University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development

Children, Youth & Family

background

Raising Non-Violent Children

Family Matters
Improving conditions at home may curb violence

Designing interventions to improve family relations and circumstances at home is showing promise as a strategy for reducing the risks of children developing violent tendencies.

The idea of focusing on the family is based on evidence that interactions between parents and their children are very influential to the development of aggressive and violent behaviors. A parent's emotional distress, for example, is associated with youth violence, as is depression, marital conflict, and other conditions in the home.

Parent- and family-based program interventions usually teach parents about child development and why children develop violent behaviors, and help them develop better parenting skills, nonviolent ways to resolve conflict, and methods of communicating with their children.

Such interventions, when well designed and implemented, can reduce violent behavior among children over the long term, studies suggest.

Tailored To Fit

When interventions are tailored to the characteristics of a certain group of parents, they usually are more successful at making it less likely their children will develop violent behaviors.

These types of programs pay attention to the parent's age, life circumstances, race, and other cultural

Parents Influence Behavior

Studies report several parent-related factors place children at risk of developing problem behaviors and violent tendencies. These include the following:

- Harsh or inconsistent discipline.

- Lack of emotional interaction between a parent and child.

- Lack of communication between a child's mother and father.

- Parental depression.

- High levels of stress in the home.

- Domestic violence.

- Divorce and separation.

and demographic issues.

Effective Black Parenting, for example, was adapted from a generic parenting skill-building intervention to fit the culture and parenting practices in South Central Los Angeles. The program has been found to have several positive outcomes, including improved family relations and fewer problems related to child behavior.[1]

Long-term improvements are more likely to be realized when programs are expanded to help parents deal with issues such as depression, marital conflict, and housing.

Young Children

Interventions for parents of young children often have the best chance of success because behavior patterns of parents and children are still developing and are more readily influenced.

Parent-Child Interaction Training, for example, helped reduce aggression,

hostility, anxiety, and hyperactivity among preschool children by having their parents attend small-group sessions, which included instruction, role-playing, supervised play and other activities to reinforce positive parenting practices.[2]

Successful programs usually teach parents about child development, which helps parents set age-appropriate expectations for children. These program may also teach a range of parenting skills and offer instruction on topics such as the impact of media violence on children.

Adolescents & Teens

Successful programs for families of adolescents usually help explain age-appropriate developmental issues, including sexuality, growing independence, and the likelihood of their children engaging in rebellious behavior.

These programs also broach such topics as communication among family

Experiences At School And Home Can Predict Violent Behavior Among Children

Factors that place children at greater risk of developing violent behaviors include:

- *Living in violent-prone neighborhoods.*

- *Witnessing violent acts.*

- *Associating with violent or antisocial friends.*

- *Being a victim of abuse.*

- *In school, learning problems or high absenteeism.*

Children at <u>high risk</u> for developing violent behaviors often show clear behavioral markers. These include:

- *Bullying other children or being the target of bullies.*

- *Displaying aggressive behavior.*

- *Being truant.*

- *Belonging to delinquent or violent peer groups.*

- *Abusing alcohol or other drugs.*

- *Setting fires, animal cruelty, other antisocial behavior.*

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members, and help parents identify positive role models among family, friends and others.

Parents who took part in the Adolescent Training Program reported a lower tendency to overreact to their child's behavior, greater diligence dealing with problem behavior, and less depression.[3] The program for parents of middle school students seeks to improve a range of parenting skills, including making rules, monitoring, providing reasonable consequences for rule violations, and problem-solving.

High Risk Children

Disadvantaged parents, particularly low-income single mothers, pose a challenge to parenting programs. However, interventions that involve parents in planning, leadership, and other key aspects of the program have been successful in recruiting mothers and improving their parenting skills.

One of the best times to intervene may be during the "terrible twos," according to University of Pittsburgh researcher Daniel Shaw. In a study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, he is studying the development of young boys whose

parents are offered an intervention package that assesses the risk of their children developing conduct problems, and allows them to select the treatment they feel will best help them.

Shaw is convinced from his previous work that interventions are most effective at a time when even strong parent-child relationships can become

frayed. "There is something going on around that age that elicits a challenge for many parents," said Shaw, Associate Professor of Psychology. "If you have a mom or dad who has a slightly aggressive personality, maybe those buttons don't get pushed in the first year. But when that child starts walking, breaking things, it may be different."

references

This report was based on the following publications:

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