

'Cascading effect' of childhood experiences may explain serious teen violence

November 14 2008

Adverse experiences early in life can lead to minor childhood behavior problems, which can grow into serious acts of teen violence, according to new research. This "cascading effect" of repeated negative incidents and behaviors is the focus of an article in the November/December edition of the journal *Child Development*.

Using a novel approach that went beyond simply identifying risk factors, a research team led by a Duke University psychologist measured how violent behavior develops across the life span, from early childhood through adolescence. The researchers tracked 754 children from preschool through adulthood and documented that children who have social and academic problems in elementary school are more likely to have parents who withdraw from them over time. That opens the door for them to make friends with adolescents exhibiting deviant behaviors and, ultimately, leads them to engage in serious and sometimes costly acts of violence.

The developmental path toward violent outcomes was largely the same for boys and girls, said Kenneth A. Dodge, the lead author of the study and director of the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University.

Dodge and his colleagues in the Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group also found that the cascade could be traced back to children born with biological risks or born into economically disadvantaged environments, both of which make consistent parenting a challenge.

They determined biological risk by assessing the temperaments of the children in infancy, based on mothers' reports; those at risk were irritable, easily startled and difficult to calm. These children are more likely to exhibit minor social and cognitive problems upon entering school. From there, the behavior problems begin to "cascade," he said.

"The findings indicate that these trajectories are not inevitable, but can be deflected at each subsequent era in development, through interactions with peers, school, and parents along the way," said Dodge, who is the William McDougall Professor of Public Policy and a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Duke. "Successful early intervention could redirect paths of antisocial development to prevent serious violent behavior in adolescence," Dodge said.

Fortunately, successful interventions, such as parent training and social cognitive skills training for children, are available, he said.

The article, "Testing an Idealized Dynamic Cascade Model of the Development of Serious Violence in Adolescence," appears in Vol. 79, Issue 6, of the journal *Child Development*, a publication of the Society for Research in Child Development Inc.

Source: Duke University

Citation: 'Cascading effect' of childhood experiences may explain serious teen violence (2008, November 14) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-11-cascading-effect-childhood-teen-violence.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.