

A Point of View

G. Scott Conrod, Laurensval School Board (Quebec)

Educating Against Violence in the Schools¹

Abstract

Violence in the schools is not only a matter of concern for school administrators, but of teachers, students, and parents as well. The author looks at some of the roots of violence and contrasts human aggression with animal aggression. The paper closes with a discussion of possibilities for curbing violence in schools.

Resumé

La violence dans les écoles n'est pas seulement un souci pour les administrateurs, mais aussi pour les professeurs, les étudiants ainsi que pour les parents. L'auteur de cet article va jusqu'aux racines de la violence et démontre les contrastes entre l'agression humaine et l'agression animale. L'article se conclut avec une discussion sur les possibilités de contrer la violence dans les écoles.

Whenever educators discuss problems facing the North American public school system, the subject of violence is raised because there appears to be more violence in schools than there used to be. Although Canadian statistics are not readily available to attest to this perception of increased violence, most teachers and school principals who have been at their trade for the past twenty to thirty years seem to agree. In support of their view, the Task Force on School Violence, prepared by the North Carolina Governor's Task Force, after studying 129 school systems, found that levels of violence increased in 59% of the state's public schools over a five-year period (Hunt, 1993).

Based on news stories from U. S. newspapers, a report titled "Caught in the Crossfire: A Report on Gun Violence in Our Nation's

Schools” states that beginning in September, 1986, at least 71 people (65 students and six school employees) have been killed with guns at school (Center to Prevent Handgun Violence, 1990). Another 201 people were seriously injured and 242 have been held hostage. These shootings or hostage takings have occurred in 35 of the 50 American states. The report further states that males are the most frequent offenders (93%) as well as victims (76%). School children aged 14-17 are most at risk of gun violence in school, much of it taking place in hallways (25%) and in classrooms (19%). Gangs or drug disputes were the leading cause of school gun-violence (18%). Long-standing arguments (15%), romantic disagreements (12%), fights over material possessions (10%), and accidents are also common causes. The report estimates that 400,000 boys carry handguns to school yearly. With these estimates the potential for even greater rates of death and injury are evident.

The 25th Annual Phi Delta Kappa - Gallup Poll, in October, 1993, found that the public’s view on education indicates that a significant number of adults are concerned about violence and discipline in the public schools (Elam, 1993). When asked the question, “What do you think are the biggest problems with which the public schools of this community must deal?”, 15% chose lack of discipline, 13% chose fighting, violence, and gangs, and 16% chose drug abuse.

Has the cause of this perceived increase in violence been due to a change in student population, a greying of the teaching staff, the change in family structure over the past thirty years, or a combination of all of these factors? Whatever the cause, what can be done to eliminate it? Before we discuss some of the means to decrease violence in the schools, perhaps we should examine some of the root causes of violence. Psychologists have been trying to understand violence for over a century, and the results of their research and the development of their theories from these findings help put some order to a conceptualization of the problem.

Violence may be defined as aggression that is directed toward another person against her/his wishes for the purpose of hurting that person. But aggression is not always perceived as negative. An athlete can be aggressive when he makes a goal line defense or when a full back crashes through the line of scrimmage to score a touchdown. Business people can be aggressive in marketing their products to convince a buyer to sign a contract. Students can be aggressive in their attempts to master certain material to attain higher grades. For the most part, society applauds these forms of aggression. Aggressive behaviour is not always physical. Although it often involves physical intimidation, it can also be a verbal assault. Malicious gossip is an expression of nonphysical aggression.

According to psychoanalytic theory (Leger, 1992), aggression is instinctive, generated by the energy that exists in a living animal. This energy is essential for life and for reproduction. Freudians believe that this energy can also be directed towards death or destruction, either that of the individual in the form of suicide or toward others in the form of violence (homicide).

Ethologists provide another view (Leger, 1992). These scientists, who try to understand human behaviour by studying animals, have found that aggression and violence towards members of the same species has survival value, ensuring that the genetic material of the strongest individual is passed on to successive generations. To test the hypothesis that aggression has a genetic component, Lagerspetz (1979) took a normal group of mice and bred the most aggressive ones with each other and the least aggressive ones with each other. Repeated selective breeding for another 25 generations resulted in a group of mice that would attack when put together, and another group of docile mice that, no matter what was done to them, refused to fight.

Biochemical influences are also at play. Testosterone levels in animals and humans affect aggression. A raging bull will become gentle when castrated. The same thing happens to mice. But when these same animals are injected with testosterone, they become aggressive again. Among humans, violent criminals tend to be muscular young males with lower than average intelligence and higher than average testosterone levels. Among normal males, high testosterone levels correlate positively with delinquency, hard drug use, and aggressive bullying (Leger, 1992).

In a surprising number of new scientific projects, research designed to explain the biology of violence has discovered how aggression is triggered in the brain - and how it can be prevented (Kotulak, 1993). There are indications that genetic disorders produce abnormal levels of serotonin and noradrenaline, two powerful brain chemicals that are linked to levels of violence in animals. Some suggest that in the future simple screening tests may be given to determine a child's propensity towards violence and, if indicated, a regulatory chemical could be administered. The frightening side of this hypothesis is that society might begin to believe it is necessary to incarcerate potentially violent people identified by this type of testing (Kotulak, 1993).

Social learning theorists and social psychologists believe that aggression is a learned behaviour. The desire to harm a person or an object is a conscious decision based on previous experiences. A person chooses to be violent because of what s/he has observed in others.

Bandura (1963) and others (Rosekrans & Hartup, 1967) have studied aggression in school children. They have shown that if a child is exposed to violence, when frustrated, the child is more prone to choose violence to release the frustration. Nursery school children, in a classic social learning study, observed an adult expressing various forms of aggression toward a large, plastic doll. Subsequently, they imitated many of the adult's actions, including lifting and throwing the doll, striking it with a hammer, and kicking it. The researchers also noted that the children invented new ways of abusing the doll, beyond what they had observed in the adult models.

Anthony Storr, in his book titled *Human Aggression*, wrote the following about the cruel, aggressive behavior of humans:

We generally describe the most repulsive examples of man's cruelty brutal or bestial, implying by these adjectives that such behaviour is characteristic of less highly-developed animals than ourselves. In truth, however, the extremes of brutal behaviour are confined to man, and there is no parallel in nature to our savage treatment of each other. The somber fact is that we are the cruelest and most ruthless species that has ever walked the earth. . . .
(Storr, 1968)

Lorenz (1966) and other ethologists, however, suggest that if man were to rely only on his rather weak finger nails and blunt teeth, the expression of human violence would be less of a problem, certainly less lethal. But because of man's intelligence and his ability to use weapons, his ferocity is much more deadly than that of other animals. It is estimated that between 1820 and 1945 over 58 million humans were killed at the hands of their fellow men. Every year, over one million Americans suffer from violent assaults that result in homicides, physical injury, or permanent impairment. Man's intelligence has enabled him to become a killing machine. The present controversy over gun control in both Canada and the United States reflects this argument. Without guns, our society would be a safer place to live, say the advocates of gun control (Center to Prevent Handgun Violence, 1990).

Ethologists argue that destructive violence is not seen to the same degree in the animal world as it is in humans because of a process known as natural selection. Because animals have to kill each other face-to-face, using their claws and teeth, with much risk to themselves, other forms of release of aggression have evolved. Backing-off behaviours such as a smile, lowering of the ears or back or tail, or rolling over and whimper-

ing, signal submission by the weaker animal. These behaviours have evolved to avoid senseless injury and death.

A common thread through the major schools of psychological thought is that frustration leads to aggression and that the type of aggression that is expressed is at least partially determined by an individual's past experiences. People can therefore be helped to be less frustrated and to choose less violent ways to cope when they become frustrated. The frustration-aggression theory posits that aggression occurs in humans whenever frustration is encountered, when a person's goal is not realized, or when the goal is perceived to be unachievable. According to control theory, frustration occurs when a person's ideal world does not correspond to the real world. Frustration does not always lead to aggression; however, it does seem to open a gate that encourages aggression.

Modern society demands that people suppress their aggressive urges. Konrad Lorenz, however, believes that if one continually prohibits the expression of the fighting instinct in any animal, aggressive impulses build up and eventually discharge in a particularly vicious way (Lorenz, 1966). This would explain periodic outbreaks of violence, including news reports of prison riots from time to time. Other investigators (Kotulak, 1993), interested in psychobiological factors, have shown that threatening environments can trigger serotonin and noradrenaline imbalances in genetically susceptible people, thus laying a chemical base for a lifetime of violence.

Together these findings help us understand the origins of violence and to develop strategies to reduce violence at school. A child who is exposed to an aggressive adult world and who is frustrated will be more likely to act aggressively than a child whose adult models have been nonaggressive. One way to reduce violence is to reduce the number of times a child is frustrated. Listening to the child in order to understand his frustration and to offer constructive outlets for the frustration can help. Another way would be to give the child better nonviolent models to copy and by teaching strategies to help the child cope more effectively with frustration. For example, by counting to ten before acting, looking at a situation from the other person's point of view, or listing ways in which a situation could be made better are all methods used by professional arbitrators to seek solutions in conflict. These methods can be used with children.

In the Montreal area, some schools have been studying the effects of peer mediation on student behaviour (The Freedom Group Montreal, 1993; in Kincaid, 1994). Early results are very positive for both students

and adults. Peer mediation involves the training of staff and selected students in the techniques of arbitration. Concepts such as active listening, seeing a problem from another point of view, and restating the problem and listing ways to make the situation better are dynamics that students and teachers learn to practice. The results for both students and adults are encouraging.

The impact of television in our society is enormous. It is said that during their first eighteen years, most children spend more time watching television than they spend in school. What they are exposed to is shocking. Seventy-five percent of all television programmes depict some form of violence. Prime-time American television offers six violent crimes per hour. On children's week end programmes that figure increases to approximately 26 violent crimes per hour (Gerbner & Signorielli, 1990). During their most impressionable elementary and junior high school years, children view some 13,000 television murders and 100,000 acts of violence. In action-oriented crime shows, television cops fire their guns in almost every episode. In contrast to television, however, it has been noted that in Montreal, throughout one entire year (1992), there were only 20 occasions during which a police officer drew his gun, according to the Montreal Police Force Annual Report, 1992.

Some experts in the field of child behaviour argue that most children can differentiate between the real world and the fictitious world of television. There is abundant research (Campbell, 1993; National Institute of Mental Health, 1982) to show that watching violence on television increased aggression. Surely, television can be used to foster more positive values, such as humour, caring, achievement, and problem solving ability. Would we have anything to lose if violence were to be significantly reduced in films, magazines, and television?

While many may believe that children, particularly young boys, should be encouraged to take part in aggressive physical activity, such as hockey with body contact, football with blocking and tackling, rugby, and basketball, these sports can, however, be unnecessarily violent and the opposite of the intended effect may result. Anyone who has witnessed a "pee-wee" hockey game can see this negative force at play. The hostility of the parent spectators, releasing their frustrations in verbal assaults against the opposing players, the referee and even their own children (when they haven't performed to their parent's expectations) is a disturbing sight.

Physical activities to release energy need not be aggressive or violent. School personnel and parents may explore the development of

opportunities for play involving physical activity that is less violent and more controlled. Periods of physical activity have been increased in Asian schools and the reviews are positive (*The Economist*, November, 1992). In Japan and Korea, where the school day is longer than in Canada, the children are not given more instruction, but they are given more opportunities for supervised play. Learning is enhanced, violence is decreased, and the children are more content because they are given more recreational time. Perhaps a clear distinction between physical education and recreation needs to be drawn.

Activity periods that release energy and reduce frustration could be supervised by less expensive personnel. These activities could become the creative side of the curriculum in the form of art, drama, and music, all of which have their calming effect by providing outlets for children's feelings. In addition, children could be encouraged to keep journals or diaries where they write their feelings about their experiences. By increasing these activities in a child's life, more positive ways to resolve frustrations may be developed and would, then, have a positive effect on the development of language skills.

Often, in both schools and homes, violence is rewarded. By being violent, by screaming, or through bullying, the children either get what they want, are seen as being stronger by the other children, or feel better about themselves. In the classroom, on the playground, or at home, adults must intervene in such a manner that reinforcement of aggressive and violent behaviour does not occur.

What kind of interventions can be used to help children with violent and aggressive tendencies? When a child becomes frustrated, the caretaker can intervene and change the activity. For example, when a child takes a toy from another child, take away the toy from the child and have her/him return it with an apology or explanation. Consistent reinforcement of the desired behaviour will achieve the desired effect both at home and at school. No violent behaviour, either physical or verbal, can be tolerated because, inadvertently, we may be reinforcing it.

In Quebec schools, orientation committees, made up of parents, teachers, and administrators, have the responsibility of establishing the rules of student conduct in each school. Often, these rules are a never-ending list of don'ts. Bath Elementary School, in New Brunswick, has taken another direction by drawing up a code of behaviour that includes a list of desired behaviours with reasons for each. The code then explains what happens when these behaviours are not respected. The policy deals with consequences (Nugent, 1991).

Discipline procedures and practices should cover the following seven areas: (1) the need for school rules; (2) the need for consequences for misbehaviour; (3) the need for conflict management; (4) the need for procedural justice; (5) the need for equal opportunity; (6) the need for violence-free schools; and (7) the need for drug-free schools.

The pamphlet, *Violence at School - Objective Zero*, sponsored by the Provincial Association of Protestant Teachers (Quebec) and other teacher groups, is an example of the type of initiative that is required in the schools (CEQ-PAPT, 1992). It highlights the prevention of violence through the coordination of group movements. For example, it suggests preventing situations where students find themselves in crowded, narrow hallways or on dangerous staircases — places where they would be likely to bump into each other inadvertently. The pamphlet suggests the setting of reasonable rules regarding conduct at school and thoughtful supervision that would help to settle disputes, such as who won a game or who goes first. It also encourages the promotion of certain values such as team work, cooperation, and mutual assistance.

Rules can be taught through games, and cooperation can be taught through group activity. Children can be encouraged to help each other achieve common goals. Establishing a superordinate goal — one that is shared by all concerned — is another important strategy for reducing violence between individuals or groups. Teachers who have become trained in cooperative learning strategies say that these techniques help to alleviate frustration and aggression in their classrooms. In a class run on a cooperative model, the teacher allows the students to take more control of the learning process. Groups of five or six students learn together, often taking turns in asking the questions and formulating answers. There is less of a chance for an individual student to be isolated in this type of setting.

Some schools have employed animators to help students cope with aggressive situations. The Montreal Assault Prevention Centre has been offering mini-plays to depict three common assault situations for children. These plays, featuring a bully, a stranger, and a familiar adult, teach young children how to cope with intimidation and fear. Students are taught that friends can be supportive and can help them feel strong enough inside to deal with bullies. They also learn that there are helpful adults around who can be of assistance.

Violent aggression must be punished if it is to be eliminated. Punishment, however, has often meant time away from school in the form of a suspension or sitting outside the principal's office. Alternative forms of correction must be found if we are to change behavior without

causing learning problems. Crisis intervention personnel, in-school suspension rooms, lunch-time detention centres, and even Saturday morning schooling could all be considered as effective ways to control negative behaviour while not jeopardizing learning.

Violence at school can be decreased. Educators working with parents can develop strategies that reduce the times children find themselves frustrated. They can create ways for children to release energy in group activities that are noncompetitive. Teachers can also reduce the negative models of aggressive behaviour by dealing quickly with acting out children. Every school must ensure that weapons are never acceptable in a school.

Whatever the causes for an increase in violence in society, a learning environment must be free of fear and intimidation. All stakeholders, including teachers, parents, administrators, and students must collaborate to ensure that school is a warm, protective place in which to learn and grow.

NOTE

1. Adapted from a paper, Parenting in the 90s, delivered at the Sixth Annual Parenting Conference, McGill University, Saturday, April 30, 1994.

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G. Scott Conrod is Director General of the Laurenval School Board in Laval, Quebec. He completed graduate studies at McGill University.

G. Scott Conrod est le Directeur général de la Commission scolaire Laurenval, située à Laval, Québec. Il a complété ses études supérieures à l'Université McGill.