

by Liz Warwick

EARLY CHILDHOOD AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Aggression is one of society's most pressing issues. From fights in the schoolyard to senseless shootings of innocent bystanders, hardly a community today can say it has not been affected by violent acts. Yet, contrary to what many Canadians think, researchers are discovering that the keys to understanding aggression - and thus providing appropriate treatment and intervention - are to be found in the prenatal and early childhood years.

obstetric complications usually require another stressor, such as poor parenting or low socio-economic status, before increased levels of aggression will be found.

When Aggressive Behaviour Peaks

Regardless of a baby's prenatal conditions, almost all infants will exhibit some form of aggression. Studies by Richard E. Tremblay, Professor at the University of Montreal, and others have shown that aggression tends to peak at

mature. "Rates of aggression decrease sharply during the preschool years as children develop their verbal, emotional, and social skills," comments Bierman.

Researchers estimate that a small group of children (5% to 10%) will continue to show aggressive patterns of behaviour throughout childhood and adolescence. Unfortunately, no definitive line has been established to distinguish normal aggression from problematic behav-

"Preschoolers who have not successfully developed age-appropriate strategies for regulating aggressive behaviour are at high risk for embarking on a trajectory to chronic antisocial and aggressive behaviour."

While some people worry about the risks of pathologizing normal toddler behaviour, Dale Hay, Professor at Cardiff University's School of Psychiatry, stresses that "extensive use of aggression is not normal, even in the earliest years of life."

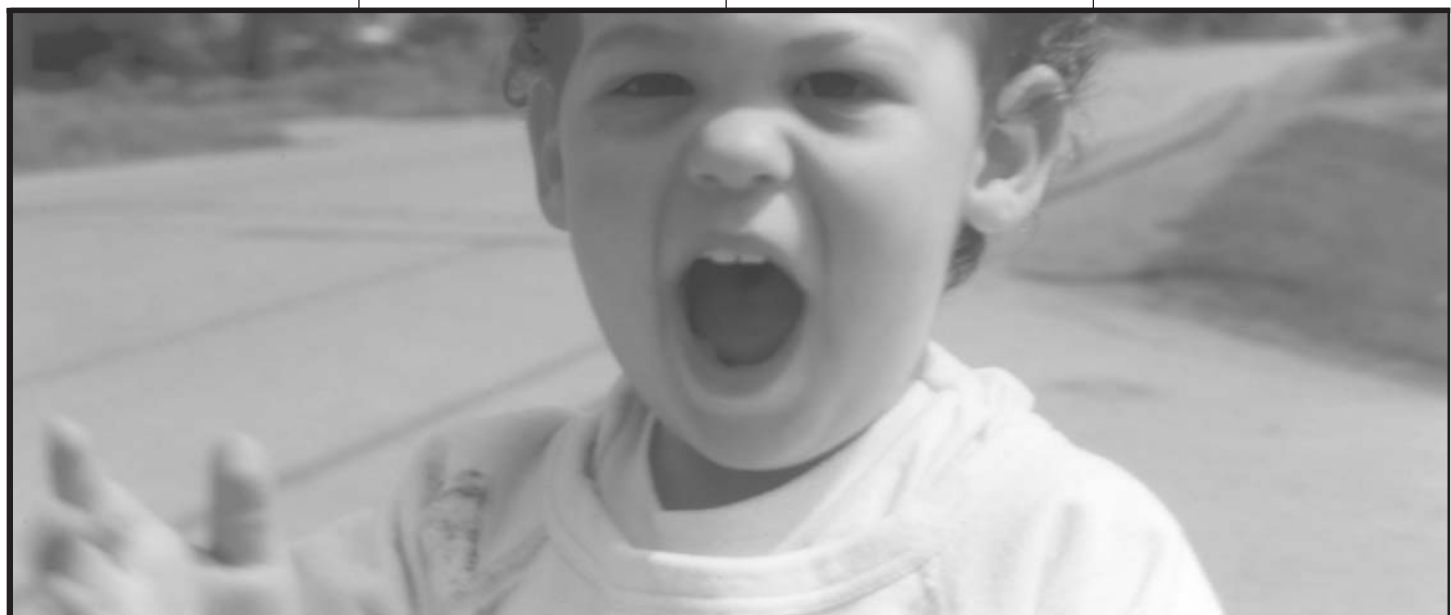


photo : Marie-Claude Saint-Laurent

Indeed, research has established some salient correlations between chronic physical aggression and numerous prenatal and perinatal conditions. However, the impact of these different complications is variable. For

about 2½ years of age and then decrease steadily. Karen Bierman, Director of the Children, Youth and Families Consortium at Pennsylvania State University notes, "There is a growing consensus that children dis-

play aggressive behaviour when they are first learning to get along with others. This happens around the ages of 2 to 3." Fortunately, these negative behaviours tend to wane as children iours. "We struggle with how to define atypical and normative aggression," says Kate Keenan, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Chicago. "We don't know how early we can identify children who will have problems with aggression." Researchers lack well-tested models or ways to identify very young children at risk for continuing aggression. "Most etiological models do not incorporate the first years of life," says Keenan.

Hay points out that toddlers are more inclined to engage in prosocial behaviours such as sharing, helping, and empathizing. "The impulse to relate positively to others is there," says Hay, and children who have problems engaging in these prosocial behaviours appear to be at higher risk for increased levels of aggression. Hay cites findings from the South London Development Study, which measured prosocial skills in children at age 4 and again at age 11. The study concluded that a child's ability to cooperate with his or her mother on a specific task (used as a measure of prosocial skills) was a

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example, the link between prenatal alcohol exposure and aggression is much stronger than the link between poor maternal nutrition and aggression. Researchers also suggest that

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Yet the need for such models is great. In a research paper on the development and socialization of aggression, Keenan confirms that

unique predictive factor for aggressive behaviour.

Prosocial vs. Aggressive Tendencies

The emergence of both prosocial and aggressive tendencies does not occur in a vacuum; children are born into and develop within particular families, neighbourhoods, schools, and peer groups. Rolf Loeber, Director of the *Pittsburgh Youth Study*, notes that a variety of factors increase children's risk of developing aggressive behaviour later in life, including low socioeconomic levels, mistreatment or abuse, peer drug use, poor school performance, and living in dangerous neighbourhoods. The greater the number of risk factors and risk domains, the greater the chance a child will become aggressive, according to Loeber.

Thus, when risk factors accumulate or "stack up" over a period of time, an individual may become increasingly aggressive, according to John Lochman, Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Alabama. Given the problem of developmental stacking, Lochman con-



photo: Andree Vallée

pared to the immense costs of containment and repair associated with troubled development. With early intervention, we have the hope of setting these troubled children on a positive pathway." However, many questions remain about the most effective and efficient means of intervening.

Prevention Programs

Prevention programs may focus on the child, parents, the parent-

tent, non-violent strategies in managing child misbehaviour have the most positive effects on reducing child aggression." Others suggest that while parents play a key role, additional work with children and their schoolteachers may be needed. In discussing *The Incredible Years* program, Carolyn Webster-Stratton, Professor at the University of Washington, and Nazli Baydar, Research Associate Professor, point out that it is one of the few programs to have been evaluated using randomized control trials conducted both by the developer and independent researchers. For children with pervasive problems, a complementary child or teacher component is also recommended. Research has shown that *The Incredible Year's* teacher training also improved children's behaviour in the classroom and

cies in key areas of communications skills, emotional understanding, and self-regulation," she says. "Prevention programs that include a comprehensive focus on promoting child competencies in cognitive and social-emotional skills are more likely to be successful than those that focus narrowly on the suppression of aggressive behaviours."

In her research work, Bierman argues for early intervention to help aggression-prone children. "Developmental research suggests that efforts to prevent aggression and related developmental problems should begin in early childhood, when learning to control aggression is a normative developmental task, rather than waiting until school age, when the problems manifest themselves at clinically significant rates."

How to Reduce Aggression

Canada has taken some significant steps to ensure that necessary intervention services are made available at the appropriate stages during childhood to reduce aggression. Under Canada's Early Childhood Development Agreement, provinces and territories receive funds for programs that cover a continuum of early interventions: promoting health in pregnancy, birthing and infant care; expanding family and parenting support systems; strengthening early childhood development, learning and care; and improving community support networks. Programs and services are tar-

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tends that there is an urgent need to intervene early. "Interventions prior to school entry can impact children's increasingly stable aggressive behaviour before some of the later additional risk factors become crystallized," he says. In a research paper on reducing aggressive behaviour in young children, Lochman warns that failing to act has serious consequences in young children. "Aggressive and disruptive behaviour is one of the most enduring dysfunctions in children, and, if left untreated, frequently results in high personal and emotional costs to children, their families, and to society in general."

Clearly, there is a pressing need for programs and services to deal with aggression. As researcher Debra Pepler, Professor of Psychology at York University, notes, "The cost of early intervention seems minimal com-

child dyad, teachers, or some combination thereof. Unfortunately, very few programs have been validated through randomized control studies. There are also significant gaps in knowledge concerning the effectiveness of programs for various risk groups (high-, medium- or low-risk aggressors), the persistence of their effects over time (eg. 6 months, one year, or longer), the timeframe needed (eg. once a week for 12 weeks) as well as the most effective target groups (children, parents, and/or teachers).

While some programs focus on the child alone, researchers suggest that successful aggression reduction interventions also target parents. Kenneth A. Dodge, Professor at Duke University, holds that "Programs that teach parents to implement consis-

"Programs that teach parents to implement consistent, non-violent strategies in managing child misbehaviour have the most positive effects on reducing child aggression." - Kenneth A. Dodge

augmented the overall impact of parent training.

The development of prosocial skills in children must be a core element in any program, according to Karen Bierman, Professor at the Pennsylvania State University. "To inhibit their aggressive impulses, children need to develop competen-

geted, culturally sensitive and community based. Patricia Bégin, then Director of *Research and Evaluation at Canada's National Crime Prevention Centre*, says that in these programs and services, "the emphasis is on knowledge, information, effective practices and accountability." Bégin
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also stresses that Canada's National Crime Prevention Strategy (a policy

down" programs, whereby communities selectively implement parts of pro-

grams and therefore potentially reduce their impact and efficacy. Researchers such as Celene E. Domitrovich and Mark Greenberg, Professors at Pennsylvania State University, agree, suggesting that the future of prevention programs resides in generation, replication, and implementation.

ing it but for some reason or other, we forget it." He says that far too many Canadians are under the impression that aggression and violence are problems to be addressed in late childhood and adolescence. But nothing could be further from the truth. According to Tremblay, if Canada wants to ensure the well-being of future generations, "early intervention is one of the best investments that can be made." 

"Early childhood is important. It's been said over and over. Everyone has been saying it but for some reason or other, we forget it." - Richard E. Tremblay

and set of programs to reduce crime) goes beyond simply policing communities and addresses the root causes of violence. "It is a long-term, proactive approach. The crime prevention benefits will accumulate over time through a social developmental approach," she says.

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There is also a clear need for expanded knowledge, more services, and better policy-making for earlier intervention. Richard E. Tremblay is emphatic when he talks about the benefits of early intervention. "Early childhood is important. It's been said over and over. Everyone has been say-

Dan Offord, Director of the *Canadian Centre for Studies of Children at Risk*, wants to take current policies aimed at reducing aggression to the next level. "If you are going to do a national program, you must have clear objectives," says Offord. While communities want and need choice, Offord emphasizes the importance of establishing the effectiveness of programs. "We need evidence that they work," he says, but he also warns against the danger of "watering-

The Need for Better Services

Most researchers agree that there is a pressing need to evaluate the effectiveness of programs, but very little money has been allocated to program evaluation. Offord is calling for increased collaboration between academic centres and the community organizations that implement aggression prevention programs. He says groups should be keeping detailed participant records, looking

News Flash: Conference PREVENTION OF ABUSE TOWARDS YOUNG CHILDREN SEPTEMBER 5-6, 2003, MONTREAL

This conference, organized by the *Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development (CEECD)*, the *Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare (CECW)*, and McGill and Concordia universities, is intended for Canadian service planners and service providers. It will focus on the prevention of abuse and neglect of young children and on what we know about the effects of abuse on

child development, protective factors, and preventive interventions. Presentations on the *Ospedale della Pieta* which combines music and support in the treatment of abandoned children, will also be covered.

For more information and for registration material, consult the CEECD Website:

www.excellence-earlychildhood.ca

YOU WISH TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT YOUNG CHILDREN AND AGGRESSION?

Please Refer to Our Experts Texts on Aggression in the CEECD Encyclopedia:

http://www.excellence-earlychildhood.ca/liste_theme.asp?lang=EN&act=32

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Editors: Lucie Beaupré and Richard E. Tremblay

Collaborators: Sandra Griffin, Pierre Picard, Liz Warwick

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Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development

GRIP-Université de Montréal

P.O. Box 6128, Succursale Centre-ville

Montreal (Quebec) H3C 3J7

Telephone: (514) 343-6111, extension 2541

Fax: (514) 343-6962

E-mail: cedje-ceecd@umontreal.ca

Website: www.excellence-earlychildhood.ca

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