Dysfunctional Family Structures and Aggression in Children: A Case for School-Based,

Systemic Approaches With Violent Students

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Abstract

School counselors may be in the best position to identify troubled students and intervene before an act of school violence occurs. Current education literature challenges school counselors to expand their knowledge of social, environmental and family dynamics and the influences of those dynamics on student violence. This article will (a) introduce the structural elements of a family system (b) describe links between dysfunctional family structure and child aggression, (c) propose school-based strategies for working with students and their families that address the structural antecedents of aggression, and (d) underscore the feasibility and benefits of a systemic approach to violent students.

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Communities and schools are currently facing unprecedented levels of unmet

mental health needs, and children with emotional or behavioral challenges are less

likely to learn while at school (Nabors, Leff, & Power, 2004). In 2005-6, 86 percent of

US public schools reported that one or more serious violent incidences occurred at their

school (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Schools and mental health centers report

an increase in children who display externalizing behavior problems, which refers to a

range of rule breaking behaviors and conduct problems, including physical and verbal

aggression, defiance, lying, stealing, truancy, delinquency, physical cruelty and criminal

acts. Any instance of crime or violence at school not only affects the individuals involved

but also may disrupt the educational process and affect bystanders, the school itself,

the families of students and the surrounding community (Henry, 2000).

The majority of counselors who will first come into contact with issues of school

violence are school counselors; as a result, school counselors may be in the best

position to assess troubled students in an effort to identify and intervene before an act

of violence occurs (Daniels, 2002). Current literature in education challenges school

counselors to expand their knowledge of social, environmental and family dynamics and

the corresponding influences of those dynamics on violent student behavior (Bryan,

2005; Epstein, 2001). This is because the roots of most violent behavior appear to

develop during childhood, the time when family members and family processes are

characteristically the most prevalent influences in an individual's life (Paylo, 2005).

Youth who commit most of the violent acts, who commit the most serious violent acts,

and who continue their violent acts beyond adolescence began their behaviors during childhood (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2001). The apparent influence of family dynamics on violent behavior in youth may help explain why efforts to describe, predict, and address youth violence on the basis of personality or character traits alone have proven extremely difficult (Quinsey, Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 2006).

When a student is threatening or exhibiting aggressive behavior in school, school counselors are encouraged to avoid interventions that focus solely on the child and minimize or ignore the larger contexts within which he or she is developing (Edwards & Foster, 1995). As noted above, the family is a central factor in the development and reduction of antisocial behaviors and delinquency. Consequently, school-based interventions to strengthen positive family involvement seem best suited to address the current trends in youth aggression and unmet mental health needs (Epstein, 2001). To apply family-inclusive prevention and intervention approaches to student violence, school counselors must first understand the antecedents of student violence that originate in the context and structure of the family. Toward promoting such understanding, this article will (a) address the social context of student violence, (b) review the structural elements of a family system, (c) describe the link between a dysfunctional family structure and aggression in youth, (d) propose school-based strategies for working with both aggressive students and their families, and (e) underscore the feasibility and benefits of a systemic approach to violent students.

Social Context

Social isolation, socioeconomic disadvantage and deprived neighborhoods are adverse factors that have been related to aggression in children (McAdams, 2002). Poverty in particular appears to cut across racial and cultural boundaries in ways that contribute to conduct disorder and interfere with intervention efforts (Prinz & Miller, 1996). Environmental stressors limit family access to adequate and safe housing, employment, education, healthcare, and transportation. Parents in low-income families must often work longer hours to compensate for low wages. Understandably, they may be less present for their spousal, parenting, and family leadership roles.

Financial challenges may lead to inadequate childcare for children of low-income families. If forced to fend for themselves for long periods without parental protection and support, children from low-income families may, out of necessity, develop aggressive skills in order to manage and survive their potentially dangerous environment. Limited family resources may encourage low-income children to rely upon peer groups for social support and self esteem; such peer groups can cultivate patterns of aggressive behavior that are unacceptable in other contexts.

 Distinguishing between cultural-bound aggressive behavior and other types of aggression is crucial for accurate assessment and effective intervention. The ability to recognize differences and similarities among families across class, race, and cultural circumstances challenges the prevailing view of diversity as pathological or dangerous, and prevents misinterpretation of behavior and characteristics that hold relevance in a particular context. School counselors hold a unique perspective on both the larger

community and the family systems within that community that can engender effective intervention.

<div align="center">The Structure of Family Systems</div>

For several decades, family systems theories have provided unique insight into interpersonal influences on child and adolescent psychological and behavioral problems. Drawing from the tenets of general systems theory in the physical sciences, family systems theories have moved away from the view of a child as the primary source of the problems or as the singular focus of treatment and identified ways that children's struggles rest within the larger environment and within the network or "system" of family relationships (Nichols & Schwartz, 2006). Various clinical applications of family systems theory have been developed that provide specific methodology and terminology for assessing and responding to the complex familial and contextual influences on children's psychological, emotional, and behavioral problems. Tenets from one such application, Structural Family Therapy (SFT), seem to have particular utility as a framework for organizing our understanding of the systemic antecedents of the problem of violence among children.

SFT is one of the theoretical frameworks most commonly used for conceptualizing and addressing family system dynamics (Walsh & McGraw, 2002). Its utility has support with families of diverse socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and configuration. The concept of the family as defined in SFT is inseparable from the larger community, or ecostructure, in which the family resides (Aponte, 1994). Accordingly, schools and families are intricately related, with changes in one never occurring independently from the other. SFT provides insight into the unique and persistent

interpersonal processes between families and schools that contribute to violent behavior among school children (Muir, Schwartz & Szapocznik, 2004). Further, SFT posits that the role of counselor empathy is an essential ingredient in establishing a collaborative relationship and facilitating change. For school counselors, an incorporation of these processes in the design and execution of violence prevention and intervention initiatives can provide a powerful window of opportunity for effecting positive change. Here we provide an overview of this model that can serve as the scaffold for school-based, systemic approaches with students who display aggression and violence.

According to SFT, family "structure" refers to recurring interaction patterns within a family that define how family members relate to one another and the outside world, what activities members engage in, and how the roles each member plays in the context of family life are related to the impact of outside systems (Levy, 2006). While no two family structures are identical, all share three common elements that school counselors should be aware of: a hierarchy of power, defining boundaries, and functional alignments among members (Becvar & Becvar, 2006).

*Hierarchy of Power*

Power within a family is defined as the level of influence that each family member has on family function and decision-making (Gladding, 1998). Ideally, family power is organized within a generational hierarchy in which parents or other adults with primary responsibility for child rearing (the two groups to be used synonmously hereafter) share the most power in making family decisions and establishing rules for children. The distribution of power and responsibility to children is then matched respective to their ages so as to afford maximum opportunities for success and positive self-esteem

development by ensuring that performance expectations do not exceed capabilities

(Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Through sharing and coordinating their authority,

parents increase their likelihood of having sufficient time, energy, and influence to

provide effective family leadership and consistent direction and support in their

children's development.

*Boundaries*

Family boundaries are defined as unspoken rules that determine who

participates in the various family functions and how they do so (Kilpatrick & Holland,

2006). They regulate the amount of communication among family members and

between a family and the outside world, including the school system. Optimal family

boundaries are "clear" (Madden-Derdich, Estrada, Updegraff, & Leonard, 2002); that is,

they are permeable enough to permit new information to flow among individual entities

within the system and between the system and its environment, yet substantial enough

to maintain the autonomy of each entity and the system as a whole. When parent-child

boundaries are clear, parental influence on children is explicit and ever-present, but not

so overbearing that it stifles children's development of personal competency and self-

confidence. With thoughtfully applied direction and support from parents, children living

in families with clear boundaries will learn to recognize their own strengths, to accept

their limitations, and to adjust calmly and with confidence to normal as well as

unexpected changes that occur in their day to day lives (Minuchin, 1982).

*Alignments*

Alignments refer to bonds formed between two or more members in a family in

order to combine individual power and exert greater collective influence within the family

as a whole (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). They result in the creation of various subgroups or "subsystems" within a family that are often necessary to the achievement of basic family tasks. Among them, the spousal and parental subsystems are especially crucial to the task of successfully rearing psychologically and emotionally healthy children. A viable spousal subsystem is one in which the marital (or otherwise bonded) adult partners have achieved a mutually fulfilling relationship with one another. From this subsystem children receive lessons and models in functional adult intimacy, commitment, communication, and problem solving. The parental subsystem has primary responsibility for the tasks of instructing, protecting, and setting behavioral limits for children. Through secure alignment with parents who are present, responsible, and complementary in these tasks, children build positive self-esteem, learn to accept authority and handle power responsibly, and safely develop capacities for independent decision-making and self-direction.

Looking at families in terms of their basic structural characteristics provides a means by which the assumed benefits to children of a functional family system can be more specifically identified. A structural view of families provides a similar means for better understanding and identifying the potential injury to children who grow up in a less functional family system.

<div align="center">Dysfunctional Family Structure and Child Aggression</div>

From a structural perspective, a dysfunctional family system exists when problems in one or more of the hierarchical, boundary or alignment elements of its structure have impaired its resources for coping with and adapting effectively to contextual stressors (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). With its adaptive resources

overloaded, a family system can no longer deal successfully with everyday stressors or adequately nurture the growth of its individual members (Colapinto, 1995). Such impairment is particularly detrimental to children who must rely upon their family's support and guidance for survival and healthy development. For school counselors, knowledge about family dysfunction can provide a roadmap for effective prevention and intervention programs.

*Dysfunctional Hierarchy*

A dysfunctional hierarchy is said to exist when parents fail to exercise their leadership responsibility in a family (Kilpatrick & Holland, 2006). The reasons for parents' failure to assume leadership in a family are numerous; however, substance abuse, mental illness, youthfulness, marital discord, work-related fatigue, and lack of parenting skills are often part of the source. Regardless of the reason, faulty parental leadership in a family can predispose aggression in children, especially if it includes neglect or abuse or if, through modeling of aggression in the spousal or parental relationship, children come to incorporate aggression into their relationships with others (James, 1995).

*Neglect.* Children of neglectful parents are denied the structure and/or nurturance that they need in order to feel safe and competent. Without consistent parental direction in their day-to-day tasks, children are likely to experience frequent and repeated failures that will ultimately contribute to a self-image of inadequacy and incompetence. Without appropriate parental modeling, support, and comforting in the face of defeat, they cannot develop the ability to contain their emotions and "self-soothe" in times of emotional stress (Gallop, 2002; Winnicott, 1972). Lacking the skills and confidence

needed to succeed in their lives as well as the self-control needed to deal with the pain and frustration of repeated failure, children of neglectful parents are understandably at increased risk of excessive (including violent) responses to real and perceived life challenges.

*Abuse.* Abuse of parental power has been defined as parents' use of punishment as a means to express their own anger and resentment rather than as an instrument for appropriately altering their children's behavior (Patterson, 1982). When parental behavior threatens children's safety and well being, children suffer a confusing collapse of behavioral strategy, in that there are simultaneous impulses to approach parents as a haven of safety and to flee from them as a source of alarm (Hesse & Main, 2000). Unable to control the conditions under which they can safely gain proximity to their primary caregiver, abused children may react in a disorganized, disoriented manner, including attempts to compensate for their loss of control by exerting physical, sometimes violent, control over the immediate environment (McAdams & Foster, 1999).

*Negative role modeling.* As noted previously, it is through interaction with the parental subsystem that children in a family learn to accept authority and, ultimately, to appropriately manage greater measures of personal responsibility and power. However, through that same interaction they can also learn to abuse power when abuse of power is the preeminent model provided by their primary caregivers. Abusive behavior patterns as well as stereotypical power disparities based on gender and racial prejudice are conveyed from parent to child through the process of social learning (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2001). The evidence is clear that witnessing parental discord

is associated with aggression in children, especially in boys. Children who witness threats and acts of violence by their parents and between their parents are the most likely to become violent themselves (Erdiller, 2003; James, 1995).

*Dysfunctional Boundaries*

The functionality of family boundaries is determined by their degrees of permeability and flexibility (i.e., their clarity)—not by their degree of alignment with some preferred or optimal configuration (Nichols & Schwartz, 2006). Provided that their boundaries are clear, families of virtually limitless configurations can achieve a functional balance of autonomy and connection among their individual members and subsystems and with their immediate environment. However, excessively rigid ("disengaged") or diffuse ("enmeshed") boundaries within a family or between a family and its environment can be detrimental to effective system function—especially to its support of developing children (Minuchin, 1982).

*Disengagement.* Families with disengaged boundaries between their members and subsystems are at increased risk of depriving children of the adult involvement they need for healthy psychological and emotional development. In such families, communication of guidance and support from parents to children will be limited, as will be opportunity for mutual exchange of affection. For over 30 years, research has indicated that affectional deprivation plays critical role in the development of aggressive disorders in youth (Bandura & Walters, 1966; Field, 2002). If parents fail to volunteer support and emotional involvement with children, children have no recourse but to force their involvement through disruptive (including violent) behavior that demands immediate and intense parental intervention. Whereas children in families with clear

boundaries need to do little to receive parental attention and involvement, those in

disengaged families may come to learn that the parental connection afforded them in

response to their violent behavior is preferable to no parental connection at all.

*Enmeshment.* Families with enmeshed boundaries between members and

subsystems tend to lack a clear generational hierarchy. As a result, children and adults

can easily exchange roles, and parental control often becomes ineffective (Goldenberg

& Goldenberg, 2004). Parents with ineffective control are less likely to discipline

children's deviant behavior or to follow through with disciplinary measures when they

are taken. The risk of physical violence in a family is increased whenever threats of

discipline without corresponding action deflate the value of what James (1995) has

referred to as the family's "disciplinary currency." When threatened disciplinary action is

not carried out, its potency as a deterrent for future misbehavior (i.e., its currency value)

is diminished, and the seriousness of misbehavior that goes unpunished is redefined to

a higher level. Escalation in the severity of future discipline then becomes necessary to

appropriately match increasingly serious behaviors. Whenever such a pattern of

behavior-response escalation becomes a primary means for relational problem solving

in a family, violent behavior among its members appears to be a predictable and

probable by-product (Olweus 1979; James, 1995).

*Family-community isolation.* As indicated previously, families must maintain clear

boundaries with their environment, accepting influence from the outside world so that

necessary change and adaptation are well-informed, yet resisting external influence that

would threaten family integrity and survival (Walsh & McGraw, 2002). Families with rigid

environmental boundaries will fail to recognize needs for adaptive change, while those

with diffuse boundaries will lack the sense of common purpose and direction needed to carry out adaptive changes that are needed. In either case, families that are unable to adapt to change will soon find their interests to be in conflict with those of an ever-changing environment (i.e., school and community). Members of families that perceive their community to be threatening and hostile are more likely to relate to others in the community in a reciprocal manner. Children in these families are predisposed to consider aggressive behavior as one means of surviving in a world they have been taught is always "out to get them."

*Dysfunctional Alignment*

Interruptions in the security of spousal, parental, and parent-child alignments in a family are interrelated and detrimental to productive family function and the healthy development of children. When spousal alignment is disrupted by serious conflict, children are deprived of positive adult role models they need as they formulate their own notions about appropriate adult respect, intimacy, and problem resolution. When alignment in parenting is disrupted by spousal turmoil, children are at increased risk of experiencing insecurity in their relationships to angry, distracted parents (Garber, 2004). Parental conflict and separation do not automatically lead to psychological and emotional damage to children. However, unless parents can maintain a primary, collaborative, and consistent presence in their children's lives during the course and aftermath of conflict and separation (often a formidable task), the potential for damage is clear (Garber, 2004). Alienation, emotional abandonment, and betrayal are demonstrated outcomes of faulty parent-child alignment, each predisposing children for aggressive behavior.

*Alienation.* Alienation refers to a child's rejection of a parent as a secure base for protection, guidance, and comfort (Gardner, 1998). In families where there is serious discord leading to the separation of one parent from the family, the risk of children's alienation from the absent parent is increased due, in part, to their loss of regular access to that parent. The potential for alienation is compounded if conflicting parents use words and behaviors that malign each other in the presence of the children. In that case, the children are pressured toward polarized alignment with one "good parent", demonizing and, thus, eliminating the other "bad parent" as a source of guidance and personal confirmation (Gardner, 1998). Generalized anger and insecurity over the "loss" of an alienated parent renders children vulnerable to excessive, emotionally charged, responses (including violent responses) in times of interpersonal stress (Levy & Orlans, 1998). Their aggression typically occurs as a spontaneous, displaced, emotional reaction, disproportionate in its intensity to the demands of a perceived challenge or threat encountered in their day-to-day experience.

*Emotional abandonment.* Emotional abandonment refers to the perception by children that they have been rejected by the significant adults in their lives (Anderson, 2000). It is a likely outcome if parents consistently rebuff their children's approaches to them for comfort and protection, and a potential outcome if conditions supporting alienation go unchecked for an extended period of time. Over time, abandoned children may lose all hope that when they seek parental care they will receive it. By necessity, they may become emotionally self-sufficient and dismissive of alignment with authority figures (and adults generally) as a dependable source of guidance and personal confirmation (Levi & Orlans, 1998).

In the absence of positive confirmation from significant others (parents, in particular), their self-esteem will be derived from their ability to succeed without, and often at the expense of others. The propensity of abandoned children toward generalized hostility and antisocial behavior appears to have two origins: one being an overt manifestation of internalized resentment and anger over frustrated needs for security, and another being a mechanism by which they keep others at bay far enough so as not to endanger their desired autonomy and self-sufficiency (Mayseless, 1996). Their aggressive behavior is more likely to be intentional, calculated, and self-serving and not necessarily in direct response to an immediate challenge or threat.

*Betrayal.* Betrayal is said to occur when those we depend on for security and survival violate our trust in some way (Sivers, Schooler, & Freyd, J., 2002). The dynamics of betrayal in parent-child alignment were introduced earlier in describing the increased propensity toward violence in children who have suffered the violation of parental abuse. Abused children may suffer extreme anxiety and frustration, often manifested as generalized hostility and violence, as the result of being placed in a behavioral paradox in which impulses to move toward parents for protection and to flee from parents in fear are simultaneously activated (Main, 1996). Without a consistent and accurate formative experience in distinguishing danger from safety in the relationship with their parents, betrayed children will understandably be inconsistent and disorganized in their responses to subsequent social interactions and more likely to over-respond aggressively to misperceived threats of danger, particularly in their relationships with authority figures.

System-Focused Intervention

The preceding paragraphs illustrate how family structure can inform school counselors of circumstances present in students' family lives that could predispose them toward violent behavior in school. Examining the link between dysfunctional family systems and aggression in children provides specific pathways by which schools can identify potentially violent students more quickly and work with both those students and their families. A systemic approach to school aggression does not preclude the need for individual and group work with the aggressive students themselves. Rather, it involves intentional efforts by school counselors: (a) to incorporate systemic issues and concerns into individual and group counseling interventions with those students, (b) to empower families to facilitate and promote their increased involvement and support of students at home and at school, (c) to inform families of available community resources and (d) to model effective methods for family-school-community interaction.

*Individual and Group Counseling.*

Individual counseling provides a medium for building and strengthening relationships with at-risk students. To incorporate a systemic perspective into their individual work with students, school-based counselors would approach counseling in an open, collaborative, manner that allows students to share their family experiences and illustrate the intricate interaction between individual and family concerns and issues. By engaging in counseling with a sincere desire to understand the students' perceptions of relationship dynamics, a counselor can gain valuable insight into the functional structure of a student's family and peer group, while concurrently promoting the development of a respectful, collaborative, working relationship. For example, the

counselor might initially ask a student to describe her or his family and responsibilities and roles within the family. From this conversation, the counselor can gain important information about the student's perceptions of safety and security afforded in the family structure and within the community. The information received from discussions with students about the hierarchy, boundaries, and alignments within their families, can provide first-hand warning of relational factors (e.g., disengagement, enmeshment, etc.) and environmental influences that might predispose the student for violent behavior.

Group counseling remains a vital component of any comprehensive, school-based, program addressing the needs of students at-risk for violence; it addresses the essence of adolescence, the peer group (Walsh, 1998). Group counseling capitalizes on the influence of the peer group by infusing the group with an intentional purpose and shared focus. Its utility in violence prevention and intervention can be enhanced by the incorporation of a systemic focus. For example, an awareness of the SFT concepts of alienation and abandonment can enable school counselors to identify students struggling with those issues at home and impacting their relationships with peers and educators at school. Identified students may benefit from emphasis and practice in group counseling on developing and maintaining meaningful relationships with peers and school counselors—beneficial relationships that they are not experiencing at home. Students threatened by alienation in other aspects of their lives may feel less threatened and inclined to defend themselves at school if, through the establishment of positive relationships with peers and school counselors, they are able to experience their school as a safe and supportive place to be.

*Family Empowerment*

Students' attitudes toward their parents will undoubtedly be influenced by the attitudes toward parents that are conveyed at school. When schools convey respect for the capabilities of parents, students will be influenced to do likewise, thus strengthening the family hierarchy by bolstering respect for its leadership. In their own eyes and the eyes of their children, parents will likewise be empowered and validated in their leadership roles when their input into matters relating to their children at school is encouraged, valued, and utilized. This type of empowerment is especially likely when parents are afforded a place in the decision-making structure of the school. Epstein (2001) has identified six specific means by which schools can productively involve families in students' education ranging from merely keeping parents informed to the active use of "parent leaders" at school. Schools that maximize the means for parents to be present and supportive in their children's educational endeavors foster and strengthen parent-child alliances by clarifying respective parent-child roles, establishing mutual parent-child goals, and affording positive models of parent-child communication and interaction. Positive parent-child alliances serve as a protective barrier to conditions for alienation, abandonment, and betrayal, and, thus, if achieved, work to lessen the potential for anxious and aggressive school behavior that can be expected from children with histories of abuse and neglect.

*Family-Community Linking*

Schools today are situated in a strong position to identify needs for specialized family support and to foster positive networks of connections (Epstein, 2001). This position is particularly true when school counselors are sensitive to the family

antecedents of problematic (including aggressive) student behavior at school. Families

insulated from their communities by rigid protective boundaries may have little

knowledge of the community support resources that are available to them (Goldenberg

& Goldenberg, 2004). Channels of communication established with these families

around children's educational concerns can also be used to provide parents with self-

help training and information (e.g., in child development, parenting skills, discipline,

career planning, etc.) and to alert them to sources of financial, legal, educational,

medical, and mental health support in the community. Families with historically closed

boundaries may decline, ignore, or even resist offers of information and assistance from

their children's schools due to generalized distrust in "outsiders" (Epstein, 2001).

School counselors must persist in creative efforts to reach out to these families

and to encourage other community support services to do the same if they hope to

reduce school aggression by children from those families. Understanding resistance as

a survival mechanism within a family system leads to increased empathy and a reduced

(albeit, an understandable) temptation to simply "write off" families displaying resistance

in favor of others who willingly seek their assistance. Further, sustained positive

engagement with families displaying resistance may alter problematic relationships that

have persisted across generations.

*Modeling Effective Problem Solving*

As noted above, families with long histories of adversity in their interactions with

the community may distrust and disengage with community services (including the

school) to preserve family security (Broadhurst, Patton, & May-Chahal, 2005). Whereas

school counselors may see a family's detachment as disinterest, wary parents in

troubled families may see it as a way to avoid further intrusion from a generally hostile and blaming outside world. Schools that initiate and persist in genuine attempts to communicate with distant families and involve them in the educational process provide a powerful and proactive model for skeptical parents to discuss problems rather than avoid them. Small successes can lead to larger ones when parents feel empowered by these attempts and seek further empowerment through continued school interaction (Paylo, 2005). By modeling, through their own actions (i.e., modeling), a process for effective family-school engagement and problem solving, school counselors can contribute directly to the opening of rigid family-school boundaries and, vicariously, to more effective communication and problem resolution within the family itself and between the family and its host community. Collaborative relationships between families, schools, and communities directly and positively impact a students' integration of learning and ability to be successful in school (Bryan, 2005, Keys & Bemak, 1997). They can also reduce the propensity for violent student behavior at school by eliminating the adversarial family-school relationships that appear to contribute to it.

## The Potential Benefits

The obvious benefit of school endeavors to engage and strengthen students' families may be a reduction in incidents of youth violence at school. It stands to reason that violent student behaviors at school will decline if dysfunctional family structures initiating and supporting those behaviors are corrected. Less obvious, but equally important benefits of involving families in school violence reduction initiatives include earlier detection of problems, more enduring positive outcomes from intervention, and reduced levels of work frustration and burnout among school counselors.

*Early Detection*

According to Boyd-Franklin and Bry (2000), early identification of the potential for violence is the key to effective prevention and intervention. They suggest that students whose aggressive propensities are addressed at first signs are more likely to respond positively. For that reason, they advocate proactively reaching out to youth at risk for violence before their behavior demands it. An awareness and examination of the patterns of interaction, alignments, and boundaries in students' primary social systems (the family and the school) can alert school counselors to students with systemic predispositions for violence. That knowledge can then be used to guide the school's provision, coordination, and recommendation of appropriate pre-crisis interventions aimed at neutralizing the risk factors before these factors matriculate into violent student behavior. Moving from a child-centered to a family-inclusive framework for assessing students' risk for violent behavior significantly broadens the effective scope of assessment and, thus, increases the probability that the most dominant risk factors in a student's life will be detected early and addressed successfully.

*More Enduring Positive Outcomes*

When interventions for school violence address behavioral symptoms alone without addressing the symptoms' origins, it is unrealistic to expect those interventions to have a lasting impact. Changes in behavior that lack concurrent changes in underlying attitudes and values have been defined as "first order changes" and are prone to relapse or some degree of symptom substitution, because the incentive for original behaviors remain intact (Nichols & Schwartz, 2006). Preferable to these are more permanent, "second order changes" in behavior that are based on changed

underlying attitudes and values and, thus, on new personal incentives to behave in a different way. Knowledge of family structure and its impact on child behavior enables school counselors to tailor interventions capable of producing second-order changes in family relational patterns that predispose violent behavior in their children. School efforts to establish a collaborative, non-hierarchical approach to problem solving that respects, informs, and utilizes the resources of all members of the school-family-community system will increase the likelihood that students' incentives for behaving non-violently at school will continue to influence their behavior when they are at home and in other aspects of their lives away from school. Students' propensities for violence at school are understandably lessened when interacting without violence is their primary way of behaving at home and in the community.

*Reduced Frustration and Burnout*

Working with violent students creates a significant level of stress upon school professionals. Aside from fears about physical safety, the work can be frustrating and subject to frequent setbacks due to the systemic influences on violent student behavior that are beyond their control. In this context, all those working with at-risk students can benefit from support and supervision that expands their knowledge related to family structure and its impact on individual behavior. A student's behavior may seem inexplicable in the school context alone, but the origin of that behavior might become clearer when viewed more broadly to include the family context (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). Similarly, a family's resistance to involvement with the school may be more empathically perceived if its survival function within a closed family system is understood. What schools interpret as a family's unwarranted hostility and resistance

toward them in particular may, in fact, be a disengaged family's characteristic (and to its members, necessary) pattern of behavior in relation to all aspects of its environment.

A family focus on school violence can help to reduce the frustration for school counselors that results from repeated failures of narrow, child-centered, assessments and interventions that consider only the symptoms of the problem and leave its supporting conditions unchanged. It can, likewise, reduce their discouragement over slow progress and relapse by reminding them of the complexity of the youth aggression problem and the limitations of any remedial intervention in changing antecedent conditions for aggression that have taken years and even generations to develop. Together, these benefits may help to mitigate feelings of futility and hopelessness in those on the front lines of the school violence prevention and intervention effort; feelings that, left unattended, will ultimately lead to their burnout and loss to more hopeful and rewarding causes (Brock, 2000).

## Conclusion

The ASCA National Model (American School Counselor Association, 2005) articulates a framework that supports the academic, career, and personal/social development of every child. Galassi and Akos (2007) have elaborated principles of Strengths- Based School Counseling (SBSC) that enrich the ASCA National Model by focusing on the promotion of culturally relevant strengths and competencies at the individual and environmental levels. The framework presented here is consistent with these principles, and also can be aligned with the ASCA National Model, providing a scaffold for school counselors to adopt in their schools.

Developing a family-focused approach to school violence prevention and intervention does not require that school counselors also be family counselors. Rather, it suggests that they possess a general awareness and appreciation of the impact of family influences on individual student behavior along with a willingness to expand their awareness as needed to understand and respond effectively to specific student situations and contexts. School counselors may be introduced to family systems dynamics and treatment as an element of their required coursework. Those from programs that do not require such training can pursue it independently through supplemental coursework and professional development workshops, conference presentations, and professional publications specific to family dynamics and issues.

This paper has addressed the influence of social context and family structure on aggressive youth behavior in school. Our first relationships, our first group, and our first experiences of the world are with and through our families. All of us grow, develop, and become who we are within a family context that is shaped by the benefits and burdens of a larger sociopolitical culture. Many of the struggles that families face are not of their own making (Walsh, 2006); rather, family patterns have been impacted by a host of interconnected factors including growing cultural diversity, the widening gap between rich and poor, multiple dislocations, and increased complexity in work demands, gender roles, culture, and lifecycle patterns. Application of a structural framework can help us organize and clarify our understanding and appreciation of the complex contextual influences on children's psychological, emotional, and behavioral problems. It offers direction for addressing the systemic roots as well as the behavioral symptoms of these problems. Above all, it promotes empathy through which we may find reason to persist

in our efforts to align with resistant parents and students rather than dismiss them in

favor of others who actively seek our help.

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