

# Aggression in Children : Reasons and Remedies

RANJANA BHATIA\*

---

## Abstract

*Children are the creation of God. They are born with all happiness and spread lot of joy all around. Some turn out to be very happy, satisfied, calm and balanced youngsters while others become hostile and problem children. As hostile youngsters, they cause lot of harm to themselves and to those around them. There are definite reasons for their hostile behaviour which is quite often due to the environmental reasons. Parents, teachers and other factors are included in the environment. Studies have shown that environment plays a major role in acquiring the aggressive traits by the children. Awareness about the causes of aggression and the ways to check as well as control will help in preventing, minimising as well as controlling aggression in children.*

*"Children are sick of being called 'the future'. They want to enjoy their childhoods, free of violence, now".*

*- Paulo Pinheiro, 2007, UN General Assembly*

---

## Aggression in Children Introduction

In psychology, as well as in other social and behavioural sciences, aggression (also called *combativeness*) refers to behaviour between members of the same species that is intended to cause pain or harm. According to Maslow (1962), aggression is not an essential part of human nature. It is a reaction to circumstances in which essential requirements of our nature are unfulfilled.

What do temper tantrums, teasing, rage, hate, and revenge have in common? All may stem from emotional pain inflicted by parents or others, said Joan Arehart-Treichel, a child psychiatrist.

Aggression in children and its causes and effects have always been a matter of great concern with the policy makers of our country. Their concern with regard to the protection of the child, prevention and prohibition of all such activities that may cause mental and physical harm to the child is evident from

---

\*Professor and Principal, Amity Institute of Education, Saket, New Delhi-110017.

the fact that they have suggested various steps to ensure the protection of the child. In 1999, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights adopted a General Comment on 'The Right to Education' which stated that corporal punishment is inconsistent with the fundamental guiding principle of international human rights.

Article 21 of the Constitution protecting the 'Right to Life' is the first point of reference. The Child Rights Charter 2003 of India specifically states "All children have a right to be protected against neglect, maltreatment, injury, and trafficking, sexual and physical abuse of all kinds, corporal punishment, torture, exploitation, violence and degrading treatment." Prohibition and elimination of corporal punishment in schools is identified as a priority in the 2005 National Plan of Action for Children and the report on child protection in the National Plan for 2007-2012. The National Policy on Education (1986, modified 1992) states that 'corporal punishment will be firmly excluded from the educational systems.'

Two out of three school going children in India are physically abused says the national report on child abuse by the Ministry of Women and Child Development in 2007. The crime is unchecked in every single district of the country. In spite of such recommendations and precautions for the parents, schools, teachers and law makers, the children especially of the present times are subjected to hostile treatment and are very aggressive. With this aggressive behaviour, they inflict harm upon themselves as well as harm all those who are around them.

Their aggression is not without any reason. All children have moments when

they lash out in anger by using coarse language, creating commotion, throwing or kicking objects. At times their aggression crosses all limits and appears alarming and out of control. The parents, teachers and others around them find it difficult to understand this behaviour and control it. Aggressiveness is a result of narcissistic anger, of the desegregation of the self, which leads to its fragmentation (Kohut, 1996). Children who experience a hostile family environment are afraid, feel isolated, threatened and unable to defend themselves.

This extreme frustration leads to deep emotional scars and these children do not develop the ability to contain themselves. At the same time the anger and pain caused by these scars continue to act, and anxiety underlies their behaviour. In attempting to adapt to this hostile environment, children may, amongst other strategies, turn to aggressive behaviour. A number of studies have been carried out all over the world to understand the reasons behind the aggressive behaviour of children. It has been established by various research studies that children who are physically disciplined by hitting or any other corporal punishment are more anxious and aggressive as compared to those who are disciplined by other approaches.

In a research finding, it was observed that the mothers of Thailand hardly use physical methods to discipline their children and this trend was also seen in mothers from China, The Philippines, Italy and even in India. The mothers in Kenya however use physical means to discipline their children. In countries where physical discipline was more

common and culturally accepted, children who were physically disciplined were less aggressive and less anxious than children who were physically disciplined in countries where physical discipline was rarely used. In all countries, however, higher use of physical discipline was associated with more child aggression and anxiety.

In Thailand, a country where peace-promoting Buddhist teachings are predominant, mothers rarely spank their children or use other forms of physical discipline. In Kenya, on the other hand, where use of physical discipline is common and considered normal, mothers spank or engage in similar disciplinary tactics. In a study conducted in Kenya in 2003, 57 per cent of grandmothers reported caning, pinching, slapping, tying with a rope, hitting, beating, and kicking as forms of discipline they had used. Whether a violent video game or corporal punishment, children learn aggressive attitudes and act them out when they are exposed to violence. They don't learn peaceful ways of solving conflict when they are exposed to violence.

#### **Forms of Aggression in Children**

Children with tendencies of aggressive behaviour have a mindset of intentionally hurting others. Aggression in them can manifest in a number of ways including hitting, kicking, spitting, biting, pushing and throwing objects. Aggression in children is of four types:

- non destructive aggression – It is an aggression which is inborn. This type of aggression sets in drive in children to excel in academics, sports and any

other fields. This kind of aggression should be cultivated by parents as well as teachers.

- the second kind of aggression is related to the urge of obtaining food. This type of aggression is also inborn.
- the third type of aggression is related to displeasure. The temper tantrum, getting into rage etc. falls in this category.
- the fourth kind of aggression is pleasure related aggression. Teasing and taunting come under this. The third and fourth type of aggressions are not inborn. Both are forms of hostile aggression and are activated by emotional pain.

#### **What are the causes of Aggression?**

Children at times are not able to express themselves because of poor language skills as compared to the adults. This helplessness and inability of expressing their feelings verbally, at times force a child to act aggressively.

In a study conducted by UNESCO in 1996-97 of 5000 students of 12 years of age across 23 nations, it was found that the children indulged in more than three hours of TV viewing. This, it was observed was next only to school attendance in terms of time spent on any activity. The study found that children turn to violence to solve problems as they watch lot of TV programmes related to violence.

In another study carried by Centre for Advocacy and Research (CFAR) in 2001, the impact of media violence was studied on children between the age group of 6 to 12 years. The study was carried out in five Indian cities (Delhi, Lucknow, Calcutta, Hyderabad and

Ahmedabad). The study reported high aggression in learnt behaviour.

Children in the United States spend three to four hours each day watching TV which has a great influence on their future behaviour. More than 60 per cent of these programmes contain some violence. About 40 per cent of these programmes have heavy violence (Rowell Huesmann, 2006). There are other factors also that contribute to the problem of aggression in children. They are:

1. *Video Games:* - Video games have greatly influenced the children these days. Children are spending lot of time playing video games and most of the video games have violence. Video games were considered to be more harmful in increasing aggression than violent movies or television shows due to their interactive and engrossing nature of time (Karen E. Dill and Craig A. Anderson, Sept 2007).
2. *Corporal Punishment at School:*- Child is the father of man. He merely reflects what he has been accorded. When the teacher at school uses corporal punishment on him for small offences, that is more common these days, he reciprocates the same. The child, during his adult days, if not given something he is duly entitled to, all that he can actually think of is how he was flogged by the teacher and was made to do something, and it is religiously followed by the child. It kindles violence when he is not given his due. The attitude of might is right automatically gets impressed on him. (Charles Karelis, 2009),

3. *There are other causes of aggression too.* Some children act aggressively because that is what they have learnt. They have seen parental argument, divorce and work schedule of parents. As a result of the family environment, they have been treated aggressively. This way they learn aggression.
4. *In addition, social problems,* separation, limited communication skills, stress, abuse, temperament, heredity factors, substance abuse, stressful family life, brain damage, imitation of aggressive behaviour, unfulfilled needs and desires, envy, desperation etc. can be some other causes of aggression in children.

#### **Warning Signs of Aggression in Children:**

The warning signs of aggression can always be seen in children. Higher the signs of aggression more will be the threat. An aggressive child can cause harm to himself and to those around him. Some of these warning signs are:

- Uncontrollable outbursts of anger at home or outside home.
- Taking weapons like knife, scissors etc. to school without any requirement.
- Suicide attempts or threats of suicide
- History of family in attempting suicide or violent behaviour
- Selection of violent movies
- Always blaming others and destiny for misfortune
- Morbidity in conversation
- Any mental illness
- Bullying, beating or indulging in some kind of violence
- Difficulty in making friends
- Overprotection of parents or family

**How to handle Aggressive Children**

According to social psychology, violence is a learned behaviour. Criminals or violent children are not born with these traits. They observe aggression around them and imitate it. The media plays a significant role in assimilation of hostile traits and ideas in children. These factors contribute in aggression. Some suggestions to handle the children with aggression are:

- constant and consistent checking of unwanted behaviour is the basic requirement for managing or reducing aggression in children.
- the surroundings should provide calm and peaceful ambience to children. This will help reduce the stress level in them.
- caring and patiently dealing with them will also help. Giving quality time to children can make them less aggressive.
- removing stimulants that trigger violent reactions or behaviour.
- Providing them with ways means and opportunities like sports, games to utilise excess energy.
- taking note as well as keeping a watchful eye on aggressive tendencies of the child.
- firm but gentle approach works best with an aggressive child.
- selection of right type of TV programmes for children.
- introducing them to yoga and meditation.
- letting the child know that you want him/her and you care for him/her.
- acknowledging their feelings within limits.
- avoiding corporal punishment for an aggressive child as it can become counter productive.
- keeping a watchful eye on the company your child keeps
- controlling your own anger so that they don't imitate you.
- providing them suitable reading material with stories on the ill effects of anger.
- encouraging the child to talk about the problems with you. The more you talk to a child, the easier they will find it to establish an equation with you. Soon they will use their own vocabulary and be able to communicate their frustrations and feelings verbally.
- giving them positive vibrations instead of blaming, punishing and publicly ridiculing them,
- be cautious of your own reaction to situations. If you are meeting every situation with aggression, you are passing it on to the child.
- praising good behaviour of the child as that is very important in correcting the aggressive tendencies of the child.

**Conclusion**

No matter what we do, children do show aggression at times. When this happens, we need to keep a close eye on children and reach out to them before such a flashpoint may arise. At times like these, children need to be guided as calmly as possible. The hostile aggression in children is greatly influenced by the way their parents and teachers treat them. Physical, emotional and any other type of unpleasant treatment meted out to these children gets reflected in their behaviour.

Emotional scars are left on the mind of the child by the parents and teachers at times unknowingly and unintentionally which finally leads to hostile aggression. To avoid the hostile aggressive tendencies in children, it is important to remember that children also have feelings. This does not mean that we

should not be firm. We have to be role models as well as watchful gardeners. Children should be led into the right paths, not by harshness, but by influence. Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to emulate them.

### REFERENCES

- DILL, KAREN E. and C.A. ANDERSON. May 2000. "Video Games and Aggressive Thoughts, Feelings, and Behavior in the Laboratory and in Life", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 78, No. 4.
- CHARLES KARELIS. 2009. Psychological Effects of Poverty in Children", *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*. Colgate University.
- HUESMANN, L. R. (ed). 1994. *Aggressive behavior: Current perspectives*. New York: Springer.
- KOHUT, H. 1974. *The Kohut Seminars on Self Psychology and Psychotherapy with Adolescent and Young Adults*. New York: Norton.
- KOHUT H. 1996. *Psychology of Self*, Allen M. Siegel :Routledge.
- MASLOW, ABRAHAM H. 1962. "Towards a Psychology of Being", Van Nostrand: Princeton.
- AREHART-TREICHEL, JOAN. April 2008. "Aggression Comes in Four Types. Psychoanalysis Explains" *Psychiatric News* 43(7). URL: <http://pn.psychiatryonline.org/content/43/7/9.1.full>, (Accessed 6 December 2010)
- June 2001. "Psychiatrist Helps Court Define 'Evil Behaviour'", *Psychiatric News*, 36(12), Accessed 6 December 2010, URL: <http://pn.psychiatryonline.org/content/36/12/9.1.full>
- "Media Violence Research: Learning-based Media Effects Theories", Accessed 6 December 2010, URL:<http://huesmann.socialpsychology.org/>.
- "Psychological Effects of Poverty in Children", Accessed 6 December 2010, URL: <http://www.legalserviceindia.com/article/1310-Psychological-Effects-Of-Poverty-In-Children.html>
- "Ereotypes the Effects of Media Stereotypes", Accessed 6 December 2010 <http://dwtsinfo.com/index>.
- "Aggression, Information about Aggression - FAQs.ORG", Accessed 6 December 2010, URL: <http://www.faqs.org/health/topics/18/Aggression.html>
- HUESMANN, ROWELL L. and LEONARD ERON. D. June 1989. "Individual differences and the trait of aggression", *European Journal of Personality*, 3(2):95–106, Accessed 6 December 2010, URL: [www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/112465830/abstract](http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/112465830/abstract).
- SHIN, GRACE. "Video Games: A Cause of Violence and Aggression", Accessed 6 December 2010, URL:<http://www.legalserviceindia.com/article/1310-Psychological-Effects-Of-Poverty-In-Children.html>