

AGGRESSIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIORS IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

David Lowenstein, Ph.D.
Psychologist

When it comes to aggressive behavior, the foremost role models for children are their parents, according to a new study in the December edition of the Journal Health Education & Behavior. The study concludes that despite the outside influence of the media and their peers, what kids see at home is the biggest determinant of how they behave.

With the increase in school violence over the past decade, researchers set out to find if there were predictors of violent behaviors among young teens. In tabulating their data, they surveyed nearly 9,000 middle school students from eight schools in Houston in 1994.

Although there have been other studies showing an association between aggressive behavior and the family, most studies worked with delinquency, not with general aggressive behaviors using a broad cross-section of students.

In the study, students were asked to rate their own aggressive behavior on a scale composed of 11 items. Items included number of fights and if they ever carried a weapon. Students were then asked to rate their relationships with the parents or guardians they lived with, with five possible responses ranging from "very well" to "very bad." Parental monitoring was measured by two questions:

"Do your parents let you come and go as you please?"

"When you are away from home do your parents know where you are and whom you are with?"

Students chose one of five possible responses from "never/almost never," to "almost always."

The students' perceptions of parental attitudes about fighting were also measured. Students gave "yes" or "no" answers to statements about their parents' attitudes, what they had told the student about fighting as well as items related to peaceful alternatives to conflict.

This study found some interesting statistics about the following issues: Students who lived with both parents had significantly lower aggression scores. The better students got along with their parents, the less likely they were to fight. The more parents monitored students' activities and friends, the less aggressive their behavior. They noted a strong correlation between a student's aggression and how he perceived his parents felt about fighting. The study also found that even though students who lived with both parents had the lowest aggression scores, low parental monitoring, poor relationship with parents, and perceived parental support for fighting were more predictive of aggression than family structure.