

## The Parent-Child Relationship as Violence Prevention

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According to a recent survey, the American public rates crime and violence as the most important problems facing our country (Coie & Dodge, 1998, p. 779). The popular media sometimes flame public fears about juvenile violent crime with sensational coverage (Hinds, 2000, p. 3), but, in fact, according to recent reports provided by the U.S. Department of Justice, the levels of rape, robbery, and murder committed by juveniles have dropped significantly over the past several years (Snyder & Sickmund, 2000). Encouraging reports, however, are tempered by the fact that American youth continue to have disturbingly high rates of violence compared to youths in other major nations (Coie & Dodge, 1998, p. 779; Hinds, 2000, p. 2).

#### Research on Risk Factors

To understand this disparity, researchers and social scientists have attempted to isolate the predictors of youth violence. A recent report released by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) describes five broad categories of factors that contribute to the development of serious and violent juvenile crime (Hawkins et al., 2000). The five categories, and some of the specific risk factors within each, include:

- Individual factors:
  - Pregnancy and delivery complications
  - Hyperactivity, concentration problems, restlessness, and risk taking
  - Aggressiveness
  - Early initiation of violent behavior
- Family factors:
  - Parental criminality
  - Child maltreatment
  - Poor family management practices
  - Low levels of parental involvement
- School factors:
  - Academic failure
  - Low bonding to school
  - Truancy and dropping out of school
  - Frequent school transitions
- Peer-related factors:
  - Delinquent siblings
  - Delinquent peers
  - Gang membership
- Community and neighborhood factors:
  - Poverty
  - Community disorganization
  - Neighborhood adults involved in crime
  - Exposure to violence and racial prejudice

Parents and others concerned with children's safety may feel daunted by the scope and implication of the risk factors related to violence. How can parents concentrate on the important tasks of parenting and maintaining a home with so many potential threats to their children's well-being, especially when so many of these factors may be out of parents' direct influence or control?

#### The Importance of Parenting Style

Good parenting and strong families can, in fact, help to protect children from many threats from the world outside and protect children from developing aggressive behaviors. Parenting style—one's "broad pattern of parenting" (Darling, 1999)—can *contribute* to aggressive behavior in children, or it can *moderate* some of the negative influences that children face.

Parenting styles are often categorized in the following four ways (Glasgow et al., 1997, p. 508):

- *Authoritarian* parents tend to be highly demanding and unresponsive to the individual needs of their children. These parents are concerned with controlling behavior so that children comply with a set of standards. Authoritarian parents place an emphasis on obedience, order, and respect for authority. They discourage verbal negotiation about rules.
- *Authoritative* parents attempt to strike a balance between demanding that their children behave appropriately and responding to their children's needs. They set and enforce firm rules and standards for behavior and consistently monitor their children's conduct, using nonpunitive methods of discipline when rules are broken. Authoritative parents are warm toward and supportive of their children. They encourage some verbal give and take and recognize a child's point of view.
- *Indulgent* parents are tolerant, warm, and accepting, but they exercise little authority over their children. Indulgent parents are very committed to their children, but they make few demands for responsible and mature behavior and permit their children considerable freedom.
- *Neglectful* or *disengaged* parents do not oversee their children's behavior or support their interests. These parents often seem preoccupied with their own concerns and appear disengaged from the responsibilities of parenting.

### Parenting Style and Cultural Influences

The concept of parenting style is further complicated by cultural differences. In order to understand how parenting style influences child outcomes, one must disentangle what research refers to as three different aspects of parenting. These include (1) the goals of *socialization*, whereby parents help children conform to the demands of the family and society; (2) *parenting practices*, which are used to help children develop specific child behaviors such as table manners or school performance; and (3)

*parenting style*, which are a “constellation of attitudes” that create an emotional climate through which parent's behaviors are expressed (Darling & Steinberg, 1993, pp. 487-496). Separating parenting practice from style and recognizing parenting style as a context through which parents socialize their children for the culture in which they will most likely reside helps one understand the role of culture in the parent-child relationship.

Children may interpret the meaning of parents' behavior differently depending on their cultural or ethnic background. For example, Chao (1994, p. 1111) notes that traditional Chinese parents have often been described as “authoritarian”—restrictive, controlling, or rejecting—but that many Chinese equate strictness, firm control, and parental obedience with parental care, concern, and involvement. Other studies have shown that greater parental control is associated with greater warmth and love by children in Korean families but is viewed far less positively by children in North American or European families (Deater-Deckard et al., 1996, p. 1070).

In another example of culturally specific parenting practices and outcomes, harsh physical discipline such as hitting and spanking is shown to be an early predictor of later hostility and aggressive behavior in European American children but not in African American children. Harsh discipline in the form of physical abuse, however, has been shown to have negative effects for all socioeconomic and ethnic groups (Deater-Deckard et al., 1996, p. 1070).

### Parenting Style and Outcomes for Youth

Despite cultural and ethnic variations in parenting style and outcomes for youth, research has found that the benefits of authoritative parents and the negative effects of neglectful or disengaged parents appear constant across all groups (Steinberg et al., 1994, p. 769). A summary of some of this research follows.

The authors of the OJJDP report referred to earlier, *Predictors of Youth Violence*, found that “failure to

set clear expectations for children's behavior, poor monitoring and supervision, and severe and inconsistent discipline consistently predict later delinquency and substance abuse" (Snyder & Sickmund, 2000). The report adds that the greatest amount of violence was reported in boys who had very strict parents—one aspect of authoritarian parenting. The second highest level of violence was reported in boys with very permissive parents—an aspect of indulgent and neglectful or uninvolved parenting. The least amount of violence was reported in boys with parents who were neither too strict nor too lax—conditions associated with authoritative parenting.

The degree of parental monitoring influences outcomes for youth. Sociologist Grace Barnes describes parental monitoring in the following way: "Monitoring means knowing where your kids are, who their friends are, when they are coming in, and so on" (Barnes, 1995, p. 1). Low levels of parental monitoring or supervision—factors associated with indulgent and neglectful or disengaged parenting—have been linked to higher rates of delinquency and sexual activity, and to lower rates of school competence (Jacobson & Crockett, 2000, pp. 65-97).

Research on patterns of dating violence among adolescents suggests that "ineffective parenting practices such as low supervision, rejection, and inconsistent discipline" increase the likelihood that children will engage in a variety of antisocial behavior throughout their life including violence toward dating partners as adolescents (Simons, Lin, & Gordon, 1998, p. 469).

Since peer influences peak during early adolescence (Steinberg, 1996, p. 141), the quality of the parent-child relationship can affect adolescents' susceptibility to antisocial peer pressure. Adolescents whose parents are authoritative—warm, firm, and demanding—are less influenced by negative peer pressure than adolescents whose parents are permissive and indulgent or whose parents are dictatorial and harsh (Collins et al., 2000, pp. 227-228).

In the book *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to*

*Do*, Laurence Steinberg (1996) describes the results of a 10-year study involving 20,000 students in 9th to 12th grade over a period of 1 to 3 years. Steinberg outlines the characteristics of adolescents from homes where different parenting styles are used.

In Steinberg's research, adolescents raised in *authoritative* homes scored highest on all measures in the study. They were more confident, more responsible, less likely to use or abuse drugs or alcohol, and less likely to be involved in delinquent behaviors. They reported less anxiety and depression and did better in school (pp. 116-117).

Teenagers from *authoritarian* homes were also less likely to use drugs and alcohol and get into trouble, as reported by teenagers raised in authoritative homes; however, teenagers in authoritarian homes were also less self-reliant, less persistent, less socially poised, and reported lower self-esteem. Although their grades were nearly as good as those raised in authoritative homes, teenagers from authoritarian homes had significantly worse views of their own abilities (p. 117).

Teenagers from *permissive* homes reported higher drug and alcohol use, lower school performance, and higher rates of misbehavior in areas involving adult authority. They also reported high levels of self-confidence and social poise compared to teenagers raised in authoritative homes (pp. 117-118).

Steinberg relates outcomes for teenagers raised in homes with "disengaged parents"—a term he uses to describe parents who are emotionally aloof, lenient in their discipline, and neglectful or uninvolved in the lives of their children. Adolescents with *disengaged* or *uninvolved* parents fared least well on all measures studied. They were less self-reliant, less socially skilled, more likely to exhibit psychological problems such as anxiety and depression, had higher rates of drug use and delinquency, and were less interested and less successful in school (pp. 118-119).

Although his study focuses on adolescents, Steinberg (1996) reminds readers that the outcomes of various parenting styles on adolescents' develop-

ment mirror outcomes for preschool and elementary school age children (p. 116). A parenting style that is effective for young children remains effective as children grow up, keeping in mind that how a parenting style “looks” will vary with the age and developmental maturity of the child. For example, a parent may negotiate rules about weekend curfew with an adolescent allowing for some verbal give and take—an aspect of authoritative parenting—yet recognize that there is no room for negotiation about holding hands with a 3-year-old while crossing a busy street.

### **Adapting One’s Parenting Style**

Learning to use an authoritative parenting style can be difficult for parents who have been raised in a predominantly authoritarian, permissive, or indulgent household. What if parents have relied on other styles of parenting while children were younger? In their book *You and Your Adolescent: A Parent’s Guide for Ages 10-20*, Laurence Steinberg and Ann Levine (1997) say it is never too late to alter or adapt one’s style of parenting (p. 12). The authors offer the following practical tips for becoming (or continuing to be) an authoritative parent (pp. 11-25):

- *Start with love and trust.* Adolescents continue to need love and affection just as they did as young children. Spend time together as a family enjoying shared interests (watching TV side by side does not count), say Steinberg and Levine (p. 13). Talk about your teenager’s interests, feelings, and concerns, and share your own feelings and concerns. Trust your child and treat him or her with respect.
- *Set clear, reasoned limits.* Show respect for your teenager’s point of view by discussing rules and regulations. Be clear about which family rules are negotiable and which are not. Balance control with independence and grant freedom in stages. Tie privileges to responsibilities.
- *Be firm and fair.* Try not to overreact when your adolescent breaks a house rule. Listen to his or her side of the story before assuming

blame. Express your displeasure and disappointment and use natural consequences in response to irresponsible behavior when possible—for example, a poor grade as a consequence of inadequate studying. Take action when your adolescent’s misbehavior is repeated or dangerous. Make the penalty fit the crime—for example, refusal to follow car safety rules results in loss of car use privileges. Never use physical punishment or verbal abuse. Research has shown these responses to be counterproductive—they only serve to promote adolescent rebellion and aggression. Be consistent both in enforcing rules and in living by the values and beliefs you espouse.

- *Accept your adolescent as an individual.* Treat your child as your child, not as a stereotypical adolescent. Parents may notice temporary disruptions as their adolescent adjusts to new situations such as a new school or dating, and puberty may contribute to periodic moodiness. These events do not result in personality changes, however. Remember that most of an adolescent’s choices are not lifelong commitments. Assuming “mistakes” are not dangerous or irreversible, let your adolescent learn about life through mistakes on occasion.
- *Let your child be the teenager he or she wants to be, not the adolescent you were or wish you had been, nor a replica of an older sibling.* Adolescents need to be loved for themselves, not for measuring up to an arbitrary standard of worth based on your unfulfilled dreams or the achievements of another sibling.

Parents must be vigilant to protect their children from the potential threats to children’s emotional and physical health—threats that seem increasingly complex in our modern culture. Parents should not, however, be distracted from the day-to-day business of parenting, of developing a strong family, and of building healthy relationships with their children. Building relationships based on love, trust, and acceptance combined with firmness, consistency, and high, yet reasonable, levels of expectations is a violence prevention strategy that parents can influence.

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