Can We Make Violent Behavior Less Adaptive for Youth?

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One of the reasons it is so difficult to prevent youth violence is that it works. For many youth, violence is one of the few available currencies they have to get ahead. It is relatively easy to learn and can be 'traded' for power, control, resources, respect, status, and other desired outcomes. This is particularly true for marginalized and disadvantaged youth in the USA and worldwide. As a Jamaican inner-city youth commented in a recent ethnographic study, 'the only skill youth have inna di (in the) ghetto is to fire a gun or construction work. Getting a gun is di quickest thing – a man will gi yuh (give you) a gun an tell yuh kill a man' [Gayle & Levy, 2007].

Both neuroscience and evolutionary psychology confirm the adaptive functions of violence, although we need only consider the course of history to corroborate this evidence. Resource-poor environments are just one example – under the right conditions, violence is a highly effective solution. Surely, the entertainment value of violence cannot be denied. Yet the idea that violence works, particularly for youth, rarely is on our collective radar. Just as it is difficult to admit that drugs can be fun and school can be boring, we shy away from considering violence as entertaining, adaptive, or desired, preferring to label it as the antisocial, deviant, and disordered behavior of a subgroup of high-risk youth.

A focus on individual pathology lends itself to interventions to redirect children and youth towards more conventional and socially acceptable behaviors. Context matters, but largely to the extent that social settings facilitate the learning of aggression through processes such as modeling and reinforcement. Multicontextual interventions work with teachers, parents, and schools to teach children alternative behaviors, reduce supports and reinforcements for acting out, and implement increasingly harsh sanctions such as zero tolerance for misbehavior. Although many comprehensive interventions have been effective in preventing and reducing children's aggressive behavior, they might be even more effective and have broader reach by systematically considering the adaptive functions of aggression and violence during childhood and adolescence.

This is particularly critical in light of recent increases in aggressive and bullying behavior in schools and in cyberspace, often with dire consequences for victims. A

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common response has been to establish ‘no bullying’ rules and policies in schools and to develop programs that build empathy and emphasize the negative consequences of bullying for victims. Yet this approach does not acknowledge the positive consequences of bullying that sustain it within a variety of social groups from schools to prisons to the workplace.

Just as inner-city violence provides access to resources, power, and control often unavailable through other means, bullying can serve many functions. For youth, these include establishing dominance hierarchies, determining group boundaries (particularly during middle school), reducing competition for romantic partners (particularly for girl-on-girl bullying), adding more drama to social interactions, and just plain fun. In fact, in a recent ethnographic study of bullying, one of the most frequently cited reasons for cyber bullying among high school students was that it was entertaining [Guerra, Williams, & Sadek, 2011].

Creating contexts where bullying, aggression, and violence are not called for requires understanding the developmental needs served by these behaviors *and* providing alternate means of fulfilling these needs. In some cases, this involves equitable resources so youth have opportunities for gainful engagement and meaningful employment. How many of us would at least consider taking a brown paper bag filled with illegal drugs across the street for several hundred dollars rather than taking three buses to work at a fast food restaurant for minimum wage?

In other cases, the solutions are less costly but require more a nuanced understanding of development in context. Considering the importance of ‘respect’ for youth in many cultures, one challenge is to create systems and settings where youth feel respected and honored rather than marginalized and excluded. This may be as simple as changing the language we use, for example, in some juvenile institutions in the USA meals are called feedings and directors are called wardens. And how can we help youth become more engaged in fun and entertaining activities that are not hurtful to others? Instead of framing our efforts simply as preventing at-risk youth from misbehavior, we must also consider how to develop contexts where positive behaviors are useful tools for meeting key developmental needs.

References

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