

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 55 (12/11)

UNDERSTANDING VIOLENT BEHAVIOR IN CHILDREN & ADOLESCENTS

There is a great concern about the incidence of violent behavior among children and adolescents. This complex and troubling issue needs to be carefully understood by parents, teachers, and other adults.

Children as young as preschoolers can show violent behavior. Parents and other adults who witness the behavior may be concerned, however, they often hope that the young child will “grow out of it.” Violent behavior in a child at any age always needs to be taken seriously. It should not be quickly dismissed as “just a phase they’re going through!”

Range of Violent Behavior

Violent behavior in children and adolescents can include a wide range of behaviors: explosive temper tantrums, physical aggression, fighting, threats or attempts to hurt others (including homicidal thoughts), use of weapons, cruelty toward animals, fire setting, intentional destruction of property and vandalism.

Factors Which Increase Risk of Violent Behavior

Numerous research studies have concluded that a complex interaction or combination of factors leads to an increased risk of violent behavior in children and adolescents. These factors include:

- Previous aggressive or violent behavior
- Being the victim of physical abuse and/or sexual abuse
- Exposure to violence in the home and/or community
- Genetic (family heredity) factors
- Exposure to violence in media (TV, movies, etc.)
- Use of drugs and/or alcohol
- Presence of firearms in home
- Combination of stressful family socioeconomic factors (poverty, severe deprivation, marital breakup, single parenting, unemployment, loss of support from extended family)
- Brain damage from head injury

What are the “warning signs” for violent behavior in children?

Children who have **several risk factors** and **show the following behaviors** should be carefully evaluated:

- Intense anger
- Frequent loss of temper or blow-ups

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- Extreme irritability
- Extreme impulsiveness
- Becoming easily frustrated

Parents and teachers should be careful not to minimize these behaviors in children.

What can be done if a child shows violent behavior?

Whenever a parent or other adult is concerned, they should immediately arrange for a comprehensive evaluation by a qualified mental health professional. Early treatment by a professional can often help. The goals of treatment typically focus on helping the child to: learn how to control his/her anger; express anger and frustrations in appropriate ways; be responsible for his/her actions; and accept consequences. In addition, family conflicts, school problems, and community issues must be addressed.

Can anything prevent violent behavior in children?

Research studies have shown that much violent behavior can be decreased or even prevented if the above risk factors are significantly reduced or eliminated. Most importantly, efforts should be directed at dramatically decreasing the exposure of children and adolescents to violence in the home, community, and through the media. Clearly, violence leads to violence.

In addition, the following strategies can lessen or prevent violent behavior:

- Prevention of child abuse (use of programs such as parent training, family support programs, etc.)
- Sex education and parenting programs for adolescents
- Early intervention programs for violent youngsters
- Monitoring child's viewing of violence on TV/videos/movies

For additional information see *Facts for Families: #33 Conduct Disorder, #37 Children & Firearms, #13 Children and TV Violence, #5 Child Abuse, and #9 Child Sexual Abuse. See also: Your Child (1998 Harper Collins)/Your Adolescent (1999 Harper Collins).*

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