

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 55

(Updated March 2001)

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

Understanding Violent Behavior, “Facts for Families,” No. 55 (3/01)

- 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).

###

If you find *Facts for Families*® helpful and would like to make good mental health a reality for all children, please consider donating to the **Campaign for America's Kids**. Your support will help us continue to produce and distribute *Facts for Families*, as well as other vital mental health information, free of charge.

You may also mail in your contribution. Please make checks payable to the AACAP and send to *Campaign for America's Kids*, P.O. Box 96106, Washington, DC 20090.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) represents over 7,000 child and adolescent psychiatrists who are physicians with at least five years of additional training beyond medical school in general (adult) and child and adolescent psychiatry.

Facts for Families® information sheets are developed, owned and distributed by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) and are supported by a grant from the Klingenstein Third Generation Foundation. Hard copies of *Facts* sheets may be reproduced for personal or educational use without written permission, but cannot be included in material presented for sale or profit. All *Facts* can be viewed and printed from the AACAP Web site (www.aacap.org). *Facts* sheets may not be reproduced, duplicated or posted on any other Internet Web site **without written consent from AACAP**. Organizations are permitted to create links to AACAP's Web site and specific *Facts* sheets. To purchase complete sets of *Facts for Families*, please contact the AACAP's Development and Communications Assistant at 800.333.7636, ext. 140.