Aggressive Behavior in Childhood and Early Adolescence: An Ecological–Developmental Perspective on Youth Violence

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This article reviews recent research on the development of aggressive behavior in childhood and early adolescence using an ecological perspective that focuses on social development in the family, school, peer group, and community. Special emphasis is placed on family processes and early childhood peer relations that appear to tip developmental trajectories toward social rejection at school and use of aggression to achieve social goals in interpersonal relationships. The article discusses implications for preventing youth violence.

Key words: aggressive behavior; child development; delinquency; ecological theory; violence

Violence is a major social and health problem that affects large numbers of children and families. Teenagers account for only 10 percent of the population, but they are victims in nearly 25 percent of all violent crimes (Allen-Hagen & Sickmund, 1993; Moone, 1994). Although only about one in five violent crimes is committed by a youth, youths have become markedly more involved in violent acts over the past decade (Snyder & Sickmund, 1995). Between 1984 and 1993, the number of juveniles arrested for murder rose 168 percent, and weapons violations rose 126 percent (Children’s Defense Fund, 1995).

On the basis of self-report and victimization data, it is not clear whether youths are fighting more than in the past. But it is clear that their fights are resulting more often in injury and death because of the use of firearms (Rosenberg, 1995). The convergence of youthful impulsivity, the growing availability of handguns, the declining socioeconomic conditions of many families, and the emergence of street subcultures based on crack and other illicit drugs has made adolescence far deadlier. The problem is widespread, and although data suggest that there are important differences by race and ethnicity, sex, and region (including urban versus rural), violence touches many families and communities (for reviews, see Fraser, 1995; Prothrow-Stith, 1995).

The problem may get worse. In the early 1980s birth rates declined and the size of the teenage birth cohort grew smaller, so there were fewer children at risk-prone ages for delinquency and violence. This is about to change, because birth rates are on the rise. Over the next 10 years, the number of teenagers in the population will increase by approximately 22 percent (Krauss, 1994; Reno, 1995). Thus, even if the rate at which it occurs does not change, the seeds have been sown for increases in youth violence.
Use of physical force in such a way that it produces injury or death—perhaps the simplest definition of violence—encompasses a wide range of acts, including child abuse, gang fighting, hate crimes, sexual assault, spouse battering, suicide, terrorism, and war (Fraser, 1995). To be sure, institutions also engage in acts that injure or kill (for example, the dumping of toxic wastes). The focus of this article, however, is on street crime, a type of violence that includes fighting; use of handguns or other weapons to resolve disputes; murder; and predatory acts such as aggravated assault, rape, and robbery.

Violent behavior of this nature rarely develops spontaneously. It often has roots in early childhood. Not surprisingly, violent behavior appears to be relatively stable for children who become aggressive at an early age. Moreover, early aggressive behavior has a strong and significant relationship with long-term life outcomes, including the development of criminal careers where physical force is used routinely (Elliott, 1994; Farrington, Loebner, et al., 1993; Nagin & Farrington, 1992).

Recent research suggests that a small percentage of families account for a disproportionately large volume of violence. Early offenders are likely to come from families in which assaultive and predatory behavior runs across generations (Farrington, Loebner, et al., 1993). In juvenile justice, a small number of youths account for a disproportionately large volume of offenses against people and property (Elliott, 1994). These children and their families use a large percentage of resources in the child welfare, mental health, and juvenile justice fields (Henggeler & Borduin, 1990). And although some children stop serious aggressive behavior as they mature and others are helped by treatment, many who avoid deep involvement in the court systems go on to lead lives characterized by heavy drinking, polydrug use, sexual promiscuity, reckless driving, marital violence, and occupational marginality (Elliott, 1994; Farrington, Loebner, et al., 1993).

It is a bleak picture, and the long-term price of violence is incalculably high. Costs to victims of medical treatment, rehabilitation, and lost productivity plus direct costs to the justice system are estimated to exceed $60 billion annually (Roth & Moore, 1995). Moreover, even with treatment, the prognosis for many violent children and their families is poor (Prothrow-Stith, 1995). Across both community-based and residential services, failure rates are high when children enter treatment because of aggressive behavior (Henggeler, 1989; Kazdin, 1987, 1995). The development of new service strategies to treat aggressive behavior in childhood and early adolescence is a major national challenge. New strategies are needed both to improve the effectiveness of existing programs and to address the growing youth violence problem. Although there are many perspectives on youth violence (for example, social control, labeling, strain, psychoanalytic, and Marxist theories), this article discusses the etiology of aggressive behavior and violence from an ecological–developmental perspective and describes the implications of recent research for strengthening early intervention services for children and their families.

Social Development and Early Aggression

A child's social development is deeply rooted in opportunities, skills, and recognition that accrue through early interactions with family members, peers, teachers, neighbors, ministers, coaches, and many others (for example, Catalano & Hawkins, 1996; Hawkins, Catalano, & Associates, 1992). Throughout the life course, successful family, school, and work experiences have bases in early childhood opportunities for social participation and the development of a broad range of social and cognitive skills that promote building attachments to other children and adults. If, because of social or economic conditions, children lack opportunities for and role models of successful social participation, they may be seriously disadvantaged in developing skills that will promote success in school, work, and other life settings.

An ecological–developmental perspective focuses on opportunities for positive social participation and skills to promote building successful relationships with peers and adults who are committed to conventional lines of action (Tolan, Guerra, & Kendall, 1995). As Maas (1986) argued, an ecodevelopmental view emphasizes the processes through which people become increasingly able to interact competently and responsibly—that is, with recognition of others' needs—in an increasing array of social contexts. The greater the number of contexts with which people can cope, the fewer the situations in which they are overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness and stress. The more often they engage in socially responsive interaction, the more likely
they are to help to generate or sustain a caring and sharing society. (p. 3)

From this perspective, youth violence is seen as the result of an impoverished opportunity structure, inadequate training in critical social and cognitive skills, the perception that there is social and concrete utility in aggressive behavior, and the lack of indigenous rewards for prosocial activities in the social environment.

Longitudinal studies in Colorado, Hawaii, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Washington, and other states and countries afford increasingly vivid glimpses of the ecological conditions that disrupt social development and increase risk for ungodliness, delinquency, substance abuse, and violence (Brook, Whiteman, & Finch, 1992; Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991; Elliott, 1994; Hawkins, Catalano, Morrison, et al., 1992; Loeb et al., 1993; Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, & Jang, 1994; Werner, 1992). Many of these studies are distinguished by oversampling of children from low-income areas or from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Many of the studies also include large numbers of female subjects, ensuring that tests for gender differences can be made and, if warranted, separate developmental models constructed for girls and boys (for example, Tremblay et al., 1992). Unlike clinical studies of conduct disorder, where biological involvement may be comparatively greater, or studies of schoolchildren in suburban communities, where the incidence of serious aggressive behavior may be low, these longitudinal studies help elucidate the developmental processes and environmental conditions that lead to aggressive behavior in children from a variety of backgrounds. Further, they provide important clues about how services might be refined for work with children whose behavior is hostile and aggressive.

Family Environment

Perhaps more than any other setting in the social ecology of childhood, conditions, processes, and experiences in the family shape the behavior of children. From a family perspective, emerging research suggests that children in some homes are trained, literally but unintentionally, to respond to authority with hostility (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989; Reid & Patterson, 1989).

Central to the sequence of events that reinforces aggression in some families is inconsistent parental supervision of children, use of harsh punishment, failure to set limits, neglect in rewarding prosocial behavior, and a coercive style of parent–child interaction (Patterson, Capaldi, & Bank, 1991). When an oppositional child engages in an aggressive behavior, most parents will intervene. However, developmental research shows that some parents do not intervene consistently. Moreover, when they do intervene, it is often with excessive force and negative affect. They yell, threaten, grab, push, yank, and hit to coerce children into compliance.

Although families that use this style of coercive child management often have many strengths, children in these homes learn poor problem-solving skills from their parents (Patterson, 1982; Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992). When faced with an undesired request (for example, “Please turn off the TV”), children respond mimetically with yelling, threatening, grabbing, crying, stomping of feet, hitting, and otherwise escalated behavior to achieve a desired goal (for example, keeping the TV turned on). More skillful parents at such a point will take decisive and preemptive action (for example, time-out or loss of a privilege). But parents who employ a coercive style of discipline—and who may be overcome by environmental stresses such as poverty, simply worn out from trying to make ends meet by working multiple jobs, or incapacitated by the abuse of psychoactive substances—are more likely to withdraw, give a neutral response, or passively grant consent.

This appears to be a common parenting pattern in homes where children are aggressive and defiant: When they do not respond with disproportional force, parents acquiesce (Patterson, 1992). Because coercion is modeled and acquiescence frequently follows a child’s protestations (for example, “I won’t turn off the TV! You can’t make me!”), children learn that aggression pays off, that it has social and sometimes concrete utility. Parental acquiescence rewards a child’s aggressive reaction and increases the chances that he or she will use similar strategies in subsequent interactions. By reacting to a parental request with an aggressive response that is modeled on parental problem solving, the child escapes punishment (hence the name “escape conditioning”), controls the social exchange, and continues desired behaviors (Patterson, 1995). In short, aggressive behavior becomes rewarding for children in families where parents employ a coercion–acquiescence
style of child management (Dishion, Andrews, & Crosby, 1995; Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990). For children who have high biological risk (through, for example, exposure to lead) or who are unusually provocative as a result of attention deficit or other disorders, this pattern of parent–child interaction may exacerbate conduct problems.

Without intervention, this pattern is thought to generalize from minor, developmentally expected opposition to increasingly serious noncompliance and aggressive behavior (Patterson, 1992; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992). Moreover, it may generalize from home to school, where it becomes part of a child’s social repertoire with peers and teachers. From this perspective, parents unintentionally train their children to use aggression to achieve social goals. Although they may not realize that they are doing it, although they are deeply troubled by their child’s increasing defiance, they prepare the child to respond to authority with aggression. This gives many young children an early start toward an aggressive, confrontational, and potentially violent interpersonal style (Patterson, 1995; Patterson, Crosby, & Vuchinich, 1992).

**Social Consequences of Early Aggression**

From toddlerhood through adolescence, confrontation with authority and aggressive behavior have serious consequences (Farrington, 1991; Farrington, Loeber, & Van Kammen, 1990; Loeber, 1996; Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeben, Van Kammen, & Farrington, 1991). Although more life course research is needed, early physical aggression and conflict with authority are often associated with the initiation of delinquency and, for some children, with behavior that escalates from minor to serious offenses. At the same time, reductions in aggression and oppositional behavior are associated with reductions over time in delinquent behavior (Loeber et al., 1991).

Many children who are ungovernable and delinquent have histories of coercive, intimidating social relations that begin in early years and that limit social opportunities with other children and adults (Kupersmidt & Coie, 1990). Early play and friend making often demonstrate this pattern. In the eyes of elementary school children, some aggressive acts warrant social censure, whereas others do not. From a series of multicultural studies, researchers have described two basic types of aggression, each eliciting a different response from children (Dodge, 1991). “Reactive” aggression involves the defensive use of force. When children are perceived as defending themselves, they are usually viewed positively by their peers. In contrast, “proactive” aggression is defined as the nondefensive use of force. When children initiate proactive aggressive contact, it is viewed negatively by peers. Children who are proactively aggressive regard physically coercive acts as socially effective. They consider it normal to employ force to obtain the use of a toy, swing seat, wagon, or teeter-totter. They use aggression and coercion to meet instrumental goals (Dodge & Coie, 1987).

Compounding matters, some aggressive children are simply bullies. Beyond the strategic use of aggression to get the things that they want, they use aggression to establish social dominance (Olweus, 1993a). Whether boy or girl, bullies use force both to obtain social position and to secure desired objects (Sharp & Smith, 1994). Proactive aggression of both the instrumental and bullying types leads to increasing peer rejection (Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993; Parker & Asher, 1987) and isolates children from prosocial peers.

Rejection, however, appears to vary by age. After a series of studies involving samples that included many children from low-income and diverse ethnic backgrounds, Coie, Dodge, Terry, and Wright (1991) concluded, “[From] the beginning years of school, children actively dislike instrumental aggression in peers and will reject those children who use instrumental aggression at the outset of establishing new relationships” (p. 821). For first graders, reactive aggression and bullying may be part and parcel of establishing a social order (Bierman, Smoot, & Aumiller, 1993; Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Olweus, 1993a). Although instrumental aggression results in peer rejection, reactive and bullying aggression are more common in the early years of school, and somewhat surprisingly, they do not encounter the same level of social censure (see also Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990; Feldman & Dodge, 1987).

By the second and third grades, children appear to demand more social competence of their friends (Dodge, Coie, Pettit, & Price, 1990; Feldman, & Dodge, 1987; Kupersmidt & Patterson, 1991; Underwood, Coie, & Herbsman, 1992). Among socially accepted children, problem solving with less resort to physical coercion is expected. Among children who are rejected by their peers, aggression is more likely to be used to achieve
social goals (Bierman et al., 1993). In addition, rejected children are more likely to escalate aggression when they are the target of aggressive acts such as teasing or taunting. They are quick to fight and slow to employ negotiation, bargaining, and other forms of problem solving. For girls as well as boys, the result is increasing rejection by other children. Thus, aggressive behavior has the consequence of isolating children from learning opportunities in socially skilled peer groups and, because children are then beyond the influence of prosocial peer groups, of increasing the risk of subsequent problems in the school and community (Coe, Lochman, Terry, & Hyman, 1992; Kupersmidt, Coie, & Dodge, 1990).

Other Factors in Early Aggression

Although family factors and peer rejection are involved in much aggressive behavior, extrafamilial and unique personal conditions also predispose children toward coercive and potentially violent means of achieving social goals (Brown, Ebensson, & Geis, 1991; Reiss & Roth, 1993; Rutter, 1979). In one of every five American families, normal child development is undermined by poverty. Poverty decreases the essential resources necessary for social development—shelter, food, clothing, and health care—and increases stressors that impede effective parenting and problem solving.

At the individual level, a host of constitutional or biological conditions can affect a child’s capacity to learn and respond to others in the social environment. Such conditions include brain damage and other neuropathology; imbalances of neurochemicals such as the neurotransmitter serotonin; imbalances of trace minerals; imbalances of hormones such as testosterone; low IQ; and unremediated hyperactivity, impulsivity, and attention deficit disorders (for reviews, see Booth & Osgood, 1993; Farrington, Loeber, et al., 1993; Johnson, 1996). Because of learning impairments, children may be tracked from early childhood into circumstances that increase the risk of poor school adjustment and achievement, association with aggressive or socially rejected children, and early experimentation with sex and drugs (Loeber et al., 1993; Reiss & Roth, 1993). Although it is clear that there is much individual variation in the pathways that lead from early childhood aggressive behavior to violence, this combination of a weak or inadequate home life, poor school adjustment, and rejection by peers is sometimes called the “Early Starter” model (Loeber et al., 1993; Patterson, 1992, 1995; Patterson & Yoerger, 1993).

Aggressive Behavior in Early Adolescence

In contrast to aggressive behavior that emerges early in childhood, aggressive behavior that begins in early or middle adolescence appears to have somewhat more diverse roots. Sometimes called the “Late Starter” model, it is often marked more directly by the influence of contextual and systemic factors outside the family (Patterson, 1992; Patterson & Yoerger, 1993; Simons, Wu, Conger, & Lorenz, 1994), including school, neighborhood, and peer conditions such as hostile relations with teachers, peer pressure for early sexual activity, and involvement with a gang (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992).

Separate from the family, school-related factors such as a teacher’s grading practices, classroom management skills, and teaching strategies exert important environmental influences on a child’s bonding with school and his or her risk of developing aggressive behavior in early adolescence (O’Donnell, Hawkins, & Abbott, 1995). In the school, teaching practices delimit children’s opportunities for success in conforming activities. Teachers establish rules that guide the social interactions of children with other children and that determine how rewards are given for academic achievement, including rewards for successful social participation in study, task, and project groups. Classroom practices that promote social development create many opportunities for success and provide recognition for students of varying abilities and backgrounds (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1995). Classroom practices that limit opportunities and constrain recognition to a small number of students do little to promote commitment to conventional activities of those who are not rewarded and may be as potentially damaging to social development.
as coercive parenting. Research increasingly shows that the school climate and teaching practices are strongly related to children's educational expectations, commitment to school, and academic achievement and, in a larger sense, to their behaviors in the community (Hawkins et al., 1992; Hawkins, Catalano, Morrison, et al., 1992; O'Donnell et al., 1995).

Further, at the peer and neighborhood levels, ecological factors such as the local social and economic infrastructure often delimit the learning opportunities afforded children. In a study of 479 white and African American seventh-grade boys in Pittsburgh, Peeples and Loeber (1994) found that the delinquent behavior of boys from low-income neighborhoods did not differ by race or ethnicity once hyperactivity, parental supervision, and neighborhood characteristics were controlled. In this and other studies (for example, Farrington, Sampson, & Wikstrom, 1993; Kupersmidt, Griesler, DeRosier, Patterson, & Davis, 1995), neighborhood conditions appeared to exert an effect on behavior that was independent of individual and family influences. For children who grow up in neighborhoods where schools are weak (for example, underfinanced with poorly trained staffs and little community involvement), where opportunities for success in conventional activities are blocked, where adults are committed to illicit activities, and where gangs offer alternative social roles and financial rewards, violence may be a product of a social context in which force and coercion are used routinely to resolve disputes and protect property. Gang-related violence, in particular, appears to be more strongly associated with local economic, school, and peer factors than with biological and family factors (Klein, 1995; Spergel, 1992, 1995).

Thus, aggressive behavior that begins in adolescence is often characterized less by family characteristics and more by failure at school, the presence of an illegitimate opportunity structure, association with delinquent peers, and in some communities the prestige and illicit money that reward gang membership (Simons et al., 1994). Compared to the development of aggressive behavior that starts in early childhood, the social development of aggressive behavior that starts in early adolescence presents challenges that more directly involve many different systems—the school, the peer group, and the neighborhood.

Preventing Youth Violence: An Ecological-Developmental Perspective

To improve rates of success in prevention and early intervention, strategies must be developed to better address the full complexity of influences that lead to aggressive behavior in the social ecology of childhood and early adolescence. Because youth violence is highly correlated with early childhood defiance and aggression, intervention that stalls the development of early childhood oppositional and coercive behavior may have preventive effects (Earle, 1995; Zigler, Taussig, & Black, 1992). Although early childhood aggressive behavior appears to have roots in fewer systems than aggressive behavior that emerges in adolescence, neither early nor late aggression has a single cause. And once in a child's social repertoire, aggressive behavior affects relationships at school and in the peer group.

To be sure, no set of local strategies is likely to change the broad societal conditions—poverty, racial discrimination, and media violence—that affect large numbers of children and weaken social developmental processes (for reviews, see Danish & Donohue, 1996; Hampton & Yung, 1996). However, in the absence of major social and structural reforms (for example, Gil, 1996), recent research provides important clues for how to configure community-based youth violence prevention programs.

Communities

A multiple impact strategy that systematically assesses and targets a range of community factors that place children at risk should guide prevention and early intervention efforts. Many different kinds of efforts are required to prevent youth violence, and no single "off-the-shelf" strategy or program can be relied on across all communities. (For brief descriptions of more than 100 off-the-shelf violence prevention programs, see the U.S. Department of Justice, Partnership Against Violence web site at http://www.usdoj.gov/pavnet.html.) Within the unique character and conditions of individual communities, both the physical and social environmental factors that affect children should be addressed.

In some communities, children must be disarmed. Laws making it illegal for children to carry handguns may need to be more vigorously enforced. In other communities, problem-oriented policing that focuses on "hot spots" of violence or
gang conflict may be needed. In the longer term, the social processes that place children at risk must be addressed. Intervention for children who demonstrate early aggressive behavior should strengthen families and help children develop skills that promote successful relationships in pre-school and elementary school (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993; Yoshikawa, 1994). Early intervention for late-start aggressive behavior should also involve families but should take place in the context of broader efforts to support children across all developmental settings and to engage children in prosocial peer groups.

Although scholars and researchers speak in terms of early and late pathways to violent behavior, there appears to be a heterogeneity of developmental risk factors. Recent research focuses less on time-invariant attributes or traits and more on dynamic processes in the environment. Building on an ecological—developmental perspective, findings can be used to design and mark the success of interventions. This approach is beginning to reap rewards in family treatment (Borduin et al., 1995; Dishion & Andrews, 1995), school reforms (Hawkins et al., 1992; Hawkins, Catalano, Morrison, et al., 1992; Tremblay, Pagani-Kurtz, Masse, Vitaro, & Pihl, 1995), and peer-related skills training (Lochman, 1992).

But mounting ecologically and developmentally based interventions is a complex undertaking because risk factors vary across and within communities. In a study of 866 elementary-school boys and girls from low-income neighborhoods in a large midwestern city, for example, Guerra, Huesmann, Tolan, Van Acker, and Eron (1995) found that poverty—a risk factor for many social problems—affects different children differently. Across the entire sample, a significant zero-order relationship between poverty and aggression washed out when controls for stress from life events (for example, serious illness), stress from neighborhood violence (for example, witnessing a shooting), and beliefs approving the use of aggression (for example, “In general, it’s OK to use violence.”) were entered into regression equations. These findings suggest that poverty affects behavior through both stressful life experiences and accrued beliefs that support the use of physical force. However, the pattern was not the same for boys and girls. Moreover, it was significantly different for boys and girls from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Neighborhood violence was a significant predictor across white (n = 168), Hispanic (n = 383), and African American (n = 315) subgroups, but poverty exerted a direct effect on violence only for the white children. Aggressive normative beliefs was a significant predictor only for Hispanic children, whereas for African American children, a complex interaction between individual and school-level poverty emerged.

Such findings suggest that the specific risks and strengths (sometimes called “protective factors”) in communities must be assessed as a part of the interventional process. As Hawkins (1995) argued, using a social development perspective “calls for first identifying the factors that put young people at risk for violence in order to reduce or eliminate these factors and strengthen the protective factors that buffer the effects of exposure to risk” (p. 11). Building on the emerging core of longitudinal research and on community risk assessments, interventions should be tailored to local differences in the individual, family, school, and neighborhood conditions that place children at risk of violence. In the spirit of community practice in social work, violence prevention initiatives must begin with broad participatory problem solving. Based on information about local risk and protective factors, community residents develop a set of tactics—such as increasing the number of community policing officers or establishing programs for gang “wannabes”—that mobilize resources, reduce fear of victimization, and alter social developmental processes for children.

Families

Services should address family-related risk factors. Across many communities, changes in social and economic conditions have dramatically affected parenting and support systems related to effective parenting. For many families, parental problem solving and child management skills are the linchpins in helping children develop prosocial relationships with peers and in preparing children with the skills to be successful in school (Henggeler & Borduin, 1990, 1995; Kazdin, 1995). In the context of family traditions and culture, family-centered activities should focus on lowering expressive and incendiary parent—child interchanges, setting graduated sanctions for defiant behavior, providing effective alternatives to harsh discipline, and increasing consistency in rewarding desirable behavior and ensuring consequences for aggressive behavior (Patterson, Dishion, & Chamberlain,
In circumstances where parents are unable to constrain their own abusive or illegal behavior, protective action to place children in foster or group care may be required, but substitute care too should be characterized by a family-centered approach, and long-term, stable, and safe living arrangements.

Schools

Services should address school-related risk factors. For communities where school-related risk factors are high, school-based prevention and early intervention strategies should be developed to promote children's attachments to prosocial peers, involvement in school activities, and academic achievement. School strategies should strengthen a child's skills for school involvement and academic achievement, promote involvement in school activities, and decrease truancy and school-related misconduct (Hawkins, Doueck, & Lishner, 1988; Maguin & Loeber, 1996; O'Donnell, Hawkins, Catalano, Abbott, & Day, 1994). To help turn the school into a successful life setting for children, services should be designed to promote home-school collaboration, assist parents in rewarding children's desirable school behaviors and (mildly) providing consequences for disruptive behaviors, ensure that a child who may be eligible for special assistance is properly assessed and assigned, locate children who are truant (and assist in returning them to school or home), help students with homework, create opportunities for children to participate in school clubs or sports (arrange transportation and supervision), and monitor children at after-school activities (Kelley & McCain, 1995; Kurtz & Barth, 1989; McMahon & Peters, 1990; Posner & Vandell, 1994).

For some older children whose behavior is influenced by years of negative school experiences, these activities may not be enough. Changing the school into a successful experience for middle or high school youths may require addressing students' views of the value of academic achievement and sense of self-efficacy and encouraging their beliefs in their capacity to be effective in the school setting. If children have long-term conventional goals (for example, to own a business or to become a clerk, doctor, social worker, or teacher), the discrepancy between these goals and current behavior can be used as a motivational tool to leverage a plan for change (Miller & Rollnick, 1991). Recognition of discrepancies between goals and behavior plus the development of a family-supported plan help break the self-defeating, negative belief systems that often build as a result of social rejection, academic marginality, and the seductive messages of gang recruiters. Within the family, parents should be encouraged to actively support a child's hope that positive change can occur in his or her life. Once engendered, the belief that change can occur is thought to act as a secondary reinforcer for developing skills to promote success in the school environment (Groff & Slowiaczek, 1994).

Peers

Services should address peer-related risk factors. Street violence is often correlated with peer-related factors such as gang involvement or, in the absence of organized gangs, association with peers who hold favorable attitudes toward problem behavior. Peer-related strategies should be linked to family and school interventions. Underpinning efforts to help both early- and late-start aggressive children, services should strengthen bonds of attachment to prosocial peers; weaken negative beliefs and values, including the belief that violence is an effective means for achieving personal goals; and weaken bonds of attachment with peers who employ aggression or violence in problem solving. For elementary and middle-school children, service plans should include developmentally appropriate skills training in processing social information (Lochman & Dodge, 1994). In the context of family and neighborhood history, lore, culture, and tradition, this should include training in processing social cues, drawing appropriate inferences about the intent of others' actions, identifying situation-specific goals, generating alternative social responses, evaluating the likely outcomes of responses, and enacting selected strategies (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Fraser, 1996).

As has been done in some family-based service programs, parents should be encouraged to set peer-related treatment goals, make explicit their own (prosocial) beliefs and values, and define peer-focused interventions (Henggeler & Borduin, 1990; Henggeler, Melton, & Smith, 1992). Together, the family might select settings and activities where children are likely to avoid trouble. Parents should play a major role in identifying appropriate and inappropriate peer behaviors and in approving a child's peers. If joining a new peer
group becomes a treatment goal, a child’s strengths might be listed, a group that fits those strengths selected, and a strategy for approaching and joining the group discussed (Henggeler, 1994). In family-centered intervention, a peer-related focus may be as important in producing positive outcomes as activities that focus explicitly on parents’ child management skills (personal communication with S. W. Henggeler, professor and director, Family Services Research Center, Medical University of South Carolina, November 17, 1995).

One of the enduring enigmas in focusing on the peer correlates of aggressive behavior is the problem of serving high-risk children in groups. Research strongly suggests that the strategy of placing aggressive children in groups with one another promotes aggressive behavior (Dishion & Andrews, 1995; Feldman, Caplinger, & Wodarski, 1983). Moderately aggressive children appear to learn from more aggressive, dominant children. Nevertheless, placing aggressive children together in groups is a common practice in schools, mental health centers, youth training programs, and other settings. Efforts are needed to engineer new group work approaches that avoid placing aggressive children together in small groups. These new approaches should be premised on the principle that children will learn from their peers, and thus services should help aggressive children develop bonds of attachment with prosocial children.

Neighborhoods

Services should address neighborhood-related risk factors. Ecological–developmental research shows clearly that context counts. When neighborhoods are characterized by easy access to drugs and firearms, by attitudes and media favorable to violence, by high poverty, and by low levels of community attachment, the risks are high for children (Hawkins, 1995). In such communities, goals should focus on providing opportunities for children to build attachments with prosocial peers and adults. To the extent possible, services should reinforce traditional elders in businesses, churches, and community agencies.

For middle and high school youths, neighborhood-based services should include after-school mentoring, tutoring, or apprenticeship programs that build bonds of attachment with adults who are committed to conventional lines of action, that strengthen youths’ vocational interests and skills, and that reinforce commitment to nonviolent, prosocial goals (Hamilton, 1990). Teenagers should be given opportunities to work or volunteer at the neighborhood level. Community programs that build children’s attachments to prosocial adults and peers by creating opportunities to help more needy (and often younger) youths have reported positive effects on children’s self-esteem, success in school, and comportment (Calhoun, 1994). Coupled with community mobilization and law enforcement reforms such as community policing, service strategies that involve the neighborhood should build hope, a sense of control over one’s environment, expectations for success in school and work, and a stake in conformity (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1995; Weingart, Hartmann, & Osborne, 1994).

Conclusion

Across the country, thousands of programs focus on children who are aggressive, ungovernable, and assaultive. The activities provided by these programs range from child psychotherapy and counseling to midnight basketball and wilderness-challenge camping trips. Most programs represent the thoughtful efforts of professionals, advocates, and policymakers to address the angry aggression they see in young people. Most also are provided in the absence of any evidence of effectiveness (Kazdin, 1995).

There is, however, growing promise in recent research on the effectiveness of some kinds of services for children (Lipsey & Wilson, 1993; Mulvey, Arthur, & Reppucci, 1993; Prothrow-Stith, 1995; Weisz, Weiss, Han, Granger, & Morton, 1995). In primary prevention with young children (Earle, 1995; Yoshikawa, 1994; Zigler et al., 1992), early intervention with children who have demonstrated aggressive, defiant behavior (Lochman, 1992; Olweus, 1993a, 1993b), and the treatment of serious juvenile offenders (Borduin et al., 1995; Gordon, Graves, & Arbuthnot, 1995; Kazdin, Siegel, & Bass, 1992), studies suggest that many of the social conditions and developmental processes that produce violence can be changed. Combinations of strategies delivered across a variety of home, school, and other settings and coupled, where necessary, with substance abuse treatment have increased children’s prosocial behaviors and reduced problem behavior, including both self-reports and official reports of illegal behaviors.
offer new promise for many young children who have learned to survive in their families, in their schools, and on the streets by confronting authority with aggression.

References


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