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Youngsters learn to settle conflicts without violence

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Control the temper or be prepared to have a "shortened and uglier life span."

Omwale Luthuli had other advice for his impulsive teen-age boys. Lay down the guns and knives; talk to each other, he preaches.

And he teaches them how.

Long before the latest wave of violent confrontations among juveniles, adults like Luthuli recognized youngsters must learn other ways to resolve conflicts if they are to live to become adults.

Luthuli is a counselor for the Fifth Ward Enrichment Program and creator of the program's Non-Violent Conflict Resolution curriculum aimed at black males ages 11 to 15.

Since 1987, Luthuli has helped frustrated youngsters avoid violence and has taught them how to fuel that energy to sensible resolutions -- solutions that don't involve any bloodshed. They learn how to ignore trouble and recognize physical symptoms like a rise in blood pressure that tells them they are losing control.

They discuss whether someone stepping on their expensive Air Jordan sneakers is reason enough to fight and how can they verbally express their anger. "Walking away from a conflict is something that is foreign to them," said Luthuli. But he and others around Houston are trying to change this.

Police officers and school counselors are offering kids common-sense solutions to their problems with peers hoping to reduce adolescent violence.

Officers from Houston Police Department's juvenile division invited members from two youth gangs to a picnic this summer hoping to diffuse tensions. Boys, ages 13 to 19, from the warring groups, attended the picnic at the San Jacinto Monument. When it ended, the boys left promising to harass each other less and to talk to each other more. They agreed to convince fellow gang members to do the same.

This fall Houston Independent School District will teach about peaceful resolutions from a youth violence prevention curriculum used by other schools around the country. Second Step, a kit developed by a non-profit education action group in Seattle, will be used in grades one through eight to teach kids ways to communicate with peers and handle aggression.

Nationally, the push is on to start more of these projects.

Through his program, Luthuli targets members of one of society's most vulnerable populations, teen-age black males.

Homicide is the leading killer of young black males. According to the June 1990 Journal of the American Medical Association ("International & Interstate Comparison of Homicide Among Young Males" by L.A. Fingerhut and J.C. Kleinman), more male teen-agers died of gunshot wounds in 1988 than of all diseases combined.

The national homicide rate from 1984 to 1988 among black males age 15 to 24 rose 66.8 percent, according to the national Centers for Disease Control.

Adults who work with children say preaching non-violence works. But they admit it's hard in a society that promotes and glamorizes violent behavior on television shows and films.

"What has happened is an infatuation with violence," Luthuli said. "Kids have a Hollywood perception of killing somebody." He added, "What's projected is that to rub somebody out is an acceptable way of conflict resolution." They have seen adults use violence against each other, he said. Kids act out what they see.

Boys ages 11 to 15 get a chance to talk about the fight at the bus stop, or the classmate who gave him an ugly look. They role play and talk to each other about ways to cope with the hurt and anger.

Since the program began, staff members estimate the program has reached 300 to 500 youngsters. Most of the boys have firsthand knowledge of the consequences of what happens when anger gets out of control. They attend wakes and funerals of schoolmates, friends and neighbors who were victims of violence, Luthuli said.

This dose of reality is a powerful tool, he said.

"We can point to boys they were with and they can see the disastrous end they came to," he said.

Violence prevention programs do work, he said. The majority of the boys who get help in the program stay in school and out of trouble. But children in all neighborhoods must receive anti-violence training early, during the first years in school, Luthuli said. This is the plan for HISD students.

Alma Lara, a counselor at Lamar Elementary School, began last year introducing the Second Step curriculum to her students.

She found eager audiences when visiting classrooms. Boys and girls were anxious to talk about what goes on and most wanted to hear about alternatives to fighting.

They learned how to react when peers start name-calling and teasing. It's OK to be angry and upset but it's best to calm down, talk to yourself, count backward or ignore them, Lara said.

"Children just think about their feelings," Lara said. "I try to teach them to always think of the consequences of their actions."