

Family influences on the development of aggression and violence

Madelyn H Labella and Ann S Masten

Recent research confirms that many of the most salient risk and protective factors for the development of aggression and violence reside in the family system. Family-based risks begin before birth, encompassing genetic and epigenetic processes. Contextual stressors (e.g., poverty, conflict) may impact development directly or indirectly through disrupted parenting behavior, including high negativity, low warmth, harshness, and exposure to violence. The family can also serve as a powerful adaptive system counteracting the risk of aggression and violence. Parents can promote healthy behavioral development through warmth, structure, and prosocial values, as well as by fostering adaptive resources in the child and community. Successful interventions often reduce aggression and violence by supporting parents and families. Recent insights and future directions for research and practice are discussed.

Address

Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota, 51 East River Parkway, Minneapolis, 55455 MN, USA

Corresponding author: Labella, Madelyn H (label052@umn.edu)

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The family is a critical context for child development, including the development of aggression and violence [1]. In developmental systems theory, individual development emerges from interactions across system levels, including interactions with the family, community, and physical environment [1–3]. Given the salience of family socialization, it is not surprising that many of the best-established risk and protective factors for the development of violence are located in the family system. This article examines recent evidence on family-based risk and protective factors for aggression and violence, describing how these influences cascade outward to affect children's adjustment at school, with friends, and in the community. Intervention efforts to reduce aggression and violence by targeting family processes are highlighted and future directions for multilevel research and interventions are discussed.

Risk factors in the family system

Family-based risk factors for aggression and violence begin before a child is born. In addition to genetic factors that may shape propensity to aggression, parents influence prenatal risk through the intrauterine environment. Fetal exposure to environmental toxins and maternal substance use have been linked to children's aggressive and antisocial behavior [4]. The family's psychosocial environment also influences fetal development, in part by shaping the stress response system. Extreme or chronic stress during pregnancy can lead to hyper-activation of the mother's hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis, producing high levels of the stress hormone cortisol, some of which permeates the placental barrier [5]. Prenatal maternal stress and cortisol exposure are associated with increased stress reactivity in utero, negativity emotionality, and behavior problems during infancy and beyond [5–7]. For example, prenatal (but not postnatal) intimate partner violence (IPV) predicted more mother-reported behavior problems and higher cortisol reactivity to an arm restraint task among one-year-old infants [8*]. Similar findings were demonstrated in middle childhood, suggesting long-term programming effects [9].

Accumulating evidence suggests that prenatal stress shapes development through epigenetic processes—for example, by decreasing expression of glucocorticoid receptors in the hippocampus, thereby slowing recovery from acute stress [5,6]. Alterations in HPA functioning may reflect conditional adaptations to a stressful postnatal environment that optimize survival at the cost of long-term health [5,10]. Chronic activation of a hyper-responsive stress system can lead to down-regulation of HPA reactivity, resulting in later failure to mobilize an adaptive stress response. Both hyper- and hypo-activation of the stress response system have been linked to violence and antisocial behavior [11,12].

Effects of prenatal stress are often compounded by ongoing adversity. Prenatal stressors, including maternal psychopathology and family strain, often persist in the postnatal period, fine-tuning the reactivity of the developing stress response system [7]. The impact of early stress on neurobehavioral development has major implications for etiological theories of violence. Several models of antisocial development identify vulnerabilities in neurobiology, temperament, and cognitive ability as risk factors for later aggression [4,12,13]. Because these individual differences are affected by stress in the family environment, they should not be interpreted as purely genetic risks, but

instead as co-acting genetic and environmental influences that shape development.

Children with individual vulnerabilities are particularly susceptible to adversity in the caregiving environment—as well as more likely to experience it. Parents who share genetic risk and provide stressful pre- and post-natal environments often struggle to parent effectively [12]. Furthermore, young children at neurobiological and temperamental risk are more difficult to parent, often eliciting frustration, low warmth, and harsh discipline [4,13]. Transactions between a difficult child and a pathogenic environment can compound and escalate individual risks. One influential developmental taxonomy [13] proposes that children with early neuropsychological risk factors (*e.g.*, low verbal intelligence, attention problems) tend to evoke adverse care, initiating a stable trajectory of antisocial behavior across the lifespan. Recent refinements of this taxonomy acknowledge that early adversity directly shapes neurobiological vulnerability and that supportive caregiving environments may function to mitigate and/or delay the onset of antisocial behavior associated with such vulnerability [14**].

Family adversities linked to the development of aggression and violence include poverty, family stress, disorganization, single parenthood, large family size, and household conflict [15–20]. These adversities may shape the development of aggression and violence indirectly through parenting behavior and/or alterations in children's stress physiology [21*,22]. Parental mental illness, substance abuse, and criminality are also associated with offspring aggression and violence [15–20,23]. These parental adjustment variables are likely linked to genetic risk, behavioral models of antisocial behavior, and disrupted parenting [22].

Ineffective parenting is one of the most consistently identified predictors of children's aggression and antisocial behavior. Trajectories of violence have been associated with high parental negativity and low parental warmth, as well as low cohesion and supportiveness in family relationships [21*,22,24,25]. Emotionally unsupportive environments may heighten children's distress without facilitating emotion management, undermining the development of secure attachment and self-regulation. Harsh and inconsistent discipline has also been implicated in antisocial development [15–19]. For example, in a cohort of children at risk for aggressive behavior, socioeconomic risk and parental depression were linked to harsh and inconsistent parenting, which in turn predicted childhood conduct problems escalating to violent behavior in adolescence [26**]. The social interaction learning model proposes that inconsistent enforcement of behavioral expectations reinforces noncompliance, and intermittent harshness in response to misbehavior

contributes to cycles of aggressive coercion, escalating antisocial development [27].

Harsh punishment may also cross the line into abuse. Robust associations between physical abuse and later aggression have been documented in studies using longitudinal and genetically-informed designs [28]. Research has identified genetic variations associated with greater vulnerability to antisocial behavior following physical abuse, although abuse operates as a risk factor regardless of genotype [29–31]. Other forms of maltreatment, such as neglect and sexual abuse, have also been linked to the development of aggression and violence. In a study of low-income families with or without maltreatment reports, repeated neglect and mixed-type maltreatment were uniquely associated with adulthood maltreatment perpetration, controlling for childhood demographics, adolescent risk behaviors, and adulthood well-being [32].

Abuse and neglect often co-occur with exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV) involving caregivers. Witnessing IPV is also known to predict aggressive and antisocial behavior [16,19,33,34]. Cycle of violence theories propose that witnessing or experiencing violence undermines secure attachment, biases social information processes toward threat detection, and contributes to dysregulation of the stress response system [35]. According to social learning theory, children and adolescents who witness family violence may imitate aggressive behavior. In fact, family violence has been linked to bullying and fighting perpetration among middle schoolers [36], and adolescent conflict with best friends prospectively mediated links between witnessing inter-parental violence and involvement in dating violence [33]. Witnessing others engage in violence may also promote internalization of aggression as acceptable in the context of close relationships. Acceptance of aggression has been found to mediate links between IPV and antisocial outcomes, including children's self-reported externalizing behavior [37] and perpetration of dating violence [38].

Neighborhood factors, including concentrated poverty, disorganization, and community violence, also predict violent development [22,39–41]. For example, cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have documented links between community violence exposure and increased aggressive behavior [25,40,41]. Because parents select young children's environments, exposure to violence in the broader community can reflect indirect family influences on children's behavioral development. Parents play a similarly critical role in structuring peer socialization. As children get older, dysfunctional behavior patterns acquired in the family can spread to other domains through processes described as developmental cascades [42]. Children with behavior problems at school entry are often rejected by mainstream peers, encouraging them to affiliate with deviant peers [4,27]. Antisocial friend groups

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