

A LINE ON LIFE

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Children's Aggression *

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Because of the recent killings of children by children, we are going to discuss children's aggression. How can we reduce aggression among young children?

First, any behavior that is learned can be unlearned. It might be even better, if aggression was never taught in the first place. One possible way to control aggression is to model less of it. Since the 1970s, various organizations have tried to reduce aggression on television. As you can see with current programming, levels of violence have not lessened.



Another possibility is to **socialize** children differently. Violent behavior on television has been linked to more aggressive behavior in boys. However, this is rarely found with girls. In fact, they often show less aggression. In our society, girls are reinforced less for aggressive behavior. Since girls are trained to be less aggressive, they are less likely to identify with aggressive media models. Thus they are less affected by these models.

We tolerate more aggression in boys. In a 1985 psychological study, 175 men and women watched a video of two children playing roughly in the snow. The gender of the children was disguised by heavy snowsuits.

The subjects were told that the children were both boys, both girls, or a girl and a boy. The adults were asked to rate the amount of aggression displayed by the children.

With the same behavior, boys were rated as *less* aggressive than the other pairs. The *same behavior* is accepted as nonaggressive in boys, but it is viewed as aggressive in girls. In other words, boys are allowed to play more roughly than girls, before they are considered to have "*stepped over the line*" with aggressive behavior. This social pressure helps girls to be less aggressive.

However, some girls can be taught to be as aggressive as any boy. Learned aggression does not depend on the child's gender, but rather on the child's experiences. If girls can be trained to be more violent, then boys can be trained to be *less* violent. This is expressed in the words of psychologist Leonard Eron.

"If we want to reduce the level of aggression in our society, we should also discourage boys from aggression early in life and reward them too for other behaviors.... Here is where the women's liberation movement has it all wrong. Rather than insisting that little girls should be treated like little boys and be given the same opportunities for participation in athletic events, Little League, and the like, as well as all other aspects of life, it should be the other way around. Boys should be socialized the way girls have traditionally been socialized, and they should be encouraged to develop socially positive qualities such as tenderness, sensitivity to feelings, nurturance, cooperativeness, and aesthetic appreciation. The level of individual aggression in society will be reduced only when male adolescents and young adults, as a result of socialization, subscribe to the same standards of behavior as have been traditionally encouraged for women."

However, to the extent that aggression is biologically determined, these efforts might not be successful. Second – even if this could be done – it might leave our country in a dangerous position in terms of the

balance of international power. Third – as long as masculinity in our culture is defined in terms of *not* being feminine – this will be a very difficult task.

**To reduce violence among children,
they need to be taught
less violent ways of expressing their anger.**

However, parents can start by changing the way they rear *their* young children. Aggression can be reduced, if children are taught other ways to deal with their frustrations. There are several possibilities for parents.

- Children can be trained to use humor to defuse their anger.
- Children can be taught other new methods of handling stress to keep their anger from increasing.
- Children can be made more aware of the harmful effects of aggression.
- Training can be provided to increase empathy and role taking in children.
- Parents can reduce the level of aggression modeled in the home.
- Parents can encourage social and legal organizations to become more involved with children at an earlier age.

The training starts with you and your children. Well, what are you waiting for?

* Adapted from John P. Dworetzky's *Introduction to Child Development*, West Publishing, 1987, pages 416-418.