



"Developing socially responsible,  
research-based communication  
strategies targeting urban youth"

## MEE - FAX TRANSMITTAL COVER SHEET

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TO: Dr. Gerbner

FROM: Ivan Juzong / Therapy Fortune

FAX: 898-2024

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MESSAGE:

Please review for changes and improvements.

Thanks

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## NADAP ARTICLE

### VIOLENCE PREVENTION STRATEGIES

**When "Stop the violence" is met by "I can't believe what you say, because I see what you do."**

**by Ivan Juzang, President  
MEE Productions, Inc.**

Violence involving youth is an issue that is at the forefront of American's consciousness. It is inescapable, whether on our television and movie screens, or on our street corners. The search for solutions to violence, especially as perpetrated by young African American males, has produced much heat, yet little light.

Part of the roadblock to formulating real solutions is that adults look to the wrong places when seeking answers. Instead of decrying the disillusionment and uncaring attitudes of today's youth, we adults need to examine ourselves. For where do our kids get the message that violence is an acceptable means to solve disagreements? From us -- from our own domestic disputes, from our action movie heroes, from our tough-as-nails sports idols (what about racist, negative stereotypes and why mainstream America has no credibility??). The reality is that, because of the conflicting messages "America's role models" present, mainstream America has no credibility when it espouses violence prevention messages. The retort from urban youth, tough as it is to swallow is: "I can't believe what you say, because I see what you do!"

Violence is not a youth issue, not a Black and White issue, not a poor people issue. It is a uniquely American problem. Even when we factor out violence perpetrated by minorities (who seem to receive the most intense media and political scrutiny), the United States is still five times more violent than any other industrialized nation. Violence is a reflection of our entire society, and all of its members must work together to forge solutions.

Violence has always been a thread running through the fabric of America's history, ever since the first settlers had to get rid of a few bothersome Indians here in the "New World." As a society, we have always managed to justify some forms of violence as a

means of self-protection or self-preservation. (what about slavery and its 100's of years legacy on both blacks and whites??). Once we begin to understand that violence involving youth is not an isolated phenomenon, but is rooted in the violence that has long been a part of our national culture, we can begin to think differently about designing strategies to combat it. Violence prevention is not a program; it is a mindset.

But we must act now. In the 90's, violence has become more intense, and most significantly, more deadly than ever. Though disputes and disagreements are nothing new, especially among young males, instead of being resolved with a snappy putdown, or even a fistfight, they are more likely to be ended by gunfire.

Each generation of this nations' young people have become increasingly willing to use (or mis-use) violence as a means of conflict resolution. The bolder, what-do-I-have-to-lose attitude of today's urban youth is merely the culmination of cycles upon cycles of bad decisions. And now, tragically, both the victims and perpetrators are younger than ever.

Young Black males are disproportionately affected by violence, both as perpetrators and victims. As a society, we have been quick to blame the victim, to write this "hip-hop generation" off, dismissing all of its members with the same wide brush strokes. Yet, we underestimate their resiliency and diversity. They too deserve to have a shot at the American dream.

We cannot ignore the overarching issues of racism, poverty and the lack of jobs, when we discuss violence, but we must also not let ourselves be paralyzed by them. We recognize that institutionalized racism and the legacy of slavery have been major factors in turning our young black men off to participation in "the system." One or two negative experiences, no matter how inevitable, can be enough to shatter the confidence and resolve of the oppressed souls, whose trust in the system remains fragile, at best.

Therefore, we need new, fresh, holistic approaches to the increasing violence in this nation -- strategies aimed not solely at youth, but also at adults. As adults, we must come to grips with two painful facts: (1) that we ourselves, have not modeled effective conflict resolution behavior, and (2) our attempts to stop violence involving youth have, by and large, failed. Our violence prevention efforts must be restructured to motivate and inspire every segment of society: community leaders, youth service providers, teachers, parents and the youth themselves, into positive action.

As a communications company specializing in issues impacting urban youth, MEE Productions Inc. has done years of research into the causes and effects of violence. We offer community-sensitive, research-based recommendations that provide the essential tools to attract and retain youth in programs that work. Our research shows that:

- Peer pressure and acceptance is a factor that must not be overlooked. Many urban youth feel that they must save face among their peer group when confronted. Any perceived invasion of personal space or a challenge to an individual's identity could be a trigger for violence. In addition, many "wild cannons" believe that they can raise their esteem within the peer group and community by acts of random violence. [When *the Image of the Peer Group* or family is at stake, some urban youth feel that they must resort to violence in order to maintain the image with which they so closely identify. When a perceived insult takes place from outside the group (i.e. peer group, family group, extended family, etc.), an individual often feels that some member of the group must respond. The feeling is "If you don't do it [seek revenge], then I'll do it." *Peer Pressure* forces youth to seek a violent resolution to confrontation in order to save face within the group, i.e., "You're a punk, if you don't do anything."]

- Another important factor is the increased access to guns at all levels of society. We have become a trigger happy-society, making the streets a dangerous place to be. These days, a young black male stands more of a chance of being killed right in his own neighborhood, than he would have 20 years ago being sent to fight in Vietnam.

- While today's younger generation has become more accustomed to violence, they seem to be unconcerned about the consequences of their own violent acts, i.e. death or incarceration.

-Some urban youth carry guns not because they intend to commit a violent act, but as a deterrent from being attacked themselves, or for protection. The reason that "I'm going to get him before he gets me."

- Drug and alcohol use and abuse impacts youth violence. People under the influence of alcohol, marijuana and cocaine are more likely than non-users to commit acts of violence. In addition, drug-related transactions are likely places for the occurrence of violence.

- The media plays an increasingly inappropriate role in defining acceptable behavior and values for youth. It has desensitized them to violence, to the point where it has become

almost acceptable for any confrontation or disagreement to end violently. [ALSO -- Media trains young people to view themselves as a minority.]

- The media also insidiously hurt the youth by perpetrating stereotypes about them, negative messages that they later internalize. In addition, these stereotypes make it possible for adults to believe that the negative messages we see and hear are accurate. We begin to wonder if today's youth are really worth saving, lowering our expectations, instead of exhorting and supporting them on to success.

- Young people tell us that they lack the information they need in order to make life-and-death decisions. Young people are poorly informed of step-by-step processes to achieve their dreams and ambitions, are unaware of "healthier" alternative to immediate gratification.

Some communication strategies which need to be considered:

- Before you deal in any way with violence involving youth, you must understand its nature and circumstances. We must, for example, explode the stereotype that all youth are into gang violence. In fact, most of their violence is perpetrated against family and friends. Therefore, additional study is needed to unearth the root causes of this epidemic of violence; research that identifies effective "stop the violence" messages, which educate the masses about the real issues.

- The creation of more recovery messages. While most public service campaigns have concentrated on violence prevention messages, recovery has been overlooked. These efforts are needed to bring back young men and women who may have made a recent mistake but who want to reenter the mainstream.

- We desperately need our communities to become more involved. A caring "village" can provide wider options for our youth, more positive channels into which they can put their energies. A network must be created to provide prevention messages, treatment, early intervention and recovery strategies. We must demand a national commitment of resources to this effort, allowing us to reclaim our youth, by re-enrolling dropouts, or providing treatment for those who have gone astray. If we don't save them now, we are only increasing the probability that they will engage in at risk behavior. Supporting our young people is making a crucial investment in our future. [We want a return but are we willing to invest in our young people?]

Community revitalization is a crucial factor. At the individual and economic level, we must slow down the brain drain that takes place as the community's more affluent member leave for "brighter pastures." The economic drain is no less devastating. We must encourage these role models to remain rooted in their home bases, if not by their choice of residence, then in their commitment to give back to youth through the investment of their time and money.

- We need to truly listen to our young people, and give them messages of hope and recovery. However, it is critical that those messages are grounded in the culture of urban youth in order to be effective. Culturally positive messages give youth the emotional and problem-solving skills they need to withstand the inevitable disappointments of life. Increased self-pride and self-esteem will prove invaluable assets in the climb toward prosperity.

- We need greater empowerment of urban youth, through entrepreneurship programs. By learning the ins and outs of running a business, and making one's own decisions, youth will find that many of the skills that have stood them well in the streets are positive forces in this new arena. Entrepreneurship also provides a unique outlet for their boundless creativity. Even if these young business person later decide to become employees rather than employers, the experiences gained will make for a much richer existence. In addition, the self-actualization gained through being one's own boss enables youth to better resist peer pressure and its sometimes negative effects.

- The African American community as a whole must take more ownership of the minds and hearts of its young. If we don't control our institutions, then we don't control who has access to our young people. We need to play a more active role in determining what messages should be and are passed on to our young.

- We must review national and local laws and regulations meant to lower the risk of violent behavior and victimization. Such laws include the prohibition against certain firearms, new gun licensing requirements, curbing violent depictions in the media, and policies against bringing weapons to school. Many have already been enacted, but they are often neither widely known or adequately enforced.

With the renewed interest in "warriors" like Malcolm X and the Black Panthers, young African Americans are in some ways returning to the consciousness of the 1960's.

**This is their time to move forward. Though their innate resiliency has enabled them to survive the effects of poverty, racism and economic oppression, this buoyancy does not last forever. We must act now to end their existence as an "endangered species." [We must act now and walk our talk if we want young people to believe what we say.]**

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We cannot ignore the overarching issues of racism, poverty and the lack of jobs, when we discuss violence, but we must also not let ourselves be paralyzed by them. We cannot afford to wait. In the 90's, violence has become more intense, and most significantly, more deadly than ever. Though disputes and disagreements are nothing new among young Black males, internalized oppression (i.e., intra-racism) and easy access to guns makes it now more likely to be ended by gunfire.



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With the renewed interest in "warriors" like Malcolm X and the Black Panthers, young African Americans are in some ways returning to the consciousness of the 1960's. This is their time to move forward. Though their innate resiliency has enabled them to survive the effects of poverty, racism and economic oppression, this buoyancy does not last forever. We must act now and walk our talk if we want young people to believe what we say.