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CURRICULUM CAN HELP CURB TEEN VIOLENCE

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Teen-agers' violent attitudes and behaviors can be changed by teaching empathy and the consequences of aggression, a new study reports.

The one-year study, released today by the Center for Communication and Social Policy at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), examined the effects of the "Choices and Consequences" curriculum, created by the Court TV television network for use in middle schools.

The study found that the curriculum decreased adolescents' verbal aggression and curbed their physical aggression.

Exposure to the curriculum also increased adolescents' empathic skills and increased their knowledge of the legal system.

" 'Choices and Consequences' has been shown to be highly effective at achieving short-term changes in adolescents' aggression in a relatively brief intervention time period of just three weeks," said Barbara Wilson, study co-author and professor of communication at UCSB.

The study divided 21 classrooms of seventh- and eighth-grade students from three California middle schools into experimental and control groups.

Seven teachers presented the curriculum to their students in regular social studies classes.

The 513 young adolescent students participating in the study came from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds.

In a pretest conducted prior to administering the curriculum, students in both the experimental and control groups scored relatively the same on measures of verbal and physical aggression, empathy, and legal knowledge.

After half the students received the curriculum, the verbal and physical aggression scores were 4 percent lower in the group that received the curriculum than those in the control group.

Empathy scores were 8 percent higher in the curriculum group and legal term knowledge was 10 percent higher.

The study's findings add to a growing body of research that suggests a relationship between empathy and aggression. The researchers found that exposure to the "Choices and Consequences" curriculum caused an increase in empathy which, in turn, led to beneficial changes in attitudes toward verbal and physical aggression.

"Helping adolescents appreciate emotional states experienced by victims of violence and their families reduced their antisocial tendencies," said Daniel Linz, another study co-author and chair of the Law and Society Program at UCSB.

The curriculum features the use of videotapes showing real teen-agers appearing in court in trouble with the law, emphasizing the serious and lifelong consequences of violent and other antisocial behavior for its perpetrators and victims.

Participating teachers reported that one of the reasons they found the curriculum particularly useful is that their students were fascinated by the videotapes and became emotionally involved in the subject matter as a result.

"The fact that the videos used real-life court cases involving teen-agers made the curriculum relevant to the students," said Deborah Lofton, a teacher at Blackstock Junior High School in Oxnard, who was one of seven teachers who administered the curriculum in their classrooms for the study.

"Knowing that the people involved were currently living out the consequences of their actions helped the students connect with the life-lessons in the curriculum."

The results of the study have important national implications for the prevention of youth violence, including extreme cases exemplified by the recent shootings at American high schools and middle schools, the researchers conclude.

"We know that many influences contribute to the prevalence of violence among adolescents," said Joel Federman, study co-author and co-director of the Center for Communication and Social Policy at UCSB.

"This study shows that educational efforts can have the opposite effect, reducing aggression among teens.

If this type of curriculum were to be disseminated nationally, it could make an important contribution to the prevention of violence in this vulnerable age group."

"Choices and Consequences" is a multifaceted, multi-year initiative that educates young adolescents about the real consequences of violent behavior and about the importance of making healthy choices in their everyday lives. It was developed by Court TV, in conjunction with Cable in the Classroom, the National Middle School Association, AT&T BIS, Time/Warner Cable, and other leading cable companies.

The campaign includes interactive classroom curriculum and corresponding videotapes of real life teen trials, resource guides for parents, teachers, and students, a Web site, and televised community-based teen forums.

"Choices and Consequences" was developed as a direct response to the National Television Violence Study, which was conducted by UCSB, in conjunction with the Universities of North Carolina, Texas and Wisconsin.

The study found that violence on television often glamorizes the perpetrators of aggression and seldom depicts the harmful consequences of violent action.

Responding to this study, Court TV designed the "Choices and Consequences" curriculum to educate young adolescents to think before they act since choices made in an instant can have consequences for a lifetime.

The "Choices and Consequences" curriculum was created for middle school students by former National Middle School Association President Ross Burkhardt and

University of Maine Education Professor Ed Brazee.

Young adolescence is the target of the curriculum because this age group, more than any other, is poised to make choices and decisions that can have lifelong consequences.

Court TV commissioned UCSB's Center for Communication and Social Policy to evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum component of the "Choices and Consequences" initiative in June 1998.

The report on "Choices and Consequences" is available on the Center for Communication and Social Policy website, <http://education.ucsb.edu/csbyd/>.

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