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Contact: Joel Schwarz
joels@u.washington.edu
206-543-2580
[University of Washington](#)

Family discipline, religious attendance cut levels of later violence among aggressive children

Aggressive 15 year olds who attended religious services, felt attached to their schools or were exposed to good family management were much less likely to have engaged in violent behavior by the time they turned 18, according to a new multi-ethnic study of urban youth by University of Washington researchers.

The study also showed that the likelihood of violence at 18 among aggressive youth was reduced when they had been exposed to several of what are called protective factors, even when they also were exposed to risk factors, according to lead author Todd Herrenkohl, UW assistant professor of social work.

The research, conducted by the UW's Social Development Research Group, assessed the impact of what social scientists describe as protective and risk factors. Protective factors, such as feeling attached to your community and family and high academic achievement, can foster pro-social and healthy behaviors, said Herrenkohl. Risk factors, such as living in a run-down and crime-ridden neighborhood or associating with antisocial peers, can encourage antisocial or unhealthy behaviors.

The study, which also was designed to assess whether there were any differences in these factors by race or between boys and girls, found only one significant racial variance and none by gender. Just 11 percent of black adolescents later engaged in violent behavior if their parents practiced such good family-management skills as actively providing supervision, setting clear rules and expectations for behavior and reinforcing good work habits. This compared to 49 percent for black adolescents whose parents did not have these kinds of skills. Among white adolescents, there was little difference. Among 15 year olds whose families had practiced good family management, 30 percent later engaged in violence, while the rate was 32 percent for those whose families had poor family-management skills.

"We need to know more about the relationship between family management practices for black families and environmental or neighborhood risks," said Herrenkohl. Clearly there was a dramatic difference in the rate of violence when good family management was present and this suggests it is important in working against future violent behavior."

Three factors put the teens at risk for later violence. Those who lived in what the authors called disorganized neighborhoods were 2.5 times more likely to engage in violence later on. These neighborhoods are characterized by crime, run-down housing, poverty, gangs and drug activity. Other significant risk factors were having the chance to associate with antisocial peers during adolescence and regular involvement with those kinds of peers.

The study used data from the much larger ongoing Seattle Social Development Project of more than 800 Seattle school children who are now adults, that is being directed by J. David Hawkins, UW social work professor and head of Social Development Research Group. In the new study, behavior was monitored at ages 10, 15 and 18. Teachers assessed all of the students in the larger Seattle study at age 10 for childhood aggression based on 10 behaviors including bullying, getting into fights, threatening people and having explosive or unpredictable behavior.

One hundred and fifty-four children were rated as being highly aggressive and were followed in the violence study. This group was predominantly male (64 percent), and 49 percent of the subjects were black while 34 percent were white. The remaining 17 percent were of another race or ethnicity, none large enough to draw any valid statistical conclusions.

At age 15 the adolescents filled out questionnaires that asked about their experiences at home, in school and in their peer groups, as well as about the characteristics of their neighborhoods, their level of attachment to their neighborhoods and their attendance at religious services. Age 15 is considered a benchmark time for looking at adolescent behavior, according to Herrenkohl, because it generally marks the transition to high school and there is an expectation that children should have more independence while still requiring family monitoring.

At age 18 the adolescents filled out self-reports that detailed any use of physical violence, ranging from picking a fight to hitting a parent or beating someone so badly that the victim required medical attention. Overall, 35 percent of the 154 adolescents had engaged in violent behavior by the time they reached age 18.

"While much research has shown that aggressive children are at high risk for later serious and chronic behavior, it is never too late to intervene and it is a mistake to assume that all early behavior problems will lead to later and more serious antisocial behavior," said Herrenkohl. "This research is the first step in documenting those things that can benefit children later on and protect them against violent behavior."

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The findings were published in the journal *Social Work Research*, and the National Institute on Drug Abuse funded the study.

Co-authors were Karl Hill, director of the UW's Seattle Social Development Project; Ick-Joong Chung, an assistant professor of social welfare at Duksung Women's University in Seoul, South Korea; Jie Guo, a former research scientist at the UW's Social Development Research Group; Robert Abbott, chairman of educational psychology at the UW; and David Hawkins.

For more information, contact Herrenkohl at (206) 221-7873 or tih@u.washington.edu.

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