

Violence in the Lives of Children

A position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children

Adopted July 1993

The problem of violence

Tragically, every day children in America witness violent acts or are victims of abuse, neglect, or personal assault in their homes or communities. Marian Wright Edelman (1993) states, “[We] Adults have failed dismally in our most basic responsibility—to protect our society’s children from violence,” as the following facts and statistics reveal:

The United States is now the most violent country in the industrialized world, leading the world in homicides, rapes, and assaults (Dodd, 1993; Weiner, 1991).

- An estimated 2.7 million children were reported to child protection agencies in 1991 as victims of neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, or emotional maltreatment; nationwide the number of children reported abused or neglected has tripled since 1980 (Children’s Defense Fund, 1992).
- Gun-related violence takes the life of an American child at least every three hours and the lives of at least 25 children—the equivalent of a classroomful—every three days. In 1990 alone, guns were used to kill 222 children under the age of 10 and 6,795 young people under the age of 25. Another 30 children are injured every day by guns (Edelman, 1993). Every day 100,000 children carry guns to school.
- In one Chicago public housing project all of the children had witnessed a shooting by the age of five (Dodd, 1993). A child growing up in Chicago is 15 times as likely to be murdered as a child growing up in Northern Ireland (Garbarino, 1992).
- By the age of 18 the average child will have seen 26,000 killings on television (Tuchscherer, 1988). *TV Guide* reports that a violent incident is shown on television, on the average, every six minutes (Edelman, 1993). The number of violent acts depicted on television has tripled since deregulation of the industry.
- In a national survey, 91% of the responding teachers reported increased violence among children in their classrooms as a result of cross-media marketing of violent cartoons, toys, videos, and other licensed products (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1991).
- In a recent survey of New Orleans fifth graders, more than half reported they had been victims of some type of violence;

70% had witnessed weapons being used (Zero to Three, 1992).

The escalating rate of violence in many American cities means that large numbers of children are growing up in conditions that have been described as “inner-city war zones” (Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, & Pardo, 1992). But the problem of violence is not restricted to any one community or group. All children today are affected by the violence that pervades our society. As a result, the healthy development of our nation’s children is in serious jeopardy.

The causes and effects of violent behavior in society are complex and interrelated; much violence results from social injustice prevalent in our society. Among the significant contributors are poverty, racism, unemployment, substance abuse, proliferation of guns, inadequate or abusive parenting practices, real-life adult models of violent problem-solving behavior, and frequent exposure to violence through the media. Today every fifth child lives in poverty; among children under the age of six, the percentage is 25% (Children’s Defense Fund, 1992). Basic services to low-income families have been drastically reduced in the last decade as federal funding has been cut. As social programs have disappeared and the economy has worsened, violence in homes, schools, and communities has increased. The proliferation of handguns has contributed greatly to the increase in violent assaults and homicides experienced by children (Garbarino, 1992).

The culture of violence is mirrored in and influenced by the media. As a result of the deregulation of the broadcasting industry, children’s television and related toys have become more violent (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1990). Research is clear that the media, particularly television and films, contribute to the problem of violence in America (Slabey, 1992; Huesmann & Miller, 1994). Research demonstrates that children who are frequent viewers of violence on television are less likely to show empathy toward the pain and suffering of others and more likely to behave aggressively.

Violence touches the life of every child in the country, some more directly than others. A continuum of exposure to violence exists that extends from exposure through the media

to being a direct witness, being a victim, and, for too many children, becoming a perpetrator. There are many points along the way in this continuum that include frequent viewing of media violence and the commercial linkup of toys that promote violent behavior (for example, a popular line of male dolls now includes drug dealers), secondhand reports of acts of violence, warnings and admonitions by parents about personal safety, witnessing actual acts of violence to strangers or family members, witnessing or experiencing domestic violence, harming or killing someone else, and being wounded or killed oneself. Recognizing the existence of this continuum of exposure to violence makes it evident that no child in America is exempt from some exposure. As U.S. Senator Christopher Dodd points out, "Violence is America's problem; from affluent suburbs to inner-city streets, violence knows no social, economic, racial, or geographic boundaries."

This country has committed itself to a national goal—by the year 2000: **All** children will start school ready to learn. Achieving this goal will be impossible unless the country also simultaneously breaks the cycle of violence that grips so many children and families. Children need to be safe and secure at home to develop a positive sense of self necessary to their growing into healthy, productive, caring adults; children need to be safe in their communities to be able to explore and develop relationships with other people; and children need to be safe at school to successfully learn.

The effects of violence on children

What is this tragedy doing to our children? A fundamental need of children is to feel safe; if children do not feel safe, they run the risk of becoming traumatized as victims or eventually becoming perpetrators themselves. Experts describe the impact of violence on many children as *post-traumatic stress disorder* (Garbarino et al., 1992). American children show symptoms similar to those first associated with some Vietnam veterans and children living in war-torn countries: sleep disturbances, inability to concentrate, flashbacks, images of terror, and nightmares.

The younger the child, the greater is the threat of exposure to violence to healthy development. Individuals who experienced an initial trauma before the age of 11 were three times more likely to develop psychiatric symptoms than those who experienced their first trauma as teens (Davidson & Smith, 1990, quoted in Garbarino et al., 1992, p. 70). Chronic exposure to violence can have serious developmental consequences for children, including psychological disorders, grief and loss reactions, impaired intellectual development and school problems, truncated moral development, pathological adaptation to violence, and identification with the

aggressor (Craig, 1992; Garbarino et al., 1992). Not surprising, children exposed to violence have difficulty focusing on school work or engaging in any of the other playful activities that should be treasured experiences of childhood.

It is estimated that up to 80% of all children exposed to powerful stressors do not sustain developmental damage (Rutter, 1979; Werner, 1990). Research indicates that certain factors contribute to the resilience of these children. A child's individual characteristics and early life experiences, as well as protective factors in the child's physical and social environment, contribute to resilience. A number of protective factors in the environment are associated with resilience: a stable, emotional relationship with at least one parent or other significant adult; an open, supportive educational climate and parental model of behavior that encourage constructive coping with problems; and social support from persons outside the family. The most important buffer is a supportive relationship with parents. Most children are able to cope with dangerous environments and maintain resilience as long as their parents are not stressed beyond their capacity to cope (Garbarino et al., 1992). Schools and child care programs can be vitally important support systems by strengthening children's resilience and providing resources for parents so that they can serve as psychological buffers to protect their children.

What can be done?

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the nation's largest professional organization of early childhood educators, is committed to actions that address two major goals:

1. To decrease the extent of violence in all forms in children's lives by advocating for public policies and actions at the national level; and
2. To enhance the ability of educators to help children cope with violence, promote children's resilience, and assist families by improving professional practice in early childhood programs.

1—Advocate for public policies and actions

Many of the negative outcomes described above can be prevented if we are willing to take action on many fronts. First, the nation must begin focusing energy and resources on prevention rather than only supporting more criminal justice strategies that come after the fact and have not proven to be effective deterrents (Prothrow-Stith, 1993).

Every sector of our society must assume some responsibility for the problem. The challenge is to develop policies that

reduce the number of risk factors for all children but especially for children from low-income families. Policies should target the greatest number of resources toward children in the preschool and elementary years when children are most vulnerable to developmental damage as a result of exposure to violence.

Several important steps are necessary for this nation to prevent violence in the lives of children:

- **Generate public outrage.** We believe that a necessary first step is to generate a sense of public outrage that motivates actions that will eliminate violence in the lives of children, families, and communities. Too many Americans believe that violence is something that happens to other people or only in some places; as a result, increasing violence in our nation has been met with surprising apathy. Only when violence hits close to home do citizens become sufficiently mobilized to take action, often too late. Many adults are so overwhelmed by constant exposure to violence in the media, on the streets, and in the world that they become hopeless, desensitized, or disempowered to act.
- **Allocate resources to prevention of violence.** In 1980 there were 500,000 inmates in jails and prisons in the United States; in 1990 there were 1,000,000. The previous decade of getting tough on crime saw a 12% increase in violent crime (Prothrow-Stith, 1993). It is obvious that criminal-justice efforts alone will not slow the rate of violence. Such efforts must be combined with equal or greater resources allocated to proven strategies that prevent violence, starting with programs targeted to support families with young children.
- **Generate commitment to the right of every child to a safe, nonviolent, and nurturing society.** Our nation must commit itself to changing the conditions in which children live, reducing the number of risk factors that children experience, and enhancing social and psychological resources. Policies must support the provision of jobs that pay adequate wages, affordable housing, adequate health care, strong supportive families, high-quality early childhood and school-age programs, and safe neighborhoods.
- **Revitalize neighborhoods through ensuring peace-keeping and targeting the delivery of human services, such as job training, health care, early childhood education programs, and parent education.** Although violence is a problem that affects our entire nation, violence in inner cities requires targeted assistance to save the children and break the cycle of violence. Resources must become available for programs that address violence prevention through legislation, such as the Child and Family Services and Law Enforcement Partnership Act. Increased funding is needed for family support programs that equip parents with

coping skills while also developing positive parenting behaviors. Resources are also needed to assist children who are victims of violence.

- **Support efforts to limit the availability of firearms and other weapons, especially their access to children.** If firearms kept people safe, the United States would be the safest country in the world because so many firearms are readily available. In the state of Texas, for instance, there are four guns available for every citizen. Instead, we are the most violent industrialized country in the world. According to the Center To Prevent Handgun Violence, in 1990 handguns were used to kill 87 people in Japan, 68 in Canada, 22 in Great Britain, 10 in Australia, and 10,567 in the United States. If we are ever to achieve safe schools and communities for our children, this nation must limit the availability of firearms and other weapons. Large numbers of children are “accidentally” injured or killed by guns; these injuries or deaths are preventable by limiting children’s access to firearms.
- **Regulate children’s television programming to limit media exposure to violence, and restrict practices that market violence through the linkup of media, toys, and licensed products.** Since deregulation in the early 1980s, children’s exposure to violence through the media has gone unchecked. At the same time, longitudinal data have become available that clearly link media viewing of violent acts with increased violent behaviors. Presumably, broadcasters would act responsibly to limit exposure to violence without the constraint of regulation, but this has not been the case. The Federal Communications Commission should regulate the amount of violence on children’s television and, as a condition for license renewal, review television stations’ efforts and accomplishments in helping serve the information and educational needs of children regarding violence and how to prevent it. The powerful linkup of commercial products with programs depicting violence has well-documented negative effects on children’s development (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1990). Regulation is also needed to control practices that market violence to children through the linkup of media, toys, and licensed products (See NAEYC Position Statement on Media Violence in Children’s Lives, 1990). Violence in film and film previews is increasing, and previews are shown even during family films and during children’s TV.
- **Prohibit corporal punishment in schools and all other programs for children.** Numerous states continue to permit corporal punishment in schools or child care programs. Some states that prohibit corporal punishment in standards for licensing child care programs allow exemptions for certain types of programs or under certain conditions.

The institutional use of corporal punishment in such situations teaches children that physical solutions to problems are acceptable for adults and that aggression is an appropriate way to control the behavior of other people. The institutional use of corporal punishment should never be condoned.

2—Commit the early childhood profession to helping children cope with violence in their lives and promoting their resilience through partnerships with parents; early childhood programs and curriculum; and professional preparation, development, and support.

As do all sectors of society, the early childhood profession has an important role to play in breaking the cycle of violence in the lives of children. Specific recommendations for action follow in each of three areas.

Partnerships with parents. Early childhood professionals must help families deal with stress and enhance their ability to help children cope with violence. The needs of families also range along a continuum. Popular culture socializes children into violent behavior so effectively that society is actually undermining parents' ability to protect their own children. Some parents are victims of violence themselves. Many are so stressed by community conditions that they are unable to serve as the buffer of emotional protection that children need. Finally, some parents are perpetrators of violence themselves, and in some cases their children are their own victims. NAEYC is committed to actions that support families, such as the following:

- Increase awareness on the part of families about the profound effects of violence on children.
- Support the critical role that parents play in promoting the development of prosocial behavior.
- Collaborate with parents to bring about changes needed in local communities to prevent violence.
- Support the importance of the parental role in the lives of children by providing education for parenthood, helping parents develop positive parenting skills, and supporting proven programs that prevent child abuse and neglect.
- Increase the ability of families to find and use community resources to support and protect children and families.

Early childhood programs and curriculum. We should not underestimate the important role that early childhood programs can play in supporting the healthy development of children and families. Although high-quality early childhood programs are *not* an inoculation against the destructive effects of violence, positive early school experiences and

warm, nurturing relationships with teachers are known to be critical contributors to children's ability to cope with stress and trauma. To achieve this potential, such programs must meet the highest possible professional standards, teachers must be well trained and compensated, and comprehensive support systems must be in place. NAEYC is committed to the following goals:

- Ensure that high-quality, developmentally appropriate early childhood programs are available to all children. Such programs comply with NAEYC's standards for accreditation (NAEYC, 1992) and developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp, 1987) and provide adequate salaries to ensure continuity of qualified staff.
- Ensure that all early childhood programs that serve children who are exposed to violence are able to provide comprehensive physical, social, and mental health services; and family involvement.
- Provide guidance to early childhood educators on how to create a sense of community in their classroom by infusing democratic processes and on the promotion of social competence into the total school environment and daily classroom life (for example, supportive, warm, caring relationships with adults; an organized and predictable environment; and a developmental curriculum that fosters self-esteem and integrates therapeutic and healing strategies, such as play and art) (See Wallach, 1993).
- Promote curriculum and teaching practices that address violence prevention; teach conflict resolution, cooperative learning, and respect for diversity in all its forms; and promote positive cultural identity as a central part of the program (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1992).
- Support individualized early intervention for children who are victims of violence and strengthen training for all personnel on violence and counseling.

Professional preparation, development, and support. Studies have shown that positive school experiences are a major contributor to the resilience of children who are exposed to stress. Of special importance is a trusting relationship with a preschool or primary school teacher. Most teachers, however, have not been trained to help children cope with the effects of violence, nor have they learned how to teach children alternatives to violent behavior. In addition, schools in urban areas with high levels of poverty have the highest levels of violence but the fewest resources to combat them. Adults who care for victimized children over long periods of time are themselves in psychological peril. NAEYC is committed to the following actions:

- Provide teacher education programs that address the areas of child development theory and practice, root causes of violence in children's lives, the developmental consequences of stress and trauma, protective factors and resilience, the development of mental health skills, emotional availability and the role of affect in helping relationships, advocacy skills to help eliminate causes of violence, and the use of community and professional resources.
- Revise teacher certification standards to require violence-prevention training and the teaching of alternatives to violence.
- Create in-service teacher education programs on helping children cope with violence in their lives, with special emphasis on the therapeutic strategies of children's play and art.
- Develop ongoing consultation services for teachers, especially those who work with children in violent communities, to support teachers' mental health, address their fears and trauma, and provide assistance as they work with children who have multiple needs.

Conclusion

The violence that plagues our nation has many sources, and its elimination will require systematic attention at many levels. Most importantly, the citizens of our nation must become outraged at the victimization and must turn this outrage into positive action and increased resources toward preventing violence in the lives of children. All adults must assume the responsibility for keeping children safe. Our society cannot afford the devastating effects of failing to protect its children. Each of us individually must commit ourselves to the actions that are most appropriate to our own sphere of influence. The early childhood profession, individually and collectively, must work to influence public commitment, action, and policy and collaborate with other organizations to reduce the causes of violence. The early childhood profession must also address issues of violence in children's lives through partnerships with parents and other professionals; early childhood programs and curriculum; and professional preparation, development, and support.

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