

Zero tolerance policies can work against cohesion in schools

February 11 2009

(PhysOrg.com) -- Students who feel connected to their peers and teachers are more inclined to alert a teacher or principal if they hear a fellow student "wants to do something dangerous," according to a new study published by the American Psychological Association.

But those students who don't feel connected are less likely to act. Researchers from The Pennsylvania State University and Missouri State University looked into why some students adopt a "code of silence" when faced with a fellow student's dangerous intentions. Their findings appear in the February Journal of Educational Psychology, published by APA.

The researchers presented a hypothetical scenario of a peer's plan "to do something dangerous" to 1,740 middle and high school students from 13 schools. The students were asked if they would (1) intervene directly, (2) tell a teacher or principal, (3) talk it over with a friend but not tell an adult, or (4) do nothing.

High school students (964) were less likely than middle school students (776) to talk directly to the peer planning to do something dangerous or tell a teacher or principal, said lead author Amy K. Syvertsen, MEd. "High schools are generally larger than middle schools and provide less opportunity for teachers and students to interact, which is the foundation for building trust, caring and community between the two."

Most students who said they would take action favored directly

approaching the peer rather than telling an adult. "This may be a reflection of where many of these students are developmentally. They want to assert their autonomy, make decisions and handle the situation on their own," said the authors.

Students who generally felt a sense of pride in their school and concern for others were more likely to say they would act rather than ignore the situation. For all students, Syvertsen said, knowing they could voice their opinions and be heard by a school official along with their sense of belonging - how they and their friends fit into the school culture - best predicted whether they would confront the peer themselves or tell an adult.

Fear of getting into trouble makes students less willing to go to a teacher or principal with their concerns about a peer's potentially dangerous plan and more likely to ignore the situation, said the authors. Yet those students who said they would speak directly to the peer said they didn't believe they would get into trouble.

Certain school policies, such as zero tolerance, may create an atmosphere that prevents students from confiding in a teacher or school administrator because of the perceived repercussions, said Syvertsen. "Blanket policies that are often not clearly explained to teachers or students can create an atmosphere in which rules get in the way of relationships between students and teachers, to the detriment of keeping the schools safe," said the authors.

"Fostering a caring school climate where students and teachers look out for each other to keep one another safe can't be taught in a single lesson or by using deterrents, like metal detectors or harsh policies," Syvertsen added. "It is built on daily interactions between the teachers and students."

Although the nature of the dangerous school event used in the study was hypothetical, the results of this study provide some sense of students' willingness to act should a similar situation arise.

Article: "Code of Silence: Students' Perceptions of School Climate and Willingness to Intervene in a Peer's Dangerous Plan," Amy K. Syvertsen, MEd, and Constance A. Flanagan, PhD, The Pennsylvania State University; Michael D. Stout, PhD, Missouri State University; *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 101, No.1.

Source: American Psychological Association

Citation: Zero tolerance policies can work against cohesion in schools (2009, February 11)
retrieved 27 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-02-tolerance-policies-cohesion-schools.html>

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