

A Violence Prevention Program and Elementary Students: Does it Matter if They Pay Attention?

Abstract

This study examined the impact of attention on what elementary students (n=170) from three different urban schools gained from the six-session *Peaceful People* program. Students who reported “never” having problems paying attention gained more of the content-specific knowledge of the program (i.e., became better at resolving conflicts). Students who reported “always” having problems paying attention did not have significant changes in content knowledge (i.e., were not significantly better at resolving conflicts), but had significant emotional changes such as being embarrassed, ashamed, sad, nervous, and anxious less often. In addition, the inability to pay attention was significantly correlated with many problematic behaviors. The implications for students with attention problems will be discussed as well as some of the issues that need to be considered when implementing classroom level programming in violence prevention.

Introduction

As universal level violence prevention programs grow in popularity at the elementary level, it is imperative that we learn more about the nature of how and when they work for students. After observing a variety of programs in several elementary schools in a particular large urban school district where students seemed to struggle to pay attention in class and in violence prevention programs, this particular research question evolved—do students get any significant benefits from programming when they have trouble paying attention? If so, are these benefits different from those who do not have problems paying attention or the group as a whole? What other behaviors are associated with attention problems for students?

The research on attention and violence prevention seems to be divided largely into two camps: studies examining the relationship between Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and learning, or studies focusing on students with ADHD and violent/aggressive behavior. Research on attention as a self-reported problem for young students has been absent in the area of violence prevention.

Brief Examination of the Literature

Attention Deficits and Attention Deficit Disorder

The research on the impact of identified Attention Deficit Disorder on learning suggests that often students with ADHD have difficulty learning and under-perform academically.

For example, a study by Barry, Lyman, and Klinger (2002) found that students with ADHD performed significantly worse in the areas of mathematics, reading, and writing than non-ADHD and lower than predicted. They also found that the more severe the ADHD symptoms the worse students performed. Hinshaw (1992) described the relationship among academic underachievement, deficits in attention, and aggressive behavior suggesting that these three factors often overlap in children.

Attention Deficit and Violence

Researchers have also examined the role of attention deficit problems in violent behavior. For example, Unnever and Cornell (2003) found based on their work with over 1300 middle school students and the seminal work of Gottfredson and Hirschi (1991) that “Students who reported taking medication for ADHD were at increased risk for bullying as well as victimization by bullies. The correlation between ADHD status and bullying could be explained by low self-control, a construct theorized by M. R. Gottfredson and T. Hirschi (1991) to be the most important determinant of criminality. In contrast, the correlation between ADHD status and bullying victimization was independent of self-control.”

Hawkins, Herrenkohl, Farrington, Brewer, Catalano, Harachi, and Cothorn (2000, p. 2) found in their comprehensive meta-analysis of over 66 studies that among the many risk factors of youth violence was “hyperactivity, concentration problems, restlessness, and risk taking.” This was also supported by Christle, Jovilette, and Nelson’s (2000) review of the literature on youth violence they found hyperactivity and serious attention problems to be risk factors in violent behavior of youth.

Research Questions: Examining Attention Problems and Violence Prevention Program Impact

Students with attention problems often seem to be identified by teachers as having problematic behavior in the classroom. Sometimes these students are viewed to be disruptive or aggressive. What is unknown is what students with attention problems take away from universal level violence prevention programs. Do students with attention problems benefit from violence prevention programs? If there is a benefit is it fundamentally different from those without attention problems?

To examine these questions, three urban elementary schools participated in the Peaceful People program. The Peaceful People Program was developed based on the foundation of the five core social skills identified by the AGS (American Guidance Society) and each lesson is based in developing one or more of those core social skills (Cooperation, Assertion, Responsibility, Empathy and Self-Control) along with conflict resolution strategies and problem solving skills. The sessions take place in the classroom with the teacher present as the trainer runs the sessions that are often interactive and cooperative where students are able to practice the skills learned. Observations conducted allowed the researcher to see that trainers worked hard to create a supportive, caring environment

with clearly established ground rules where students felt safe practicing these skills and teachers could see what students were learning to continue the skills.

Method

A modified version of the Student Behavior Checklist (Meier, McDougal, and Bardos, 2002) was administered on the first day of the Peaceful People program to elementary students in three different urban elementary schools ($n=170$). The same survey was administered on the final day (after 6 weeks and 6 sessions) of the workshops ($n=169$). The scale was a 3-point scale (1=never, 2=sometimes, 3=often) and students were asked to rate their perceptions on a variety of behaviors and feelings (a copy of the survey will be available from the author and at the presentation).

Results

Pre-test and post-test comparisons for all students in Peaceful People training

For the whole population of students ($n=170$) receiving the Peaceful People program, significant differences were found for the following variables (scale included never=1, sometimes=2, often=3):

- At times I argue with others (pretest $M=2.2$ versus post-test $M=2.0$, $t(329)=1.87$, $p<.1$).
- I am generally well behaved (pretest $M=2.38$, post-test $M=2.21$, $t(328)=2.5$, $p<.05$)
- I feel nervous or anxious (pre-test $M=1.94$, post-test $M=1.77$, $t(326)=2.21$, $p<.05$)
- I get emotional or become easily upset (pretest $M=2.05$ post-test $M=1.86$, $t(336)=2.4$, $p<.05$)
- I help with household chores (pre-test $M=2.54$, post-test $M=2.34$, $t(332)=2.9$, $p<.01$)

Thus, for all students in the Peaceful People program, even though they felt that they were generally less often well behaved and helped with household chores less often than they were less nervous and anxious and argued less with others.

Others were lowered (approaching significance) such as:

- I have thoughts of hurting others
- I fight with others physically

Correlations with attention problems

Students were asked in the first question of the survey to rate the following “I have trouble paying attention” 1=never 2=sometimes 3=always. The ability to pay attention was significantly correlated with many other factors in the post-test:

At times I act before I think $r(167)=.16, p<.05$
 People think my thoughts are strange and bizarre $r(164)=.21, p<.001$
 I engage in dangerous and risky behaviors $r(164)=.34, p<.001$
 At times I argue with others $r(159)=.16, p<.05$
 *I can resolve conflicts $r(164)=-.23, p<.01$
 *I follow directions $r(157)=-.23, p<.01$
 I fight with others physically $r(167)=.28, p<.001$
 I get emotional or become easily upset $r(167)=.173, p<.05$
 *I try my best in school $r(159)=-.19, p<.05$
 *I am responsible $r(162)=-.32, p<.001$
 *I make friends easily $r(163)=-.17, p<.05$
 *It is easy for me to talk to others $r(163)=-.16, p<.05$
 *I go to class prepared $r(165)=-.22, p<.01$
 *I get good grades in school $r(161)=-.36, p<.001$
 *I cooperate with others $r(165)=-.18, p<.05$
 *I can speak up for myself $r(165)=-.18, p<.05$

*=denotes a significant negative correlation

Controlling for Attention

Those who reported “never” having trouble paying attention” $n=37$ at pre-test and $n=34$ at post-test seemed to get one of the primary messages of the Peaceful People program—ways to resolve conflict. They had significant differences in their reported ability to resolve conflicts $M=2.0$ at pre-test versus $M=2.4$ at post-test $t(69)=2.21, p<.05$.

Those who reported “often have trouble paying attention” seemed to benefit on the following emotional factors ($n=19$):

I feel embarrassed and ashamed (pre-test $m=2.5$, post-test $m=1.8$, $t=2.4$ $p<.05$)
 I feel sad (2.1, 1.6) $t=1.86$ $p<.1$
 I cry easily (2.1, 1.4, $t=2.68$, $p<.01$)
 I feel nervous and anxious (2.5, 1.7) $t=3.5$, $p<.001$

Comparison of scores for students who reported “often” having trouble paying attention in school

	Pretest mean	Post-test mean	<i>t</i> -value
Ashamed	2.5	1.8	2.4*
Sad	2.1	1.6	1.8
Crying	2.1	1.4	2.7**
Anxious	2.5	1.7	3.5***

* $p<.05$ two-tailed test

** $p<.01$ two-tailed test

*** $p < .001$ two-tailed test

Even though they find themselves fighting physically significantly more often post-test. (Pre-test $M = 1.68$, post-test $M = 2.28$, $t(2.22)$, $p < .05$).

There were no significant racial, gender, school, or age pre- and post-test differences.

Discussion/Implications

A great deal of time, money, and energy is being spent on universal level violence prevention programs. In areas where there are many students with attention problems, it is important to determine if students who have difficulty attending to the content message are getting any benefit from the programs. It seems that in this study, students with self-identified attention problems were receiving emotional benefit from this program. While those students who reportedly did not have attention problems were gaining the content information.

Most trainers are not classroom teachers and are not trained in dealing with attention problems or classroom management problems. It is important to address the attention issues that trainers may experience in the classroom to help maximize the impact of program objectives.

Anderson (2000, p.7) makes the following suggestions for working with students with serious attention problems:

“[S]eek medical evaluation; discuss treatment options with the physician and school; communicate with the child's teachers; provide feedback, praise, and consequences; help the child develop social skills; understand when ADD with hyperactivity is disabling; know the child's legal rights; and assure the child of opportunities to succeed.”

Classroom programs such as *Peaceful People* seek to create cooperative classroom environments that provide feedback, praise, and consequences, help children develop social skills, and give children opportunities to succeed. However, many trainers and even many teachers are often unable to discern when ADD can be disabling and when medical attention is needed.

As we invest much time, money, and effort into violence prevention curricula, it is important to better understand, not only how students with identified disabilities respond, but also those students with attention problems that may not be labeled Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. This study does not attempt to determine students with Attention Deficit Disorder, but rather relies on students' self report of attention problems. An avenue for future research would be to examine the effectiveness of classroom-based violence prevention programs for students with Attention Deficit Disorder or other attention-related disabilities to see if the same emotional benefits are found with the content benefits lost.

The good news is that students with attention problems still have emotional benefits—even though they may not be getting the full benefits of the content of the universal level violence prevention program of Peaceful People. Issues of attention need to be addressed however to fully reach students for whom attending in a classroom or workshop setting is challenging.

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