



Aggressive Girls

National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

Introduction

Until recently, males were believed to be more aggressive and violent than females, and therefore few studies of aggression and violence included girls and women. Lately, however, more adolescent girls have been charged with violent crimes than before,¹ which has led to increased research on girls who use violent strategies. Nevertheless, prevention programs and intervention services often rely on research based on explanations of male behaviour. However, more recent research addresses how best to prevent and intervene in girls' use of aggression and violence.²⁻⁵

The rate of violent crime reflected in official reports increased steadily among both male and female youth during the late 1980s and the 1990s: the rate among male youth nearly doubled, and the rate among female youth almost tripled.^{6,7} For example, the violent crime rate among female youth rose from 2.2 per 1,000 in 1988 to a peak of 5.6 per 1,000 in 1996, and began to decline in 1999. Two key points must be noted. First, the number of charges laid against boys is still three to four times greater than the number against girls. Second, the actual number of girls charged is small, so that a small increase in the number of charges results in a large percentage increase.⁸

Some researchers suggest that the increase can be partly explained by the stricter approach to schoolyard fights and bullying in recent years, which has led educators, parents and police to label as "assaults" behaviours once viewed as unfortunate or "bad," but not criminal.⁹ In fact, the self-reported rates of aggressive behaviour of 10 and 11 year olds in the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth were similar in the 1994/95 and 1996/97 cycles (38% and 34% respectively).¹⁰ In both cycles, girls between the ages of 12 and 13 were less likely than boys to display aggressive behaviour (29% and 56% respectively).¹¹

Terms and Definitions

Numbers by themselves do not provide insight into the dynamics of girls' participation in aggression and violence. It is helpful to start by defining the terms used to discuss the issue of aggression and violence in girls.

Aggression

Aggression can be defined as “a class of behaviours that have in common an intrusive, demanding, and aversive effect on others.”¹² In other words, aggressive behaviours are those that are hurtful and/or harmful to others. Aggression that is outwardly observable, as in name-calling, taunting, or physical intimidation and threat, is *overt*. Aggression that is not observable, as in lying or stealing, is *covert*. Aggression can also be *direct* (threatening, yelling, insulting, name-calling, teasing, hitting, shoving, pushing, kicking or destroying personal property) or *indirect* (also known as “social” or “relational” aggression, as in shunning, excluding, ignoring, gossiping, spreading false rumours or disclosing another person's secrets). Canadian reports indicate that girls demonstrate a higher level of indirect aggression at every age than do boys and that indirect aggression increases with age for both boys and girls.^{13,14}

Violence

Violence is distinguished from aggression by the presence of acts that involve the overt and observable use of physical force.^{15,16} Typically, males' aggression is overt and direct (physical), which contri-

butes to the assumption that violence is a male behaviour. However, recent studies provide evidence of females employing both direct violence and indirect violence (using males to commit violent acts for them).^{17,18} If violence were assumed to be a male behaviour, female violence would be overlooked or denied. Consequently, we would fail to develop ways to prevent or intervene in violence by girls.

Bullying

Bullies use power to control others. Usually, a “dominant individual (the bully) repeatedly exhibits aggressive behaviour intended to cause distress to a less dominant individual (the victim).”¹⁹ Girl bullies tend to manipulate social groups by name-calling, verbal abuse and spreading rumours to damage friendships among others or to exclude selected girls from social interaction.²⁰ Thus, girl bullies tend to use non-physical aggression more than physical violence.²¹ Most recently, girls are reported to be using the Internet to harass their peers.²² Recent research indicates that 9% of Canadian girls between the ages of 4 and 11 participate in bullying other children, and 7% are victimized by bullies; 68% of children have been observed in both roles (bully and victim).²³ Without intervention, bullying behaviours in young children tend to persist throughout adolescence. Girls who are bullied are more likely to feel sad or miserable than to feel angry. They more often discuss their distress with their friends than with a teacher or another adult.²⁴

Conduct Disorder

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)*,²⁵ to be diagnosed with conduct disorder a young person must have committed at least three violations in four categories of aggression (aggression toward people and animals, aggression toward property, deceit/theft and serious violations of rules) in the previous 12 months, the latest within the previous 6 months.²⁶ Girls who frequently use aggression and violence may be diagnosed as “conduct disordered”. These girls display a pattern of repetitive behaviours that involve violating the rights of others and other socially destructive behaviours.²⁷ Only a qualified DSM-IV-trained practitioner can make a diagnosis of conduct disorder, which represents an underlying dysfunction within the individual and is distinct from behaviours that reflect reactions to social or contextual situations.²⁸ Being labelled with a mental disorder represents a permanent condition and may not allow a girl to change or develop new behaviours. Therefore, labelling should be taken very seriously by anyone working with children and youth, and used only after careful consideration of its appropriateness and impact.²⁹

Some research suggests that biological, genetic and medical factors are related to the occurrence of conduct disorder in some children.³⁰ Environmental factors such as family, education and peer relationships also influence the development and maintenance of conduct disorder. Conduct disorder is not “oppositional disorder.” Girls with oppositional disorder display patterns of negative, hostile and defiant behaviour, but their behaviours do not involve violating the rights of others.

Why Do Girls Engage in Aggression and Violence?

Some researchers think that girls resort to aggression and violence for different reasons than boys. No single factor can predict aggressive and violent behaviour.³¹ The factors that contribute to the risk of aggressive and violent behaviour among girls include both systemic (family, community and social context) and individual (personal) variables.³² Usually, many factors act in combination.

Family Dynamics and Parental Relationships

Evidence suggests that aggressive and violent behaviour in children is linked to family and social factors, such as social and financial deprivation; harsh and inconsistent parenting; parents’ marital problems; family violence, whether between parents, by parents toward children or between siblings; poor parental mental health; physical and sexual abuse; and alcoholism, drug dependency or other substance misuse by parents or other family members.³³ In addition, many aggressive and violent girls have poorly developed connections to their mothers.^{34,35}

School Difficulties

Girls who experience difficulties at school, like social rejection by peers and low connectedness to school, are often more likely to be absent and to drop out eventually. These girls are also more likely to use aggression and violence.³⁶⁻³⁹ Problems at home and learning disabilities are also interconnected with difficulties at school.

Gender Issues

Aggressive and violent girls often see male control and domination over females as normal. They may hold views similar to those that support male violence towards females in that they tend to believe girls and women have less value and importance than boys and men. Aggressive and violent girls tend to attack other girls who are perceived as competing with them for male attention, and they tend to maintain social connections with peers who are perceived as helping them win in that competition.⁴⁰

Boredom and Attention-seeking Behaviour

Girls who engage in relational aggression and bullying suggest that they often do so to alleviate boredom, by creating excitement, finding out gossip, seeking attention/importance⁴¹ and seeking validation from a group that excludes others.⁴²

Connections to Delinquent Peers

Girls are more likely than boys to be rejected by their peers for engaging in outward (overt and direct) aggression and violence.⁴³ However, gang membership can appeal to girls when they are seeking to escape economically disadvantaged homes, improve their self-esteem, increase their feelings of belonging, or seek revenge and protection.⁴⁴ Association with delinquent peers increases girls' opportunities to engage in aggressive and violent behaviours.

Experiences with Abuse

Aggressive and violent girls often report having been victimized by others.⁴⁵ These girls are more likely than non-violent girls and both violent and non-violent boys to

have been attacked while going to or from school, physically abused at home, sexually abused or coerced into sexual relations.⁴⁶ In their relationships with adults, aggressive and violent girls have often learned that relationships involve one person dominating and abusing another.⁴⁷

Drug Involvement

The abuse of alcohol and drugs contributes to aggression and violence in both adolescent girls and boys.⁴⁸ However, chronic use of drugs seems to be especially strongly related to girls' ongoing participation in violence.⁴⁹

Atypical Physiological Responses

Girls who externalize (openly show) aggression and anger very often have family histories that involved repeated exposure to negative events during which they could neither fight nor flee (e.g. being abused as a child or being exposed to the abuse of a parent and/or sibling).⁵⁰ As a result, these girls tend to be less responsive than other girls when exposed to threatening or stressful situations. They tend not to avoid situations that others would deem risky or dangerous and so are more likely to become involved with violence.⁵¹

Personality Factors and Mental Illness

Although conduct disorder occurs in only 2% of the female youth population,⁵² close to 90% of aggressive and violent girls are given a diagnosis of conduct disorder, and 31% have a diagnosis of major depression.^{53,54} Aggressive and violent girls are also known to suffer from anxiety and attachment disorders (difficulties creating and sustaining affectionate social and

personal bonds).⁵⁵ With the onset of puberty, girls are typically three times as likely as boys to suffer from depression due to low self-esteem, negative body image, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, and stress.⁵⁶ If they are also exposed to abuse or neglect at home, they are at increased risk of becoming involved with violence.⁵⁷

Delayed Cognitive, Moral and Social Development

The use of aggression and violence may be more likely if girls believe that other people's attitudes toward them are negative.⁵⁸ Aggressive and violent girls may also have poor self-representations or self-images, based on negative beliefs about themselves or on negative perceptions they believe parents and peers have of them.⁵⁹ Girls who experience delayed cognitive, moral or social development are more likely to experience school difficulties and social rejection, and are therefore at an increased risk of resorting to aggressive and violent behaviour.⁶⁰

Myths and Realities About Violent Girls

Myths abound about the reasons for aggression and violence in girls. The reality about what drives girls to become aggressive or violent becomes clear when we examine their experiences and beliefs. Table 1 outlines the myths and realities of what contributes to aggressive and violent behaviour in girls.^{61,62}

What Factors Can Prevent Girls From Engaging in Aggression and Violence?

Various protective factors can help girls at risk to avoid exhibiting aggressive and violent behaviour.⁶³

Individual protective factors: An intelligent girl with solid self-esteem, who believes that she is a capable person and who is able to take on age-appropriate social and personal responsibilities, is not likely to become aggressive or violent.

Family protective factors: Within the family, variables that support girls' use of assertive rather than aggressive behaviour include positive exposure to social situations; the presence of at least one caring and supportive adult; positive relationships with parents, especially mothers; and effective, non-authoritarian parenting.

School/community protective factors: At the school and neighbourhood level, variables that help to prevent or counter aggression and violence in girls include opportunities for education, achievement, personal growth and employment, as well as feelings of connectedness to the local community.

Efforts to prevent or counter girls' aggression and violence should be directed toward individual, family and community levels.

Table 1
Myths and Realities About Aggressive and Violent Girls

Myth	Reality
<p><i>Aggressive and violent girls ...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Do not care about others. ➤ Beat up people for no reason or for fun. ➤ Are trying to show that females are equal to males. ➤ Are an outcome of women’s liberation. ➤ Have never been adequately disciplined. ➤ Get high on being involved in dangerous activities. 	<p><i>Aggressive and violent girls ...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Endorse respect and concern for others, politeness, forgiveness and generosity to the same degree as non-violent girls; they value honesty less than non-violent girls do, but not less than boys. ➤ Rationalize their aggression and violence toward others by blaming someone else, as in “she made me do it” or “I never beat up anyone I didn’t have to.” ➤ Do not recognize the value or power of females and believe that females are inferior to males; they believe the only way they can attain power is by attracting dominant males. ➤ Are more likely to seek validation from men than to compete with them. ➤ Have been harshly disciplined and received more abuse than non-violent girls and both violent and non-violent boys. ➤ Often act out aggressively to secure social dominance or to avoid being controlled or victimized by others.

Individual level: Prevention programs and intervention services should address the unique ways in which girls respond to initiatives to prevent violence.⁶⁴ Initiatives should

- counter girls’ low self-esteem as they approach adolescence;
- focus on early intervention for girls who have witnessed or experienced violence, with an emphasis on strengthening and valuing the roles of women;

- provide experiences that instill a sense of “mattering” (i.e., a sense of being valued and belonging) not based on sexual currency;
- involve girls in social skills and assertiveness training programs;⁶⁵⁻⁶⁷ and
- resist programs that focus solely on anger management, since they ignore the ways in which aggression and violence can be adaptations in the struggle to survive (e.g. for self-protection).

Family level: Including parents in interventions is essential. Aggressive girls benefit from a long-term relationship with at least one adult who provides them with a sense of acceptance, safety and prosocial values.⁶⁸ In some cases, this adult may be someone outside of the family.

School/community level: Early involvement in proactive, prosocial programs in elementary schools has demonstrated positive effects on reducing aggression and violence in girls.⁶⁹ Children (both boys and girls) should be engaged in discussions about sexism and taught to hold broader and less restrictive views of the roles of girls and boys.⁷⁰ The best prevention efforts tend to be community-driven, use multiple strategies and adopt a holistic approach that incorporates involvement of parents, students, community-based agencies and community members. Programs should also include a plan for ongoing evaluation and follow-up.

Resources

Canadian risk assessment tools, prevention programs and intervention services are listed below to assist parents, teachers and youth workers.

Earlscourt Child and Family Centre

46 St. Clair Gardens
Toronto, ON M6E 3V4

Telephone: (416) 654-8981

Fax: (416) 654-8996

E-mail: mailus@earlscourt.on.ca

Internet: www.earlscourt.on.ca

- ♦ Girls Connection Program and the EARL-21G Early Assessment Risk List for Girls, Consultation Edition — 2001.

Department of Justice Canada

284 Wellington Street

Ottawa, ON K1A 0H8

Internet: canada.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/yj

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<<http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/yj/rp/doc/Paper107.PDF>>
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<<http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/yj/rp/doc/Paper104.PDF>>

Men for Change

Box 33005, Quinpool Postal Outlet

Halifax, NS B3L 4T6

Telephone: (902) 457-4351

Fax: (902) 457-4597

E-mail: info@m4c.ns.ca or

aa116@chebucto.ns.ca or

<mailto:healthy@fox.nstn.ca>

Internet: www.m4c.ns.ca or

www.chebucto.ns.ca/CommunitySupport/Men4Change

- ♦ Safer, A. *Healthy Relationships: A Violence-prevention Curriculum*, 1996.

British Columbia Health Research Foundation

#710–4720 Kingsway
Burnaby BC V5H 4N2

Telephone: 1-800-565-1994 or
(604) 436-3573

Fax: (604) 436-2573

Internet: <http://www.bchrf.org>

- ♦ Artz, S., Riecken, T., MacIntyre, B., Lam, E. and Maczewski, M. *A Community-based Violence Prevention Project: Final Report*, 1999.

School of Child and Youth Care

University of Victoria
Victoria, BC and
National Crime Prevention Centre
Ottawa, ON

Internet: <http://web.uvic.ca/cyc> or
<http://www.crime-prevention.org>

- ♦ *Gender-Sensitive Guide for Needs Assessment for Youth*. Available on Internet: <http://web.uvic.ca/cyc/naty>

BC Institute Against Family Violence

Vancouver, BC

Telephone: (604) 255-5147

Internet: <http://www.bcifv.org/>

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<http://www.bcifv.org/resources/newsletter/1998/fall/safeteen.html>

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