

INTRODUCTION TO AGGRESSORS, VICTIMS, AND BYSTANDERS: THINKING AND ACTING TO PREVENT VIOLENCE

Violence is one of the most common, socially transmittable, and personally destructive problems we face. As violence in America rises to staggering levels, its effects reach younger children and youth in more and more communities.

In response to this problem, all of society's institutions have begun to contribute to a national initiative to prevent violence. The field of education has joined public health, criminal justice, and behavioral science in prevention efforts that are based on the understanding that most violence is not random or uncontrollable but predictable and preventable.

Violence does not simply appear mysteriously and full blown in an adolescent. Rather, violence is learned; therefore, it can be unlearned or conditions can be changed so that it is not learned in the first place. Thus, a key to preventing violence lies in building children's internal resources to protect them against violence.

In 2001, more than 2,000 adolescents were violently killed, and many more suffered from debilitating injury, loss of a loved one, fear, and intimidation. Violent death for adolescents follows a distinct pattern. Most violence involves an aggressor and a victim who know each other, often quite well. Moreover, violent encounters among peers frequently involve third-party participants (bystanders) because violence often occurs in the public places—in school, in parks, and on the streets. Bystanders sometimes instigate, encourage, or passively accept violence; sometimes they become aggressors or victims.

The roles of aggressor, victim, and bystander may fluctuate as conflict escalates toward violence. The participants often shift from one role to another until a gun is fired. Then, and forever after, the one holding the gun is cast in the role of the aggressor, the one on the ground is the victim, and the one who has been observing the violent encounter is the bystander who has contributed to violence. Although some children play all of these roles depending on the situation, more often children tend to play one role consistently: aggressor, victim, or bystander. The habitual patterns of thought and behavior that characterize each of these roles are built throughout childhood. Early intervention can be effective in altering patterns of aggression; if left unchallenged, the patterns are likely to lead toward increasing violence.

Aggressors, Victims, and Bystanders deals specifically with the issues of violence among peers and the different roles youth play in potentially violent situations. The goals and lessons of the module reflect THTM's essential themes of protecting ourselves and others, responsibility, and interdependence. The major assumptions of this module are that

- fighting is not a viable way to resolve problems or conflict
- adolescents can learn skills to solve problems in nonviolent ways
- these new skills will enable students to stay safe while maintaining self-respect and the respect of others

The module encourages young people to examine their roles as aggressors, victims, and bystanders and helps students develop problem-solving skills and new ways of thinking about how they respond to conflict in each of these roles. The backbone of *Aggressors, Victims, and Bystanders* is the four-step Think-First Model of Conflict Resolution. The Think-First Model provides students with a framework for dealing with and changing the habits of thought that can result in violence. These habits of thought include

- *how* one thinks, as indicated by one's skills in solving social problems
- *what* one thinks, as indicated by one's beliefs supporting the use of violence
- one's *style* of thinking in conflict situations, a hot-headed style of making impulsive, incomplete, and erroneous responses or a cool-headed style of making reflective, thorough, and accurate responses

The model helps students pause and keep cool, to understand what is going on before jumping to conclusions, to understand other perspectives, to define their problems and goals in ways that will not lead to fights, and to generate and act on solutions that have positive outcomes for themselves and others.

Most violence prevention strategies and curricula have focused on the aggressor. What makes *Aggressors, Victims, and Bystanders* different is that it also considers the separate but interrelated roles of victims and bystanders and suggests that all three players can build skills to resolve problems nonviolently.

Aggressors, Victims, and Bystanders was developed by combining findings and strategies from the disciplines of public health, behavioral science, and education. Public health professionals view violent acts much as they view diseases that can be prevented by controlling their causes. Behavioral scientists see violence as forms of aggressive human behavior that can be measured, understood, and changed. And educators recognize that the ability to prevent and avoid violence can, to some degree, be influenced in the classroom setting.

Aggressors, Victims, and Bystanders is based on behavioral science research findings that explain what needs to be taught to avoid violence and how to teach it most effectively. We know from our research that behavior leading to violence is guided strongly, and sometimes almost automatically, by an individual's habits of thought. Each individual develops habitual ways of thinking about how to solve social problems and what role violent or nonviolent actions might play.

An aggressive youth will commonly show a tendency to act impulsively, hold beliefs that support the use of violence, and lack skills in solving social problems in thorough and effective ways. We also know that aggressive youth carefully and repeatedly select certain individuals as victims. Youth who are repeatedly victimized also may develop habits of thought that put them at risk for violence. And the majority of youth—who are neither aggressors nor victims—play an important bystander role that often influences whether violence will occur. Some bystanders support violence through their passive acceptance or active encouragement, while others help to prevent violence through their withdrawal of support or preventive action.

Clearly, violent behavior has its roots in early childhood and springs from many sources and experiences. Teachers alone cannot be expected to shoulder the entire burden of preventing their students from becoming involved in violence. Classroom time accounts for only a small portion of students' lives. Nevertheless, teachers can make an important and lasting difference to many students by helping them to develop their own resources for solving social problems in effective and nonviolent ways. Many students have never been taught strategies for thinking and acting in ways that prevent violence. The middle school years represent a pivotal age for developing the habits of thought that will carry the preadolescent child into adolescence and young adulthood. Significant evidence exists to show that an individual's risk for violence can be changed through classroom intervention.

Aggressors, Victims, and Bystanders was developed to meet the needs of urban middle school students in communities that put them at high risk for involvement with violence. Thus, many of the lessons contain features that are particularly addressed to those students at high risk to become aggressors, victims, or bystanders. Similarly, many of the lessons ask the teacher to draw upon the strengths of students who have already mastered many of the skills needed to solve social problems effectively and nonviolently.

Aggressors, Victims, and Bystanders is organized in the following manner:

- In Sessions 1 and 2 students explore conflict as a normal part of life and examine how their choices and actions can prevent conflicts from escalating into fights.

- Session 3 deals with certain attitudes and beliefs about conflict and violence, how those beliefs become habits of thought, and how those habits of thought affect the way individuals deal with conflict.
- Session 4 introduces the Think-First Model of Conflict Resolution, a four-step model designed to help students to be aware of their habits of thought and to resolve their conflicts constructively. The steps of the model include (1) keeping cool, (2) sizing up the situation, (3) thinking it through, and (4) doing the right thing.
- In Session 5 students practice the first step of the Think-First Model—keeping cool—by exploring ways to stay calm and think clearly during heated conflict.
- In Sessions 6 and 7 students practice the second step of the Think-First Model—sizing up the situation—by examining ways to get the information they need before making a judgment during conflict, addressing and presenting different points of view, and defining problems in ways that relieve conflict.
- In Sessions 8 and 9 students address the third step of the Think-First Model—thinking it through—by practicing goal setting and generating creative and constructive ways to meet those goals in the long run and in the short run.
- Session 10 deals with the fourth step in the Think-First Model—doing the right thing. Students practice choosing options during conflict that have the best overall outcome for themselves and others, acting on their choices, and evaluating the consequences of their actions.
- In Session 11 students examine how language, both physical and verbal, can be an important tool in alleviating conflict and preventing fights.
- Finally, Session 12 includes an assessment of student learning. The last half of this session is devoted to students and allows them to formulate and act on their visions of a nonviolent world.

Because student experiences differ, we encourage you to tailor the sessions to meet the needs of your students. Explore with your students how conflict and violence prevention is expressed in the community as well as their feelings about the impact of violence in the community. You may choose to have students carry out community-based projects or you may work with students to identify local violence prevention resources and community services, as suggested in this module. Also consider modifying the examples and scenarios we provide or writing new ones to capture the reality of your students' lives.

You will notice that many lessons include additional activities that can supplement the core material. These activities are artistic and creative, designed to encourage alternative forms of expression regarding violence. If time allows or if you are able to make time, we encourage you to try some of these activities.

The problems of violence are deep-seated and complex. They involve attitudinal, behavioral, socioeconomic, environmental, and legal factors. Prevention requires action at individual and societal levels through strategies involving technology (e.g., safety clips on guns), regulation (e.g., curfews or gun control), and public education (e.g., school curricula, community media campaigns). This module encourages students to take action, especially as bystanders to violence, to enable all of us to lead safer, longer, and more constructive lives.

GOALS OF THE MODULE

The aim of *Aggressors, Victims, and Bystanders* is to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills that will enable them to successfully resolve their conflicts without resorting to violence. Specific goals of the module are

- To alert students to the fact that their choices and actions can alleviate conflicts and prevent fights.
- To help students see how they can participate in conflict resolution as aggressors, victims, and bystanders.
- To provide students with the skills to challenge habits of thought that support violence.
- To sensitize students to the many factors that influence their attitudes and beliefs toward violence.
- To equip students with the skills to think first and resolve conflicts peacefully.
- To encourage students to see that, with additional information, they can avoid making snap judgments that lead to conflict.
- To enable students to practice their conflict resolution skills.