

# Understanding Violent Behavior In Children and Adolescents

<http://www.cdc.gov/od/oc/media/pressrel/r990421.htm>

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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
- 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

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# *The Risk Of Violent And Homicidal Behavior In Children*

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<http://www.oregoncounseling.org/ArticlesPapers/Documents/childviolence.htm>

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Violent. Child. These two words don't seem to belong together. We hope and expect that children will be gentle, loving, happy little beings, greeting the world with open hearts. But some children do behave violently. And, as we are painfully aware, children sometimes kill.

**What is the cause of violent behavior?** As you might expect, there is no simple, definite answer. Research on child violence has focused on the influences of biology, on social and economic factors, on trauma, on personality, and on temperament. Research scientists attempt to understand the situations and influences that lead to children's violent behavior. Emotional problems, social conflict, the availability of weapons and the effects of alcohol and drugs contribute to violent and homicidal behavior by children. While we don't understand all the causes, we know a lot. There are steps we can take to recognize and reduce the risk of children's destructive and violent behaviors.

The risk for violent and homicidal behavior can be difficult to recognize in very young children. Prior to adolescence, the major violence factors are: that the child is temperamentally difficult, has problems in socialization, and has experienced severe or repeated emotional trauma.

## **Developmental Challenges - Children at Risk**

- ***Temperamental Difficulty.*** Temperament is the emotional style of a child. A temperamentally difficult child may behave in ways that are impulsive, insensitive to others, easily threatened, aggressive or withdrawn. Except in the most severe cases, temperament alone cannot indicate that a child may become dangerous or violent.
- ***Problems in Socialization.*** A child learns about society and relationships from parents and under parents guidance. What children learn about the world is based on how parents raise, encourage and educate them. The behavior of parents toward children, and the examples parents set, **are** the lessons they teach. Children raised in homes where adult behavior is confusing and emotionally unstable and where communication is poor will develop

problems relating to other people. Violent behavior in the home and tolerance of violence in media and entertainment can promote a child's belief that thrill seeking and violence are ways to solve problems.

- **Emotional Trauma.** Emotional trauma has a negative impact on a child's emotional style profoundly affecting their relationships and how they view the world. Physical, emotional and mental abuse damages a child's basic sense of safety. Children who are physically abused and treated violently often become violent. Children who are neglected often have difficulty forming relationships and caring about others. Children who are sexually abused frequently exhibit sexually inappropriate and abusive behavior with other children..

### **How can we tell whether a child may become destructive and violent?**

The backgrounds of children tell us only part of the reason why some children become dangerous and violent. Difficult temperament, poor child raising and emotional trauma can explain unhappy childhoods, but won't explain why so many young children with unhappy history don't become violent.

We are beginning to understand that violent behavior is just one result for children who experience early developmental challenges. Instead of becoming violent some unhappy children develop severe depression, anxiety disorders, phobias, obsessions, compulsive behaviors or personality problems characterized by extreme emotionality and behavioral instability.

Without help, young children with developmental challenges will have continuing problems. What we don't know, and we can't predict when children are very young, is which of these unhappy children will become dangerous, destructive and violent.

### **Are there specific behaviors that indicate a risk of destructive and violent behavior?**

There are three levels of behavior which should arouse concern. These are Early Warning Signs, General Warning Signs and those associated with Immediate Risk and Danger.

**1. The first level of concern** is the earliest warning signs. While rare in the general population, a history that combines fire starting, cruelty to animals and bed wetting has been linked with destructive, dangerous and violent behavior. Bed wetting alone is not significant. While there may not be a risk of violence when these three risk factors are present, the risk of future destructive behavior, violence or ongoing psychological and behavioral problems is very high.

### **Early Warning Signs**

- Fire starting
- Cruelty to animals
- Bed wetting

**2. The second level of concern** involves warning signs associated with a risk of violence or destructive behavior in the near future. These behaviors are often seen in adolescents who become destructive and violent. Many of these behaviors are seen in children as young as seven. The presence of "General Warning Signs" indicates a risk that a child will become destructive or violent in the near future. The more warning signs the greater the risk.

### **General Warning Signs**

- Socially isolated, outcast or withdrawn.
- Feelings and behavior are easily influenced by peers.
- Victimized or treated badly by peers.
- Alcohol or other drug use.
- Dwelling on experiences of rejection, on injustices or unrealistic fears.
- Reacting to disappointments, criticisms or teasing with extreme and intense anger, blame or a desire for revenge.
- Increasing anger, aggression and destructive behavior.
- Associates with children known to be involved with morbid, destructive or violent behavior or fantasy.
- Preoccupation or interest in destructive or violent behavior.
- Has been cruel or violent towards pets or other animals.
- Fascination, interest or an obsession with weapons or potential weapons.
- Depicts violent or destructive behaviors in artistic or other creative expressions.

**3. The third level of concern involves immediate risk or danger.** Immediate Risk or Danger indicates that some intervention should begin as soon as possible. This may include an immediate evaluation by a qualified mental health professional. If a child is violent or dangerous to self or others, parents should take the child to a nearby hospital emergency department. If the child is unmanageable and cannot be controlled

physically, parents should call 911 and law enforcement. A comprehensive evaluation and intervention by a qualified crisis intervention professional may be necessary.

#### **Immediate Risk or Danger**

- Recently assaulted another child or was recently assaulted.
- Brought a weapon to a place or situation that is inappropriate.
- Has or may have a weapon that is potentially lethal.
- Destructive, violent or threatening gestures or statements.
- Has or may have a plan for destructive, violent or suicidal behavior.
- Saying or implying they are suicidal.
- There is or may be an identified a target for destructive behavior or violence.

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# Understanding the Violent Child

<http://www.drspock.com/article/0,1510,9601,00.html>

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Although the roots of child violence are varied, **violent youth often share a pattern of beliefs and feelings that support their aggressive behavior.** In some cases, **it is relatively easy to punish the behavior, but it can be much more difficult to change the underlying thoughts and emotions of a violent child.**

To be effective, treatment approaches for violent youths need to take these factors into account:

- **The loss of empathy.** Violent children often don't even recognize (much less feel) the suffering of others. Empathy develops early in infancy. Most nine-month-old infants register concern if they see their parents crying, for example. Children who have been emotionally traumatized learn to protect themselves from further emotional damage by shutting off their own feelings along with any empathic feelings they might have for others.
- **Distorted thinking.** Violent children come to believe that overpowering another person is a mark of strength and worth, and that violence is a legitimate way to resolve conflict. Popular media support this idea, with wrestlers who pound their opponents without mercy and so-called action heroes who slaughter foes by the truckload. For good or bad, the government unwittingly encourages the idea that "might makes right" when it engages in shows of strength celebrating the Army and police. Violent children needn't look far for evidence that force is what really counts.
- **Self-esteem.** For some children, aggression toward other children may be a powerful source of self-esteem, particularly if they lack other confirmation of their human worth. In many cases, the problem is not lack of self-esteem so much as lack of self-esteem related to positive, peaceful accomplishments.
- **A 'me against the world' attitude.** Children who become violent have often learned to see the world as a cold and hostile place. They develop a habit of thought that attributes hostile intentions to others. This attitude leaves them little choice but to fight virtually all the time. If, for example, another child bumps up against them in the hallway at school, they immediately take offense, certain that they were attacked. They cannot imagine that perhaps the bumping was just clumsiness on the other child's part or an attempt to tease that really wasn't hostile.
- **Always the victim.** Even while they are the aggressors, violent individuals almost always think of themselves as victims--of unfair teachers, of other bullies, of prejudice--and believe that their violent acts are therefore totally justified.
- **Never safe.** The aggressive child sees the world as an unsafe place in which there are only victims and victimizers, so he (unconsciously) chooses to be one of the latter. The power and delight he takes in hurting others, in combination with his already numbed emotions, can make for a lethal mixture.

## Easing the pain and anger

**It isn't difficult to recognize many of these beliefs and emotions in children who act violently, but it is hard to know how to correct them.** While it is clear to others that many of the ideas the violent child

harbors are wrong and that the scope of his feelings is narrowed, from the inside, these thoughts and feelings make perfect sense. Every experience the child has seems to reinforce the idea that the world is a hostile, uncaring place.

**Unfortunately, juvenile justice programs that rely on scare tactics, punishments, and threats only give support to the child's negative, antagonistic beliefs, creating an even more dangerous young adult.**

**There is no simple, surefire answer to breaking through this wall of beliefs and perceptions.**

Programs that train children to think of alternative explanations for others' actions--that is, reasons other than "he was out to get me"--have had some success, particularly when used early on. Other programs, such as peer mediation, teach young adults the specific skills needed to resolve conflicts nonviolently. In some cases, children can learn to think through the consequences of violent responses and to imagine other responses that might be more effective in the long run.

But the task of healing the emotional wounds that underlie hostile behavior is daunting, and we haven't yet found a cure that works for the most aggressive children.

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