



# Getting it together

the value of  
ALTERNATIVE  
BEHAVIOURS  
to VIOLENCE  
and  
PEER MEDIATION  
programs

*making school happier  
and safer, and helping  
students at risk*



**BROTHERHOOD**  
of St LAURENCE

Prevention of Youth  
Homelessness Project

Schools play a unique role in the lives of young people and their future. They can equip them with the skills and knowledge needed for a job and further study. They can also support them if they are having difficulties with their families. Schools allow students to socialise with their peers in a safe supportive environment and teach them important life skills.

**For some young people, especially those with unstable home lives, school has the potential to be a stable and important focus, and their main area of attachment.**

Teaching students to deal constructively with violence and conflict and helping them to participate in school activities in meaningful ways can make school a much more attractive place to be. This in turn can increase students' attachment to school and reduce the risk of early school leaving and the potential for homelessness.

Programs dealing with violence can also have positive spin-off effects on the home lives of students at risk. Learning how to deal positively with conflict can help students with problems at home and programs involving student participation can improve family relationships.

**Anti-violence, conflict resolution and student participation programs have the potential to reduce the risk of homelessness for young people both at school and at home.**

### **The impact of violence**

Violence has been identified as a significant contributing factor to the weakening of attachments to family, school and community—and thus to youth homelessness.

Our world appears as an increasingly violent place. Films and television programs, news footage, computer

games and even sites on the Internet can transmit the message that violence is a legitimate and inevitable part of human interaction.

Sadly, for some young people, violence isn't confined to the computer or television screen — it is a part of their daily lives. **Despite the best efforts of teachers, these students can experience threats of physical harassment, verbal taunts and violent incidents.**

For some students what is happening at school reflects what is happening at home. The home lives of these students are marred by physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse. A young person living with violence in the family home may also be involved, either as a victim or a perpetrator, in violence at school. Students with poor parental models can 'act out' similar behaviour at school, and thus develop difficult relationships with teachers and other students.

## **Prevention of youth homelessness**

The Prevention of youth homelessness project (PYHP), auspiced by the Brotherhood of St Laurence, ran from 1992 until the end of 1996. Using an action research approach, it aimed to explore ways to prevent youth homelessness in the two Victorian communities of Ballarat and Dandenong.

The project arose from the findings of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry into homeless children. The Inquiry estimated that there were between 20,000 to 25,000 homeless young people in Australia. One of the Inquiry's major findings was the need to do much more to prevent youth homelessness.

The Brotherhood responded to this finding by developing a proposal offering a framework for understanding prevention of youth homelessness. Recent changes in Australian society had affected family and community life and seriously affected the place of young people. A key aspect of the project proposal was to strengthen young people's attachment to school and to family.

The research report arising from this proposal, *Strengthening Attachments*, found that homelessness may be prevented by schools and community agencies intervening early to help young people who are at risk.

The research found that when schools and community agencies combined to provide programs for young people emphasising 'real life' issues and practical skills, young people improved their communication, their conflict resolution skills, and their academic performance. These in turn gave them the necessary skills to deal with problems occurring at home and impacting on their school life.

Two programs were aimed at helping secondary school students deal constructively with conflict in order to increase their attachment to school. These were the Alternative Behaviors to Violence (ABTV) and Peer Mediation programs piloted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence as part of its PYHP Project.

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Gender can play a significant role in shaping how young people respond to violence at home. Young males who witness family violence are likely to show aggressive, disruptive behaviour, including fights with their siblings and schoolmates. In contrast, girls are more likely to become withdrawn and anxious.

The effects of violence can cause low self-esteem, truancy, illness, stress, tiredness and lack of concentration, and can inhibit the educational achievement of young people. Students who suffer abuse at home may have greater difficulty coping with the demands of school, such as the need to complete homework assignments on time. School violence can compound the problems already experienced at home, and may reduce young people's attachment to school. Students who don't perform well in the classroom may suffer from low self-esteem, which in turn can further diminish their attachment to school.

**Research has shown that students with a weak attachment to school run a greater risk of becoming homeless. Young people who be-**

**come homeless after escaping from violent homes are likely to encounter further violence while they are homeless, and also resort to violence themselves as a way of life in order to survive.**

This booklet describes the value of two types of programs: the **Alternative Behaviours to Violence Program (ABTV)** and the **Peer Mediation Program**. Both were carried out at Ballarat Secondary College between 1995 and 1996.

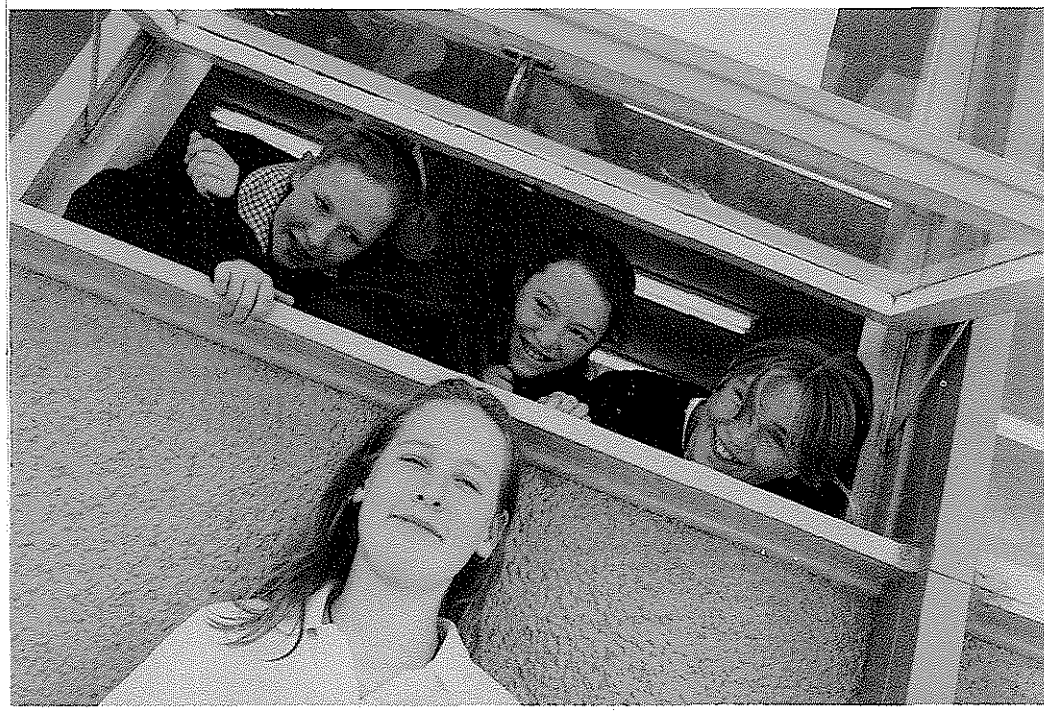
This record of their implementation and effects is offered as a starting point in establishing any school program based on student empowerment and participation. A list of resources is included for further information.

While sufficient information is provided for schools to assess the possible contribution they could make, further reading and planning will be required for these programs.

*Quotes and photos are from students and teachers of Ballarat Secondary College who took part in the programs.*

**Programs such as ABTV and Peer Mediation can:**

- strengthen young people's attachments to their families, friends and community;
- allow students to experience conflict as a positive and enriching experience rather than a negative and alienating one;
- in the case of peer mediation, allow both parties to 'win', instead of one person winning and the other losing;
- improve students' interpersonal skills;
- reduce the need for teachers to be involved in disciplinary action;
- heighten an understanding of self and others through improved communication skills;
- enhance academic and lifestyle skills, such as listening, critical thinking and problem solving;
- allow schools to develop non-adversarial ways of resolving conflict, and more effective dispute resolution methods generally, which could reduce violence, vandalism and school absenteeism; and
- help students to use their skills in dealing with home-based conflict.



# Alternative Behaviours to Violence Program (ABTV)

*'My mum and I used to fight all the time ... after I did the course I kind of started talking to her ...*

*We're communicating now—we haven't been fighting since about Term 1'*

## How did the program come about?

The program arose from research carried out by the PYHP which found that:

- violence was a key issue for homeless young people and those at risk of homelessness; and
- young people were keen to work on curriculum activities with a real-life focus.

## What were its aims?

The ABTV program aimed to:

- broaden students' understanding of violence;
- give them non-violent options for responding to violence; and
- strengthen their attachments to their schools and their families.

## Who was involved?

The program involved Year 7 and 8 students and teachers from the Ballarat Secondary College East campus. The group consisted of 41 students—22 girls and 19 boys ranging from 12 to 14 years of age, and three of their teachers. These teachers and students were chosen because of problems with student conflict in the two classes the teachers taught.

## How was it carried out?

The program took place over a 14-week period.

Although the program had the potential to become a whole curriculum unit, it was decided to make it part of existing subjects such as Social and Environmental Studies.

PYHP workers held planning sessions with teachers dealing with the issues of:

- working with students in empowering and collaborative ways;
- setting mutual expectations in relation to school and outside agency collaboration; and
- identifying resources necessary to successfully implement the program.

The program brought in a consultant with experience in promoting and

implementing student participation. Workshops were held involving the consultant, teachers, and the PYHP workers.

Students began the program by taking part in an Adventure Ropes course at the Ballarat Aquatic Centre. This course played a vital role in helping students to bond with each other.

The PYHP workers ran sessions with the students to:

- provide input about different types of violence;
- develop a definition of violence in collaboration with the students; and
- discuss non-violent alternatives to situations of conflict with them.



The students chose their own topics, decided what type of research they would undertake and how they would present the end product. They worked on the following range of topics:

- **family violence;**
- **schoolyard bullying;**
- **alcohol and violence;**
- **sexual harassment;**
- **violence in sport;**
- **self-mutilation; and**
- **drugs and violence.**

Working in groups, the students undertook a range of activities, including:

- visiting community agencies;
- interviewing experts in the field, such as workers at the local Centre Against Sexual Assault;
- gathering information from community agencies and libraries;
- interviewing welfare staff at school; and
- undertaking research into students' perceptions of school violence.

From these activities, they submitted a variety of products for assessment, including:

- a video on family violence;
- a rap song on drugs and violence;
- a board game on alcohol and violence;
- comic strips depicting different forms of violence;
- an information kit on anorexia; and
- an audio-visual presentation on schoolyard bullying, presented at a whole school assembly.

### **Violence Awareness week**

As a culmination of the students' work a special week was held in Term 4. One of its highlights was a launch to acknowledge their work. The launch included displays and demonstrations of students' work and the presentation of certificates acknowledging successful completion of the program.

### **Results of the program**

*'Well I've changed and I've stopped teasing ... I think, well, doing this project has broadened my view.'*

Almost all students said their understanding of violence had broadened and:

- half said there had been a significant change in their understanding of violence;
- one-third showed some improvement in their attachment to school;
- about one-half showed improvements in their relationships with other students;
- about one-quarter indicated that relationships with family members had improved; and
- almost all of the students said that they preferred the subject matter and activities they undertook as part of the program as compared to their normal schoolwork.

Students said they had:

- increased their knowledge about different types of violence;
- come to a better understanding of the meaning of the word violence and/or their specific topics;
- learned some of the precipitating factors to violence;

### **Comments about the Alternative Behaviours to Violence and Peer Mediation projects**

#### **What teachers said:**

*"About one-third of students showed some improvement in their attachment to the school."*

*"About one half showed improvements in their relationships with other students."*

*"There are not as many fights ... and if they try peer mediation they sort it out."*

*"Almost all the students said their understanding of violence had broadened."*

#### **What students said:**

*"If I'm calling someone names I now wonder whether I'm hurting them."*

*"I'm not really as violent as I used to be."*

*"There are not as many fights...because people are realising that they're fighting over stupid things and if they try peer mediation they sort it out ... most of the time they want to be friends anyway."*

- improved their understanding of what behaviours were violent, and had greater ability to reflect on their own potentially violent behaviour;
- increased their knowledge of community agencies which can assist victims of violence; and
- gained an understanding of gender and age differences in the experience of these types of behaviour.

**About one-third of students showed some improvement in their attachment to school, with approximately one-half showing improvements in their relationships with other students.**

The teachers reported:

- a reduced level of physical violence;
- more problem-solving by the students;
- increases in students' self-esteem;
- students had become more involved in other extra-curricular activities around the campus and college;
- students worked more effectively as a group during the program;
- students were more open in talking about what they would like to see changed in the school and how teachers and parents could go about it;
- levels of cohesiveness among the two classes improved; and
- students in the classes had come to identify themselves more closely as a group.

Teachers also noted their own inconsistencies in relation to violence. For example, some teachers commented that they may have been unwittingly reinforcing students' attitudes to violence by speaking about their enjoyment of violent movies and engaging in 'friendly stirring' from time to time.

## Peer Mediation Program

### Who was involved?

A group of teachers and two groups of students from the Wendouree campus of Ballarat Secondary College were involved. In the first group, eight students from Years 8 to 10 and in the second group, 18 students were trained. The students were aged from 12 to 16 years. Twelve teachers also undertook mediation training.

To ensure the program was accepted among all the students, a mixture of students was chosen. They included students performing well at school who were well-liked as well as students at risk of leaving school early, some of whom may have been less popular.

### How was it carried out?

The first group of students undertook training in 14 sessions over a period of six months, while the second group of students attended an intensive three-day training camp. Teachers took part in three training sessions over a one-month period. The training of both students and teachers emphasised:

- experience and views of conflict;
- the theory of conflict management;
- the practice of mediation; and
- experiential learning and group discussion.

In the final session of the teachers' training, some of the trained student mediators took part in role plays, provision of critical feedback and debriefing of teachers.

The program was monitored in its early stages by the PYHP worker, who followed up on any difficulties or problems. Management of the program was then handed over to teachers who were heads of school units.

They were responsible for:

- establishing referral procedures;
- allocating responsibility for record keeping;
- selecting mediators to undertake each mediation;
- determining who would debrief disputants and mediators; and
- determining who would undertake longer-term follow-up with disputants.

A room was set aside for the conduct of mediations. This had the effect of bringing the program to the notice of the school community.

Both disputants and mediators were involved in the evaluation process.

The PYHP worker was involved with teacher discussions about the progress of the program.

Peer mediation was also incorporated into the school's suspension policy, a significant whole-school initiative.

Between April and December 1996, 20 mediations were completed.

### What were the results?

*'She was always out of class but now she is more on track, more focused in doing things.'*

The program improved the ability of students to resolve conflicts among themselves.

The student mediators improved their ability to resolve conflicts between disputing parties.

Disputants to the mediation process also improved their ability to respond appropriately to situations of conflict in which they were involved.

Teachers considered that some student mediators had improved their relationships with other students and demonstrated an increased interest and involvement in the school.

### What makes a successful peer mediation program?

*'Everyone gets their say and ... it's their solution, they're not told what to do.'*

Because students in Years 8 and 9 are most likely to experience conflict, it is ideal for peer mediation training to begin as early as Years 6, 7 and 8. But students of all ages can benefit from training.

The form of peer mediation training should be adapted to the needs of the school. This can best be done by an outside trainer coming into the school and working with teachers to develop a program which is suitable for the students and school culture generally.

Initially, a 'cadre' approach—training of a select group of student mediators—may be appropriate. But in the long term, schools should aim for a 'whole school approach', involving as many students, teachers and parents as possible.

There needs to be a sustained commitment to mediation from the whole school. This can take the form of:

- training, ongoing support and skill development; and
  - ensuring adequate material resources such as physical space.
- A broad mix of students, including students considered to be at risk, should be involved in mediation training.
- While both short-term, intensive training and longer-term training have merit, it is vital that students who undertake intensive training receive follow-up which allows them to integrate what they have learned into everyday life.
- Training should be structured and experiential.
- Schools need to follow up and evaluate mediation agreements to ensure that the disputants are adhering to them.
- Those running the program need to meet regularly to evaluate its progress and make sure that it adheres to mediation principles.
- integrating the program into the school curriculum;
  - assigning areas of responsibility to a variety of teachers and students;
  - establishing clear guidelines and procedures for mediation recruitment;

*'We've allowed them more negotiation because we think they worked really well during the project.'*

*So it has been good for us in terms of looking at the kids and changing our teaching, so that it is more geared to what we saw them achieving.'*

(Teachers)

