Department for Education

Evidence informed interventions

Guidance document for tackling serious youth violence through school-based interventions

November 2023

Contents

What is the Evidence Informed Interventions guidance?

A version of this guidance was originally developed in February 2022 for SAFE Taskforce areas to provide advice on navigating the evidence on serious youth violence prevention approaches to use in and around schools. It has been updated to make this advice available to schools and local commissioners outside of SAFE areas.

The SAFE Taskforces programme has brought together mainstream schools to commission evidence-based interventions[1] to Support young people with challenging behaviour, enabling them to Attend school regularly so they can Fulfil their potential and prevent costly poor life outcomes by inspiring them to Exceed their expectations.

This programme is about delivering high-quality intervention in and around schools, to the right young people based on an understanding the strategic needs within the local area, and delivered in the right way, to make maximum impact.

This guidance sets out the evidence on tackling serious youth violence[2] including top tips for implementing high quality interventions. It draws on the knowledge base of the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF, the What Works Centre for serious youth violence) and the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) as well as a wider field of evidence.

The role of evidence

The intervention types in this guidance focus primarily on tackling serious violence in a schools-based context, for young people aged 10-14, and which can be used 'upstream' or 'downstream' of serious violence.[3]

As well as which intervention types are commissioned, how you implement your chosen intervention also impacts on how effective it can be. For example, mentoring can come in many different formats, but not all are equally effective. The evidence shows that one off or shorter mentoring programmes are less effective than longer term programmes (i.e., at least one school year).

SAFE Taskforces have been required to use evidence when making choices about which interventions to invest in and how to implement them.

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[1] By 'intervention' we mean strategies and approaches designed to affect change in a situation or individual after a modification.

[2] The review of the evidence base on which this guidance was based was undertaken in early 2022, and only a light touch review has been undertaken to ensure it reflects more recent findings.

[3] 'Upstream' intervention is preventative and seeks to support children and young people before they are involved in serious youth violence, for example, when they may be showing early signs of disengaging from education. 'Downstream' intervention is when support is targeted at those considered at risk of or involved in serious youth violence.

Sometimes the evidence base is limited or is not directly applicable to your context. This guidance also provides advice on navigating this, to check the suitability of different interventions for your area and pupil need.

How to use this guidance

The rest of this guidance will focus on specific intervention types and how to implement them in your context.

From page 6, we have provided details to help local areas choose which intervention types will work for you. We have categorised intervention types into four groups on the basis of the impact on serious youth violence and the quality and availability of the evidence. We have only considered approaches relevant to the SAFE Taskforce programme (i.e. those which work in and around schools) rather than an exhaustive selection of all intervention types.

Key point
This guidance should complement the professional and practical expertise of working with children and young people to tackle serious violence, held within local areas, as well as engagement with the views and experiences of children and young people.

Implementation will be a strong thread in this guidance. It is just as important to use evidence when designing the delivery of an intervention as it is when choosing which type of intervention to invest in. Page 23 onwards will provide recommendations to help you ensure that the intervention you have chosen is well suited to your cohort and context.

Page 28 onwards explains the 'next steps' of how to develop a theory of change for your intervention choices.

All SAFE Taskforces have completed a Strategic Needs Assessment to identify and map priority cohorts, settings and outcomes. Intervention types are then chosen to address these priority needs.

Key points
AMBER is not an exhaustive list of interventions, but a set of parameters for the quality and suitability of the evidence base that is needed. For example, the YEF toolkit is updated to include developments in the evidence base, including additional intervention types. Local areas may also have local programmes with promising evidence which they wish to build on.
In this guidance, we talk about 'intervention types', however in practice, programmes may involve a combination or blend of intervention components (for example, mentoring or

after-school programmes with social skills training), and practitioners may draw on a toolkit of evidence informed interventions.

Choosing evidence informed interventions

This section outlines the GREEN intervention types which DfE considers suitably evidence-based for SAFE Taskforces as well as advice on choosing, and examples of AMBER intervention types, for which the evidence is still emerging.

Further information on RED types can be found in <u>Annex A</u>. These RED intervention types do not have sufficient evidence of a positive impact on serious violence and we have asked SAFE Taskforces not to choose approaches in these categories.

GREEN interventions

Intervention types are classed as GREEN if they are considered effective at preventing serious youth violence.

We have identified three GREEN intervention types. For each, we have read and synthesised below the available evidence that relates to how to implement those types of interventions effectively to impact on serious youth violence.[4]

We have asked SAFE Taskforces to choose at least one GREEN intervention, given these are currently the most evidence-based approaches.

Mentoring

Evidence quality: Good

Estimated impact on Serious Violence: Consistent, small to moderate

Outcomes: Youth violence, aggression, behavioural difficulties, engaging with education

Who it works for: Primary and secondary school age, upstream or downstream

What is it?

Mentoring is a popular intervention which has been shown to have consistent positive, if often small, impacts on children across a range of outcomes.[5,6,7] Mentoring can be delivered in a wide range of formats, not all of which are effective at reducing serious

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[4] A comprehensive review of the evidence-base was undertaken in February 2022 and therefore the advice in this section may not reflect more recent research findings. A light touch evidence review was undertaken in May 2023 which confirmed that these remain the key GREEN intervention types relevant to the SAFE programme.

[5] Raposa et al., 2019. <u>The Effects of Youth Mentoring Programs: A Meta-analysis of Outcome Studies</u>

[6] Christensen et al., 2020. <u>Non-Specific versus Targeted Approaches to Youth Mentoring: A Follow-up Meta-analysis</u>

[7] DuBois et al., 2011. <u>How Effective Are Mentoring Programs for Youth? A Systematic Assessment of the Evidence</u>

violence, and so it is particularly important to take into account the specific features associated with having the right impact.

Although mentoring is sometimes considered to be 'low cost', as mentors may have lower salary costs than professionals for other interventions or can be volunteers, there are often hidden costs associated when taking account of those features which are important to delivering an impactful programme, such as the cost of recruiting and training high quality mentors.

A central feature of any youth mentoring programme involves the matching of a child or young person (the 'mentee') to a mentor, who forms a relationship with the mentee and can provide social, emotional and/or academic guidance. [8,9]

Mentors can support young people through:[10]

- developing a trusting relationship and providing emotional support;

- listening carefully and helping the mentee gain insight and self-awareness;

- providing practical support and instruction (academic, employment or social skills as well as access to services);

- acting as a positive role model; and

- helping mentees to become aware of and gain access to new networks and opportunities.

The explanation behind why mentoring reduces serious youth violence is that the mentor-mentee relationship and associated activities can support the positive development of children and young people's social-emotional and cognitive skills. Improvements in social-emotional skills can occur through a positive, consistent and safe relationship with a mentor, who models prosocial[11] skills. Meaningful engagement between the young person and their mentor can also help develop young people's cognitive skills, for example their ability to self-regulate and process information.[12]

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[8] Bellis et al., 2012: A Public Health approach to violence prevention in England

[9] Tolan et al.,2013: Mentoring Interventions to Affect Juvenile Delinquency and Associated Problems: A Systematic Review

[10] Gaffney et al., 2021. YEF mentoring technical report

[11] Prosocial skills are a set of behaviours that intend to benefit others, such as helping and co-operating, as well as following socially acceptable behaviours, such as school rules.

[12] Raposa et al., 2019. The Effects of Youth Mentoring Programs: A Meta-analysis of Outcome Studies

What does it have an impact on?

Mentoring can reduce violent crime and behavioural indicators of violent crime, including aggression, delinquency, and conduct problems.[13,14]

Mentoring can improve engagement in education including reduced unauthorised absence, improved academic performance (as rated by teachers) and academic efficacy (measured through completed school work and quality of school work).[15]

Who does it work for?

Mentoring can be effective for primary and secondary school age children.

Evidence suggests that mentoring programmes which are targeted to specific individuals and problems, rather than offered to all children, have more impact. Mentoring can be targeted towards children who are either showing early signs of disengaging from education or considered at risk of serious youth violence.[16]

There is evidence that mentoring programmes are more effective when implemented as prevention strategies for at-risk children and young people, and may have less impact for those who are older and already engaged in offending behaviours.[17]

Mentoring may be more impactful for boys than girls. However, race/ethnicity have not been found to affect its impact.[18]

Who can deliver it, how and in which settings?

Mentors should be adults. The evidence for young people as mentors is weak.[19]

Interventions are most effective when mentors come from helping professions, when they are motivated to be a mentor, and where their occupational/educational background fits with the programme's aims.[20,21]

Training and support for mentors is important and can influence how effective a programme is.[22] This might include trust and competency building skills, listening and non-judgemental counselling skills, understanding youth violence risks and drivers, and

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[13] Gaffney et al., 2021. YEF - Mentoring Technical Report

[14] DuBois et al., 2011. Meta analysis of mentoring programs, across a broad range of outcomes

[15] In an evaluation of the Big Brothers Big Sisters programme, frequency of skipping school demonstrated the largest positive impact, and was the one outcome which still demonstrated an impact after 15 months. Herrera et al., 2007. Making a Difference in Schools: The Big Brothers Big Sisters School-Based Mentoring Impact Study .

[16] DuBois et al., 2011. Meta analysis of mentoring programs, across a broad range of outcomes

[17] Gaffney et al., 2021. YEF - Mentoring Technical Report

[18] Raposa et al., 2019. The Effects of Youth Mentoring Programs: A Meta-analysis of Outcome Studies

[19] Raposa et al., 2019. The Effects of Youth Mentoring Programs: A Meta-analysis of Outcome Studies

[20] Raposa et al., 2019. The Effects of Youth Mentoring Programs: A Meta-analysis of Outcome Studies

[21] Gaffney et al., 2021. YEF mentoring technical report

[22] DuBois et al., 2011. How Effective Are Mentoring Programs for Youth? A Systematic Assessment of the Evidence

safeguarding responsibilities and processes.[23]

Mentoring can be successfully delivered in both community and school-based settings.

Relationship-building should be a key component of any mentoring intervention, and mentors and mentees should be suitably matched in a way that helps foster a positive relationship.[24] However, mentoring is most effective when it also focuses on a particular issue relevant to the young person (such as support re-engaging with school or with substance misuse).[25]

Mentoring is most effective when delivered consistently over a longer period (e.g., the school year) rather than a short-term or one off intervention, with clear expectations about the frequency of contact.[26]

Maintaining participation of mentees over the longer term is a key barrier to implementation, and therefore engaging them effectively is important.[27]

Some mentoring programmes involve the young person's parents or family, and these have been demonstrated to be effective.

Implementation checklist

Mentors should be adults, have relevant skills (e.g., come from helping professions), and have experience working with children or families.

Training should equip mentors with the skills they need to support young people effectively (e.g., trust and competency building skills, non-judgemental counselling skills, understanding youth violence risks and drivers).

Plan how ongoing mentor participation will be supported, for example through training, supervision and support.

Consider how mentee engagement will be supported, thinking about children and young people's own views.

Match mentors and mentees suitably, and in a way that helps foster a positive relationship.

Mentoring should be a longer-term programme, ideally at least a full school year, so plan how this will work in practice.

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[23] Gaffney et al., 2021. YEF mentoring technical report
[24] Hererra, 2007. Making a Difference in Schools: The Big Brothers Big Sisters School-Based Mentoring Impact Study
[25] Christensen et al., 2020. Non-Specific versus Targeted Approaches to Youth Mentoring: A Follow-up Meta-analysis
[26] Hererra, 2007. Making a Difference in Schools: The Big Brothers Big Sisters School-Based Mentoring Impact Study
[27] Gaffney et al., 2021. YEF mentoring technical report

Plan how positive endings to the mentor-mentee relationship are supported, as this may be particularly important for children and young people.

Further links and resources:

- [Youth Endowment Fund Toolkit – Mentoring](#)

- [Early Intervention Foundation – Preventing gang involvement and youth violence: Advice for commissioning mentoring programmes](#)

Social skills programmes

Evidence quality: Good

Estimated impact on Serious Violence: High

Outcomes: Youth violence, aggression, behavioural difficulties, engaging with education

Who it works for: Primary and secondary school age, upstream or downstream

What is it?

Social skills training encourages young people to adopt positive behaviours and reduce anti-social behaviours. In the context of serious youth violence, social skills training focuses on addressing the skills which reduce aggressive or violent behaviours. In terms of encouraging children and young people's engagement in education, it aims to reduce behaviour problems and improve social competence.[28]

The aim of social skills training is to develop positive behaviours such as children and young people's ability to exercise self-control, to understand and respond appropriately to their emotions, to understand things from others' perspectives and improve their inter-personal, communication and problem-solving skills. [29] The theory behind social skills training is that by promoting these skills, young people will be better able to pause, reflect and control their behaviour before they act, reducing the risk that they will act impulsively and aggressively.

Social skills training often involves role-playing exercises, group and individual discussions, video demonstrations and motivational and informative activities.

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[28] Social competence describes the social and emotional and cognitive skills needed to effectively navigate social interactions (e.g., getting along with others, making and maintaining relationships, and responding appropriately in different social settings).

[29] Gaffney et al., 2021. [YEF social skills technical report](#)

What does it have an impact on?

Social skills training can reduce serious youth violence, arrests and offending, as well as having small but noticeable reductions on outcomes such as aggressive and disruptive behaviours.[30]

Social skills training has also been found to have a small positive impact on some educational engagement outcomes, such as increased school attendance and attainment[31], and reductions in conduct problems such as disruptive class behaviour, non-compliance, aggression, and bullying.[32]

Who does it work for?

Social skills training can be effective for primary and secondary school age children.

Social skills training can be targeted towards children who are either showing early signs of disengaging from education or considered at risk of serious youth violence.[33]

Multiple studies have found small, positive impacts from universal (e.g., whole class) social skills programmes on outcomes such as youth violence and delinquency, as well as conduct problems such as aggression, disruptive behaviour and bullying.[34] While the evidence suggests that social skills programmes can be effectively delivered in both a targeted or universal format, the SAFE programme is geared toward targeted support.

In general, there is little evidence to suggest that social skills training is more-or-less effective for specific groups of children. It has been shown to be effective for a range of children in a range of contexts. There is some evidence to suggest that social skills training can have a greater impact on boys compared to girls on outcomes such as aggression and disruptive behaviour. Some programmes demonstrated higher effectiveness when the majority of participants were boys, as opposed to programmes with a more balanced gender ratio or a higher proportion of girls.[35]

Who can deliver it, how, and in which settings?

The design and monitoring of social skills training interventions has been found to be an important factor in their success. Research has found that interventions which are well-

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[30] Youth Endowment Fund, 2021. Youth Endowment Fund Social Skills Toolkit

[31] Heller et al., 2013. Preventing youth violence and dropout: a randomized field experiment

[32] Durlak et al., 2011. The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions

[33] Youth Endowment Fund, 2021. Youth Endowment Fund Social Skills Toolkit

[34] Durlak et al., 2011. The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions

[35] Beelman & Lösel, 2020. A Comprehensive Meta-Analysis of Randomized Evaluations of the Effect of Child Social Skills Training on Antisocial Development

designed, effectively structured, delivered consistently, and that have had their implementation monitored, are generally more effective on outcomes.[36]

Teachers and other school-based or external professionals[37] can deliver social skills training, however they may benefit from a good level of training and support so as to deliver it as effectively as possible.

For greater impacts from social skills training, programme materials should be accessible, easy to use and relevant.[38] This may be particularly important if you are using a programme developed for another cultural context (e.g., a number of programmes have been developed in the US and may need adapting to be suitable in the UK).

Social skills training is typically delivered in school settings, outside a child's regular classroom to individuals or small groups. Individual sessions have been found to be effective.[39] Delivering a complete social skills programme within the time constraints of the school timetable has been identified as a key implementation barrier, and so effectively planning for how and when the programme will take place is important. [40]

Further links and resources:

- Youth Endowment Fund Toolkit - Social skills training

- Early Intervention Foundation Guidebook - PATHS Elementary curriculum

- Early Intervention Foundation Guidebook - Becoming A Man

Implementation checklist

Make sure your programme has been carefully designed and clearly structured. Plan how it will be delivered and monitored consistently.

Plan to deliver training and support upfront, and then on an ongoing basis, for those delivering social skills training, especially if this will be teachers or professionals who are less familiar with how and why it works.

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[36] Durlak et al., 2011. The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions

[37] Wilsons and Lipsey (2007). Meta analysis of school-based psychosocial preventative programs, focused on aggressive & disruptive behaviour

[38] Humphrey et al., 2010. Social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL)programme in secondary schools: national evaluation

[39] Wilsons and Lipsey (2007). Meta analysis of school-based psychosocial preventative programs, focused on aggressive & disruptive behaviour

[40] Humphrey et al., 2010. Social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL)programme in secondary schools: national evaluation

Ensure those delivering the intervention have access to suitable programme materials, relevant to the children they are working with.

Plan how to realistically deliver the programme within or around the school timetable so that young people benefit from its full length and content.

Try and plan individual social skills sessions for children and young people in combination with group sessions or other activities.

Cognitive Behavioural Approaches (including CBT)

Evidence quality: Moderate

Estimated impact on Serious Violence: High

Outcomes: Youth violence indicators and reoffending, aggression, behavioural difficulties

Who it works for: Primary and secondary school age, upstream or downstream

What is it?

'Cognitive behavioural approaches' describe a range of different formats. Within this guidance, we are talking about:

The teaching and use of **cognitive behavioural techniques**, which are the ways in which young people can, for example, control their anger, resolve conflict and build positive relationships. A range of techniques can be used such as self-talk, modelling, reinforcement or cognitive mediation. These techniques are often included within ready-made curriculum programmes for use in schools. These techniques and programmes can be delivered by teachers in classrooms, or utilised by other relevant professionals in their work with children and young people.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), which is a specific cognitive behavioural approach. While it often utilises the cognitive behavioural techniques above, it is a form of therapy delivered by qualified mental health professionals. The mental health professional might establish a trusting therapeutic relationship and environment in which the young person can address their experiences and thinking patterns, usually in a one-to-one environment.

This section covers both of these cognitive behavioural approaches. The evidence demonstrates that both can be effective at reducing serious violence and associated behaviours, however we are clear that the evidence and implementation requirements can differ for each.

Cognitive behavioural approaches can be delivered in a range of formats within schools[41], including but not limited to:

- **Social competence training, with a cognitive-behavioural component**: Helping young people develop social competence, understand and control their anger and resolve conflict using cognitive behavioural techniques).

- **Specific programmes**: Specific programmes which aim to teach cognitive behavioural techniques, such as the Tools for Getting Along curriculum.

- **Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT):** Therapy intervention delivered within school settings (or elsewhere) by qualified mental health professionals.

Cognitive behavioural approaches involve exercises and activities which help individuals recognise and respond to 'distortions' in their thinking patterns. Thinking patterns and responses can be related to trauma an individual has experienced – this could be a particular event or a set of experiences. In the context of serious youth violence, the premise is that these thinking patterns and behaviours might make someone more susceptible to acting aggressively and impulsively.

The presumed reason cognitive behavioural approaches are effective at impacting on serious violence is that supporting young people to develop strategies to manage negative thoughts, feelings and responses can help reduce the types of behaviours (such as a limited ability to self-regulate) that can put them at risk of youth violence.

While there are some similarities to social skills training (such as interpersonal problem-solving), a key difference is that cognitive behavioural approaches involve activities and exercises to help children and young people understand and modify thinking patterns. In practice, many programmes combine cognitive behavioural approaches (teaching of cognitive behavioural techniques or CBT), with social skills training or another intervention type.

What does it have an impact on?

School-based interventions using cognitive behavioural techniques have been found to cause reductions in behavioural difficulties, in particular anger and aggression[42], which are indicators associated with serious violence. However, some studies have found aggression to be higher in the treatment group after the intervention, indicating that how the intervention is delivered is important to consider (see below for considerations).[43]

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[41] Wilson, 2003. The effects of school-based intervention programs on aggressive behaviour: a meta-analysis

[42] Lavenberg, 2007: Effects of school-based cognitive-behavioral anger interventions: A meta-analysis

[43] Barnes et al., 2014. School-based cognitive-behavioral interventions in the treatment of aggression in the United States: A meta-analysis

While much of the evidence focuses on mental health outcomes, CBT has been found to have an impact on violent crime committed by children and young people and youth reoffending.[44]

Who does it work for?

Cognitive behavioural approaches can be effective for primary and secondary school age children and young people. Most evidence on school-based interventions using cognitive behavioural techniques relevant to the SAFE programme focus on aggression and aggressive behaviour.

The evidence on the most effective delivery format of school-based interventions teaching cognitive behavioural techniques is mixed. The evidence for CBT on outcomes relevant to SAFE largely comes from clinical settings where it is often based on intensive, one-to-one intervention. However, for school-based interventions the evidence is less clear on which group sizes are most effective. The strongest evidence for school-based approaches aimed at reducing aggressive behaviour through cognitive behavioural techniques is for individuals[45] and larger groups. Research comparing group sizes found that larger groups worked better than smaller groups, however the explanation for this is unclear.[46]

School-based interventions that use cognitive behavioural techniques are relevant for those who are either showing early signs of disengaging from education or considered at risk of serious youth violence.

When targeting a reduction in reoffending, CBT specifically may be particularly effective for children and young people who have previously had contact with the criminal justice system, though the research findings for this were not specific to school-based settings.[47]

There is also evidence that CBT can be effective at reducing negative behavioural outcomes such as aggression and conduct problems in children with ADHD and conduct disorder.[48]

Who can deliver it, how, and in which settings?

CBT is a psychological intervention, and is intended to be implemented by mental health professionals, usually with postgraduate training or professional CBT certification.[49]

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[44] Youth Endowment Fund, 2021. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.

[45] Wilson, 2003.The effects of school-based intervention programs on aggressive behaviour: a meta-analysis

[46] Barnes et al., 2014. School-based cognitive-behavioral interventions in the treatment of aggression in the United States: A meta-analysis

[47] Gaffney et al. 2021. YEF CBT Technical Report

[48] Hoogsteder et al., 2014. A meta-analysis of the effectiveness of individually oriented Cognitive Behavioral Treatment (CBT) for severe aggressive behavior in adolescents

[49] Gaffney et al. 2021. YEF CBT Technical Report

There is evidence to suggest that interventions using cognitive behavioural techniques can effectively be delivered in schools by teachers or other appropriate professionals (either school-based or external) who work with children and young people.[50,51] Most school-based evidence comes from those under the age of 12.

Studies have found that adequate training, supervision and support for those delivering cognitive behavioural techniques were key to implementing school-based interventions successfully.[52]

Interventions where the quality of intervention was closely monitored resulted in better participation by young people on the programme.

Further links and resources:

[Youth Endowment Fund Toolkit - Cognitive Behavioural Therapy](#)

Implementation Checklist

CBT needs to be delivered by qualified mental health professionals

Ensure teachers or other professionals delivering interventions using cognitive behavioural techniques receive high quality, intensive training on using these approaches with children and young people, and know how it applies to reducing serious violence and indicators

Provide those delivering the intervention with ongoing support and professional supervision

Put effective mechanisms in place for monitoring the quality of the intervention delivery, and have measures to improve quality where necessary (e.g., through training, coaching and supervision).

AMBER interventions

We have considered interventions to be in the AMBER category if they are potentially effective. We have included a list of examples of approaches we consider to be in this category later in this section, however this is not an exhaustive list.

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[50] Barnes et al., 2014. [School-based cognitive-behavioral interventions in the treatment of aggression in the United States: A meta-analysis](#)

[51]Lavenberg, 2007: [Effects of school-based cognitive-behavioral anger interventions: A meta-analysis](#)

[52] Wilson et. al (2003): [The effects of school-based intervention programs on aggressive behaviour: a meta-analysis.](#)

Because the evidence on AMBER interventions is less clear, we have asked SAFE Taskforces to **consider in greater detail how and why they will impact on serious youth violence.**

> **Key point**
>
> AMBER is not an exhaustive list of interventions, but a set of parameters for the quality and suitability of the evidence base needed. SAFE Taskforces are able to put forward other programmes (e.g., building on existing work), where there is supporting evidence showing how and why it is likely to have impact on reducing serious youth violence.

Interventions that target an indicator of serious violence

In the previous section we set out the three GREEN interventions which have high quality evidenced impact on serious violence. AMBER interventions include those where there is high quality evidence that the intervention is effective at addressing a key indicator for serious violence. Addressing these indicators is still likely to have positive benefits for the young person, but there are additional things we need to check before assuming it will also have a positive impact on reducing serious violence.

In the absence of evidence of a direct impact on serious violence, choosing an intervention which focuses on tackling a well-evidenced indicator of serious violence can be the next best approach.

> **Key point**
>
> When it comes to choosing interventions, we need to use indicators carefully. Indicators do not necessarily cause serious youth violence, and it is important not to take them at face value. Behind each indicator are a number of factors across different parts of a child or young person's life and experiences.

Indicators (sometimes referred to as 'risk factors'), are features of a child or young person's life that indicate the child is at increased risk of involvement in serious violence. Indicators are a valuable tool especially for identifying young people at risk of becoming involved in serious violence who may need support.[53]

We have synthesised below the research findings to create a shortlist of indicators most applicable for this programme and which areas may want to focus on. We have divided these into two categories of indicators: "attitudinal or behavioural" and "educational". For example, a young person may be suspended from school for the same aggressive behaviour which led to a violent altercation among peers. Both the 'aggressive behaviour'

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[53] Our focus on indicators of risk does not minimise the importance of protective factors in a child or young person's life. However, the majority of available evidence is on indicators ('risk factors'), and it can be more complex to use protective factors for the purposes of targeting interventions.

and 'suspension' are useful indicators, but need to be used slightly differently. This is because the first describes a *behaviour* which is leading to the poor *educational* outcome.

Category 1: Attitudinal and behavioural indicators

These indicators focus on how children and young people behave and feel. These indicators are more 'upstream' in nature, meaning that they can lead to many poor outcomes for children and young people, including poor educational outcomes such as suspension and exclusion as well as serious violence. There is good evidence to suggest that interventions which target behavioural indicators can have a knock-on effect in reducing the likelihood of serious youth violence.

> **Key point**
>
> Given the complex relationship between 'educational indicators' and serious youth violence, we do not recommend targeting a single 'educational indicator' on its own, but instead to make sure the approach is also shown to impact on an attitudinal and behavioural indicator or directly on serious violence.

Key attitudinal and behavioural indicators:

- **Challenging behaviour:** Challenging behaviour is often defined as behaviour which has a duration, frequency, intensity or persistence that is beyond the normal range that schools tolerate; and most unlikely to respond to the customary strategies used in the classroom and school.

- **Aggressive behaviours:** Aggressive behaviours are those intended to harm others[54], which can include verbal or physical aggression. For example, frequently arguing, getting into a lot of fights or swearing.[55]

- **Low levels of self-control:** This is the lack of restraint over behaviour, emotions or thoughts, which may lead to less inhibited or impulsive actions.

- **Low self-esteem:** Self-esteem is the opinion people hold of themselves. Individuals with low self-esteem often see themselves and their lives in a more negative or critical way.[56]

- **Low prosocial attitudes**: Low prosocial attitudes mean a young person may engage in, associate with peers who engage in, or approve of anti-social behaviour or other problem behaviours such as aggression.[57]

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[54] Loesel & Farrington, 2012 Direct Protective and Buffering Protective Factors in the Development of Youth Violence
[55] EIF, 2015 Preventing Gang and Youth Violence
[56] NHS, 2020 Raising low self-esteem
[57] EIF, 2015 Preventing Gang and Youth Violence

Category 2: Educational indicators

These indicators focus on poor educational engagement outcomes experienced by children and young people. They are more 'downstream' in nature, meaning that they can be the result of other factors such as the attitudinal and behavioural indicators. There is clear evidence that children and young people who demonstrate these indicators may also be at risk of exposure to serious violence, but it is less clear whether interventions which only target these indicators will necessarily reduce the likelihood of serious youth violence.

Key educational indicators:

- **Unauthorised absence (truancy):** The repeat unauthorised absence of a child or young person from school. There is generally an association between truancy from school and serious youth violence. For example, analysis from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) shows that controlling for other variables, those children and young people who truanted once a week were more likely to carry or use a weapon than those who had never truanted.[58]

- **Suspensions**: Previously known as 'fixed period exclusions', where a pupil is excluded from school for a set amount of time (up to a maximum of 45 school days in one academic year). This can involve part of the school day and it does not have to be for a continuous period.[59] Suspension has been cited as a risk factor for youth violence in various studies.[60,61]

- **Exclusions:** A permanent exclusion is where a pupil is excluded and will not come back to that school unless the permanent exclusion is overturned.[62] Those who have been excluded from school are more likely to carry or use a weapon compared to those who have not been suspended or excluded, though this does not prove that school exclusion causes weapon carrying or use, or that all those who have been excluded carry or use a weapon.[63]

- **Low academic attainment:** Poor school achievement compared to others of the same age, often reported by a child's teacher or assessment scores. Low school performance as reported by a child's teacher has been cited as a risk factor for future involvement in serious violence.[64]

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[58] Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2021 Prevalence and predictors of weapon carrying and use and other offences at age 17

[59] GOV.UK, 2023 Permanent exclusions and suspensions in England

[60] EIF, 2015 Preventing Gang and Youth Violence

[61] Home Office, 2006 Delinquent youth groups and offending behaviour: findings from the 2004 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey

[62] GOV.UK, 2023 Permanent exclusions and suspensions in England

[63] Home Office, 2019 An analysis of indicators of serious violence

[64] Home Office, 2019 An analysis of indicators of serious violence

List of amber interventions

AMBER interventions include interventions where there may be high quality evidence that the intervention is effective at addressing a key indicator for serious youth violence but not serious violence directly. It may also include those interventions which show a moderate impact on serious youth violence, but from a limited evidence source (compared with GREEN interventions where the evidence is higher quality). The table below is a non-exhaustive list of approaches we consider AMBER, drawn from the [Youth Endowment Fund's evidence toolkit](). This has been updated (as of May 2023).

1. **Adventure and wilderness therapy**: The evidence base is not conclusive or wholly convincing, but there is some emerging evidence that supports it having a positive impact on indicators of serious violence.

2. **After-school programmes**: Findings from studies testing these programmes are mixed – some show positive effects, whilst others have negative effects. It's not clear if these interventions will have positive outcomes.

3. **Anti-bullying programmes**: Finding from studies testing these interventions are mixed: they have been shown to be both ineffective and effective. Overall, they likely have a small impact on challenging / aggressive behaviour, both indicators of serious violence. However, there is little evidence for their impact on serious violence.

4. **Interventions to prevent school exclusion**: These programmes may result in a reduction in school exclusions; however, evidence on their effectiveness is mixed, and the effects are likely to be small. UK studies do not report on this type of interventions effects on violence itself.

5. **Multi-systemic therapy:** International studies indicate this type of intervention may be effective, however, this evidence does not seem to be applicable to the UK context. UK evidence does not support MSTs effectiveness in reducing violence.

6. **Sports programmes**: Sports programmes may be effective in combination with non-sports elements. There is very little relevant literature from the UK which can be used to claim these interventions are effective at reducing serious violence.

7. **Trauma-specific therapies**: This intervention has been positive for both serious violence and indicators of serious violence, however we cannot be certain as these conclusions are based on limited and sometimes poor-quality evidence, largely based outside the UK.

Implementing interventions in your context

Regardless of how well an intervention works on paper, what matters is how successfully it is brought to life and made to work for children and those working with them. In combination with the professional and practice expertise held within local areas, it is just as important to use evidence when designing the implementation of an intervention as it is when choosing which type of intervention to invest in. This section outlines tips and advice for implementing successful interventions, drawn from research on serious youth violence and implementation practice. [65,66,67]

A theory of change uses evidence and needs to show why the intervention will be effective:

1. Why is the intervention needed?
2. Who is supported?
3. What activities are delivered?
4. How are interventions delivered?
5. When do the interventions take place?
6. Where do the interventions take place?

The implementation recommendations outline the steps which can help maximise the chances of your interventions being successful. These are likely things that local areas consider as a matter of course, and many may seem obvious; they should complement professional and practice expertise held within local areas.

It can be helpful to think about these principles according to each step in the intervention design process:

Why is the intervention needed?

Be clear on the outcomes of the intervention

Be clear on the problem you are trying to solve. The overall goal of this programme is tackling serious youth violence; this is a long-term outcome.

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[65] Early Intervention Foundation, 2015. What works to prevent gang involvement, youth violence and crime: A rapid review of interventions delivered in the UK and abroad

[66] Education Endowment Foundation, 2019. Putting Evidence to Work – A School's Guide to Implementation

[67] Education Endowment Foundation, 2016. Implementation and process evaluation for interventions in education settings

Map how short-term outputs and outcomes, which can include reducing the indicators of serious youth violence, can build towards long-term outcomes.

Consider the short-term outcomes for each intervention type and test whether the evidence suggests they will build toward the long-term outcome of reducing serious violence.

Have clear, logical outputs and specify the programme structure and content needed to achieve them

Define clear and logical outputs for your intervention which build toward your outcomes.

Specify the structure, phases and content of the intervention which have the crucial components for achieving these outcomes.

Create a shared understanding among professionals involved in the intervention about how and why these crucial components are important and expected to achieve your outcomes.

Who is supported?

Consider how the needs of different demographic characteristics within your cohort will be met

Use your Strategic Needs Assessment to identify which children are most at risk of being impacted by serious youth violence.

Draw on the available evidence on whether interventions may have greater impact for children with different demographic characteristics (age, gender, ethnic and cultural background). Plan how the various characteristics of your cohort will be well met with your interventions.

Look at the cultural applicability of any 'ready-made' programmes (e.g. many social skills programmes originate from the US and may need to be tailored for the UK).

If you adapt your intervention to meet your childrens' needs, ensure that the crucial components that make the intervention work remain securely defined in your Theory of Change.

Ensure the right children and young people can access your interventions:

Consider who will be able to refer children and young people and how they will do so, including the role of schools in identifying those who need support.

Think about your referral criteria and consider how 'tight' this will be, as well as the role of professional judgement in ensuring support reaches those who need it.

Consider the barriers to support for children, including potential stigmatisation through referral or involvement in the intervention.

Map how your referral process interacts with statutory processes and support.

Consider how to take children and young people's views and experiences into account, including on their own strengths and needs, as well as how they might best engage with support.

Identify who in the children and young people's networks (at home, school and in the community) need to be consulted or involved to achieve successful outcomes.

What activities are delivered?

Use approaches which support positive change:

Seek to create positive changes in the lives of children and young people through increasing protective factors and improving their skill sets.

Use real-life examples, activities and practice to support changes in real-life situations and relationships. For example, social skills training can include the use of role play to support children and young people to put into practice the skills they are developing; a group of young people might be given a scenario of a conflict situation and may then be supported to resolve it peacefully using the strategies they have learned.

How interventions are delivered?

Support the leadership and environments which will enable successful implementation:

Assess the readiness of schools and other settings to implement the intervention, and plan what support might they need.

Identify and enable leaders and teams who can support the intervention to be implemented in their settings, or to ensure children and young people access the intervention.

Consider how leaders can motivate and support the people delivering the intervention effectively, given motivation and sustainability are often critical to the success of a programme.

Ensure those delivering the intervention have the right knowledge and skills:

Identify who is best placed to deliver your intervention. Professionals may include teachers, youth workers, mental health professionals or other specialist practitioners, though the suitability of different professionals will depend upon the intervention.

Make sure the people delivering your intervention are trained and suitably qualified to deliver it, and are experienced in working with children and families. The evidence suggests that this impacts on the success of an intervention.

Prioritise relationship-building skills alongside other training and skill development. The quality of the relationship between a child or young person and the person delivering the intervention may influence engagement and its impact.

Support those delivering interventions with appropriate upfront and ongoing training. Think about professional coaching, peer support and supervision. How will this work in practice (e.g. for remote staff, as well as school staff taking on additional responsibilities)?

Consider whether you need to invest in greater depth training and preparation for your workforce. The SAFE programme is a three-year programme, and so there is scope to do this in your first year ready for implementation in years two and three.

Monitor your implementation:

Deliver the intervention as specified and intended in your evidence-based Theory of Change to make sure the intervention has the crucial components needed for it to have impact. This is known as 'implementation fidelity'.

Individual and cultural adaptations can still be made, where this has been considered as part of the intervention's Theory of Change.

Plan effective strategies and practices to monitor the overall delivery and specific components of the intervention to a high standard.

When do interventions take place?

Set clear expectations on contact:

Use the evidence on the optimum duration and intensity for the intervention to guide the scale and depth of the implementation. The SAFE Taskforces programme prioritises quality and impact, rather than the overall quantity of children and young people receiving an intervention.

Plan for interventions to involve regular and/or frequent contact between the facilitator and the child or young person as this is associated with greater impact. For example, this could be regular weekly contact delivered over the school term or year.

Think about how to encourage young people to consistently engage with the intervention. Take account of their views on their strengths and needs, as well as what they think would help them to engage (e.g. additional activities they like which can run alongside the intervention, such as music or sport).

Support quality relationships between children and young people and those working with them. The evidence suggests this influences the impact of interventions.

Consider accessibility barriers for children and young people and how these can be addressed.

Consider the optimum times to intervene:

Consider a child or young person's development. For example, the transition from primary to secondary school is often considered a critical period and may be an important time to offer intervention (for example via intensive support or summer school programmes).

Consider the degree to which young people are involved in serious violence ('upstream' or 'downstream') as well as whether there are 'teachable' moments when they may be particularly receptive to support.

Use a Strategic Needs Assessment to understand times when provision may be valuable due to spikes in violence (e.g. after school or holiday periods).

Where do the interventions take place?

Think about the fit and feasibility of your implementation environment:

Think about the fit and feasibility of the intervention within your environments (e.g. school, different locations in the community). For example, if a young person has to travel through areas they feel unsafe to access the intervention, they are much less likely to participate.

Where low school attendance and engagement may be a barrier to a young person participating, using the available evidence as much as possible, consider the most appropriate settings for delivering your intervention. For example, some interventions will work better in informal settings, like a youth club or elsewhere in the community, whereas others will work better in more formal settings, like a school.

Developing a Theory of Change

SAFE Taskforces have developed a Theory of Change for each intervention they have chosen. This maps out what the intervention will look like, and how and why it is expected to achieve the intended aims of preventing serious violence and improving engagement in education. As well as the basis for planning an intervention, it can be helpful for explaining the rationale for an intervention to partners and those involved with the intervention to ensure a shared understanding of what it entails, what is needed for it to succeed and to help establish how progress and success will be monitored locally.

A Theory of Change can come in many different visual or written forms, but it should aim to answer the following questions:

- What problem(s) are you trying to solve? Who is impacted by the problem(s)?

- What specific intervention are you using to address the problem(s)?

- What resources will be used in your intervention (e.g., money, facilities, staff)?

- How will the intervention be delivered, and to whom? What are the crucial characteristics of the people who will be taking part and how will they access the intervention?

- How will you decide who takes part in the intervention? Will there be a referral process?

- What will delivery look like? How will you recruit appropriate professionals to deliver the intervention? What is the content of the intervention, and what will participants do?

- How will you continue to monitor the intervention?

- What product will the intervention deliver (e.g., training, programmes, resources)?

- What are the intended outcomes for the children and young people taking part both in the short term (6 months – 2 years) and the long term (2-5 years), and how do you expect the intervention to lead to these outcomes?

- What are the assumptions and risks that need to be considered? How can these risks be mitigated?

Together, these features of an intervention start to paint a picture of how an intervention is expected to work.

Testing your assumptions:

It may seem obvious why a particular intervention is needed, or how it will work to improve children's lives. But often, there are a set of assumptions involved, which may not have been tested, and may not even be true. For example, suppose we choose to invest in a sports programme. We will want to check whether participating in a sports activity necessarily improves social skills. If so, how does it improve social skills, what are the crucial components for doing this, and do improved social skills necessarily reduce serious violence? We need to use evidence to test these assumptions and mitigate the associated risks.

The video below from the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) unpacks an example of a theory of change and how to use evidence to test our assumptions.

Key point

The Youth Endowment Fund evidence and gap map is a helpful starting point for identifying research on interventions.

Annex A – RED interventions

There are a number of interventions that we have classified as 'red' and inappropriate for the SAFE Taskforce programme. This is because the evidence shows that the intervention is either ineffective or harmful for children and young people and for achieving the target outcomes. This assessment has been based on the Youth Endowment Fund's Toolkit (interventions with an impact rating of 'harmful') as well as the Early Intervention Foundation's literature review What works to prevent gang involvement, youth violence and crime[68].

Boot camps: Boot camps are typically short-term military-style camps for children and young people aimed at providing children with self-discipline. Some camps combine this with an emphasis on developing positive behaviours, relationships and attitudes. Overall, the research , indicates that Boot camps are not effective, and young people who participate in Boot camps may be more likely to offend in the future.

Prison Awareness programme: Prison awareness programmes are a deterrence-based approach, which involve children and young people meeting current or former prisoners (either in a visit to prisons, or in a school or community setting). Some are focused on educating young people about the reality of prison, while others are fear-based. The Youth Endowment Fund explains that research on school-based programmes is limited, but that overall, the research suggests that Prison awareness programmes are ineffective and could increase the likelihood of young people offending in the future.

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[68] Early Intervention Foundation, 2015. What works to prevent gang involvement, youth violence and crime: A rapid review of interventions delivered in the UK and abroad

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