Play by the Rules or Leave

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: Youth Protection and Child Safety

Violence cannot build a better society. Disruption and disorder nourish repression, not justice. They strike at the freedom of every citizen. The community cannot—it will not—tolerate coercion and mob rule.

— Commission on Civil Disorder, 1968

Violence pervades the lives of America's youth… Surveys document that today's youth are aware of violence and feel less secure than those of the same age in previous generations. The Centers for Disease Control reports that one of the first steps toward preventing violence is to identify and understand the factors that place young people at risk for violent victimization and perpetration. Previous research shows that there are a number of individual and social factors that increase the probability of violence during adolescence and young adulthood. Organizations serving high-risk children must balance those children's need for services against legitimate concerns for the safety of all program participants.

Three aspects of violence that represent risk management concerns for youth-serving organizations: bullies, gangs and weapons.

Risk Management Strategies to Reduce Violence

The risk management measures necessary to control violence in your organizations' programs begins with the staff. Discipline is the first step the staff should take. If discipline doesn't get the young person to change his or her behavior, the next step is for the staff to speak with the parents or guardians. If the young person's behavior is still not acceptable, the staff should tell the parents or guardians that they will have to find services for their child elsewhere. (For a free sample Code of Conduct, click here.)

Discipline

The best control techniques reinforce positive behavior and don't reward bad, or negative, behavior. Smiles, an encouraging pat on the head, a word of encouragement, and other kinds of praise and support will often be all that's required to have the children or youths with whom you work ready to jump through hoops to please you. Unfortunately, the children that are most needy for words of encouragement or praise are the most problematic from a disciplinary perspective. These children are so much in need of attention that they are willing to misbehave to obtain negative attention rather than share attention with the group.

Success-Oriented Rules to Live By

Young children, who think in concrete terms, need short, specific rules that they can understand and follow. A sample follows.

Young Children — Rules of Conduct

- No hitting
- No biting

- No pinching
- No slapping
- No kicking
- No pulling hair
- No fighting
- No yelling
- Report all accidents to your teacher (leader).

School-age children who comprehend abstract concepts, need direction, but can understand broader terms. A sample follows.

School-Age Children — Rules of Conduct

- No fighting
- No weapons
- No drugs, including alcohol, or drug paraphernalia
- No swearing or bad mouthing
- Report all accidents to a supervisor.

The rules reflect the developmental age of the program's participants.

The disruptive behavior of individual children shouldn't be allowed to interfere with the ability of other children to benefit from your organization's services. Disruptive behavior may also put the safety of the child and possibly the safety of the entire group at risk. Discipline should address behavioral problems that impair the organization's ability to accomplish its mission.

When discipline of a child in your organization's program is necessary, the discipline should be age-appropriate and related to the behavior that you are trying to change. Slapping, hitting and spanking children are inappropriate disciplinary techniques for nonfamily caregivers. While of questionable value in a family situation, when these disciplinary techniques are used outside of the family, the risks of allegations of child abuse and subsequent lawsuits are considerable.

For younger children, a time-out corner with a chair for the child to sit for brief periods of time is appropriate. Two or three minutes in the time-out corner are usually all that is necessary for the child to contemplate his or her wrongdoing and be ready to rejoin the activity. A good rule of thumb is one minute for each year of the child's age. Longer periods of time in the time-out corner are counter-productive. If disruptive behavior continues, temporary exclusion from the group may be appropriate.

Running extra laps, doing pushups, and other physical exercises are common disciplinary measures in youth sports programs. Within reason, these may be appropriate as they allow the youth to expend some excess energy and are consistent with the aims of the sports programs to promote fitness and physical conditioning. Their use, however, should be avoided when they could aggravate an injury or when climatic conditions could cause hyper- or hypothermia. Withholding water is never an appropriate disciplinary strategy.

Factors That Increase Victimization

The Centers for Disease Control says that one of the first steps toward preventing violence is to identify and understand the factors that place young people at risk for violent victimization and perpetration. Some individual and social factors that increase the probability of violence during adolescence and young adulthood are:

Individual

- history of early aggression
- beliefs supportive of violence
- social cognitive deficits

Family

- poor monitoring or supervision of children
- exposure to violence
- parental drug/alcohol abuse
- poor emotional attachment to parents or caregivers

Peer/School

- associate with peers engaged in high-risk or problem behavior
- low commitment to school
- academic failure

Neighborhood

- poverty and diminished economic opportunity
- high levels of transiency and family disruption
- exposure to violence

Organizations serving high-risk children must balance those children's need for services against legitimate concerns for the safety of all program participants.

Parent Conferences

Usually, only a few children are responsible for most of the disruptive behavior in an organizational setting. If your program has a chronic troublemaker, it may be necessary to have a conference with that child's parents. When conferring with parents, identify the objectionable behavior and the reasons the organization finds the behavior objectionable. Discuss the steps you have taken to control the child's behavior and the results. Refrain from making accusations and control your anger. Indicate that the behaviors are unacceptable and seek the parents' assistance. Some parents may try to shift the responsibility back to the organization by giving their permission to use corporal punishment or other more severe forms of punishment. This should be unacceptable. Let the parents know that if the disruptions continue, the child will need to seek services elsewhere.

Truth and Consequences

Bullies and gangs and weapons represent risk management concerns for youth-serving organizations. The staff of your nonprofit need to be educated and alert for the first signs of disruptive behavior among program participants and take corrective action. It's important that requests for changed behavior are monitored and, if the young person fails to comply, that stated consequences occur.

This article was adapted from Chapter 5, "Violence Among Youth" featured in The Season of Hope: A Risk Management Guide for Youth-Serving Nonprofits. For more information, click here to view the book. The Center provides free technical assistance to nonprofits via e-mail and telephone. To send your question via e-mail, click here. To speak with our in-house experts on youth protection issues, call the Center at (703) 777-3504.