

Introduction



Why a Violence Prevention Resource Guide for Parents?

Media attention and public concern about serious violence and antisocial behavior among children and youth in the United States have grown in recent years, especially after the recent tragic and violent events in several public schools. Not surprisingly, some recent surveys suggest that the American public rates crime and violence among the most important problems facing our country [3]. Other research shows encouraging trends, including a decrease over the past 5 years in school crime and the reporting by 99% of public schools that no incidents of serious violent crime have taken place in their buildings ([12], p. 1).

If we define violence as *the exertion of emotional or physical force with the intention of causing harm to another*, then violence prevention is the effort to intervene *before* harm is caused. Throughout history, children have been threatened with various types of harm—among them life-threatening diseases, natural disasters, and war. Although these threats may not have been avoidable, they were usually understandable. Parents can understand that there may be no way to keep a child from being stricken with a deadly disease or injured during the devastation of a flood or hurricane. The causes and effects of violence, on the other hand, are more difficult to understand and to predict. Parents seldom know where, how, and when violence is likely to take place, and if anything can be done to prevent it.

A recent survey supported by Public Agenda as part of their National Issues Forums suggests three possible strategies to help prevent violence in our culture. First, we can foster a nonviolent popular culture that does not portray violence as an acceptable way to resolve conflicts. Second, we

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should provide more help for those children who are considered at risk to commit violence than they currently receive from educators, health care providers, and law enforcement professionals. Third, we must offer children moral discipline at home and in our communities [10].

Just as researchers are working in health care to understand and prevent the spread of HIV and new strains of tuberculosis, researchers are also working to understand and prevent violence. Although much of our understanding about the development of aggression is based on clinical studies of children or youth who have alarming or extreme behaviors, much has also been learned generally about the factors that contribute to violence. Many groups are using this knowledge to incorporate violence prevention efforts into child care programs, schools, churches, and youth organizations. This *Guide* was

prepared to help parents understand some of the factors that may contribute to violence and what they can do at home and in the community to help prevent violence.

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What parenting issues have been selected for discussion in this *Guide*?

There is no single factor responsible for violent behavior in children, and there is no easy way to insure that every child will avoid becoming a victim—or a perpetrator—of violence. Instead, a variety of factors, commonly called “risk factors,” interact and may affect a child’s tendency to act or react aggressively. The more of these factors that are present in a child’s life, the greater his or her risk of being a victim or perpetrator of violent behavior. The issues that we have chosen to explore in this *Guide* are ones that have been linked in some way with violent or aggressive behavior, and are risk factors upon which parents have some direct influence. The *Guide* also discusses “protective factors,” or those characteristics that are likely to help buffer or reduce the impact of a risk factor.

Limited space prevents this *Guide* from containing a complete discussion of violence-related factors. Some issues that may influence aggression in children are mentioned only briefly or excluded from the *Guide* because much has been written about them elsewhere. Others have been excluded because they are so complex that they warrant separate treatment. The most significant of these is the influence of family violence across the child’s life span. Research on the severe effects of domestic violence and child abuse is mentioned later in the Introduction. Additional references to the impact of family violence on later

aggression are found in two sections in the Early Years chapter: Brain Development and Infant Attachment, and Managing Family Conflict.

The *Guide* also focuses primarily on typically developing children. Issues such as temperament and attention deficits are discussed only briefly, even though they are believed to contribute to patterns of impulsiveness and possibly aggression in children. It is important for parents to know that if a child simply has an attention deficit disorder or learning disability it does not necessarily mean that the child will also be aggressive or violent. Although the pathways of these influences are less clearly understood [3], research suggests that a child’s risk for delinquent behavior increases dramatically when a child has a combination of risk factors such as irritability or impulsivity, hyperactivity, learning disabilities, or an attention deficit disorder [2]. Early and accurate identification of and intervention on behalf of children with special needs are protective factors and can make a substantial difference in the long-term outcomes for children. Without early diagnosis and appropriate intervention and support, learning disabilities, for example, can lead to a variety of negative outcomes for children, including loss of self-esteem, dropping out of school, and, in some severe cases, even juvenile delinquency [16; 17].

How does domestic violence affect children?

One of the most common pathways to aggressive behavior in children occurs in children who are victims of physical and emotional abuse [9; 11]. The cycle of family violence is complicated since other problems, including poverty and substance abuse, affect the likelihood of family violence. Children who witness their parents’ violence are at a significant risk of being abused themselves—by their parents or by other adults in the household ([21], pp. 6–8). In fact, in 30% to 60% of families experiencing family violence, both partner violence and child abuse are present in the family ([6], p. 3).

Exposure to domestic violence can have a severe impact on children’s social, emotional, and cognitive

development. These effects include more anger and other behavior problems in school along with lower grades and test scores. Children who are exposed to domestic violence also are more likely to be depressed and have suicidal thoughts ([7], p. 27). Studies of children who have been physically abused show that not only are they more aggressive but they also are less likely to help another child in trouble than are children who have not been abused ([3], p. 820). In his work with boys in jail for violent crimes, James Garbarino found that being abused as a child was a significant risk factor for juvenile violence. In the men he studied, Garbarino found that a history of child abuse increased *by 7 times* the likelihood that the man would be diagnosed with a conduct disorder. Since children diagnosed with conduct disorders are more likely to be impulsive and to have difficulty communicating, following rules, and making transitions, they have an increased likelihood of becoming delinquent ([6], pp. 1, 5). However, early intervention, parenting education, school success, and family support can help reduce the chances of long-term serious consequences.

How does “parenting style” help to shield children from violence?

There are many variables that play a major role in influencing a child’s behavior. Parenting style, for example, can *contribute* to aggressive behavior in children or it can *moderate* some of the negative influences that are part of growing up in our society. Some researchers find it helpful to think of parenting styles as falling within one of three general categories: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive. An authoritative parenting style (as opposed to a predominantly permissive or authoritarian parenting style) has been shown to help children become mature, socially competent, and disciplined members of society. Authoritative parenting is characterized by high levels of nurturing and responsiveness, support, and nonpunitive discipline. It is also demanding, but at the same time low in the kinds of psychological control that rely on guilt, withdrawal of love, or shaming [5; 13].

In several studies by psychologist Laurence Steinberg and others, authoritative parenting was associated with many positive outcomes for adolescents. Parents who used an authoritative style of parenting—and treated their adolescents warmly, firmly, and democratically—had adolescents who

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did better in school, had positive attitudes towards their school achievement, were more self-reliant, reported less anxiety and depression, and were less likely to engage in delinquent behaviors [15; 18; 19].

A recent summary of research on parenting further supports the benefits of an authoritative parenting style. The summary states, “adolescents from authoritative homes are more susceptible to pro-social peer pressure (e.g., pressure to do well in school), but less susceptible to anti-social peer pressure (e.g., pressure to use illicit drugs and alcohol). In other words, the particular peers a youngster selects as friends and the extent to which he or she is susceptible to their influence are both affected by parenting” [4].

How can you learn more about parenting characteristics? We have cited some additional resources for more information on parenting style in the Resources on the Web sections.

How does a healthy family help to shield children from violence?

Research completed by family development leaders such as Nick Stinnet, Dolores Curran, and Robert Hill suggests that “healthy families” or “strong families” have some common characteristics and can prepare children to handle most of life’s threats and

hazards. For example, Nick Stinnet's research highlighted six traits in strong families, including appreciation for each other, spending time together, good communication patterns, a commitment to the family, a high degree of religious orientation, and the ability to deal with crises in a positive manner [14]. Curran's research identified 15 traits in healthy families, including the ability to communicate and listen, to affirm and support one another, to teach respect for others, to develop a sense of trust, and to admit and seek help with problems [20]. During the turbulent period of the 1960s and 1970s, researcher Robert Hill focused on the strengths of African American families and found five additional characteristics that appeared to stabilize the African American family. Those traits included strong kinship bonds, a strong work orientation, adaptability of family roles, a strong achievement orientation, and a strong religious orientation [14].

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The influence that healthy family factors have on a child's behavior may be particularly important for children with attention deficits. In their book *The Youngest Minds*, authors Ann and Richard Barnett report that children with risk factors such as attention deficits sometimes also have behavior problems. Whether these behavior problems may lead to more serious conduct disorders—including a group of more serious behaviors that persist, such as lying, stealing, truancy, and fighting [2]—depends largely on the availability of strong families as a protective factor.

On the other hand, families considered at risk or lacking in a significant number of family strengths may engage in behaviors that can make their children more vulnerable to even mild dangers in the outside world [8]. In his book *Raising Children in a*

Socially Toxic Environment, James Garbarino echoes the lists of identified characteristics of strong families that earlier researchers defined. It appears that especially when struggling with issues like marital conflict, separation, and divorce, children benefit from a strong family. "Family strength transcends family structure; it derives from a process, not a formal arrangement," says Garbarino ([8], p. 56). In other words, family strengths and healthy resilience can be observed in any family structure—traditional, single parent, foster parent, stepparent, and other family types.

How can parents use this Guide?

The topical areas included in this *Guide* include discussions of parenting strategies that can be used by parents with all children under their care and guidance, including their own children and children of relatives, neighbors, and friends. In addition, parents will find information in the *Guide* on becoming strong advocates for change and for incorporating violence prevention efforts in their children's school, the local community, and the larger society. The *Guide* also suggests some ways that parents may choose to advocate for a more peaceful community. This *Guide* also provides the information needed to acquire some of the relevant resources.

Although the topical areas are organized by developmental stage in the *Guide*, readers will recognize that there is overlap between stages. For example, behaviors related to impulse control and prosocial skills during a child's early years will certainly influence the child's ability to cope with bullying behaviors and manage conflict later in life. Issues included in the "The Early Years" section will continue to be issues of concern for later stages of development. These issues are discussed at the preschool level, however, because they are essential building blocks for violence prevention that can be acquired early in a child's life. Issues related to impulse control, prosocial skills, empathy, and managing family conflict, all of which can be addressed during a child's preschool years, remain a

focus of parenting during a child's later school-age and adolescent years as well. Clearly, if the foundation for violence prevention is solid and well supported in the early years, it will be better able to hold up over time.

Finally, there is also frequent overlap among the issues. For example, when teens use alcohol and have access to guns, the risk for violent behavior increases [1].

How important is parental influence?

To be sure, parents have less control over their children's experiences as the children grow older and become more independent. This *Guide* lists resources and contact information for organizations that work with parents to help identify problem behaviors and to find interventions to alleviate problems once they are identified. But, if parenting children can be compared to sailing a ship, the foundation laid by parents and guardians in a child's early years, combined with regular communication, care, and attention from these significant adults in later years, are the anchors for children growing up in turbulent times. The information in this *Guide* is intended to help parents feel prepared for the journey as it relates to violence, to understand what storms might arise, and to take note of the icebergs that may appear in the waters of childhood and adolescence. We hope that identifying potential dangers will not result in becoming so preoccupied with the hazards of the journey that parents overlook the joys of parenting. As this *Guide* shows, parents are not alone on their journey.

Your Thoughts and Notes

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