

A LOOK AT VIOLENCE

Violence has increasingly become recognized as a pressing social problem that requires urgent attention. In the last decade in particular, violence, including that by and against children and adolescents, has received extensive media attention, public debate and research focus.

Violence comes in many forms. Most commonly, we think of violence as physical assaults such as hitting, biting and beating. Violence can also be sexual; including unwanted sexual touching on a continuum of intrusiveness from fondling to rape. Violence is not always overt and easily recognized. Violence can also be subtle and pervasive. Emotional and verbal abuse including threats, intimidation and harassment can cause great fear, yet may be minimized until they escalate into physical violence.

Some forms of violence have remained hidden and unrecognized, particularly abuse that occurs in the privacy of the home. Wife beating (woman abuse) and child sexual abuse were not considered widespread or of importance until the last third of the 20th century when research documented that large segments of the population experience both and that the long-term effects are damaging.



“Violence is the actual or threatened use of physical, verbal, or emotional power, intimidation, or harassment, by or against individuals or groups, which results in physical and/or psychological harm, or is harmful to the social well-being of an individual or group of individuals” (MacDonald cited in Alberta Learning, online, p.1).



Boys and girls, men and women can all be victimized by violence. While no one deserves to be abused and we must continue to explore ways to prevent all violence, girls and women are the primary targets in many forms of abuse including dating violence, sexual assault and abuse and sexual harassment. The National Crime Prevention Centre of Canada (January, 2000) describes these forms of violence as “gender-based”. They suggest that violence and fear of violence are critical factors that undermine the personal security and well being of women and girls in Canada. A sense of personal security is essential to the physical, intellectual, emotional, economic and spiritual sense of well being for any person.

Canadian crime statistics support the need to focus on reducing violence against girls and women. For example, in 1997 42.2% of reported violent crimes against women were perpetrated by a family member and 9.5% were perpetrated by a friend, compared to 11.2% of reported violent crimes against males perpetrated by a family member and 2.7% by a friend (Statistics Canada, 1997). In a series of focus groups with young women aged 13 to 19, The Alliance of Five Research Centres on Violence (1999) reported that harassment and abuse are realities in the lives of many young women, as was the fear of

being unsafe within their homes and communities. Violence in the everyday lives of girls mirrors that of adult women: harassment, bullying, aggression, maltreatment, physical and emotional abuse and sexual harassment and abuse (Berman et al., 2002). Gender-based violence cuts across racial, socio-economic class, and ethnic groups.

What causes violence? A power imbalance is the primary factor in all forms of interpersonal violence and abuse (Roher, 1997; Sudermann, Jaffe, & Schieck, 1996). The National Crime Prevention Centre (January, 2000) suggests that gender-based violence flourishes when societal attitudes, behaviours and institutions uphold traditional male power. Such a power imbalance between men and women leaves women and girls vulnerable to crimes of violence and abuse. The fear that many women and girls experience tends only to reinforce the gender inequality in Canadian society; reinforcing a sense of powerlessness and limiting the effective functioning of girls and young women in both private and public realms (Berman et al., 2002).

Researchers have looked at what individual (e.g., impaired cognitive functioning, poor academic achievement), family (e.g., inadequate family coping and problem-solving skills) and environmental (e.g., deviant peers, poverty) factors or characteristics (*risk factors*) have been associated with an elevated chance of exhibiting violent behaviour in an effort to identify those children and youth most at-risk of being victimized or victimizing others (Tolan & Guerra, 1998; Williams, Guerra, & Elliott, 1997). A complimentary approach has been to identify individual and social factors associated with a reduced risk for victimization or perpetration of violence (protective factors).

Violence Prevention Efforts

We do not yet know what factors (or combination of factors) significantly prevent or reduce interpersonal aggression and violence. Prevention programs typically target three main areas: knowledge, attitudes and behaviour. Violence prevention programs that address a variety of risk and protective factors are more likely to be successful than those that address only a few. Presenting information about interpersonal violence in settings such as schools recognizes that all children and youth need to be supported and educated about interpersonal violence and personal safety (Wolfe, Wekerle & Scott, 1997).

The United Nations (cited in National Crime Prevention Centre, 1997) has urged all nations to implement prevention strategies at the school and other levels that:

- Prevent violence against women by promoting equality, cooperation, mutual respect and shared responsibilities between women and men;
- Offer information to girls and young women about gender roles, the human rights of women and the social, health, legal and economic aspects of violence against women, in order to empower them to protect themselves against all forms of violence; and
- Develop and disseminate information on different forms of violence and programs that concern the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

Schools are well positioned to be a prime educational partner involved in ending violence and promoting equality.

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