

Violence and Aggression of Children and Youth: A Call for Action

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We are in no danger of becoming a nation of wimps; we are in imminent danger of becoming a nation of thugs. We know the details of violence among children and youth in our society. We recite the litany of this violence with shame, sorrow, disgust, and terror. For decades we have failed to act on what we know about the causes of violence and aggression. We can not afford to delay effective action any longer.

The violence and aggression of the young have no single cause nor a single solution. Decades of research have revealed several contributing causes and partial solutions. If we take any of the following steps, we will become a less violent society. If we argue about which step should be first or complain that taking only one or two is insufficient, we will waste energy and delay progress. If we take all these steps together, we will reap the benefits of concerted, coherent action. None of these steps is easy or quick, nor is any a full remedy; all require intelligence and persistence.

1. Provide effective consequences that stop aggression. Aggressive behavior is less likely to recur if it is followed by consequences that are nonviolent but immediate, certain, and proportional to the seriousness of the offense. Violence as a means of controlling aggression engenders counteraggression, setting the stage for further coercion. Violence is reduced in the long term if the consequences are swift, assured, and restrictive of personal preferences rather than harsh or physically painful. Aggressive children and youth are typically punished capriciously and severely--the consequences of their aggression are often random, harsh, and unfair, cementing the pattern of counterviolence. The belief that harsher punishment is more effective is a deeply ingrained superstition. If teachers, parents, and others dealing with aggression learn to use effective nonviolent consequences, the level of violence in our society will decline.
2. Teach non-aggressive responses to problems. Aggressive behavior is, to a significant degree, learned. So is nonaggressive behavior. Teaching youngsters how to solve personal conflicts and other problems nonaggressively is not easy, nor will teaching nonaggression help them solve all problems. A school curriculum including nonaggressive conflict resolution and problem solving could lower the level of violence, but that effect would be multiplied many times were the media, community leaders, and high-profile role models to join forces with educators in teaching that nonviolence is a better way.
3. Stop aggression early--before it takes root. Aggression begets aggression, particularly when it is successful in obtaining desired ends and when it has become well practiced. Aggression often escalates from relatively minor belligerence to appalling acts of violence, and nonviolent consequences are more effective when applied early in the sequence. Early intervention--with young children and from first instances--will reduce violence most effectively.
4. Restrict access to the instruments of aggression. Aggressors use the most efficient tools available to damage their targets. True, some will aggress with whatever tools are available. The more important truth is that having more efficient weapons enables aggressors to accomplish violent ends with less immediate risk to themselves and to escalate the level of violence easily. More effective restriction of

- access to the most efficient tools of aggression would help to check the rise in violence--restrictions on the manufacture, distribution, and possession of both the tools themselves and the of parts that make the most efficient weapons of violence operable.
5. Restrain and reform public displays of aggression. The behavior one observes affects one's own thinking and overt behavior. Much of the fare marketed by the entertainment industry is saturated with aggressive acts, desensitizes observers to aggression and its consequences, and disinhibits expressions of aggression. Reducing the amount and type of aggression purveyed to the public as entertainment and requiring that the realistic consequences of aggression be depicted would contribute to the goal of a less violent society. Sports figures who eschew violence could add immeasurably to this effect.
 6. Correct the conditions of everyday life that foster aggression. People tend to be more aggressive when they are deprived of basic necessities, experience aversive conditions, or perceive that there is no path to their legitimate goals other than aggression. Poverty and its attendant deprivations and aversive conditions affect an enormous proportion of American children and youth, and these conditions of everyday life provide fertile ground for aggressive conduct. Social programs that address poverty, unemployment, and related social inequities would help to remove the conditions that breed aggression. Opportunities for supervised recreation offer alternatives to antisocial behavior. A reasonably supportive society can not abolish poverty or remove all of life's dangers, but it can keep many children from living in abject fear, misery, and hopelessness. We do not need a welfare state, but we must have more effective social programs of government, the private sector, local communities, religious groups, families, and individuals.
 7. Offer more effective instruction and more attractive educational options in public schools. Achieving academic success and engaging in study that they see as interesting and useful in their lives reduces the likelihood that youngsters will behave aggressively. By adopting instructional methods known to produce superior results--putting instruction on a solid scientific footing--schools could ensure that more students achieve success in the basic skills needed to pursue any educational option. By offering highly differentiated curricula, school systems could help more students find options that interest them and prepare them for life after high school.

Each of us must make a sustained personal commitment to building an American consensus that these are matters of personal responsibility. We must persist in demanding of ourselves and others in assertive, nonviolent ways that we take the steps necessary to become a less violent nation. Toward these ends, let educators, students, parents, religious and community leaders, media personalities, and government officials call their communities to action.

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See, also, [CEC's Safe Streets, Safe Schools Initiative](#)

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