary intervention, the program is currently being utilised across the world and Australia-wide to address issues of crime. For example, in the United Kingdom, the Protective Behaviours program underpins the Youth Crime Reduction Project in Milton Keynes and is used in training and as a framework for Restorative Justice Processes (Margetts, 2002). Protective Behaviours is also taught in UK schools around issues of safety and citizenship. In Australia, the program is currently being introduced into the Community and Juvenile Justice Services. A trial of the Protective Behaviours program is being launched into detention centres in Western Australia. More specifically, the Young Offender Development Branch has recently coordinated the first training program for group workers, teachers and Aboriginal welfare officers in an effort to help juveniles protect themselves from domestic violence and other forms of abuse. The program has been particularly important for young female offenders, given their likelihood to have been subjected to victimisation of this nature (Paterson, 2001).

From these examples, it is clearly evident that the Protective Behaviours program is well utilised at the secondary and tertiary levels of intervention. The author will now focus on the potential use of the program as a primary prevention approach that can be utilised by schools to address a wide range of social issues affecting young people and as a means by which to increase protective factors.

Social, Cultural and Political Context

The program is adaptable to a wide range of social, cultural and political contexts. The universal principals advocated by the program include the two statements '*We all have the right to feel safe all of the time*' and '*Nothing is so awful that we can't talk about it with someone*'. Due to their simplicity, the ideas communicated through the two themes transcend age, culture, gender and religious barriers. The strength of the program lies in the fact that the program concepts can be adapted to cater for all ability levels, making it suitable for children of all ages and abilities, parents, community groups as well as professionals such as teachers, police, nurses, psychologists, youth and social workers.

Prevention Approach

The Protective Behaviours program conforms to Ekholm and Pease (2002) social/developmental approach to crime prevention in that it is aimed at increasing children's resilience, promotes self esteem and introduces a cognitive problem solving approach to recognise and influence feelings and behaviours. In this way, crime prevention is brought about by changing the disposition, motives, knowledge and skill potential offenders bring to situations. The program also introduces strategies to develop protective mechanisms for potential victims at the individual, whole class, whole school, home and community level. The major components of the program include:

- The Language of Safety
- Unwritten Rules of Society
- Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviours

- Theme One – “We all have the right to feel safe all of the time”
- Rights and Responsibilities
- Safety Continuum
- Body Signals/Early Warning Signs
- Theme Two – “Nothing is so awful that we can’t talk about it with someone”
- Networks

Through these concepts, the program provides strategies to empower individuals to develop skills in:

- communicating and interacting with others using non-violent, assertive approaches
- editing their own self talk
- identifying feelings and expressing these in appropriate ways
- showing empathy for others
- considering the effect of their actions on others
- respecting their own and others right to feel safe
- tuning into their individual body signals
- distinguishing between activities which are safe, fun, risky or unsafe
- using criteria such as choice, control and time limits to identify unsafe activities
- decision-making
- identifying supports
- seeking help when needed
- persisting until they feel safe again

The anticipated outcomes of the Protective Behaviours program include increased feelings of self-efficacy, self esteem and is peer, family and community oriented. Clearly, via the messages communicated through the two themes, the program also has the potential to provide a school environment in which children feel secure, respected and cared for. It is in this way that the program may work to create opportunities to help reduce the likelihood or impact of adversity and foster academic and social successes (Rutter et al., 1979). Essentially, the Protective Behaviours program can work to reduce crime at two levels. At one level, the program works to address the abusive, violent or antisocial behaviours that may be displayed by perpetrators through the development of social skills, recognition of the rights and responsibilities as well as the effect of their actions on others. At another level, the program works to reduce the number of children at risk of victimisation by empowering them to utilise skills to avoid unsafe activities or situations in which they may become victims of actions such as peer-pressure, abuse or bullying.

Program Specification

Due to the simplistic nature of the principals advocated by the Protective Behaviours Program, it can be implemented across a wide variety of settings. As the program in this instance is advocated as a school-based intervention, the target group includes all members of the school community. For example, the program is usually implemented by teachers at the individual classroom level and is supported by a whole-school adoption of the program themes and philosophy. This whole-community approach is supported by research, which suggests that the program is most effectively implemented with wide community involvement including parents (Watts & Watts, 1998). Given the concepts covered in the program, Protective Behaviours is adopted by schools to address a wide

range of issues including bullying, social skills, feelings management and abuse prevention. Furthermore, the development of resilience and reinforcement of strategies aimed to keep the individual safe reduce the vulnerability of certain groups, including children and people with a disability.

Key Stakeholders for Crime Prevention

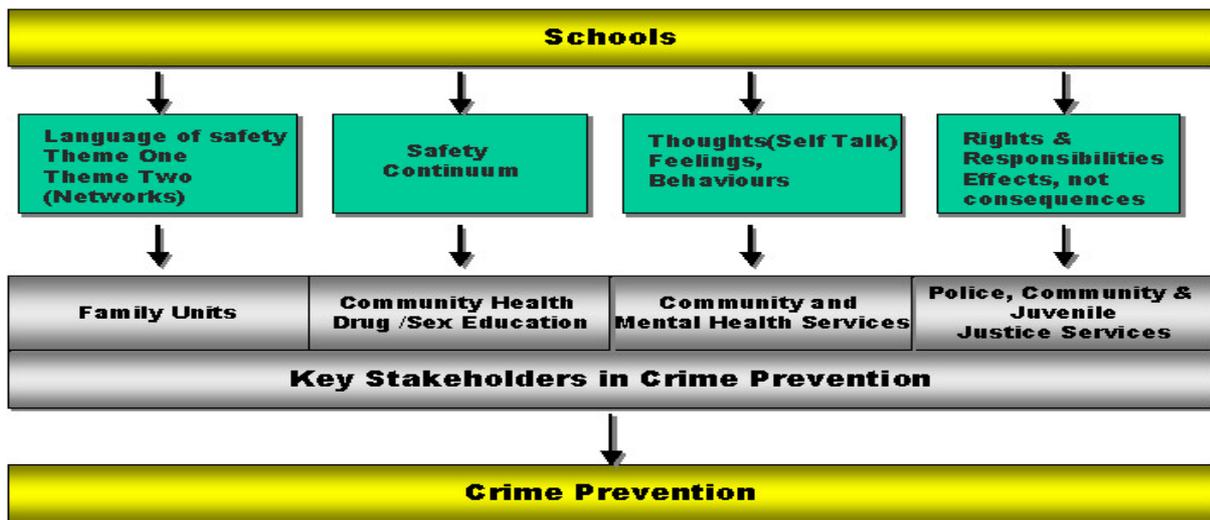
While it has been established that schools have a vital role to play in the prevention of a wide range of social issues, the potential for schools to contribute to crime prevention initiatives is often under-represented in the literature and in Policy documents. One such example exists in the recently published document *Safer Streets and Homes: A Crime and Violence Prevention Strategy for Victoria 2002-2005*. While this document proposes a model with many strengths, there are few references to specific primary prevention strategies at the school level. This is surprising given that the document acknowledges that young people are consistently over-represented in the justice system with 53% of all offenders recorded by Victoria Police in 1999/2000 aged between 10 and 24.

Recognition of the risks for the 10-24 year old age group supports the need for prevention strategies to target youths within or prior to this age range. The *Safer Streets and Homes* document outlines three key themes which relate to primary, secondary and tertiary levels of intervention and include: *Improving Safety in Streets and Neighborhoods*, *Preventing Family Violence – Safety in the Home* and *Reducing Offending and Violence by Young People*. Even at the Primary level of intervention, however, schools do not appear to form the focus, with more weight given to opportunity-reduction approaches to crime prevention rather than utilising social-developmental approaches that would be appropriate for the school context and therefore form the basis of more effective prevention.

In the Crime Prevention Awards application, Andre Haermeyer, Minister for Police and Emergency Services, imparts the message that crime prevention is about '*building fences at the top of cliffs rather than parking ambulances at the bottom of them*'. Clearly, attempts to address issues of crime cannot be successful without some form of specific school involvement at the primary prevention phase. In a sense, if we are to build fences at the top of cliffs, then surely schools provide the foundation upon which we build these fences. If Neighborhood safety, safety at home and reduced youth violence are the desired goals, what better way than to recognise schools for their potential as the central focus of all communities? This of course means working in partnership with schools to share resources, knowledge and responsibilities.

The importance of placing local communities at the centre of crime prevention is not a new concept, with the idea proposed by a variety of authors. Felson (1994), for example, emphasises informal social control rather than relying on the typically distant and more expensive criminal justice system in crime prevention. Felson (1994) puts the local community and its institutions such as the family, schools, neighbourhood organisations and youth work programs at the center of crime prevention. Adopting this approach, the following model focuses on the school as the beginning point of crime prevention with concepts of the Protective Behaviours program providing the opportunity for a unified approach to the wide range of psychological, social and structural factors that can influence involvement in crime-related activities.

The following model is used as a diagrammatic representation to illustrate the potential of the Protective Behaviours Program. The diagram serves to highlight how each of the priorities of some of the key stakeholders in Crime Prevention might be met through reference to each of the program concepts. The model clearly identifies the links between key stakeholders in crime prevention with schools placed at the pivotal point of prevention-related objectives.



In summary, many variables have been identified as risk factors associated with antisocial and criminal behaviour as outlined at the beginning of this paper. I propose that primary prevention can take place when each of these psychological, social and structural factors is addressed at the school level. Co-ordination between community groups and schools might be achieved through one program, which provides a link to all aspects of the risk factors that might lead to criminal activity. The desired outcome is to increase resilience and protective factors to bring about crime prevention.

In advocating the holistic approach that might be adopted through such a model, the author acknowledges the need for effective partnerships between each of the key stakeholders in the spirit of collaboration, as proposed by documents such as *Safer Streets Safer Homes*. It is also acknowledged that, in order to be effective, programs such as Protective Behaviours need to be part of broader 'ecological' prevention programs that include the provision of supports and services for families and the children within them (Prilleltensky et al, 2000). Such a discussion exceeds the scope of this paper but is opened for discussion within the context of arenas like the *Role of Schools in Crime Prevention Conference*.

This paper has highlighted the central role schools can play in crime prevention and has provided examples of where this role might be under-utilised at the level of policy and practice. The Protective Behaviours program has been proposed by the author as one potential program that can serve to provide a unified approach to crime prevention in its ability to address a wide range of psychological, social and structural factors that can influence crime involvement amongst youth. Advantages of the program include its ability to be adapted to a wide range of audiences and contexts and to address a broad range of social issues. In this way, the one program has the potential to provide the means by which to promote crime prevention through the development of social skills, promotion of resilience and cognitive strategies that improve mental health and psychological well-being. If schools are to be utilised in the process of crime prevention, it is essential that they are provided with the resources to address a wide range of issues that affect them as well as a co-ordinated system of support which enhances, rather than complicates school program delivery. The Protective Behaviours Program provides a means by which this might be achieved without adding to an already overcrowded curriculum.

If we are serious about reducing crime, it is clear that schools provide a starting point. Effective prevention requires unified approaches that provide opportunities to promote a strong sense of community values. It has been proposed in this paper that the Protective Behaviours Program has enormous potential to promote such values and to mobilise the school and community to work in partnership to reduce crime.

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