



PREVENTING YOUTH VIOLENCE: THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PARENT-AND- FAMILY-BASED STRATEGIES

Special Report

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A leading strategy for preventing children from developing violent tendencies is to design interventions aimed at improving family relations that can profoundly shape the course children follow throughout childhood and later in life.

The interactions between parents and their children, in particular, tend to accurately predict violent behavior. Studies suggest that having an emotionally distressed parent at age four contributes to a child developing conduct disorders and antisocial behaviors. And marital conflict, poor communication between parents, and other family characteristics have been identified as factors that contribute to youth violence.

Parent- and family-based strategies are particularly well suited for parents of very young children or those who have a child on the way. These programs usually focus on giving parents a better understanding of child development and issues such as why children develop violent tendencies. They also help parents develop parenting skills, nonviolent ways to resolve conflict, and ways to communicate with their children.

Studies suggest that such interventions, when well designed and implemented, can reduce violent behavior among children over the long term. The most promising programs are those that begin early in childhood and recognize all the factors that influence families, from financial circumstances and neighborhood characteristics to parenting practices and mental health issues.

The Problem

Although nearly all measures of youth violence are in decline, violence among children and adolescents remains a major concern in America, one that many see as a national crisis.

High-profile school shootings, although statistically rare,

have raised public concern over youth violence, have led many Americans to realize the problem is not exclusive to the inner city, and heightened demands on policymakers to find ways of stopping it.

Even improving statistics cannot hide the fact that youth violence in America is far worse than in any other developed nation, or that homicide remains the second leading cause of death among American children ages 1 to 14 years.

In 1998, America saw a decline in the number of juveniles arrested for Violent Crime Index offenses – murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.¹ The decline was the fourth reported in as many years.

Nevertheless, the 2.6 million youth under age 18 who were arrested in 1998 for Violent Crime Index offenses still represented a 15% increase over the total arrests reported in 1989.

Juvenile homicides have also fallen steadily, although the murder toll remains higher than that seen in the mid-1980s. In 1998, there were 1,960 murder victims under the age of 18 – down from the 2,880 juveniles murdered in 1993, when the toll was the highest ever in the U.S. The good news, however, is tempered by the fact that the recent decline has only returned the murder toll to the level reported 1988, when youth violence was rising in America.

Statistics and studies show clearly that the use of firearms is a powerful influence on violent juvenile crime trends. Nearly all of the increase in juvenile homicides from 1984 to 1993 – and all of the decline since – has been in murders committed with a firearm, with the handgun being the weapon of choice. And from 1980-1997, about 77% of the juveniles aged 15 years and older who were murdered by another juvenile were killed with a gun.

Why children turn to violence is a question with many possible answers. Unchecked aggression early in childhood

and drug and alcohol use are just a few of the risk factors of violent behavior. Domestic abuse, poor parenting practices, weak supervision, and other family characteristics are also associated with child violence.

Risk Factors

Certain characteristics of parents and children and circumstances facing families are associated with children developing violent behaviors.

Parent Factors

Parents who engage in violence themselves, abuse drugs or alcohol, and abuse or neglect their children increase the likelihood their children will become violent.

Other risk factors include:

- Harsh or inconsistent discipline.
- Lack of emotional interaction between a parent and child.
- Lack of communication between a child's mother and father.
- Parental depression.
- High levels of stress in the home.
- Domestic violence.
- Divorce and separation.

Few parents face greater stresses than those living in poverty. And poor single mothers have been found to be at the highest risk for developing parenting patterns that can lead to violent behavior by their children.²

Child Factors

Factors placing children at greater risk of developing violent behaviors, include:

- Living in violent-prone neighborhoods.
- Witnessing violent acts.

- Associating with violent or antisocial friends.
- Being a victim of abuse.

In school, learning problems or high absenteeism can signal a child's descent toward violence.

Children at high risk for developing violent behaviors often show clear behavioral markers. These include:

- Bullying other children or being the target of bullies.
- Displaying aggressive behavior.
- Being truant.
- Belonging to delinquent or violent peer groups.
- Abusing alcohol or other drugs.
- Setting fires, treating animals with cruelty, or engaging in other antisocial behavior.

Intervention

Parent-and family-based interventions for reducing the risk of children developing violent behavior stand a better chance of success when they embrace certain characteristics.

Tailored To Participants

When parenting interventions are tailored to the unique characteristics and needs of the intended participants, for example, they usually are more successful. An important early step, therefore, is identifying the population a program wishes to reach.

It is also important that programs consider the participants' age, life circumstances, race, and other cultural and demographic issues. When the group is fairly homogeneous, programs are better able to tailor materials and activities to them.

And culturally-relevant content tends to create a stronger sense of ownership and promote community-building. Effective Black Parenting, for example, was adapted from

a generic parenting skill-building intervention to better fit the culture and parenting practices in South Central Los Angeles. The program has been found to have led to several positive outcomes, including improved family relations and fewer problems related to child behavior.³

Long-term improvements are more likely to be realized when programs are expanded to help parents deal with issues such as stress, depression, marital conflict, housing, and financial matters.

Successful parent- and family-based interventions share other characteristics. These programs, for example:

- Involve parents and community in planning the intervention.
- Set clear goals and objectives.
- Hire staff appropriate for the type of intervention and train them thoroughly. Studies suggest the quality of the relationships between practitioners and parents can profoundly affect the outcomes of parent- and family-based interventions.
- Evaluate outcomes.
- Link interventions with other strategies, particularly when dealing with parents of school-aged children. Adverse experiences in school can forecast violent behavior, and evidence suggests that a partnership between parents and the school is more effective than parent-based strategies alone.⁴

Young Children

More specifically, interventions for parents of young children often have the best chance of success because behavior patterns of parents and children are still developing and are more readily influenced.

Parent-Child Interaction Training, for example, helped reduce aggression, hostility, anxiety, and hyperactivity among preschool children by having their parents attend small-group sessions, which included instruction, role-playing, supervised play and other activities designed to reinforce positive parenting practices.⁵

Successful programs usually include an overview of

child development, which helps parents set realistic, age-appropriate expectations for children. These programs often share other principles. For example, most:

- Teach the use of praise and rewards to reinforce good behavior and correct bad behavior.
- Emphasize the need for supervision and discipline, promote an understanding that children need a consistent set of rules to follow, and teach parents nonviolent disciplinary practices to use when their children break those rules.
- Offer instruction on the impact of seeing violence, in person and on television programs and movies.

Adolescents and Teens

Research suggests that parent- and family-based programs to reduce violent behavior among adolescents and teens should explain age-appropriate developmental issues, such as sexuality, growing independence, and the likelihood of their children engaging in rebellious behavior.

Successful programs for older children also address issues such as increasing positive communication patterns among family members, and helping parents identify positive role models among extended family and the community.

Parents who took part in the Adolescent Training Program reported a lower tendency to overreact to their child's behavior, greater diligence dealing with problem behavior, and less depression.⁶ Studies found the more sessions a parent attended, the greater the reported improvements in their child's behavior. This program for parents of middle school students attempts to improve a range of parenting skills, including making rules, monitoring, providing reasonable consequences for rule violations, and problem-solving.

High Risk Children

Disadvantaged parents, particularly low-income single mothers, pose a challenge to parenting programs. However, interventions that involve parents in planning, leadership and other key aspects of the program have been successful in recruiting mothers and improving their parenting skills.⁷

Some programs work with parents before or immediately after the birth of their child. Counseling, parenting

skills training, strategies for problem-solving, and other services are offered to help parents manage their lives more effectively and reduce stress typical of raising an infant. Several have shown promise, such as the Houston Parent-Child Development Center, which serves as a "parent college" for Mexican-American families. Children of parents in the program have had fewer problem behaviors than a comparison group of children whose parents did not receive this program, and the improved behavior has been seen for as long as eight years after the parents enrolled.⁸

These programs and others underscore how profoundly the relationship between parent and child can influence the development of violent behaviors. Studies suggest that regardless of the child's risk level or age, interventions focused on the parent and family are among the most effective at preventing those behaviors from developing.

References

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- This Special Report, written by Jeffery Fraser, is largely based on the above-referenced report. It is not intended to be an original work but a summary for the convenience of our readers. References noted in the text follow:*
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University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, a program of the University Center for Social and Urban Research, 121 University Place, Second Floor, Pittsburgh, PA 15260 (412)624-7426. Internet: www.pitt.edu/~ocdweb/.