



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Changing Children's Trajectories of Development

## Two-Year Evidence for the Effectiveness of a School-Based Approach to Violence Prevention

by: J. Lawrence Aber, Sara Pedersen, Joshua L. Brown, Stephanie M. Jones, and Elizabeth T. Gershoff

### Introduction

Awareness of youth violence has increased in recent years, resulting in more interest in programs that can prevent violent and aggressive behavior. Although overall rates of violence among young people have declined since the mid-1990s, rates of some forms of youth aggression, violence, and crime remain high. National data reveal that, each year, about 15 percent of high school students are involved in a physical fight at school and 8 percent are threatened or injured with a weapon.<sup>1</sup> Urban youth are at particular risk for exposure to violence and victimization.<sup>2</sup>

This report describes one of the largest and longest running school-based violence prevention programs in the country—the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP)—and discusses the results of a rigorous evaluation conducted by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. The evaluation provides concrete evidence that early, school-based prevention initiatives such as the RCCP can work and should be included in communities' efforts to prevent violence among children and youth.

### Program Overview

The RCCP is a school-based, primary prevention program that begins in kindergarten and extends through the 12th grade. The program is designed to help children learn to deal with conflict and get along better with their peers. It is more likely that children who learn these lessons at a young age will use them throughout their lives. The RCCP helps develop the following skills:

- Active listening
- Expressing feelings and dealing with anger
- Assertiveness
- Collaborative problem solving (including negotiation and mediation)
- Appreciating diversity
- Countering discrimination

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The RCCP is taught by teachers who receive both initial training and follow-up classroom coaching by a staff developer. The program also includes training of student-based peer mediation groups and school administrators as well as continued outreach to parents.

Founded in 1985 as a collaboration between a community-based not-for-profit organization, Educators for Social Responsibility Metropolitan Area (ESR Metro), and the New York City Board of Education, the RCCP has trained and coached some 6,000 teachers who have provided instruction to more than 200,000 children in New York City. The RCCP has been replicated in 15 other school districts around the country.<sup>3</sup>

## **Evaluation Overview**

Certain types of behaviors or ways that children interpret situations can indicate that they are headed on a pathway toward aggression and violence. Beliefs and fantasies about violence, how children interpret the motivations of others (e.g., when someone bumps into them), and how they solve problems are some of the signs. This evaluation assessed the growth or decline in these ideas and behaviors for children in grades 1–6.

The two-year evaluation included approximately 11,000 children from 15 New York City elementary schools. Both the students and the schools were representative of the public education system in New York City, with approximately one-third Latino, one-third African-American, and one-sixth white.

## **The Findings**

Factors that lead to aggression increase during middle childhood.<sup>4</sup> The results of this evaluation show that the RCCP can significantly reduce the rate at which these risky beliefs and behaviors increase.<sup>5</sup> Children exposed to more RCCP lessons said they were less likely to view other's behavior as hostile and directed towards them and that they were less likely to use violence to solve problems. Teachers reported consistently better behavior among children exposed to more RCCP lessons. In addition, analyses of children's mathematics achievement records obtained from the New York City Board of Education revealed that children who had more RCCP lessons did better in math.<sup>6</sup>

The results of the NCCP evaluation show that, when implemented well, the RCCP and programs like it can set children on more positive developmental trajectories, slowing the rate of increase in aggressive social-cognitive processes and behaviors that lead to violence and enhancing children's classroom learning. Critical to educational policymakers, these effects are gained at a relatively low cost and are not purchased at the expense of academic achievement. On the contrary, high quality implementation of the RCCP appears to lead to more rapid increases in children's academic learning. This may be because teachers have more time to focus on teaching—rather than classroom management—when classroom conflict is low.

## The Evolution of ESR Metro's Work: From RCCP to The 4Rs

ESR Metro has recently developed the 4Rs (Reading, WRiting, Respect, and Resolution), a new program based in part on what was learned through the evaluation of the RCCP. The 4Rs has two goals. First, it aims to develop children's literacy skills. Second, it aims to create classroom environments that support nonviolent problem-solving.<sup>7</sup> The 4Rs fits within the new "balanced literacy" framework now being implemented systemwide by the New York City Department of Education. This program also includes after-school activities for parents and children designed to reinforce the nonviolent conflict resolution lessons learned in school.

## Conclusion

Youth violence is a growing concern for many Americans. Approximately two out of three schools now use a violence prevention program. It is important that school decisionmakers use programs with proven effectiveness. The results of the evaluation show that the RCCP, a prevention program that targets factors that lead to violence, reduces the precursors of violent and aggressive behavior.

## Contact Information

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## Endnotes

1. Kaufman, P.; Chen, X.; Choy, S. P.; Ruddy, S. A.; Miller, A. K.; Fleury, J. K.; Chandler, K. A.; Rand, M. R.; Klaus, P.; and Planty, M. G. (2000). *Indicators of school crime and safety, 2000*. NCES 2001-017/ NCJ-184176. Washington, DC: NCES.
2. See endnote 1 and Schwab-Stone, M.; Chen, C.; Greenberger, E.; Silver, D.; Lichtman, J.; & Voyce, C. (1999). No safe haven II: The effects of violence exposure on urban youth. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 38(4), pp. 359–367.
3. The sites replicating RCCP are: Anchorage, Alaska; Atlanta, Georgia; Lawrence, New York; New Orleans, Louisiana; Vista Unified Schools and Modesta City Schools, California; Newark, West Orange, and South Orange-Maplewood, New Jersey School Districts; Lincoln County, Oregon; Roosevelt School District, Arizona; and Boston, Massachusetts.
4. Aber, J. L.; Brown, J. L.; & Jones, S. M. (2003). Developmental trajectories toward violence in middle childhood: Course, demographic differences, and response to school-based intervention. *Developmental Psychology*, 39(2), pp. 324–348.
5. These findings have been published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal. See Aber, Brown, & Jones in endnote 4.
6. These findings have not yet been published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal. See Brown, J. L. (2003). *The direct and indirect effects of a school-based social-emotional learning program on trajectories of children's academic achievement*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University.
7. Educators for Social Responsibility Metropolitan Area. (2003). Our year in review. *ESR Action News*, (Jul–Aug).

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