

Violence and Young Children's Development

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Violence in the United States has claimed thousands of lives and annually costs hundreds of millions of dollars in medical care and lost wages. In the context of this digest, the term *violence* is used to refer to child abuse or other domestic conflict, gang aggression, and community crime, including assault. One of the most pernicious consequences of violence is its effect on the development of children. This digest examines the developmental consequences for children who are the victims of, or witnesses to, family and community violence.

Violence in the Preschool Years

Children growing up with violence are at risk for pathological development. According to Erikson's classical exposition of individual development, learning to trust is the infant's primary task during the first year of life. Trust provides the foundation for further development and forms the basis for self-confidence and self-esteem. The baby's ability to trust is dependent upon the family's ability to provide consistent care and to respond to the infant's need for love and stimulation. Caregiving is compromised when the infant's family lives in a community racked by violence and when the family fears for its safety. Parents may not give an infant proper care when their psychological energy is sapped by efforts to keep safe (Halpern, 1990). Routine tasks like going to work, shopping, and keeping clinic appointments take careful planning and extra effort.

When infants reach toddlerhood they have an inner push to try newly gained skills, such as walking, jumping, and climbing. These skills are best practiced in parks and playgrounds, not in crowded apartments. But young children who live in communities racked by crime and menaced by gangs are often not permitted to be out-of-doors. Instead, they are confined to small quarters that hamper their

activities, and that lead to restrictions imposed by parents and older family members (Scheinfeld, 1983). These restrictions, which are difficult for toddlers to understand and to obey, can lead in turn to disruptions in their relationships with the rest of the family.

During the preschool years, young children are ready to venture outside of the family in order to make new relationships and learn about other people (Spock, 1988). However, when they live in neighborhoods where dangers lurk outside, children may be prevented from going out to play or even from accompanying older children on errands. In addition, preschoolers may be in child care programs that are located in areas where violent acts occur frequently.

Violence: The School Years

Although the early years are critical in setting the stage for future development, the experiences of the school years are also important to children's healthy growth. During the school years, children develop the social and academic skills necessary to function as adults and citizens; violence at home or in the community takes a high toll.

- When children's energies are drained because they are defending themselves against outside dangers or warding off their own fears, they have difficulty learning in school (Craig, 1992). Children traumatized by violence can have distorted memories, and their cognitive functions can be compromised (Terr, 1983).
- Children who have been victimized by or who have seen others victimized by violence may have trouble learning to get along with others. The anger that is often instilled in such children is

likely to be incorporated into their personality structures. Carrying an extra load of anger makes it difficult for them to control their behavior and increases their risk for resorting to violent action.

- Children learn social skills by identifying with adults in their lives. Children cannot learn nonaggressive ways of interacting with others when their only models, including those in the media, use physical force to solve problems (Garbarino et al., 1992).
- To control their fears, children who live with violence may repress feelings. This defensive maneuver takes its toll in their immediate lives and can lead to further pathological development. It can interfere with their ability to relate to others in meaningful ways and to feel empathy. Individuals who cannot empathize with others' feelings are less likely to curb their own aggression, and more likely to become insensitive to brutality in general. Knowing how some youths become emotionally bankrupt in this way helps us understand why they are so careless with their own lives and with the lives of others (Gilligan, 1991).
- Children who are traumatized by violence may have difficulty seeing themselves in future roles that are meaningful. The California school children who were kidnapped and held hostage in their bus were found to have limited views of their future lives and often anticipated disaster (Terr, 1983). Children who cannot see a decent future for themselves have a hard time concentrating on present tasks such as learning in school and becoming socialized.
- Children need to feel that they can direct some part of their existence, but children who live with violence learn that they have little say in what happens to them. Beginning with the restrictions on autonomy when they are toddlers, this sense of helplessness continues as they reach school age. Not only do they encounter the constraints that all children do, but their freedom is restricted

by an environment in which gangs and drug dealers control the streets.

- When children experience a trauma, a common reaction is to regress to an earlier stage when things were easier. This regression can be therapeutic by allowing the child to postpone having to face the feelings aroused by the traumatic event. It is a way of gaining psychological strength. However, when children face continual stress they are in danger of remaining psychologically in an earlier stage of development.

Individual Differences and Resilience

Not all children respond to difficult situations in the same way; there are many factors that influence coping abilities, including age, family reaction to stress, and temperament. Younger children are more likely to succumb to stress than school-age children or adolescents. Infants can be shielded from outside forces if their caregivers are psychologically strong and available to the baby.

Children who live in stable, supportive homes have a better chance of coping because they are surrounded by nurturing adults. If grown-ups are willing to listen to children's fears and provide appropriate outlets for them, children are better able to contend with the difficulties in their lives. Children are more resilient if they are born with easy temperaments and are in good mental health. If they are lucky enough to have strong parents who can withstand the stresses of poverty and community violence, children also have a better chance of growing into happy and productive adults (Garmezy & Rutter, 1983).

Adaptability in Children

Although what happens to them in the early years is very important, many children can overcome the hurts and fears of earlier times. For children living in an atmosphere of stress and violence, the ability to make relationships and get from others what they miss in their own families and communities is crucial to healthy development.

The staff in schools, day care centers, and recreational programs can be resources to children and offer them alternative perceptions of themselves, as well as teaching them skills for getting along in the world. With time, effort, and skill, caregivers can provide children with an opportunity to challenge the odds and turn their lives in a positive direction.

For More Information

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