

Title:

Breaking The Cycle of Violence Among Youth Living in Metropolitan Atlanta: A Case History of Kids Alive and Loved

Source:

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Conclusion:

Research literature shows that residents of central cities have the highest probability of experiencing violent crime, and that firearm-related mortality accounts for almost half of all deaths among African American teens. Kids Alive and Loved (KAL), an innovative community-based intervention program was founded by Bernadette Liette, the mother of a murdered teenager. Ms. Liette, determined to break the cycle of violence among youth in metropolitan Atlanta, feels that survivors of violence have a deep desire to prevent both the loss of life and the pain that families and friends experience after that death. If these survivors offer support to youth who are grieving the violent death of friends and/or family members, it would begin to break the cycle of violence that is so rampant in America's cities. Ms Liette explains, "Some violence prevention programs focus on taking back the streets. We believe that if we take back our kids, the streets will take care of themselves."

This "taking back our kids" involves developing support groups where youth are encouraged to share their memories, and thus begin to work through the grief and anger. Preliminary evaluation of the programs effectiveness appears to demonstrate that such groups can be effective in breaking the cycle of violence.

Purpose:

Kids Alive and Loved (KAL) is based on the concept that children exposed to violence experience post-traumatic stress (PTS). PTS, a normal response to a traumatic event, might impact a person's ability to concentrate, process information, and control impulses. If symptoms persist, the person is considered to be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The consequences of PTSD on urban youth are only recently being researched. However, research does provide strong evidence to support the assumption that being the victim of violence and/or witnessing violence is a significant predictor of youth becoming future perpetrators or victims of violence. Without intervention, exposure to violence can lead to youth experiencing grief, anger, and aggressive, assaultive behavior.

The specific aim of KAL is to provide urban youth with the opportunity to discuss their traumatic experiences in an environment that provides both safety and support. This occurs during weekly 2-3 hour long support groups. These groups are held in a downtown hospital classroom (bus transportation is provided) and are led by trained adults. The process of each

group follows a set format, always opening with a moment of silence “for those who have been murdered” and ends with hugs and food. The groups occasionally invite guest speakers, and often incorporate art therapy into their time together.

#### Findings:

Although KAL has maintained weekly support groups for youth survivors of violence for five years, evaluation of the programs effectiveness is still in the formative stage. Preliminary evidence suggests that group participants display more expression of empathy for others, tolerance toward people who are different, and assume responsibility for maintaining and expanding the KAL support group. It also appears that participation may reduce assaultive behavior, improve school performance, and increase the use of social skills to resolve conflict without violence. (This assumption is based on self reports, parent-teacher reports, written exercises, group discussions, personal interviews, direct observation and video taped recordings of sessions over a three year period which show participants report “relieved stress” in their lives, possess better verbal skills, and are better able to diffuse conflict and prevent fights (a few have even been selected by classmates to be peer mediators).

Youth enter the support group at different stages of their grief. As they learn to label their memories of traumatic experiences, they are able to grieve and thus begin the process of healing. Those youth who have learned to understand their emotions and express their feelings often help others who are mute and withdrawn. Such “natural helpers” are invited to receive training to serve as peer facilitators for the support group. They also provide public presentations, which, in turn, bring more people to the groups.

Group attendance ranges from 10-18 (average 12) with youth ages 4-22. The program’s founder facilitates the group’s activities and invites family members and friends including toddlers and senior citizens, to attend. This cross-generational nature allows youth to demonstrate respect for the elderly, care of children, and tolerance toward others.

#### Implication for Prevention:

The KAL intervention utilizes neighborhood residents, themselves survivors of violence, as resources of support for youth traumatized by violence. KAL support groups focus on the connection between young people suffering unresolved grief, and the accompanying anger that often increases their risk of becoming a perpetrator or victim of violence. Once youth address these issues, they will be better able to learn and practice both conflict resolution and stress management skills.

Although program evaluation is not yet complete, the KAL intervention appears to be a promising strategy for youth violence prevention efforts. The authors feel that this program could compliment school and community-based conflict resolution programs. They also provide a five-step community based plan to help other communities address interpersonal violence.

Summary Provided by:

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