

SEEING VIOLENCE PROVOKES VIOLENCE IN CHILDREN

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Violence among young people is on parents' minds and in politicians' speeches. At the same time, researchers are finding out more about what is behind the plague of violent acts. Sixth graders who see or are the targets of violence are more likely to become violent themselves, and those who use cigarettes or drugs are at even greater risk because they are engaging in a package of experimental, risky activities, researchers report in the Journal of Pediatrics (October, 2004).

This study demonstrated that violence prevention efforts must address the cluster of behaviors that include exposure to violence, substance use, and smoking for any hope of success. In this study, the researchers surveyed over 700 11 and 12-year-old middle school students. Violent acts were defined in the study as:

1. Carrying a weapon other than a firearm, such as a knife or bat
2. Being in a fight and requiring medical attention
3. Carrying a concealed gun
4. Attacking someone with a weapon or with the idea of seriously hurting him or her
5. Using a weapon to steal from someone

This study also found that almost 100% of the students had witnessed or been a victim of violence at some time during their lives. Although more than half of the students had not engaged in any violent behaviors during the previous three months, 25% had engaged in one or two violent acts. And as many as 5% reported seven or more violent acts during the previous three months. Multiple substance use, interest in a gang, being male, cigarette smoking, and depression also significantly increased violence.

On a more positive note, the researchers report that students who regularly attend religious services are less likely to be violent. But unfortunately, living in a home with a male head of household neither decreased or increased the risk of being violent.

Every 11- or 12-year-old is at risk for violence. The sixth grader who is involved with alcohol or drug use is even more at risk than a 16-year old. This study found that programs to prevent violence should include protection from media violence. Students this age should not have television sets in their bedrooms and should not watch television without parental supervision of what they are watching. This is a very impressionable age. Mental Health Professionals should advise pediatricians and parents to ask kids questions about the group of behaviors that put middle-school students at risk. For example:

1. Do you know people who have tried smoking or drugs?
2. How would you handle requests to participate?"

3. Do you feel safe at home and at school? If not, why?
4. Have you seen or heard of violence occurring?
5. Have you ever been threatened or hurt? If so, what happened?