



Understanding and Responding to the Violence in Children's Lives

by Diane E. Levin

When I work with groups of parents and teachers on issues of violence in children's lives, I begin by asking participants what kinds of issues they want to make sure we address. With each passing month, the list of topics grows longer, the violence mentioned is more widespread, and the examples become more extreme. Some recent issues raised include:

- "Should we talk to children about the mother who drowned her children? I know many of the children in my class heard about it."
- "A child announced at our class meeting yesterday that her brother had been shot. I didn't know anything about it but have found out he was killed two years ago."
- "My four year olds were on a field trip and started kicking and karate chopping cars and making real dents. They excitedly said they were Power Rangers."

Growing Up in Violent Times

As many of us are becoming all too aware, children growing up today encounter enormous amounts of violence. There is the violence most children see on entertainment media, like the Power Rangers show which averages over 200 acts of violence per hour. There is the violence that children, especially boys, bring to their play as they imitate the violence they have seen on the screen with the highly realistic toys that are marketed with shows — retail sales for Power Ranger products reached one billion dollars in 1994 (Levin and Carlsson-Page, 1994a and 1994b).

Then there is the real world violence that children see on the news — adults hurting adults, adults hurting children, children hurting children. And, there is the violence that comes from economic and social injustice which growing numbers of children are experiencing directly in their own homes and communities — in 1992, almost three million children were reported abused or neglected and 100,000 were estimated to be homeless (Children's Defense Fund, 1994).

The degree to which children are exposed to and affected by violence varies, but few children are untouched by it. As shown in Figure 1, the violence in children's lives can be seen as fitting along a continuum of severity. At the bottom is entertainment violence (which is most prevalent in society and touches most children's lives); at the top are the most extreme forms of violence — chronic and direct exposure in the immediate environment (which fewer children experience but which builds onto the exposure to more prevalent forms of violence below it on the pyramid). The degree to which children are affected is likely to increase as they move up the continuum.

Fortunately, there are many teachers who have not yet had to help children deal with the range of incidents listed above. Still, children at all ages are being affected, and it is becoming increasingly urgent for educators to begin to confront the special challenges that these violent times are creating for children and families. We need to figure out how to effectively counteract the negative effects and break the cycle of violence in children's lives and in society (Levin, 1994).



Understanding and Responding Effectively

Exposure to violence creates special needs and problems for many children which the adults who care for them need to understand in order to help. It can affect development in far reaching ways as children struggle to make meaning of the violence they see and incorporate it into their ideas and behavior.

The meaning children make of the violence in their lives is different from that adults make (Levin, 1994). Children's understandings are influenced by such things as their current level of development, the meanings made from prior experience onto which understandings from new experiences are built, individual characteristics, and cultural background. As we work with children around issues of violence, the more we are able to take each child's point of view and understand the unique meanings he or she is making, the more we are likely to be able to help.

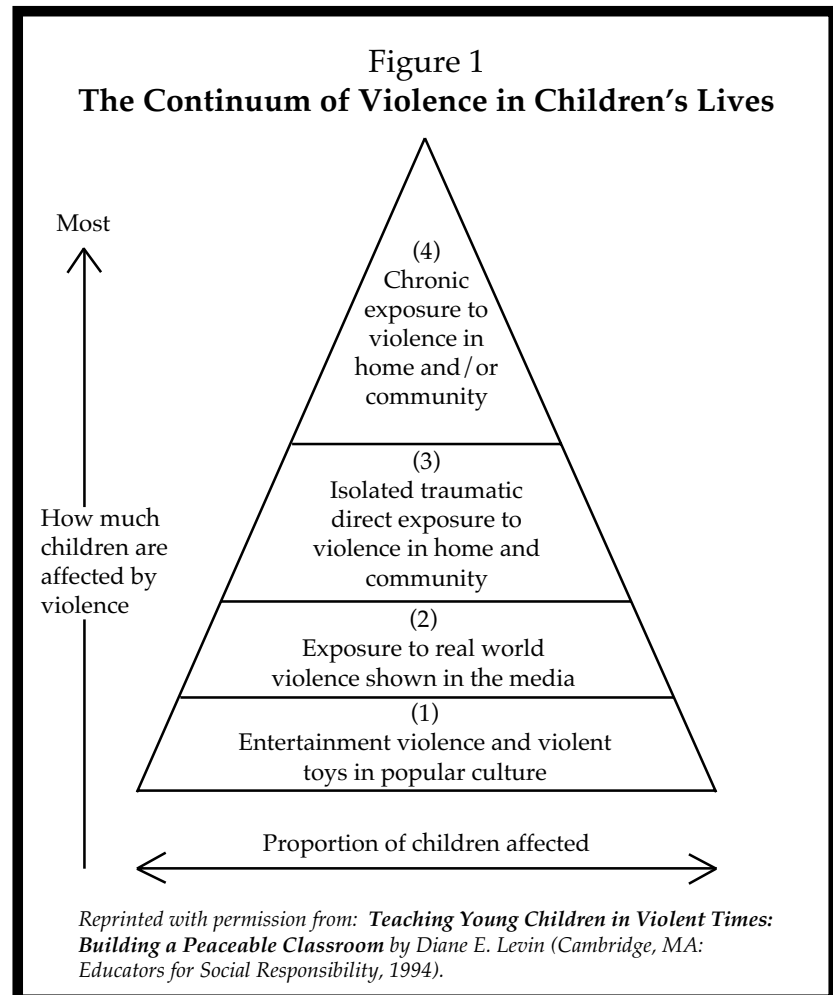
Child development theory and the growing body of research and literature about the effects of violence on children (for instance, see American Psychological Association, 1993; Craig, 1992; Garbarino et al., 1992; Levin, 1994; and Wallach, 1993) provide a very powerful lens for understanding how young children interpret and build ideas and feelings about the violence in their lives and how they are affected by it. Such a lens can also provide a framework for figuring out how to respond effectively (see Table 1, "A Developmental Framework for Understanding How to Counteract the Negative Effects of Violence").

✓ Violence Undermines the Sense of Trust and Safety

Many children growing up today see over and over, from both entertainment violence and the violence that they experience directly, that the world is a dangerous place. Dangers lurk in many places. Often, adults are unable to keep children safe. Fighting and weapons are necessary to keep oneself safe. Such messages undermine children's very sense of safety and trust.

Not feeling safe deeply affects social and emotional development. It can contribute to increased aggression, hyperactivity, impulsiveness, withdrawal, and distractibility. Intellectual development is also undermined as children's energy goes into understanding the violence that surrounds them and figuring out how to keep themselves safe rather than into mastering other vital cognitive issues. This situation can place many later aspects of development at risk (Erikson, 1950).

WHAT YOU CAN DO. Children who see the world as a dangerous place need to learn how to feel safe. They need help learning what they can do to keep themselves and others safe. They should be able to let their guard down and trust the adults who are caring for them. To accomplish this goal, children require predictable, secure, respectful classroom environments. And, they need consistent, caring, and responsive adults who see helping children feel safe as a legitimate and important focus of the curriculum.





✓ Violence Undermines Feelings of Competence and Autonomy

A central developmental task of children in the early years is to develop a sense of themselves as separate people who can effectively deal with and make a difference in what happens in the world that surrounds them. As children experience this, they feel powerful and strong; they are developing the confidence and skills they need to get their needs met and solve the problems they encounter without violence.

Exposure to violence can make children feel that being strong, separate, and competent is dangerous and requires fighting and weapons. And, for some children, few other models are provided about how to be separate and safe.

WHAT YOU CAN DO. Children exposed to violence need help learning how to function as autonomous and effective people — sharing responsibility for what happens in their immediate environment, feeling important and powerful through really making a difference, getting their needs met and voices heard — without fighting and violence. To do this, you need to work to make classrooms places where children regularly contribute to what happens in meaningful and developmentally appropriate ways and where their individual voices are heard and respected.

✓ Violence Undermines the Sense of Mutual Respect and Connectedness

Another task in the early years is to learn how to participate in relationships with others and to rely on

Table 1
**A Developmental Framework for Understanding
How to Counteract the Negative Effects of Violence**

How Children Are Affected by Violence

- Sense of *trust and safety* is undermined as children see the world is dangerous and adults can't keep them safe.
- Sense of *self* as a separate person who can have a positive, meaningful *effect* on the world without violence is undermined.
- Sense of *mutual respect and interdependence* is undermined — relying on others is a sign of vulnerability, violence is modeled as central in human interactions.
- Increased *need to construct an understanding of violent experiences* in discussions, creative play, art, and storytelling.
- *Endangered ability to work through violence* as mechanisms for doing so are undermined.
- *Overemphasis on violent content as the organizer* of thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

How to Counteract the Negative Effects

- Create a *secure, predictable environment* which teaches children how to keep themselves and others *safe*.
- Help children *take responsibility, feel powerful, positively affect their world*, and meet individual needs without fighting.
- Many opportunities to *participate in a caring community* where people help and rely on each other and work out their problems in mutually agreeable ways.
- *Wide-ranging opportunities to develop meanings of violence* through art, stories, and play (with adult help as needed).
- *Actively facilitate play, art, language* so children can safely and competently work through violent experiences.
- Provide deeply *meaningful content which offers appealing alternatives* to violence as organizers of experience.

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and support others in mutually respectful ways — to be a part of a caring community. As they succeed, children develop a sense of belonging which can help them feel secure enough to try new things, experiment, explore, learn, and grow as autonomous individuals.

Violence undermines children’s ability to develop positive interpersonal skills or a sense of connectedness with others. The rugged individual who can protect him or herself is the model held up to be emulated. Needing others is associated with vulnerability and helplessness. And, violence is often seen as the method of choice for solving problems and conflicts among people.

WHAT YOU CAN DO. You can provide children with opportunities to belong to a community of caring and responsible individuals. In such a classroom, children contribute in meaningful ways to what happens. They have many chances to learn about how their actions affect others and what they can do to get their own needs met. They also learn skills for solving their problems with others in mutually agreeable ways.

✓ Children Need to Build an Understanding of Violent Experiences

Children need to tell their stories and work through their experience in order to master and construct meaning from it. They often do this through their play, art, storytelling, or writing (as they get older), or by talking to a caring adult. It is through this work that a sense of equilibrium is achieved and learning and development are fostered.

When children have experienced some sort of trauma or disturbing and violent event, it is especially important to their healthy development that they have ample opportunities and the assistance they need to talk about and work it through (Garbarino et al., 1992). So, the more violence children are exposed to, the greater will be their efforts to try to work it out.

WHAT YOU CAN DO. Trying to “ban” violent content from the classroom, which often seems like the easiest and safest approach, usually does not serve children’s needs well. They need wide-ranging opportunities to talk about and work through the violence in their lives with caring adults and to develop rich and meaningful art, stories, and play.

As children do this, you can gain an understanding of their needs and how they are interpreting the violence. This information can guide your efforts to provide children with the information and support they need and to counteract many of the negative lessons they may be learning.

Creating opportunities for children to work through an understanding of their experiences with violence can be quite stressful for adults. You never know what disturbing information children will bring up; you might even hear things about children’s experiences that you wish you did not know and cannot possibly make better. In some cases, it will be important to know outside resources to which you can turn for help.

✓ Violence Undermines the Ability to Construct Meaning from Experience

Children’s ability to engage in the activities that could help them work through their violent experience (e.g., play, art, language) can be seriously undermined when their energy goes into dealing with violence in their homes, communities, and TV, and using media-linked toys of violence which channel children into imitative rather than creative play. So, as children’s needs to work through violence increase, their ability to work it through is often seriously impaired.

WHAT YOU CAN DO. Once children feel safe expressing themselves openly, adults can help them develop the skills and processes they need — for instance, creativity, imagination, problem solving, and communication — to work through violence in play, art, storytelling, drama, and guided discussions. The materials you provide, how time is structured, the degree to which you value and respect what children do, as well as the ways you actively enter in and facilitate children’s efforts, all contribute to their ability to work things through effectively.

✓ Violent Content Becomes a Central Organizer of Experience

What children see, hear, and do in their environment becomes the content they use for building ideas about the world. The ideas they build are then used for interpreting new experience and building new ideas. When society provides children with extensive violent content, it is hard for them not to come to see violence as central to how the world works and how they will fit into it. In this way, violence can become



a powerful part of the foundation onto which later ideas are built.

WHAT YOU CAN DO. As children work through the violence in their lives, you can also help them to get deeply involved in developmentally appropriate content that offers exciting and meaningful alternatives to violence. You can consciously build a curriculum with activities that offer such alternatives and grow out of children's deep interests and needs (see Edwards et al., 1993, and Jones and Nimmo, 1994). I have found that it is often those children most involved with violence who are the most excited about finding new and empowering ways to become involved with their world.

Meeting Children's Needs in Violent Times

It is an enormous challenge we face. Teachers alone cannot solve the problems created for children by the violence in society. Yet, there is a lot we can do. And, working to understand how children are affected and what helps to counteract the negative effects is one meaningful way to begin. It will never be easy, but it can be empowering and rewarding for everyone involved.

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Share Your Wisdom About How Things Have Changed

Are you an early childhood professional who has been in the field for more than TEN years? If so, Diane Levin is interested in finding out your ideas about how teaching young children and how the needs of children and families have changed over time. If you are willing to complete a questionnaire on this subject, please circle number 75 on the *Exchange Product Inquiry Card* inside the back cover of this issue.