A DEVELOPMENTAL-ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON
THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF
MEANINGFULNESS IN ADOLESCENT BOYS

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ABSTRACT

As a result of recent incidents of school violence, a number of approaches have been undertaken in an effort to address the risk factors typically associated with violent behavior among adolescent boys. Among the risk factors generally identified is the need for boys to view their lives as meaningful. The purpose of this research is to examine how spirituality serves as a protective factor against aggressive and violent behavior among boys by investigating how it helps them to view their lives as being meaningful. Focusing on schools as a particularly important context for adolescent development, this work demonstrates that the use of pedagogical practices that support and foster spirituality promotes positive development and may aid in the reduction of specific risk factors associated with violent and antisocial behavior among adolescent boys.

According to a recent survey of high school students by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2004), 33% of students reported that they were in a physical fight on school property in the past year, 26% said that they had their property stolen or deliberately damaged on school property, 6% said that on at least one day in the previous month they felt too unsafe to go to school, and 17% reported carrying a weapon (e.g., gun, knife, or club) on one or more of the 30 days preceding the survey. Furthermore, in 2004, more than 750,000 young people ages 10 to 24 were treated in emergency departments for injuries sustained due to violence (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006).

A study by Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simmons-Morton, & Scheidt (2001) stated that approximately 30% of American students between 6th and 10th grade were involved in bullying (as perpetrator, victim, or both). Additionally, among 10 to 24 year olds, homicide is the leading cause of death for African Americans, the second leading cause of death for Hispanics, and the third leading cause of death for American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Asian/Pacific Islanders (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006). Furthermore, of the 5,570 homicides reported in 2003 among 10 to 24 year olds, 86% were males and 14% were females (Center for Disease Control and Prevention).
with male students more likely to be involved in a physical fight than female students (41% vs. 25%; Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004). Such findings have resulted in numerous efforts to determine what it is about the period of adolescence that makes such behavior probable, and what we can do as a society to support our adolescent boys to decrease the likelihood of their becoming either the perpetrators or victims of such crime.

As a result of recent incidents of school violence, a number of approaches have been undertaken in an effort to address the risk factors typically associated with violent behavior among adolescents in general and among boys in particular. This work explores the critical role of spirituality in both the prevention of violent behavior and the promotion of positive behavior by examining how it serves to foster a sense of personal meaning.

**Risk Factors Contributing to Violence among Adolescent Males**

In his groundbreaking book *Lost Boys*, James Garbarino describes extensive interviews with adolescent males who have committed murder in an attempt to uncover the circumstances that led to their violent act. Through his retelling of their personal narratives, certain themes unfortunately consistently emerge. He uncovers in the lives of many young boys characteristics associated with depression, a pattern of antisocial and self-destructive behavior, instances of suicidal ideation, and low self-esteem (Garbarino, 1999). While such characteristics cannot be viewed as the direct cause of violent behavior, they have been found to increase the probability of violence (Resnick, Ireland, & Borowsky, 2004).

Garbarino’s findings mirror those of many who have investigated the causes of violence among adolescent boys (Canada, 2000; Lipsey & Derzon, 1998). While his work focused on the most violent of behaviors, the characteristics identified through this line of research have also been associated with less severe problematic behavior. For example, research by Dervic, Grunebaum, Burke, & Oquendo (2006) has linked depression in adolescents to outcomes including violent behavior and increased rates of suicide. Furthermore, developmental research examining antisocial and self-destructive behavior in children finds that the earlier the onset of such behavior, the more likely it is to continue into adulthood (Eccles & Appleton Gootman, 2002). Research regarding adolescent suicidal ideation and work examining the impact of low self-esteem, have found that suicidal ideation is linked to despair and...