

Nature and Media's Nurture Spawn Girl Violence

BY TIMOTHY F. KIRN
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ATLANTA — The media shares the blame for the rising tide of girl violence. But this tide would not be rising if females did not naturally have tendencies to aggression that are in some ways as strong as those of males, James Garbarino, Ph.D., said at a meeting of the National Adolescent Perpetration Network.

Many think that girls lack the same ca-

capacity for violence as males. But like many concepts, that is a little simplistic, said Dr. Garbarino, the Maude C. Clarke chair in humanistic psychology at Loyola University, Chicago, and the author of the recent book "See Jane Hit: Why Girls Are Growing More Violent and What We Can Do About It" (Penguin Press, 2006).

All humans are naturally aggressive, and infants and children growing up are taught to control their aggression, Dr. Garbarino said at the meeting, sponsored

by the University of Colorado. That concept—advanced mostly by Richard E. Tremblay, Ph.D., of the University of Montreal—is an important one. And it is now generally accepted.

"You don't have to teach a baby to bite; you teach them not to bite," he said.

Moreover, a violent nature is almost equally true of females as of males, and, in fact, in some contexts, females can show even more aggression than males.

Dr. Garbarino noted one study in which

children who were brought into a laboratory played a video game that involved dropping bombs. With some of the subjects, the researchers personalized the environment and introduced the children and let them get to know each other. In the second group of subjects, the investigators purposely had the subjects and the game remain anonymous.

In the personalized scenario, the boys dropped more bombs during the game than the girls did, an average of 31 bombs versus 27 bombs. However, in the anonymous scenario, both groups increased the number of bombs they dropped, but the girls had a greater increase and even tended to drop more bombs than the boys, an average of 41 bombs versus 37 bombs.

In addition, Dr. Tremblay had showed that at 17 months of age, 90% of boys and more than 80% of girls were still acting in demonstrably aggressive ways, he said.

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The role that the media has played in creating a rise in girl violence is not in encouraging it, but rather in removing constraints that previously inhibited it, he said. But it is still a powerful effect.

Much research has been done on the effect of media violence on behavior and aggression, he said. It shows a strong correlation, almost as strong a correlation as that between smoking and lung cancer, and an effect that is larger.

Smoking accounts for 10% of the variance in lung cancer. Television violence accounts for 15% of the variance in teenagers' violent behavior, he stated.

In the 1960s, studies seemed to show that females were immune to the effect of television violence. But that was no longer true by the 1980s, he said. What changed? Images portrayed by the media—which do not need to create aggression, only validate it—became more violent. The heroes became as violent as the bad guys, and many of those heroes are female.

Such images send the message that one can be the good guy and be violent; that message resonates with individuals because when they become agitated enough to become violent, they usually think they are justified, he said.

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"The messages are much more positive about violence than they used to be," he said. For example, at the end of the third movie in the Harry Potter series, it is the very likeable and admirable character, Hermione, who punches the bully, Draco Malfoy. She turns around and she is cheered, and she says: "That felt good."

"The message is very clear," Dr. Garbarino said. "Powerful, good, strong girls hit, and they enjoy it." ■

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