

Why Adolescents Fight: A Qualitative Study of Youth Perspectives on Fighting and Its Prevention

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ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE: To identify risk factors for fighting, factors that protect against fighting, and strategies to prevent fighting, among adolescents who fight and those uninvolved in fighting.

METHODS: Focus groups were conducted with middle and high school students, stratified by fighting (fighter/nonfighter) status, race/ethnicity, and gender. Groups were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed using margin coding and thematic content analysis. Themes were independently identified by 3 coders; disagreements were resolved by consensus.

RESULTS: The 65 participants in the 12 focus groups were 13 to 17 years old. Reasons for fighting include self-defense, to gain/maintain respect, or anger; having goals for the future is protective. Nonfighters state that their parents condone fighting only when physically attacked and that they teach adolescents strategies to avoid fighting. Fighters describe mixed messages from parents, and pro-fighting attitudes and modeling of aggressive behavior among some family members. Nonfighters avoid fighting by ignoring insults or walking

away. Fighters feel unable to use nonviolent conflict-resolution methods effectively. Peers may instigate or encourage fights. Suggested prevention strategies include anger-management and conflict-resolution programs, relationships with caring adults, and physicians counseling youth about the consequences of fighting.

CONCLUSIONS: Nonfighters use various strategies to avoid fighting, whereas fighters are aware of few alternatives to fighting. Conflicting parental messages about fighting may enhance the likelihood of fighting. Physicians can counsel youth about the negative consequences of fighting. Interventions that teach anger management and conflict resolution, promote adolescent self-efficacy for using nonviolent strategies, and address parental attitudes about fighting may be effective in preventing fighting.

KEYWORDS: adolescent; aggression; anger; parents; peer group

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WHAT'S NEW

Adolescents who fight receive mixed messages from their families about the acceptability of fighting, and they have low self-efficacy for using alternative conflict-resolution strategies. Adolescents uninvolved in fighting effectively use a variety of nonviolent strategies learned from parents.

ONE IN 3 high school students is involved in a fight annually.¹ Fighting is an antecedent behavior and an occasional cause of homicides among adolescents,^{2–5} and it can persist as violence in adulthood.⁶ Youth involvement in fighting and violence can be conceptualized using the social-ecological model, used by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as a framework for violence prevention, and derived from Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of child development.⁷ According to this model key influences on youth behavior are at the individual, relationship, community, and societal levels. Risk factors increase the odds that an adolescent will behave violently, whereas protective factors decrease these odds.⁸ Individual

factors, such as depression^{9,10} and impulsivity,^{9,11} increase the risk of adolescent violence, whereas anger-control skills¹² are protective. Relationship level risk factors include parent-child conflict,¹⁰ poor parental monitoring^{9,11} and parent-child communication,¹³ exposure to violence in the family,^{10,11} delinquent peers,⁶ negative peer norms about violence,⁶ and low school connectedness;^{10,14} high family connectedness and parental support^{12,13,15,16} are protective. School and community¹¹ violence also are risk factors. Violence prevention programs are primarily school based and focus on addressing social skills, conflict resolution, and peer norms about violence. These programs have shown variable impacts on aggressive behavior, especially among adolescents; the reasons for this are unclear.^{17–20}

Qualitative research allows the examination of attitudes and behaviors, and could provide important insights into reasons for engaging in aggressive behavior.²¹ Few qualitative studies, however, have examined fighting.^{22–28} Most of these studies consist of interviews with preadolescents or adolescents with assault injuries.^{24–28} Fighting is viewed as a problem-solving strategy and a means for gaining

status and respect among peers; walking away from a fight is viewed as ineffective and can lead to increased harassment and rejection by peers.^{22–28} Parental attitudes that support fighting in self-defense or retaliation^{24–28} increase the risk of fighting. None of these studies examined strategies to prevent fighting.

To our knowledge, no published qualitative studies have examined adolescent perspectives on fighting and its prevention, with comparison of youth who fight and those who do not fight. Such comparisons could provide information from fighters on why they engage in fighting, and from nonfighters on strategies they use to effectively avoid fighting. Focus group methodology provides insight into participants' attitudes, experiences, knowledge, and motivations within the participants' cultural context and allows for group interactions to facilitate discussion.²¹ The aim of this study was to examine fighters' and nonfighters' perspectives on fighting and strategies to prevent fighting, by use of focus groups.

METHODS

STUDY DESIGN

Focus groups were conducted with adolescents 13 to 17 years old, 6 groups with adolescents who have been in a fight (fighters) and 6 with adolescents who have not been in a fight (nonfighters). Students self-reported participation in a physical fight in the past 12 months. Groups were stratified by gender and race/ethnicity. Participants were recruited at 2 urban middle schools and 3 high schools using flyers and in-person visits to classrooms by study personnel, who stated that the purpose of the study was to understand youth involvement in fighting from the perspectives of both involved and uninvolved students. Students were eligible to participate if they were 13 to 17 years old and English or Spanish was their primary language. Written informed consent was obtained from par-

ents and assent from students. Students took consent documents home, then returned signed documents and contact information to study personnel at school. Students were asked about fighting status in private, by phone; no formal assessment of fighting status was conducted. Six to 8 participants were recruited per group.²¹ Focus groups were conducted as they accrued, and although categories of data collection were predetermined (fighters/nonfighters), there was no structured pattern in the order in which focus groups were conducted. A trained research assistant moderated the groups, using a semistructured format, with a moderator's guide of open-ended questions and probes to stimulate discussion (Table 1). Fighters and nonfighters were asked the same questions in each domain; probes varied based on the discussion in each group. All groups were conducted in English by participant preference. Groups were 60 to 90 minutes in duration. Participants completed a self-reported questionnaire about demographics and involvement in fighting and received a \$30 participation honorarium. Participant engagement and nonverbal interactions were similar across most groups, except for one group of female nonfighters, in which participants were less interactive. This study was approved by the University of Texas Southwestern institutional review board.

ANALYSIS

Focus groups were audiotaped and professionally transcribed, and the accuracy of the transcripts was verified by reading the transcript while listening to the audiotape. Transcripts were independently analyzed by 3 coders,²⁹ who met to resolve differences by consensus. Participant perspectives were compared and contrasted using thematic content analysis. Inductive analysis was conducted using open-coding of the transcripts to identify concepts stated by the participants.³⁰ Similar codes were aggregated into broader themes. A coding scheme was developed after

Table 1. Moderator's Guide for Focus Groups of Adolescents Regarding Fighting

Domain	Question	Probes
Risk factors for fighting	Why do you or your friends get into fights?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What makes you (your friends) want to fight? • What do you (your friends) think about people who fight? • Do your friends, family, and other adults encourage you to or make you fight? • Can TV, movies, or video games encourage or make a teen fight?
Factors protective against fighting	What keeps you or your friends from fighting?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe people who don't fight. • Why don't they get into fights? • How are teens who don't fight different from teens who fight? • What do you (your friends) think about teens who don't fight? • Who keeps you (your friends) from fighting?
Prevention strategies	How can we keep fights from happening?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do your parents (or anyone else) tell you not to fight? • How do you prevent yourself from fighting? • How do other people prevent you (your friends) from fighting? • What can parents or families do to help you (your friends) not fight? What can schools do? What can doctors do?

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