

A Summary of Violence in Children and Adolescents:
Warning Signs, Risks, and Factors Influencing Violent Behavior

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Influencing Violent Behavior

The prevalence of violence in American children and adolescents is a polarizing issue plagued by misinformation. While many attempt to attribute violent tendencies in young adults to the unseemly consumption of distasteful and violent media, the warning signs, risks, and factors influencing violent behavior are much more varied. Violence is a learned behavior and not to be taken lightly; most children caught acting with intense aggression are simply emulating behaviors demonstrated by others at home or in their communities. The importance of recognizing the presence of these behaviors in children and adolescents cannot be overstated, as disregarding them can lead to profound psychological, developmental, and emotional disorders and conditions affecting a person for a lifetime. Intimate partner violence in the home, consumption of violent media, geographic location, and socioeconomic status are some of the leading factors contributing to violent behavior in American children and adolescents. Countless studies have outlined the importance of quickly assessing a child's risk of exposure to violence at a young age in order to find them treatment before they are seriously plagued by emotional or psychological disorders at the most critical stages of development.

Warning Signs of Violent Behavior

According to a survey conducted by Holmes (2013), children between the ages of two and seven who have witnessed acts of domestic violence at home are not likely to exhibit much outwardly aggressive behavior. The effects of partner violence on children instead remains latent until their formative elementary years, during which adolescents begin to act with aggression in school, emulating their parents' actions while internalizing most of their trauma (Holmes, 2013). On average, these acts of aggressive behavior gradually grow worse as children mature and

develop into teens and young adults. As adults, they are much more likely than not to fully exhibit their internalized aggression, though this is a fairly unconscious process. Depending on the age at which a child was exposed to violence will ultimately affect how intensely they emulate such behavior; the younger a child was at the time, the more hostile they are likely to become in the future (Holmes, 2013).

Mrug, Madan, and Windle (2016) nationally surveyed adolescents from varying age groups to determine both the psychological and emotional consequences on children and teens exposed to violence. The study found that nearly half of American adolescents have witnessed some sort of domestic violence during childhood, most of which are likely to develop introverted behaviors, anxiety, or traumatic disorders (Mrug et al., 2016). The three researchers divided up the adolescents' behaviors into three distinct waves following violent encounters. Throughout the first wave, usually between the ages of 11 and 13, youth tend to battle depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide (Mrug et al., 2016). The second wave, typically occurring around the time adolescents enter their teenage years, is characterized by outwardly hostile behavior. Finally, around the age of 18, adolescents exposed to violence enter the third wave and begin to inflict harm onto others, mostly mimicking their own experiences (Mrug et al., 2016).

Risks Contributing to Violent Behavior

Houltberg, Henry, and Morris (2012) surveyed children in an ethnically diverse, poor urban community to determine whether respondents' socioeconomic statuses affected the results of the test and likelihood of exposure to domestic abuse. (Houltberg et al., 2012). They concluded that children and adolescents living in low-income communities are more likely to witness violence in their community but less likely to have the resources to manage their own aggressive tendencies healthily and productively. Without such resources, children living in

poverty often develop anxiety, antisocial behaviorisms, and violent inclinations (Houlberg et al., 2012). Lack of parental control, support, or involvement in the lives of their children are often common among the residents of such communities, according to the study. Unfortunately, the same children whose parents pay them little attention at home receive little more in their schools, which often receive sparse funding and provide very few, if any, mental health resources for students (Houlberg et al., 2012).

Living in low-income communities can thus breed subversive behaviors that may devolve into acts of violence stemming from outside influences, peer pressure, and gang culture, all of which may be interconnected (Houlberg et al., 2012). Children who witness violence in their communities but have active and engaged parents at home are better equipped than children who receive limited parental support to regulate violent thoughts and behaviors, especially if both a mother and father are present in their lives (Houlberg et al., 2012). Meanwhile, children whose parents are inattentive or unadaptable face a greater risk of exposure to violence from sources within their communities and schools and are not likely to regulate their emotions or curb unwanted behaviors. Because of this reality, many adolescents from within disadvantaged communities join groups to establish intimate bonds and espouse familiarity but ultimately subject themselves to violence, adversely affecting their overall perspectives on life (Houlberg et al., 2012). In these instances, adolescents mature antipathetically and grow increasingly inclined to commit acts of violence.

The glorification of violence and power in the media, though not the leading cause of violence in children and adolescents, is also a serious issue. Though domestic violence is not present in all families, children may still be from a very young age exposed to media depictions of violent behavior within the home. Mrug, Madan, and Windle (2016) found that young adults

who play violent video games and consume violent media experience desensitization to violence and introversion much like those who have fallen victim to or witnessed physical abuse. Because depictions of violence in the media are not personally felt or experienced, young viewers are not likely to emulate them (Mrug et al., 2016). However, steady consumption of violent media at a young age can lead to desensitization and negative emotional implications which may grow stronger as adolescents age. Routine exposure to violence in the media can also lead youth to internalize their emotions, so it may become difficult for adults to determine the root cause of their behavior (Mrug et al., 2016).

Factors Influencing Violent Behavior

Kaufman, Ortega, Schewe, and Kracke (2011) gathered information across the United States by surveying children under the age of seven for signs of aggressive behavior. According to their findings, nearly 30% of children nationwide have been exposed to violence, whether at home or in their communities, and the younger the children, the more likely they are to act violently (Kaufman et al., 2011). While children in poverty-stricken communities do tend to witness the most violence and suffer the most negligence, they are not markedly more likely to fall victim to violence. Rather, nearly one-fourth of children from disadvantaged communities suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after witnessing violent acts. Adolescents who have been exposed to intense violence are also likely to commit acts of intimate partner violence themselves later on in life, especially if they felt personally victimized during childhood (Kaufman et al., 2011).

Relying on information provided by respondents whose children had witnessed acts of domestic partner violence, Wherry, Medford, and Corson (2015) found that children are most likely to develop behavioral or emotional disorders throughout consequential phases of

adolescence if they have previously witnessed violence in the home. Regardless of sex, children who have witnessed violent acts between their parents and their spouses are likely to emulate aggressive behaviors at school with and around peers. Anxiety and depression are the most common conditions developed by younger children, while symptoms of PTSD occur most often among older adolescents (Wherry et al., 2015). Sex also affects how young children react to violence in the home. While young boys tend to internalize most of their emotions, young girls are prone to externalization (Wherry et al., 2015).

A significant problem regarding the reporting of intimate partner violence, however, especially as it contributes to violent behavior in children, is that most cases are self-reported. Self-reporting can lead to statistical inaccuracies in the data surrounding domestic violence, which is indeed a larger issue (Wherry et al., 2015). Because most of the data regarding youths affected by intimate partner violence between one or more of their parents and significant others is actually reported by parents themselves, much of the data remains unreliable. Thus, the percentage of children who have witnessed acts of violence in the home is more of a reasonable estimate than a concrete statistic. Surveys conducted on adolescent respondents are considered much more reliable and reveal much higher percentages of youths affected by intimate partner violence (Wherry et al., 2015).

Conclusion

Children and adolescents who exhibit disturbing, violent behaviors must be properly treated before they venture into young adulthood with irreparable psychological or emotional damage. Violence can be emulated by children from an abundance of sources, whether from within or without the home. Young children living in low-income, urban communities are most at risk for exposure to violent behavior and also most likely to develop traumatic disorders such

as PTSD, though children and adolescents of all walks of life are equally likely to fall victim to violent acts in the home. Without proper access to quality care, children may experience more intense bouts of violence, which they are bound to emulate; swift identification of risk factors is pivotal in such cases. Though many children do not show early signs of abuse, a thorough assessment of a child's potential risks of exposure to violence are essential in limiting factors that may influence violent behavior.

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