

# School Violence: To What Extent do Perceptions of Problem Solving Skills Protect Adolescents?

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## Abstract

This study examined whether adolescents' perceptions of problem solving skills differ according to their sex, experiences of exposure to violence, age and grade, and the variables predicting their experiences of exposure to violence. Data were collected from 600 (298 females, 302 males) 14-19 year-old students attending various types of high schools in central Eskişehir. The Problem Solving Inventory and a questionnaire were used in the study. Findings of the study revealed that students' perceptions of problem solving skills do not change according to their sex and the place they are exposed to violence. Adolescents' perceptions of problem solving skills differ in accordance with the level of their exposure to violence; perception level of the problem solving skills of the students rarely exposed to violence is higher than that of the students exposed to violence occasionally or often. Perception level of the adolescents who are often exposed to violence does not change depending on their sex and age. The variables predicting adolescents' experiences of exposure to violence are listed as perceptions of problem solving skills, sex, grade, age, and school type. In conclusion, the adolescents' perceptions of problem solving skills are partially effective in protecting them against school violence. The place of the skills training programs -particularly the ones that aimed at prevention of and protection from violence- in the content of counselling programs was discussed.

## Key Words

School Violence, Adolescent, Places of Exposure to Violence, Experiences of Exposure to Violence, Problem Solving Skills, Prevention of School Violence.

As it is globally around the world, violence is one of the most important problems threatening the physical and mental health of people in Turkey as well. Although, for children and adolescents, school is a place that is equipped with the characteristics which mitigate the traumatic effects of violence in social domains, it may be a source of violence itself. School violence may include all types of violence such as emotional, verbal, physical, sexual, economic, etc. School violence is fed by peer bullying among students (Baker & Kavşut, 2007; Canseven Önder & Yurtal, 2008; Everett & Price, 1995; Janosz et al., 2008; Malek, Chang, & Davis, 1998; Pişkin, 2002; Quinn, Bell-Ellison, Loomis, & Tucci, 2007; Ybarra et al., 2009), dif-

ferent types of violence erupting between students and school staff (Daniels, Bradley, & Hays, 2007; Gözütok, Er, & Karacaoğlu, 2006; Hyman & Perone, 1998; Khoury-Kassabri, 2006; Lea Maes & Lievens, 2003; Tural Kurul, 2006), and the external sources around the school.

Our knowledge with regard to school violence in Turkey is mainly based on the findings of the studies on peer bullying (Cenkseven Önder & Yurtal, 2008; Deveci, Acik, & Ayar, 2007; Durmuş & Gürkan, 2005; Kepenekçi & Çınkır, 2006; Öğülmüş, 1995; Pekel-Uludağlı & Uçanok, 2005; Pişkin, 2006; Pişkin & Ayas, 2005; Sümer & Aydın, 1999; Şirvanlı Özen, 2006). However, fighting against violence effectively also requires obtaining information on the personal characteristics and personality traits of the children and adolescents exposed to violence (Avcı & Güçray, 2010; Aypay & Durmuş, 2008; Marvin, Malek, Chang, & Davis, 1998; Pişkin & Ayas, 2005; Spriggs, Halpern, Herring, Victor, & Schoenbach, 2009; Şirvanlı Özen, 2006; Vittes, Susan, & Sorenson, 2006). Limited research findings

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related to the children and adolescents exposed to school violence -i.e. the victims- are not sufficient to shape and form the content of counseling programs run at schools (Korkut, 2004). This study, conducted in the light of this approach, examined whether the problem solving skills of adolescents differ according to their sex, experiences of exposure to violence, age and grade, and it also examined the variables predicting their experiences of exposure to violence. More specifically, the answers to the following questions were searched in our study:

- 1- Do the students' perceptions of problem solving skills differ according to their sex, place of exposure to violence, or the frequency of exposure to violence?
- 2- Do the perceptions of problem solving skills of the students who are frequently exposed to violence differ according to age and sex?
- 3- Are the students' experiences of exposure to violence predicted by the perceptions of problem solving skills, the type of violence, the type of school, sex, age, and grade variables?

## Method

### Model

This study is a quantitative and relational study aimed at examining the relationships between the variables. The data were collected by means of a questionnaire and a self-report Likert-type scale.

### Participants

In the study, three regions of central Eskişehir, representing three different socio-economic levels, were identified and the data were collected by randomly selecting one 1<sup>st</sup>, one 2<sup>nd</sup>, one 3<sup>rd</sup> and one 4<sup>th</sup> grade classes from each high school of different type. The research was carried out with the data gathered from 298 female (49.67%) and 302 male (50.33%) -600 in total- high school students. Students were in 14-19 age range and, average age was 16.39 with a standard deviation of 1.06. Thirty percent of the participants were 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students and 18.8% of them were 4<sup>th</sup> grade students.

### Instruments

The Problem Solving Inventory (PSI) -developed by Heppner and Petersen (1982) and adapted to Turkish by Şahin, Şahin and Heppner (1993) - was used in this study to measure the problem solving skills of students. Related studies reveal validity

and reliability of this instrument (Şahin, Şahin, & Heppner, 1993). Demographic features -such as age, school, grade, sex, parents- and violence experiences of the students were gathered with the help of a questionnaire adapted from the another instrument (Türküm, Eraslan-Çapan, Ergun-Başak, & Aşıcı, 2009).

### Procedures

A permit for data collection was obtained from the Ministry of National Education, and the data were gathered in the selected schools and classes by a doctoral student studying psychological counseling and guidance. Data collection procedure was carried out by providing students with the appropriate environment and sufficient time for answering the questions in groups in the classroom.

### Data Analysis

Research data were analyzed via variance analysis, chi-square and regression analysis techniques (Büyüköztürk, 2009; Cohen, 1988; Pallant, 2005).

## Results

To answer the first research question, the PSI scores of the students were compared according to sex variable; and it was found that the PSI scores of the students did not differ significantly according to sex ( $t_{592}=1.77, p>.05$ ). Students were grouped according to the place of exposure to violence and it was observed that they were exposed to violence the most while returning home from school. Regarding all the students, the order of the places of exposure to violence from the most to the least were found to be the schoolyard, the lavatory-changing rooms, the road to school, the classroom, the places near the school, and the school corridors. Regarding the sex-based order of the places of exposure to violence of the female and male students, the order valid for both groups was found to be quite similar to the whole group. A chi-square test was used to find the answer to the second research question. The findings revealed that there was statistically no significant difference between the PSI scores and the places of exposure to violence ( $\chi^2_{7,600} = 9.46, p>.05$ ). The frequency of students' exposure to physical, emotional, sexual and verbal types of violence was also examined. It was observed that most of the students (at varying rates between 77.5% and 98.8%) had never been exposed to violence cases sorted above, or had been exposed to such cases just once. On the other hand, it was found that the violence cases most frequently ex-

perceived by the students were “swear” by 16.3%, “mock” by 11.2% , “damage to their belongings” by 7.5%, “being pushed” by 7.2%, “backbiting” by 6.3% and “being made a sexual pass at” by 6.2%. Similarly, it was revealed that the violence cases occasionally experienced by the students were “harm to their belongings” by 7.3%, “swear” by 6.2%, and “mock” by 5.5%. The violence cases rarely experienced by them were “being injured with a knife, gun, or pocketknife” by 98.8%, “being robbed” by 98.0%, and “being beaten” by 97.5%. The findings of one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that the PSI scores of students differed significantly according to their levels of exposure to violence ( $F_{2,597} = 10.64, p < .01, \eta^2 = .03$ ). A Scheffé’s test was then applied to examine the source of the statistically significant differences. According to the results of the Scheffé’s test, the perception of problem solving skills of the students rarely exposed to violence ( $\bar{x} = 90.50, ss = 18.92$ ), was significantly better than that of the students occasionally exposed to violence ( $\bar{x} = 95.53, ss = 18.23$ ); also, the perception of problem solving skills of the students rarely exposed to violence ( $\bar{x} = 90.50, ss = 18.92$ ) was significantly better than that of the students frequently exposed to violence ( $\bar{x} = 100.10, ss = 17.48$ ).

Two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied to the research data to answer the second research question. The results revealed that the PSI scores of the students frequently exposed to violence cases did not differ significantly according to age variable ( $F_{1,152} = 1.60, p > .05$ ). It was also observed that the PSI scores of the students did not differ significantly according to sex variable ( $F_{1,152} = 0.00, p > .05$ ). It was also seen that the common effect of the sex and age variables was not significant ( $F_{1,152} = 0.14, p > .05$ ).

A hierarchical regression analysis was made to answer the third research question. The experience of exposure to violence was predicted significantly by problem solving skills ( $F_{1,598} = 23.66; p < .05$ ) in the first model; by problem solving skills ( $F_{2,597} = 19.92; p < .05$ ) and sex ( $F_{2,597} = 19.92; p < .05$ ) in the second model; by problem solving skills ( $F_{3,596} = 17.60; p < .05$ ), sex ( $F_{3,596} = 17.60; p < .05$ ) and grade ( $F_{3,596} = 17.60; p < .05$ ) in the third model; by problem solving skills ( $F_{4,595} = 15.07; p < .05$ ), sex ( $F_{4,595} = 15.07; p < .05$ ), grade ( $F_{4,595} = 15.07; p < .05$ ) and age ( $F_{4,595} = 15.07; p < .05$ ) in the fourth model; and by problem solving skills ( $F_{5,594} = 13.57; p < .05$ ), sex ( $F_{5,594} = 13.57; p < .05$ ), grade ( $F_{5,594} = 13.57; p < .05$ ), age ( $F_{5,594} = 13.57; p < .05$ ) and type of school ( $F_{5,594} = 13.57; p < .05$ ) in the fifth model.

## Discussion

In this study, which examined the experiences of exposure to violence of the adolescents attending high school in terms of the problem solving skills, it was observed that the problem solving skills of the adolescents were partially effective on their self-protection against violence experienced at school.

The findings of the study revealed that there was statistically no significant difference between the problem solving skills of female and male students (Arslan, 2010). While the findings of some studies conducted on adolescents in Turkey suggest that problem solving skills of females are superior to those of males, findings of some other studies suggest the opposite. In addition, in some similar studies (Demirci Danışık & Erdur-Baker, 2005; Korkut, 2004), no significant difference between these variables was found. The diversity of the findings may arise from the fact that problem solving skills are multi-dimensional and also that comparisons are made in many studies -as well as the present one- on the basis of the total score obtained from the tools measuring these abilities. Conducting future studies on the sub-scales of PSI can provide more detailed information.

Examination of the places where students were exposed to violence showed that they were exposed to violence most frequently on the way to home from school, followed by the schoolyard, the lavatory-changing rooms, the road to school, the classroom, the places near the school, and the school corridors, in order of frequency. Regarding the sex-based order of the places of exposure to violence of the female and male students, the order valid for both groups was found to be quite similar to the whole group. This order is consistent with the findings of the studies conducted on high school students in Turkey in the last 15 years (Durmuş & Gürcan, 2005; Öğülmüş, 1995; Pişkin, 2006; Yurtal & Cenkseven, 2007). In spite of the important steps taken in the last five years towards the fight against violence under the leadership of the Ministry of National Education (Bilge, 2009), it is observed that “the places of contact with violence sources pursue their functions!”

The study revealed that the problem solving skills of the students did not differ according to the place of violence. In other words, although they were exposed to violence in different places, they had similar problem solving skills. This finding reflects the importance of focusing on studies aimed at developing the problem solving skills of the adolescents such as coping with violence, which have the potential to produce successful results. In the light of the existing information on the places of school violence,

package programs (e.g. Orpinas, Parcel, Mcalister, & Frankowski, 1995; Simon et al., 2009) can be developed to be used in counseling work at schools. It will be appropriate for the programs to involve the elements such as possible places of violence and the physical self-protection abilities varying according to such places; emergency support sources and ways of communication; the people they can consult with when encountered with the defined cases; legal rights as well as social skills.

Research findings with regard to the frequency of exposure to different types of violence, revealed that majority of the high school students either once exposed or never exposed to the violence cases sorted in the data collection tool. This may be interpreted as a finding that reflects a gratifying and positive development in the context of school violence problem because the findings of different studies on school violence and peer bullying (Durmuş & Gürcan, 2005; Öğülmüş, 1995), carried out on the same age groups between 1995 and 2005, reflected that, in addition to maintenance of the frequency of robberies and stealing personal belongings, the mass fights exceeding school borders and causing injuries reached to high rates. It may be considered that the studies carried out in the frame of the Circular on Prevention of Violence issued by the Ministry of National Education (Okul- larda Şiddetin Önlenmesi Genelgesi, 2006), the precautions taken at schools and the attitudes developed against violence, have decreased the number of physical violence cases.

In spite of the promising and gratifying rates mentioned in this study in relation to the frequency of school violence, we cannot make the same comments when we look at the cases of violence the students are most frequently exposed to. The cases that students experience most frequently are the cases such as being sworn, being mocked, being backbiten, experiencing damage to their belongings, being made a sexual pass at and being pushed. Given that such violent behavior has been observed in the last fifteen years in the studies (Deveci et al., 2007; Durmuş & Gürcan, 2005; Öğülmüş, 1995; Şirvanlı Özen, 2006; Yurtal & Cenkseven, 2007) carried out on school violence and peer bullying among high school and primary education students, and given that the frequency of this behavior remains at the similar rates despite the years passed, it may be thought that there are still gaps in the fight against verbal, emotional and sexual violence.

The findings that the students with low problem solving skill are frequently exposed to violence seem to be consistent with the findings of the other studies conducted in Turkey on the traits of the students displaying violence or exposed to violence.

Findings of the present study revealed that, for example, victim and bullying children are lonelier and have lower academic achievements than their peers not having these traits (Pekel-Uludağlı & Uçanok, 2005), and that negative self-image has an important role in the children's and adolescents' exposure to peer bullying (Şirvanlı Özen, 2006). The findings about the introversion-extroversion, shyness and self-esteem traits of the victim and bullying high school students (Pişkin & Ayas, 2005), and the findings obtained from the high school students listing the reasons of violence as the traits such as lacking communication skills, lack of self-confidence, failure and self-interest (Durmuş & Gürcan, 2005) show us that the students' personal characteristics and personality traits as factors increasing their chance to be exposed to violence. Current findings give rise to the thought that helping students in improving their problem solving skills may ensure self-protection of these students from violence. This idea can be tested by the findings of future experimental studies.

Another finding obtained in the present study reveals that, the students with high frequency of exposure to violence have similar limited problem solving skills, regardless of their age and sex. This finding reflects the importance of providing particular counseling services, considering special requirements of victims, the students who are being exposed to violence.

Examination of the variables predicting high school students' experiences of exposure to violence revealed that the most effective predictor is problem solving skills of the students, which is followed in order of effectiveness by the variables of sex, grade, age and type of school. Based on the findings, it is observed that the more efficient the students become in problem solving, the less they experience exposure to violence, and that female students tend to have more experiences of exposure to violence. The research findings reflect that the younger the students in the fourth grade are, the more they are exposed to violence. Additionally, students of the general high schools tend to be exposed to violence more than the students of the teacher education high schools. However; these variables can explain only 10% of the violence exposure of students. In other words, there is an important finding which should not be ignored; that the remaining 90% of the variance cannot be explained by these five variables and that there are different variables explaining this variance. This means that there are still unknown factors affecting adolescent high school students' exposure to violence. It is clear that protecting adolescents from possible violence cannot be achieved without determining these other factors.

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### **Teşekkür:**

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