
Deborah Prothrow-Stith: Schools as Safe Havens

Deborah Prothrow-Stith, M.D., traces her interest in adolescent violence to her work as a staff physician at the Boston City Hospital and the Harvard Street Neighborhood Health Center. Currently Assistant Dean for Government and Community Programs at Harvard University's School of Public Health and Professor of Public Health Practice for the Harvard School of Public Health, she was State Commissioner of Public Health in Massachusetts from 1987 to 1989. In the latter capacity, she established the first state office of violence prevention and expanded treatment programs on AIDS, drug rehabilitation, and other urban health issues. Author of the first violence prevention curriculum for schools, she is also the author of Deadly Consequences, which presents a public health perspective on violence to a mass audience.

Meanness of character is one powerful reason the United States has become a violent society, Deborah Prothrow-Stith believes, coupled with a synergism of abundant influences steered by the profit motive. Manufacturers prosper from the sales of guns, video games, and movies that are targeted to children and actively promote and celebrate violence. A uniform—and disturbing—image that such manufacturers put forward is that of the hero as a figure who reacts quickly and violently, is deprived of a conscience, and is motivated solely by his own interests,

How have we, as a society, reached the point where children and teachers are afraid to go to school, where violence and crime are no longer solely urban problems? I asked her.

"I use the metaphor of a slot machine to explain our current infatuation with violence," Prothrow-Stith replied. "Unless you get five oranges, you don't hit the jackpot. In the windows of the slot machine, put up the widening gap of poverty we have experienced over the past 12 to 14 years; the crack epidemic, alcohol use and other drugs; the availability of guns; the big money that gun manufacturers have made in this country; the sociocultural issues, which are

probably the most devastating; and it is clear that there is no jackpot. Instead, in every window of the slot machine we see how mean we have gotten as a society and how popular it has become to be mean.”

The Marketing of Meanness

It is easy to enter the arena of violent behavior, she insists. “Being mean didn’t become popular because it was natural,” she pointed out. “Meanness has been promoted and sold in a very deliberate fashion; ‘mean’ as a state of being has been marketed carefully.”

In her work on public health and violence prevention, Prothrow-Stith travels widely around the United States, taking painstaking note of ever-increasing tendencies toward violent behavior. Her observations alarm her: the nearly universal admiration for violence that youth display is disquieting at best. “In addition to being able to *give* it—in terms of violent behavior—you have to be able to *take* it,” she emphasized. “Since violence and its consequences are no big deal, youth do not display much emotion about it. We don’t see pain and empathy and remorse until there are very devastating consequences.”

Why is life so devalued among so many youth?, I asked.

“Children have to be valued in order to learn that life is valuable,” Prothrow-Stith said. “Obviously, most families do a pretty good job of teaching their children that they are valuable. But this important job can’t be left to the family alone. Society has to think that children are valuable, and that belief has to be demonstrated in public policy and in the ethos of the community.”

As a society, our commitment to children is woefully inadequate, she believes. Instead, children are exploited as a lucrative and vulnerable market for a plethora of violent, life-diminishing products. “Children are viewed as economically valuable by major corporations who sell them products. Of course, the same corporations are nonchalant about the effects of their sales. As long as children buy their goods, manufacturers can be indifferent to the fact that their products are unneeded *and* unhealthy. We must decide, as a society, that some things really are more important than money.”

In what ways, I asked, can public policy effect change? “We’re doing more crisis intervention and imprisonment,” Prothrow-Stith said evenly, “and spending loads of money being big and mean and bad and tough on crime, but literally ignoring the front end of the problem. We have schools that are housed in horrible buildings, places in which none of us would spend our work day if we had a choice. We have schools with no books; we have schools with no physical education programs. Most communities that I visit have built new jails and have cut needed educational programs in the schools.”

She added, “At one level, you get what you pay for.”

The School's Role in Violence Prevention

How can the school play a role in mitigating violence in our society?, I asked. Is this truly the school's responsibility?

"The school has a major role," Prothrow-Stith replied firmly. "The socialization process that takes place in the school is an essential part of the educational process. Occasionally I hear teachers say, 'I don't teach how to get along.' But you can't teach math without teaching kids how to get along. While you're teaching math, you're teaching children how to treat each other, how to treat people who are different, how to behave with people who don't understand. Literally, you are teaching children how to get along with others and how to be socialized."

She places responsibility squarely on educators to create a movement that recognizes and promotes the importance of adequate socialization in schools, so that they are environments where children learn the difference between right and wrong. "Those students who do less well in school are often more at risk for being involved in violent behavior," she explained. "Schools could—and should—make a big contribution to this issue by not only teaching everybody how to read and do math, but also how to exist in an environment in which that would take place."

Finally, she believes schools should engage actively in programs aimed at reducing violence. "We need to teach children how to handle conflict and anger, how to solve problems in a very deliberate way. Schools must be safe havens, examples of nonviolence, places where children learn the essentials for functioning in society in addition to learning the basics of reading and writing—in some ways to make up for what the rest of society isn't doing now."

She points to research conducted by the Governor's Alliance Against Drugs in Massachusetts to illustrate how powerful advertising is in promoting self-destructive behavior among youth, citing a pre- and post-survey of children who entered a three-year substance abuse prevention curriculum. "Self-reported behavior around drugs decreased after the three years in every category except alcohol," she said, "where it rose slightly. This was unexplained for a long time because the curriculum dealt with alcohol more than with other drugs."

While casually watching television one evening and viewing an anti-drugs public service spot immediately followed by an alcohol commercial, Prothrow-Stith was struck with a realization: educators possess and transmit the correct prevention messages, but are contradicted by the media—which in turn contradicts its own messages and public service announcements. Commercials for alcohol preceded by anti-drugs messages are too contradictory and confusing for children to absorb, she told me.

Doesn't this suggest, I asked, that the problem of violence is simply too global to be placed upon the shoulders of educators who are held increasingly

accountable for the systemic problems of society? What about harnessing a coalition of forces to combat it?

"Schools can't do it alone," she acknowledged in reply, "but obviously they can mitigate and counter some of the things that are going on, just as families always have intervened in the lives of children.

"I challenge educators to do this, because I think classroom teachers ought to be outraged by the lack of priority public policy gives to children and schools. Educators should lead a movement to change that. Instead, most of the teachers' unions debate salary and contract issues, which is disappointing, because there is a larger mission."

Prothrow-Stith quickly added, "I realize that I'm prescribing something for another profession that my own profession of physicians hasn't been able to accomplish in terms of health care reform. Nonetheless, even given the substantial difficulties, I would love to see teachers leading a violence reduction and conflict resolution movement."

I asked if she believes that parents should monitor videos and books that their children choose to ensure they are nonviolent. "Yes," she replied, although she was clear that such monitoring should possess a core of reason rather than blind censorship motivated by fear. "Throughout the education process, one ought to analyze with students *why* they like something, how they have learned to like it, and why people produce whatever it is."

Since the profit motive lies at the core of the production and promotion of violent entertainment and weapons for children, she maintains that the allure of such products will be lessened if children's sophistication about the motives of manufacturers and advertisers is elevated. "There is the need to indicate to youngsters that all these things they watch and see are lies," she said. "Many kids, especially older ones, think they know what is real and what is not, but when they're watching the stories, they get caught up in them to the point that they don't think of alternatives."

Learning Alternatives to Violence and Rage

Alternatives to violence are Prothrow-Stith's main message. "Unless you train yourself, you go right along with the story," she noted. "There are strategies for watching movies and television that should be shared with children, and it is the school's responsibility to do that. After all, the parent may think the school assigned a project and the child should complete it."

What elements comprise a good curriculum against violence?, I asked.

Prothrow-Stith believes the first step in any educative campaign against violence begins with the need to acknowledge the primacy of violence in our society. "We have to realize that violence is the norm," she said sadly, "and that

children admire violence. We actively promote and celebrate violence ourselves. In some ways, children are being socialized very actively to have the opinions about violence that they hold.”

Acknowledging that violence dominates our society, she believes, sets the right tone for violence reduction programs. “We don’t want to make children defensive; it is very helpful to have them understand that people make money from guns and from movies. Nobody worries about the consequences; nobody is liable for the consequences except an individual—but the individual doesn’t make money from the products.”

Recognizing that anger and conflict are normal human responses to stress is another key educative component, she maintains. “No one is perfect. Conflict and anger can be energizing; they can provide an opportunity for growth and creativity. Most of us, as adults, have learned to use our anger creatively to solve the problem. We also need to focus not just on the kids who fight, but on the whole—the kids who create the fights, who instigate the fights, who pass the rumors, who run to see the fights. If we look at adolescent development and sociocultural issues, a lot of these fights represent peer pressure that accumulates over time. They are carefully choreographed. Often it is more important to deal with the whole class, not just those who have been labeled as fighters.”

How has she seen youth respond, I asked, when violence reduction is taught actively to them in the school setting?

In her response, Prothrow-Stith points to the youngsters who are the most fearful as the ones who benefit most obviously from a violence prevention curriculum. “They are the most receptive,” she emphasized. “Often it is the suburban, middle-class kids who are callous and playful with violence. Some of my colleagues, who have a very analytical approach and don’t feel pressure for things to change, believe that nothing will work.

“The people closest to violence—those who live with it daily—are often the most receptive. They know who is authentic and who is not. Kids know if you are talking from your experience. As another starting place, teachers of violence prevention programs need to deal with their own issues of anger and violence. How do they feel about violence? At what point would anger push them to violence?”

This is especially important, she emphasizes, because the classroom can be a setting in which students challenge the teacher, pushing for limits. “They will ask: ‘What if I hit you? What if this or that happened? What if somebody did this to your daughter; what would you do?’

“As a teacher, you must be prepared to respond, not in a trite way, but in an authentic way that means you must know yourself and your own reactions and attitudes toward anger and violence.”

Such awareness of one’s own tolerance of stressors suggests teachers need considerable inservice of their own before embarking on delivery of a

violence prevention program, I said. Is this indeed the case?

“It does require significant thought and energy,” Prothrow-Stith responded. “In the curriculum I developed, for instance, there is a way to do the training in a short period of time. However, some teachers are better prepared and better equipped to go ahead with it than others, depending on their level of interaction and how much they challenge themselves on issues.”

Violence prevention should not be something special tacked on to teachers’ already crowded work lives, she believes, but instead should be an integral part of a school’s educative mission. Particularly in high schools, where teachers frequently are locked into teaching only their content area, attention to issues surrounding conflict resolution, the management of anger, and violence prevention is especially appropriate. “Kids in high school are at the peak of their adolescent development,” she explained, “and it is very helpful for them to learn to understand their own behavior.”

Examples of an Anti-Violence Curriculum

In the past 25 to 30 years, I said, it appears that we, as a society, have slid into a terrible state—into an antisocial situation where we glorify and profit from violence, where human life has lost much of its meaning, where the loss of life seems inconsequential, where people are numbed by news reports of yet another murder or incident of domestic violence. If this continues unchecked, I asked, where does she see us twenty years from now?

“We will be in something very close to the Wild West,” Prothrow-Stith said ruefully, “where everybody carries a gun, there are regular shootouts on the street, and killing is the way of solving conflict. In my worst fears, that is something I can envision. We already have lost a certain amount of safety, which is visible when we look at our homicide rates compared to other industrialized countries. Many people feel they must be armed to go out. Ultimately, of course, this attitude contributes to the problem.

“One student in an alternative school said to me: ‘What is the big deal? I have a gun. You have a gun. We have a beef. We have a shootout.’

“What else has he experienced?” she asked. “How else has anyone taught him to handle conflict? That is what all the superheroes do on TV. They don’t stop to try to solve a conflict. Some of the movies that are marketed directly to children, like *Kindergarten Cop*, show people shooting others in the bathroom at school. If we look at this, we realize our children are sent down a path that says they have no other way to solve problems other than through violent reactions.”

Since she is a physician with a background in public health, how did she become interested in violence prevention as an educative mission for schools?, I asked.

"I started looking at violence as a public health problem, so naturally health education came to mind," she replied. "Health education is one of the major strategies within public health. Using the same strategies that have been used to prevent smoking or drunk driving to prevent violence was an irresistible challenge."

Providing information on a consistent basis to children, Prothrow-Stith insists, is the best way to ensure that the future will improve. "We hope that the information we provide becomes part of children's standard knowledge base and is incorporated into their day-to-day activities, their attitudes, and their behavior."

Admitting that children are a "captive audience" in schools, she asked: "Why do you rob a bank? Because the money is there. Why do we think about health education in the schools? Because that is where the kids are. Obviously all kids aren't in school, and that suggests the need for an additional set of strategies. But health education in the classroom is a mainstay of public health."

Prothrow-Stith believes a successful violence prevention program moves in carefully coordinated stages. The curriculum she has developed is divided into ten sessions, offered for forty-five minutes to an hour, depending on the length of the class period.

"The first three sessions set the stage for our work. We talk about violence in America compared with other countries. We talk about friend and family violence, and, in particular, we hone in on violence being a learned behavior that is preventable."

The second stage of the curriculum deals specifically with anger, opening the discussion to questions such as: What makes you angry? What are ways in which you can handle anger in a nonviolent way? "We culminate," Prothrow-Stith explained, "with a cost-benefit analysis of fighting. After listing causes of anger and solutions to anger, the discussion centers around healthy and unhealthy reactions to it, including specific targeting of fighting." At that point, Prothrow-Stith hopes students are primed to prevent fighting.

Finally, the last section of the curriculum engages students in role playing and distinct strategies for handling anger, for preventing violence, and for resolving conflict productively. "If teachers wished to add to the curriculum," she observed, "they could provide additional sessions on conflict resolution, anger management, and issues of dating violence or family violence."

As with many other educative efforts, she believes it is important to target young children—but she also maintains adolescents must not be neglected, since part of their development and peer socialization encourages unhealthy reactions to violence.

"Although it is important to offer this early, we should offer it throughout the educational experience," she said. "Actually, it is something we could teach to parents, or to future parents, so that they could have some sense of child

development, of handling anger and emotions within the context of a family.”

Adolescents are especially susceptible to violence, and Prothrow-Stith is deeply concerned about their vulnerability. “Some reasons for their vulnerability have to do with peer pressure, with adolescent narcissism, with self-consciousness, and with a certain amount of risk-taking. Even if we have taught good anger management and excellent conflict resolution skills to youngsters, during the adolescent years we have to do something extra.”

Part of the “something extra,” she told me, has to do with redefining the popular image of the American hero, which has edged closer and closer over the years to one of an anti-social, semi-psychotic figure who acts violently without remorse, conscience, or guilt. “We need to change the peer pressure so that the pressure is not to fight, but to solve the problem without fighting. If we could adjust the social norm among teenagers to one where fighting is considered stupid, then we have made progress.”

In order to successfully implement a violence prevention curriculum, what conditions in the school must be present?, I asked.

“Teachers must be interested in teaching these skills,” she noted, “and they must have the full support of the administration. They also need dedicated training time and some support as they implement it, so that they aren’t helpless when questions come up. In general, the teachers who are the most successful teaching these skills are those who are committed not just to helping their students but to helping this society deal with the issue of violence.”