



# Society for Research in Child Development

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## **Adolescents' Values Can Serve as a Buffer Against Behaving Violently at School**

Researchers in Israel have found that teenagers' values helped determine whether or not they engaged in violent behavior at school, especially in schools where violence was common.

The researchers are from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The study is published in the May/June 2008 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

The researchers gave questionnaires to 907 Jewish and Arab teenagers in grades 10 to 12 who attended 33 schools in Israel, where Jewish and Arab children attend two separate public schools systems. The teens answered questions about the importance of 10 different values and about their own violent behavior. Values were defined as goals and ideas the students saw as important and guiding principles in their lives. Violent behavior was defined as actions like hitting and threatening. The prevalence of violence in the schools was estimated by averaging, in each school, adolescents' reports of their own violent behavior, violent behavior by their two best friends, and the violence they had encountered at school.

In both Arab and Jewish schools, adolescents who valued power (trying to attain social status by controlling and dominating others) reported more violent behavior than their peers. Teenagers who valued universalism (promoting understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protecting the welfare of all people and nature) and those who valued conformity (limiting actions and urges that might violate social expectations and norms) reported less violent behavior than their peers. The association of power and universalism with teenagers' behavior was especially strong in schools where children's exposure to violence was relatively common.

According to the researchers, the study's findings highlight the protective role of values, in the same way that personality and family can be protective. In high-risk environments like violent schools, adolescents who place a low value on power and those who place a high value on universalism may be relatively protected against engaging in violent behavior. This could happen, the researchers suggest, because as teenagers become more aware of violence, their values are more likely to guide their behavior.

"It has always been a major goal of developmental research to understand the causes of violence," says Ariel Knafo, assistant professor of psychology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the lead author of the study. "The current study, focusing on a life period considered crucial to the development of values, shows the importance of values considered in the educational context. The results suggest that programs that promote universalistic values at the expense of power values, if properly implemented, may help reduce adolescents' violent behavior."

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 79, Issue 3, *Values as Protective Factors against Violent Behavior in Jewish and Arab High Schools in Israel* by Knafo, A, Daniel, E, and Khoury-Kassabri, M (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem). Copyright 2008 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.