

PUBLIC OPINION AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION

by Richard E. Tremblay

Last June, when we invited newspapers to collaborate with the CEECD to conduct an opinion poll on children's aggression¹, Paule Des Rivières (an editorialist at *Le Devoir*) told us, "It isn't newsworthy." This reaction came as a bit of a surprise since, over the past decade, *Le Devoir* has covered the progress of Canadian longitudinal studies on child development very well indeed. Des Rivières, in particular, has often recognized the importance of early intervention in her editorials.

Our aim with the opinion poll was to verify to what extent the Canadian public understood (like Des Rivières) that the Canadians who use physical aggression most often are preschoolers, and that preventive interventions during the preschool years are probably the best way to prevent subsequent problems with schoolyard bullying, violent juvenile delinquency, biker gang violence, and spousal violence.

Of course, the CEECD forged ahead with the poll. We asked a random sample of 1,500 Canadians to select the age at which they thought young Canadians used physical aggression most often, and which age category the Canadian government should target if it were to invest \$100 million (of new money) into violence prevention. Des Rivières was astonished by the results of the poll and the story made the front page of *Le Devoir*.

According to the poll, more than 60% of Canadians believe that adolescents resort to physical aggression more frequently than any other category of young Canadian boys (see Figure 1). Only 2% correctly identified



photo: Marie-Claude Saint-Laurent

preschoolers as being the most frequent physical aggressors. Des Rivières was especially interested by the fact that no Quebecers (0%) correctly identified preschoolers as the leading age group for frequent physical aggression. So while we know that *Le Devoir* has been doing its job reporting research results and writing editorials on this subject, its efforts do not appear to have changed public opinion in Quebec - not even by 1%!

Considering that, across the country, most Canadians perceive adolescents as being prone to physical aggression, it is not surprising that 41% wanted to spend the \$100 million on preventing physical violence in this age group (Figure 2). No more than 10% of respondents said they would spend the money to help preschool children learn alternatives to physical aggression. These results are disturbing, especially when we consider that politicians often rely on public opinion to decide where to allocate government resources.

There is clearly a long way to go if we want Canadians to understand the results of research on child development and its implications for the prevention of childhood precursors to more serious problems. Results from

longitudinal studies indicate that early childhood problems can lead to devastating school performance, social relationships, mental health problems, and increased risk-taking behaviours such as smoking, alcohol abuse, drug use, and reckless driving.

The best way of changing public opinion is most likely to make good use of the resources that are allocated to early childhood development. Once

we are able to demonstrate that the programs we have implemented for young children actually prevent school problems and juvenile delinquency, it will be much easier to request further resources. For the time being, our main problem is that we have to convince politicians to invest billions in early childhood development when the short- and long-term effects of the programs are not being adequately evaluated. **In 10 years time will we be able to identify which of the early childhood programs did change the life-course of children? Who is keeping score?**

For more information, see:

<http://www.excellence-earlychildhood.ca/documents/SondLégerAggressionANG.pdf>

¹ *Opinion Poll Regarding Aggression among Young Children in Canada* - Conducted by Léger-Marketing

figure 1

AGE BOYS RESORTING MOST FREQUENTLY TO PHYSICAL AGGRESSION ? *

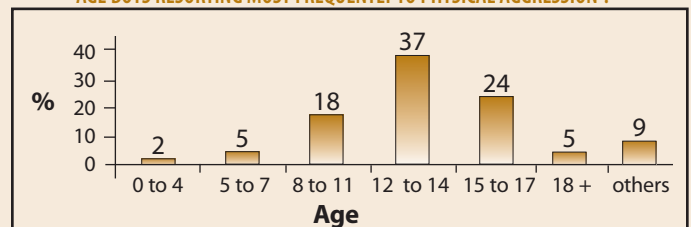
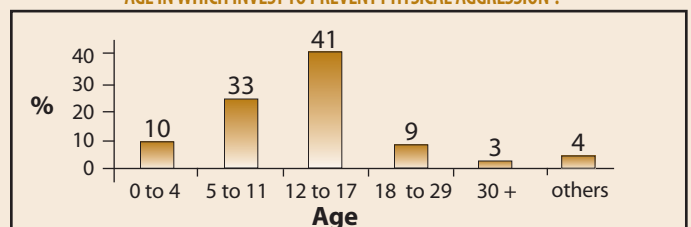


figure 2

AGE IN WHICH INVEST TO PREVENT PHYSICAL AGGRESSION ? *



* Poll conducted by Léger-Marketing, perception of a representative sample of the Canadian population