

Where Is School Along the Path to Prison?

Schools that offer comprehensive early intervention programs for antisocial youths and their families may save them from spending their lives in costly human warehouses.

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Where is school along the road for those who seem bound for prison? It's merely a way station for most. Juvenile criminal behavior has risen dramatically in the U.S. over the past three decades. Young people, who represent about 20 percent of the population, now account for over 40 percent of the reported crimes. Almost half of the youth charged with serious offenses are under 15, and 75 percent are boys.

Antisocial and aggressive behavior is also escalating in schools, where boys are responsible for 90 percent of such behavior. Schools move many antisocial adolescents from mainstream classrooms into school-based, specialized placements or home tutoring programs, or they suspend them. But by and large, such one-dimensional approaches to a multidimensional problem have proven ineffective in preventing the eventual criminal careers of these children.

Precursors to Criminal Behavior

The research evidence is strong that young boys who are extremely antisocial will probably be arrested during adolescence (Loeber 1982, 1985). Gerald Patterson and his colleagues at the Oregon Social Learning Center have spent three decades studying the

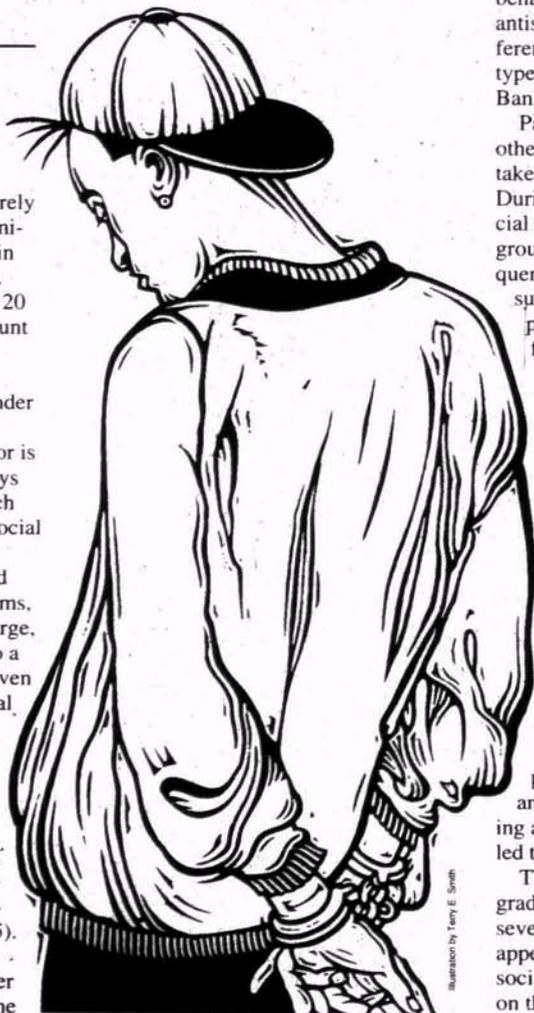


Illustration by Terry E. Smith

behavior patterns and family characteristics of such children. They discovered that the single best predictor of adolescent criminal behavior is a long established pattern of early school antisocial behavior. This is especially true if the antisocial behavior occurs in many different settings and involves several types of antisocial acts (Patterson and Bank 1985).

Patterson's group also observed another very important step that such boys take on the road to criminal behavior: During the intermediate grades, antisocial students tend to develop peer groups with values that support delinquent antisocial acts. A member of such a deviant group has an almost 70 percent chance of experiencing a first felony arrest within two years.

Many of these students live in poverty-stricken, dysfunctional homes with parents who have limited parenting skills. These families often experience extreme stress, and this severely disrupts the parents' ability to monitor and discipline their children.

Predicting Adolescent Arrests

In 1984, Hill Walker joined Patterson and his colleagues in a longitudinal study of two groups of 5th grade antisocial boys. The study sought to determine (1) the possibility of predicting which of the antisocial boys would be arrested during adolescence and (2) the factors that led to their antisocial behavior.

The study initially identified 200 5th grade boys (from a school population of several thousand 5th grade boys) who appeared to be at elevated risk for antisocial behavior. The study then focused on the 40 most serious cases and on a

control group of 40 who were randomly selected from the remaining 160 5th grade boys.

Dramatic differences emerged between the two groups of at-risk boys over the next 7 years. For example, by the 7th grade, 21 of the 40 most antisocial boys had been arrested 68 times for criminal behavior, while only three boys in the control group had been arrested (and each only once). Further, the 5th grade behavior of the very antisocial group was highly predictive of their arrest status up to five years later; and their general behavior pattern tended to get worse as they progressed through school (Walker et al. 1990).

This consistent pattern occurred in spite of the best efforts of their school and related social agencies to deal with the problems these students presented. The chronic nature of this behavior pattern is a strong indication of its resistance to attempts to improve it. Highly aggressive antisocial behavior is nearly as stable over a decade as I.Q., with correlations of approximately .60 (Quay and Wherry 1986).

Our longitudinal data suggest that three rather simple measures would have predicted the arrest record of nearly 80 percent of the boys in our study who have been arrested to date: (1) teacher ratings of social skills, (2) total negative playground behavior of the boy and his playmates, and (3) discipline contacts with the principal's office (as measured by written file records).

This study also found differences in the parenting skills of the parents of the two groups of boys. The parents of the very antisocial boys were ineffective and inconsistent in their discipline, ignoring an infraction on one occasion and harshly punishing it on another. They were not involved in their children's lives as playmate, mentor, role model, or advocate. They didn't encourage their children and didn't positively manage or interact with them. Finally, they didn't have the minimal problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills that are essen-

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tial to meet the challenges of their daily home and work lives.

A Bleak Future

These most antisocial students can look forward to bleak adolescent and adult lives. They'll probably experience substantial difficulty in adapting to school and vocational settings. They can expect more mental and physical illnesses and problems with social relationships than other people. Further, any children they have will have a high probability of continuing this pattern of antisocial behavior and criminality, since antisocial behavior tends to flow through generations like child abuse.

In coping with antisocial behavior, the school is caught in the middle of a difficult situation that demands far more of its energy, for relatively limited results, than the small number of antisocial students should suggest. Our society can't expect the school to solve this problem alone since it also affects all aspects of the antisocial student's home and community life. However, antisocial students are such a continuously unpleasant and disruptive force at school that educators are motivated to assume leadership in the search for a solution.

What Schools Can Do

The situation isn't hopeless. The federally funded longitudinal study discussed above has recently expanded its focus to begin a long-term study of the effectiveness of an early and vigorous home/school intervention program for

preventing antisocial behavior. The primary intervention lasts about a year; but follow-up interventions that are less intensive can continue for several years, until a student's problems are stabilized. This longitudinal study will eventually develop a complete package of specific assessment and remediation programs for each of its areas of intervention. And the resource section at the end of this article includes recommended existing programs drawn from current sources that address this problem.

What is emerging in the field is the conviction that a successful comprehensive intervention program for antisocial behavior should contain the following elements:

1. Schools should take the lead in setting up and coordinating the home/school, behavioral intervention program.
2. The school should monitor student behavior carefully so that it can begin the intervention process as soon as a student's antisocial behavior indicators emerge.
3. A brief parent training program should focus on five basic parenting practices: how to (a) closely monitor a child's whereabouts, activities, and friends; (b) actively participate in a child's life; (c) use such positive techniques as encouragement, praise, and approval to manage a child's home behavior; (d) ensure that discipline is fair, timely, and appropriate to the offense; and (e) use effective conflict-resolution and problem-solving strategies.
4. The program should help parents (a) set up home reward systems that provide incentives for the child to achieve academic success and to behave appropriately at school and (b) encourage their child to develop a positive attitude toward school.
5. A tracking/monitoring system for school and home should provide daily two-way communication about the student's performance at school and parental acknowledgment of that performance.

6. The school program should teach the personal, academic, and social skills that the at-risk student needs for school success. This instructional program should be accompanied by unobtrusive but sensitive school monitoring systems that measure progress.

7. The school should establish a program of peer and teacher mentors who take an active interest in the antisocial, at-risk student's school success.

Toward Durable Change

The most promising intervention programs are those that include a strong family intervention component and direct intervention procedures that are simultaneously applied to the student's school behavior. As we develop and

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field-test our own program, we expect to develop clear evidence that such a seemingly complex approach to antisocial behavior can succeed—and that it will actually be socially and financially cost-effective. Our society now spends the equivalent of a living wage for criminals to endure their adult years in human warehouses. A fraction of that cost spent on a massive early intervention program could move them toward much more productive adult lives.

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Resources

The best current source of information on clinical, family-based interventions for this population is Alan Kazdin's *Treatment of Antisocial Behavior* (Dorsey Press 1985). The best current source on school intervention procedures for this population is D. Morgan and W. Jenson's *Teaching Behaviorally Disordered Students: Preferred Practices* (Merrill 1988).

Some recommended currently available parent education programs are G. R. Patterson's *Families* (Research Press, Champaign, Ill., 1971) and G. R. Patterson and M. Forgatch's *Parents and Adolescents Together: The Basics, Part I* (Castalia Press, Eugene, Ore., 1987).

A good source of useful information on home reward systems to support school achievement and adjustment is M. Kelley's *School-Home Notes: Promoting Children's Classroom Success* (Guilford Press, New

York, 1990).

Some fine school-based programs for teaching personal, academic, and social skills are:

Jones, V., and L. Jones. (1990). *Classroom Management*. 3rd. ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Kerr, M., M. Nelson, and D. Lambert. (1987). *Helping Adolescents with Learning and Behavior Problems*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles Merrill.

McGinnis, E., and A. Goldstein. (1984). *Skillstreaming the Elementary School Child*. Champaign, Ill.: Research Press.

Shapiro, E. (1989). *Academic Skills Problems: Direct Assessment and Intervention*. New York: Guilford Press.

Walker, H. M., S. McConnell, D. Holmes, B. Todis, J. Walker, and N. Golden. (1983). *The Walker Social Skills Curriculum: The ACCEPTS Program*. Austin, Texas: PRO-ED.

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