

100,000 weapons a day

What will work to stem the swell in violent acts among children?

Nothing is quite so alarming as children who commit violent crimes. The frequency of serious juvenile crime portends a prison population that will become immense in the next century.

If we have any hope of dealing with children before they become full-blown criminals, it lies with researchers such as Professor Hill Walker of the University of Oregon.

Walker is co-director of the Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior and he is director of the Center on Human Development in the College of Education at the University of Oregon.

His numerous publications include two books: *The Acting Out Child* and *Anti-Social Behavior and School: Strategies and Best Practices*.

In this interview with *The Daily Astorian*, Professor Walker talks about his research on anti-social children in the elementary grades. He also talks about building a strategy to effect change in those children.

Part 1 of a two-part series

The Daily Astorian: Physicians have begun to regard violence as an epidemic. How is it showing up in the schools?

Hill Walker: We see 100,000 students bringing weapons to schools each day, and 40 children or youth are wounded by those weapons each day. Some 6,000 teachers are assaulted each year. Over 200 teachers are killed or wounded per year from those assaults.

There is a larger trend that is very disturbing. We have taken some comfort in the past that most violence is between people who know each other. Now in 53 percent of the incidents, the victims do not know the person who perpetrates the violence against them.

Schools are a very important socializing context for children and youth. But they more often reflect the larger society than shape it. So the schools are no safer than the community they are located in.



Photo by JACI

Professor Hill Walker has researched the antisocial child and wants to build a strategy to help those children around. He is the co-director of the Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior and the director of the Center on Human Development at the University of Oregon.

DA: Your research focuses on the years of kindergarten through third grade. Why those years?

HW: I believe we have a window from zero through grade three to effect a true prevention of this social toxin. In that period, from zero to 8 years you have a wonderful opportunity to make the investments in health, family support and training and preschool education to find these children as early as possible and intervene comprehensively and get them off this path.

We need to do this as soon as possible. The Healthy Start program is an example: picking up these moms in the hospital and following them to Head Start. That is the ultimate in prevention. It's very expensive and Oregon is strongly invested in it. So you have a huge role for health and family support professionals in prevention.

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Schools come into play at about age 4 or 5. Time after time, kindergarten teachers will look at their class and say Johnny, Fred and Harriet will be juvenile offenders. But there is a next layer of children who are not so obvious. And a significant portion of that layer will follow this same path to serious crime. So you need to share with early childhood educators the soft signs of the emerging at-risk status and use their knowledge to identify them.

DA: What are those signs?

HW: Agitation. Aggressive behavior that is verbal, physical or gestural. Use of what are called coercive tactics to force the submission of others. Engaging in what's called escalation to get people to withdraw their demands. They learn to do that at home and they bring it to school and it works even better at school.

Another sign is what are called antisocial beliefs and attitudes. Hit first and ask questions later.

These children have a view of the world that insulates them from reality and learning civilized behavior. They tend to see the behavior of others as malevolent and having a hostile intent. And it is a huge bias. You can see this when they walk in the preschool door.

I think all the evidence shows that if you can intervene in that time frame with parents, teacher, target child and peers and come up with coordinated intervention you have a very good chance to turn them around and get them off this path.

DA: Tell us about your Eugene study. Why has it achieved landmark status?

HW: It is rare that you have an opportunity to pick up a group of children at risk and follow them for 15 to 20 years in family and school contexts. In our study we have two groups: severely at-risk and a lower risk group.

If I were summing up, on every dimension you can imagine, the severe at-risk group has more negative profiles than the others. The anti-social boys are doing worse, but we couldn't imagine how badly. The at-risk boys are doing better than expected. Both groups are now through high school and in their early 20s.

From grade 4 through grade 11, the at-risk boys had 45 arrests, the anti-social boys had 350. Across the two groups, the relationship between the number of arrests and the severity of crimes was almost perfect. The more times they were arrested the more likely they were doing severe things. Sixty-two percent of the anti-social boys dropped out of high school. Twelve percent of the at-risk group dropped out. Thirty-eight percent of the anti-social boys became fathers in high school. Half of the anti-social boys said they come to school under the influence of drugs and alcohol. Ten percent of the at-risk boys did.

At the end of the fifth grade we looked at their school records. The at-risk boys had 19 referrals to the front office, the number for the anti-social boys was 420.

DA: Many elementary school teachers will say that they are not surprised when a certain child runs afoul of the law later in their life. They will say that they could spot those tendencies in the classroom. Yet, if asked why they didn't respond to the budding problem in front of them, I suspect they would say (1) I don't know what to do, or (2) I don't have the resources to do something.

What is your response to those assertions?

HW: About 5 to 7 percent of the school age population fit the profile of being intensely at-risk. That is a significant portion of the school population, and it is growing. That 5-7 percent will account for well over half of the discipline problems that occur in the whole school in a given year.

Teachers aren't trained systematically to deal with this population. Your most natural instincts are to use warnings, reprimands, guidance and so forth. But using threats with this group is like trying to control a grizzly bear with a switch. The antisocial child is a

professional, the teacher is the amateur. The at-risk child has 6 to 7 years of prior training in how to manipulate adults, how to escalate a situation.

Rather than refusing to play that game, the teacher gets sucked into it. And the next thing you know you have a discipline referral. As far as the teacher and the student are concerned, it is at best a standoff and the teacher's authority to manage the classroom is damaged.

Teachers are right. They are not trained to deal with this population. We have a belief in this society and in schools that the problems these individuals have are specific to those individuals. The person has the wherewithal through proper counseling to see the evil of

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their ways and change. Both of those assumptions are false in most cases with respect to this population. They have been inoculated by having been taught from day one a set of anti-social attitudes. They often don't accept the fact that they are different from others. They believe their hostile actions are justified. It's not their fault. It's never me. It's out there. It is someone else's fault.

To teach these children a different behavior pattern you have to give them direct training over time in social skills and problem-solving strategies that most of us learn on our own or are taught by our parents.

So the first order of business is to teach these skills and show them that others use these skills.

You've got to use powerful instructional techniques. You have to provide incentives for them that are as powerful as the natural rewards that come from behaving in an aggressive fashion. And that is difficult.

DA: What kind of incentives?

HW: You need to set up incentives, ranging from recognition and social praise to access to preferred activities, so the child can earn free time at school or at home. You've got to be able to teach the skills, provide the opportunities to display the skills, monitor and give feedback and provide incentives for using them, and often. Then you have a chance. And you must involve teachers, peers, students and parents in the process.

It's obviously going to take investments by schools in support personnel. Teachers are absolutely right. Most teachers don't have the training or skills to do that. They need assistance from trained professionals.

Friday: The importance of keeping at-risk children in school. How much does an intervention program cost? What if the anti-social child's parents don't care?