No silver bullets, but a silver lining in youth programs

Originally published in: The Herald-Sun
Monday, February 09, 2009
Edition:
Page: a7
By Kenneth A. Dodge, Guest columnist

Our community leaders have been exploring programs to address problems of school dropout and violence among our youth. Although these difficult economic times might tempt us to dismiss social programs for high-risk youth as discretionary and unaffordable, recent research tells us not only that preventive intervention can be cost-beneficial but also where to place our investment.

Across their lives, chronically violent youths cost American society over two million dollars each, on average, in expenditures for adjudication, incarceration, treatment and victim response. Many of these youths come from our cities, from backgrounds of disadvantage, and from early lives of trauma and abuse.

Right now, our de facto policy toward these young people is to wait until they screw up, and then punish them and ask taxpayers to pay the price of their misbehavior. Instead, we could invest in prevention programs for these youths and reap a high rate of return, but only, of course, if the programs are effective.

Polls show that taxpayers understand the investment concept and are willing to pay for prevention programs, if the programs are effective.

So where should we place our investment dollars? Colleagues and I recently examined the files of over 500 children whom we had followed prospectively from early life through adulthood, in order to identify potential targets for prevention policies and practices. We also reviewed published evaluations of "what works" for high-risk youths. What we found could re-frame how we think about these children and how we go about the public policy task of raising our children to be violence-free.

We found bad news and good news. The bad news is that we were not able to identify a "silver bullet" or single program that could stem the tide of youth violence. In fact, we should understand that we cannot immunize our young children from growing up to be violent with a single pill, or a 10-session classroom curriculum, or even one month of mentoring by a big brother.

The good news, however, is that a comprehensive, coordinated and cumulative effort across childhood can work to steer high-risk youth away from violence and toward high school graduation. By early childhood, we know which children are at risk to end up in prison. But, we found that even the highest-risk children are "malleable" and can be influenced by adults and peers around them. Several target areas for intervention stand out.
First, parents must be supported in the child's first five years of life, to help them develop a warm relationship with their child and apply consistent, non-harsh discipline to shape the child's behavior. Parental support means respite in stressful times, financial relief, and direct instruction in parenting practices. No parent does it alone; it takes a village to help a parent raise a child.

Second, when the child reaches school age, the school must provide academic support, instruction in social competence, and a classroom environment that is orderly, intolerant of aggression, and nurturing of peer acceptance. Our school leaders are well on their way to achieving these goals, and we must support and enhance their efforts.

Third, when chaos hits in early adolescence (as it inevitably does), parents, teachers, and community authorities must work together to supervise every youth's behavior, monitor his or her whereabouts at all times and restrict interaction in gangs and unsupervised groups of deviant peers.

This sounds like a simple recipe, but it is difficult to cook up with programs that work.

The very children who need warmth, consistent discipline, and close monitoring the most are the ones who are the most difficult to engage. The very students who need academic instruction the most are the ones whom we suspend and do not allow to receive instruction at all. And high-risk youths seem to bring it on themselves. They are "maddening" to those around them. They test us, and they tempt us to reject them, morally judge them and give up on them as being depraved, defective or diseased.

The research suggests that a different framing of the challenge is in order. Instead of blaming our children's violent outcomes on their moral weakness or inherent defects, we can understand the task of helping our children to grow up nonviolently as one of education.

We already understand that it takes 12 years of schooling and a community of parents and teachers for a child to become literate. So, too, it takes a lifetime and a unified support system of parents, schools, and community to become socially literate and competent. When one of our children grows up to become violent, we have all failed.

The good news is that if we can cook up the recipe, the tasting will be worth the time and the investment will reap economic and social benefits.

Kenneth A. Dodge is William McDougall Professor of Public Policy Studies, professor of psychology and director of the Center for Child and Family Policy Studies at Duke University.