

## Supporting High-risk Adolescent Girls in an Alternative Educational Program

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This article reports on research that was conducted as part of the *Girls and Aggression Project* that was led by Dr. Marlene Moretti, Simon Fraser University and involved six university researchers from across Canada and had links to colleagues in the United States and the United Kingdom. This project was generously funded by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research and the Human Early Learning Partnership. In the context of this large undertaking, our research focused on the use of aggression and violence among adolescent females in suburban schools and included an investigation into working with high risk adolescent girls who had previously failed at school, victimized others and have themselves been victimized, had engaged in a variety of risk behaviors including the misuse of substances, and become pregnant while still in their teen years. The findings that we describe here highlight the importance of providing safe, well-staffed, learning-based, supportive environments and services to high-risk adolescent girls and suggest that under such conditions, high-risk girls can become willing and able to set aside their risk-based behaviors and concentrate on learning the knowledge and skills necessary to developing and sustaining healthy relationships and to attaining positive life goals.

### **The Study**

In our 5-year study on the use of aggression and violence among adolescent females in suburban schools we focused on tracking and investigating the nature and incidence of violence and victimization among the females in the participating schools and examined the cultural and social factors correlated to the involvement in aggressive and violent behaviors, including the climate and conditions of the schools that the research participants attended.

### **Participants**

A total of 210 female students enrolled in 4 educational programs (a public middle school, a public high school, an independent school, and an alternative program), in a mid-sized

Canadian city volunteered as participants in the study. The mean age and the number of the participants varied across programs: 17.0 years for the girls in the alternative program, 13.7 years for girls in the public middle school, 14.9 years for girls in the independent school and 15.1 years for girls in the public high school. Nineteen girls in the alternative program, 55 girls in the public middle school, 64 girls in the public high school, and 72 girls in the independent school took part in the study.

### **Data Collection and Findings**

Each participant provided quantitative data on their use of aggression and violence and on their victimization experiences along with information about school climate in their present school through *The Survey of Student Life*, an instrument adapted from Artz and Riecken (1994a&b). Additionally, because the highest levels of victimization and reports of using violence (see Tables 1 and 2) were obtained for the girls in the alternative program, and their responses on school climate contrasted with what we knew about risk for school drop-out, qualitative individual interviews that probed aggression, victimization, and school climate further were conducted with 15 of the 19 participants in the alternative program. Each interview was approximately 1 hour long.

Table 1. Percentage reporting “beating up another kid at least once or twice in the past year”

Alternative Program Females Gr. 9-12 (N=19)	Public Middle School Females Gr. 7-9 (N=55)	Public High School Females Gr. 9-12 (N=64)	Independent School Females Gr. 7-9 (N=72)
36.9%	9.4%	17.7 %	4.5%

Table 2. Past Victimization Experiences

<i>Have you ever been...</i>	Alternative Program (N=19)	Public Middle School (N=55)	Public High School (N=64)	Independent School (N=72)
...attacked on the way to or from school	16.7%	5.7%	9.4%	3.1%
...attacked at school	27.8%	7.5%	6.3%	18.8%
...beaten up by more than one person at a time	33.3%	7.5%	3.1%	9.4%
...physically abused at home	38.9%	7.5%	6.3%	9.1%
...sexually assaulted	38.9%	11.5%	21.9%	1.5%
...talked into sex by your boyfriend or girlfriend against your will	44.4%	1.9%	4.7%	7.6%

The relationship between having been victimized and the use of aggression has been well-established (see Katz, 2004, for an in-depth discussion). Experiencing sexual harassment has been linked to school-based difficulties such as sustaining attention, inhibited classroom participation, getting into trouble at school, and skipping school (AAUW Educational Foundation, 2001). Victimization, in general, has been shown to be related to emotional distress, poor school achievement, low self-confidence, and behavior problems (Paul & Cillessen, 2007). The girls in the alternative program appear to fit the description of “aggressive-victims” – children/youth who have a history of harsh discipline and abuse, are rejected by their peers, and respond more aggressively to being victimized than other children/youth (Schwartz, 2000). As likely aggressive-victims, the girls in the alternative program present an especially high risk for disengaging from school (Graham, Bellmore & Mize, 2006) which is further exacerbated by their having experienced multiple forms of victimization (Holt & Espelage, 2007). Victimization tends to predict an increased dislike for school over time (Card, Isaacs & Hodges, 2007).

Also evident in the literature on girls' use of aggression and violence are links between such behavior and poor school experiences (Artz, 1998; Levene, Madsen & Pepler, ; Serbin, Cooperman, Peters, Lehoux, Stack & Schwartzman, 1998). In their interviews, the girls in the alternative program described their past school experiences as characterized by a lack of belonging, poor relationships with teachers, and feelings of discouragement. Some illustrative examples provided by these girls follow:

*Past school experiences with other students*

I hated elementary school. ...I didn't like how the other girls were treated better than me. Like that's mean. ...The popular, bitchy, prissy girls that get chosen for everything ...I never got to do anything. ...And it was hard being a third daughter and wearing cast-me-downs constantly so you got people making fun of you.

Like at regular schools everybody is so judgmental.

[At most schools] girls don't get along with girls. ...Like it's a competition [for] guys. If you're not dressed to the style, they shun you. ...If you're slower than other students too, you really get judged on that. ...You know, 'Ah ha, you're stupid.'

Even in middle school I was the one walking by myself and spending lunch and recess just looking at the grass and getting picked on.

*Past school experiences with teachers*

Well in other schools there's ...a big group of people that stick together and then there's like the littler groups. ...The snobby people in the school have the biggest group right? ...If anyone else says something... in class, like ask a question then I guess they'd go 'Oh my gosh! Someone said this.' ...But if someone from their group asked the same question it doesn't matter. ...I guess the people in the bigger groups would be more confident ...it wouldn't matter what questions they ask. So the teachers would like them more because they would be, you know, asking questions and stuff like that. Because they're the ones who learn more right?

[If] you weren't participating in class, they [teachers] didn't ask you what was wrong, they just assumed that you were like all the kids and you just didn't want to [learn].

[At other schools] some kids are really like good with the teacher and other students the teacher just kind of looks over you, kind of ignores you.

They [teachers] would be like, 'Okay, you didn't really understand it. Here's C minus. We're moving on to the next thing. They just told you what to do and not that they were there to actually help you to learn to understand it.

She [teacher] used to make fun of me in class, in front of all the other students. She made me feel like a total shit, so I would just hide in the corner and not do anything.

I wasn't as likely to ask [questions]. I felt like I was bothering the teacher. I didn't care enough to ask.

You didn't have any say there. It just seemed that most of the decisions were made and they're finalized in stone.

Given the extensive documentation in the literature of the strong relationship between victimization, the use of aggression and violence and school based difficulties including poor school outcomes, we fully expected that because of their histories of past victimization and negative school experiences, the alternative school participants would stand out among all of our participants as the ones who would report having the greatest current difficulties. This was however not the case.

When we examined all our participants' responses to our survey questions about their perspectives of school climate in their *present* schools by inquiring into the level of cooperation in classrooms, feelings of encouragement and discouragement, and overall school connectedness, the responses of the girls in the alternative program depict a school climate and level of enjoyment of school that contradicts what the research literature on risk for drop-out would lead us to expect from a population of highly victimized and aggressive girls. The tables that follow report frequencies for the various elements that comprise school climate.

Table 3. Classroom Cooperation with other Students

<u>Survey Item</u>	Alternative Program (N=19)	Public Middle School (N=55)	Public High School (N=64)	Independent School (N=72)
Other students care about my feelings	95%	49%	46%	63%
In this school we learn more when we work with others	78%	54%	50%	48%
All the students in this school know each other well	100%	18%	49%	54%
I like to share materials with other students	88%	38%	53%	63%
I can learn important things from other students	94%	62%	60%	75%
I like to help other students learn	88%	57%	70%	58%

Table 4. School Encouragement from Teachers

<u>Survey Item</u>	Alternative Program (N=19)	Public Middle School (N=55)	Public High School (N=64)	Independent School (N=72)
My teachers think it is important to support me	100%	62%	52%	76%
My teachers want me to do my best	100%	74%	74%	81%
The teachers like everyone equally	100%	67%	65%	59%
The teachers care about my feelings	100%	51%	54%	64%

Table 5. Felt School Discouragement

<u>Survey Item</u>	Alternative Program (N=19)	Public Middle School (N=55)	Public High School (N=64)	Independent School (N=72)
When I participate in class I am afraid I will fail	33%	32%	25%	20%
I find it hard to speak my thoughts clearly in this school	11%	43%	31%	27%
I often get discouraged at this school	0%	27%	19%	32%
I have a lot of questions I never get a chance to ask in this school	6%	33%	35%	24%
I am often lonely in this school	0%	24%	12%	30%

Table 6. Felt School Connectedness

<u>Survey Item</u>	Alternative Program (N=19)	Public Middle School (N=55)	Public High School (N=64)	Independent School (N=72)
I am proud to tell others where I go to school	100%	54%	65%	34%
I like going to this school	100%	59%	76%	41%
It would take a lot to want to leave this school	100%	33%	42%	34%
If I had a problem outside of school, I know I could ask someone at school to help me with it	100%	54%	58%	49%
I share a common vision and sense of purpose with others at my school	100%	50%	53%	49%
I feel like I belong here at this school	100%	62%	57%	56%
At this school, I can influence decisions that affect me	95%	46%	62%	50%

The survey items that assessed classroom cooperation, school encouragement, discouragement, and connectedness show that the high-risk females in the alternative program



experienced higher levels of all elements of positive school climate than did the females in the other educational programs. The females in the alternative program reported the highest level of classroom cooperation, were unanimous in feeling strongly encouraged by their teachers, experienced very low levels of discouragement (save for a persistent fear of failure), and also reported the highest level of school connectedness.

In addition to reporting enjoying school, the girls in the alternative program reported holding hope for their futures. All the girls in the alternative program reported that they expected to complete high school and 68% told us they expected to go on to post-secondary education. This stands in contrast to expectations for similar populations in the school district within which their program is situated. Graduation rates in the district for 2005-2006 were only 76% for females and 20% for students with behavioral disabilities (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2006). These survey results piqued our interest in learning more about the alternative program. The individual interviews provided us with an opportunity to probe for detailed descriptions of the girls' experiences in the alternative program.

In their interviews, the girls in the alternative program spoke about feeling supported in the development of healthy interpersonal relationships, enjoying caring relationships with staff and teachers, experiencing a cooperative atmosphere, and feeling a strong sense of belonging and connectedness to school.

*Supporting the development of healthy interpersonal relationships*

We do conflict resolution. So you get what you want to say, they'll get what they have to say, and then come to a middle ground together. It always works. That's why we get along so well in this school.

If we have a problem with somebody, then we can tell them to their face and then we don't ever get angry with each other for being honest. I think it all begins with X [this program], so we all kind of learn how to be like that with each other. ... They have a way of making you feel like you can really support yourself. Like I found when I wasn't here,

I was doing what other people wanted me to do and feeling like I had to kind of put on a mask so I could hide my true self so people wouldn't judge me. When I came here I felt so welcome. And like we have different groups and stuff, like self-esteem groups, and it really helped me to explore my own mind, my own soul.

[Counselling] was through here ...being able to talk to someone whether it was like going out with my friends or dealing with an issue at home or something like that. It was just like someone who didn't really take sides, like listened.

I was so like shitty and never happy and stuff and I'd be just like fighting all the time in my life. ...I treated people badly yeah. They treat me badly too so it goes both ways. ...My life has totally changed in the past month. ...What really helped me was this school. ...They just helped me to get through stuff and give me advice on how I can go about it and tell me like, what I need to take care of myself.

This is a school where I feel safe. I've never had this kind of help anywhere else that I've gone to.

### *Caring relationships with staff and teachers*

This school is like a home, like a special environment, and I can't describe it, it's just a good place. Like in other schools it's like we're the students and they're the teachers. Like here, the teachers are our friends.

In [my old school] the teachers just want to get paid; here they actually want to get to know you and help you.

At first I wasn't really willing [to participate] because I thought it was the same old shit ...I kind of came in here with my guards up, and then after a while, I just loved to participate. ...The teachers talk to you and know more about what's going on in your life and they have more of an understanding and they just genuinely care, pretty much. ...If I'm off for a day, someone will ask, "Oh, you weren't here yesterday. What's wrong?"

We sit in the same room but we all go at our own pace. ...It's what you want to do when you want to do it kind of thing. But they still have that structure you know like A [teacher] will sit there and be like, "Come on, I know you can do this. You've just got to get yourself going," and she's good about getting people to work.

### *Cooperative atmosphere*

We have a lot of say in how things are done. It's comforting that they care what we think.

We have a lot of say here, 'cause it's smaller, so you get your words out faster. It's a tight-knit community.

We can decide on a lot. ...they have a suggestion box or you just put up your hand, "Oh, I think this," and they'll write it down on the board and if everyone agrees [it gets done].

Here there's lot of different choices and if some of them aren't working for you, you can always tell them. You know they'll get looked at, at least.

You come here and it's like some people are behind you, right where you are, and some people are ahead of you, and they all like help out. They don't laugh at you for not knowing something. ...It helps you open up. ...I wish more schools were like this. I wouldn't be able to go back to a regular school. I tried and I couldn't.

I love it here, so cozy and I know all the girls and I know they don't have a problem with me and they make me feel involved. From day one, they were like "Oh yeah, ...we'll help you." I like working as a group because you all learn from each other, like especially their opinions. I can't work alone because I have a learning disability. I can't be in normal classrooms, I can't learn. So it's really one-on-one assistance and even some of the girls do that ...they come over and teach me.

### *Belonging and connectedness*

We all know each other so well. I think that helps a lot. And we all feel very comfortable talking to each other about everything. ...They know they're not judged. ...This school is the best program I've ever heard of.

I think the kids here understand ...the value of this school. Like everybody in this school wants to stay here.

This is my third year, it's my last year. I don't know how I'm going to deal with it. I'm going to cry so bad.

I love this school. ...I don't want to leave this school.

The findings from the interviews and survey suggest that the alternative program has been successful in creating the conditions necessary for school engagement and to protect against drop-out for this population of high-risk adolescent females. The females in the alternative program brought with them histories characterized by both high victimization and use of violence that placed them at high-risk for school disengagement and drop-out. Many of the girls (10 of the 19 who participated) were either pregnant or already parenting young children. The research literature on school drop-outs confirms that students gradually disengage in school

before dropping out and dropping out is usually preceded by poor academic performance, and low feelings of competence and acceptance by teachers and peers, and, for females, often involves getting pregnant and becoming a teen mother (Lan & Lanthier, 2003). Students who feel a sense of belonging at school are less likely to exhibit problem behaviors (Resnick, Bearman, et al., 1997) and schools in which teacher-student interactions are respectful and caring, and that employ positive, proactive disciplinary methods rather than punitive, exclusionary measures (e.g., zero-tolerance policies and school suspension or expulsion), tend to have lower school drop-out rates (Christle, Nelson & Jolivette, 2004).

### **Implications for Practice**

The results from our research point to the importance of making available supportive alternative educational options for high-risk girls. Opportunities for education, achievement, personal growth, and connectedness to a community are protective factors against girls' aggressive and violent behavior (Artz & Nicholson, 2002). Given the picture painted of their past school experiences, it is easy to believe that were it not for the integration of life skills along with academics in the alternative program, these high-risk girls might not be attending school. A solid connection to school has been cited as the most powerful predictor of adolescent well-being (Resnick, Bearman, et al., 1997).

Further, in addition to continuing their academic work, the girls in the alternative program also benefited from learning about how to develop and sustain healthy interpersonal relationships so they do not perpetuate the violence that characterizes their highly-victimized pasts. The interpersonal skills gained in the alternative program might assist this population of girls to avoid abusive relationships later in life. In addition to improving their quality of life, helping young women avoid relationship violence also reduces the likelihood of their

experiencing homelessness in their future (Caldwell, Artz & Kasting, 2006). Future research that follows the high-risk girls who attended the alternative program would help to determine the long-term benefits of their experiences in the program.

Our research indicates that efforts to build a supportive school climate must include the creation of a cooperative milieu and ensure that students feel encouraged and connected at school. A considerable research literature states that the development of a sense of school belonging depends upon a cooperative school environment (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Natvig, Albrektsen, & Qvarnström, 2003; Schaps, 2002). Other research attests to the importance of taking students' concerns seriously, providing them with opportunities to experience competence, respecting them as individuals, and ensuring that they have a voice in decision-making (Baker & Bridger, 1997; Fallis & Opatow, 2003).

We should not underestimate the power that school context has to influence the interpretations that inform students' decisions to use aggression and violence (Powell, 2003). When aggression is viewed as an interactive social issue rather than a problem that exists within individuals (Whitmer, 1997), it becomes possible to envision how social contexts can inform the sense-making that goes into determining social behavior. Encouraging prosocial over aggressive behavior largely depends on a school's ability to create a climate wherein even youth with highly-victimized pasts can feel safe, supported and able to participate in learning. Programs like the integrated alternative program described in this article should serve as exemplary models for alternative education that responds to the needs of high-risk adolescent girls.

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