Aggression is one of society's most pressing issues. From fights in the schoolyard to senseless shootings of innocent bystanders, hardly a community today can say it has not been affected by violent acts. Yet, contrary to what many Canadians think, researchers are discovering that the keys to understanding aggression - and thus providing appropriate treatment and intervention - are to be found in the prenatal and early childhood years.

Indeed, research has established some salient correlations between chronic physical aggression and numerous prenatal and perinatal conditions. However, the impact of these different complications is variable. For example, the link between prenatal alcohol exposure and aggression is much stronger than the link between poor maternal nutrition and aggression. Researchers also suggest that play aggressive behaviour when they are first learning to get along with others. This happens around the ages of 2 to 3.” Fortunately, these negative behaviours tend to wane as children mature. "Rates of aggression decrease sharply during the preschool years as children develop their verbal, emotional, and social skills," comments Bierman.

Researchers estimate that a small group of children (5% to 10%) will continue to show aggressive patterns of behaviour throughout childhood and adolescence. Unfortunately, no definitive line has been established to distinguish normal aggression from problematic behaviours. "Preschoolers who have not successfully developed age-appropriate strategies for regulating aggressive behaviour are at high risk for embarking on a trajectory to chronic antisocial and aggressive behaviour."

While some people worry about the risks of pathologizing normal toddler behaviour, Dale Hay, Professor at Cardiff University’s School of Psychiatry, stresses that "extensive use of aggression is not normal, even in the earliest years of life."

Hay points out that toddlers are more inclined to engage in prosocial behaviours such as sharing, helping, and empathizing. "The impulse to relate positively to others is there," says Hay, and children who have problems engaging in these prosocial behaviours appear to be at higher risk for increased levels of aggression. Hay cites findings from the South London Development Study, which measured prosocial skills in children at age 4 and again at age 11. The study concluded that a child’s ability to cooperate with his or her mother on a specific task (used as a measure of prosocial skills) was a
unique predictive factor for aggressive behaviour.

Prosocial vs. Aggressive Tendencies
The emergence of both prosocial and aggressive tendencies does not occur in a vacuum: children are born into and develop within particular families, neighbourhoods, schools, and peer groups. Rolf Loeber, Director of the Pittsburgh Youth Study, notes that a variety of factors increase children’s risk of developing aggressive behaviour later in life, including low socio-economic levels, mistreatment or abuse, peer drug use, poor school performance, and living in dangerous neighbourhoods. The greater the number of risk factors and risk domains, the greater the chance a child will become aggressive, according to Loeber.

Thus, when risk factors accumulate or “stack up” over a period of time, an individual may become increasingly aggressive, according to John Lochman, Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Alabama. Given the problem of developmental stacking, Lochman commented that the immense costs of containment and repair associated with troubled development. With early intervention, we have the hope of setting these troubled children on a positive pathway.” However, many questions remain about the most effective and efficient means of intervening.

Prevention Programs

Prevention programs may focus on the child, parents, the parent-child dyad, teachers, or some combination thereof. Unfortunately, very few programs have been validated through randomized control studies. There are also significant gaps in knowledge concerning the effectiveness of programs for various risk groups (high-, medium-, or low-risk aggressors), the persistence of their effects over time (e.g., 6 months, one year, or longer), the timeframe needed (e.g., once a week for 12 weeks) as well as the most effective target groups (children, parents, and/or teachers).

While some programs focus on the child alone, researchers suggest that successful aggression reduction interventions also target parents. Kenneth A. Dodge, Professor at Duke University, holds that “Programs that teach parents to implement consistent, non-violent strategies in managing child misbehaviour have the most positive effects on reducing child aggression.” Others suggest that while parents play a key role, additional work with children and their schoolteachers may be needed. In discussing The Incredible Years program, Carolyn Webster-Stratton, Professor at the University of Washington, and Nazli Baydar, Research Associate Professor, point out that it is one of the few programs to have been evaluated using randomized control trials conducted both by the developer and independent researchers. For children with pervasive problems, a complementary child or teacher component is also recommended. Research has shown that The Incredible Years' teacher training also improved children's behaviour in the classroom and augmented the overall impact of parent training.

The development of prosocial skills in children must be a core element in any program, according to Karen Bierman, Professor at the Pennsylvania State University. "To inhibit their aggressive impulses, children need to develop competent, culturally sensitive and community based. Patricia Bégin, then Director of Research and Evaluation at Canada's National Crime Prevention Centre, says that in these programs and services, "the emphasis is on knowledge, information, effective practices and accountability." Bégin

"The greater the number of risk factors and risk domains, the greater the chance a child will become aggressive." - Rolf Loeber

"Programs that teach parents to implement consistent, non-violent strategies in managing child misbehaviour have the most positive effects on reducing child aggression." - Kenneth A. Dodge

"To inhibit their aggressive impulses, children need to develop competence in key areas of communications skills, emotional understanding, and self-regulation," she says. “Prevention programs that include a comprehensive focus on promoting child competencies in cognitive and social-emotional skills are more likely to be successful than those that focus narrowly on the suppression of aggressive behaviours.”

In her research work, Bierman argues for early intervention to help aggression-prone children. "Developmental research suggests that efforts to prevent aggression and related developmental problems should begin in early childhood, when learning to control aggression is a normative developmental task, rather than waiting until school age, when the problems manifest themselves at clinically significant rates."

How to Reduce Aggression

Canada has taken some significant steps to ensure that necessary intervention services are made available at the appropriate stages during childhood to reduce aggression. Under Canada’s Early Childhood Development Agreement, provinces and territories receive funds for programs that cover a continuum of early interventions: promoting health in pregnancy, birthing and infant care; expanding family and parenting support systems; strengthening early childhood development, learning and care; and improving community support networks. Programs and services are targeted, culturally sensitive and community based. Patricia Bégin, then Director of Research and Evaluation at Canada’s National Crime Prevention Centre, says that in these programs and services, “the emphasis is on knowledge, information, effective practices and accountability.” Bégin

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EARLY CHILDHOOD AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION

"Early childhood is important. It's been said over and over. Everyone has been saying it but for some reason or other, we forget it." - Richard E. Tremblay

also stresses that Canada’s National Crime Prevention Strategy (a policy and set of programs to reduce crime) goes beyond simply policing communities and addresses the root causes of violence. "It is a long-term, proactive approach. The crime prevention benefits will accumulate over time through a social developmental approach," she says.

Dan Offord, Director of the Canadian Centre for Studies of Children at Risk, wants to take current policies aimed at reducing aggression to the next level. "If you are going to do a national program, you must have clear objectives," says Offord. While communities want and need choice, Offord emphasizes the importance of establishing the effectiveness of programs. "We need evidence that they work," he says, but he also warns against the danger of "watering-down" programs, whereby communities selectively implement parts of programs and therefore potentially reduce their impact and efficacy. Researchers such as Celene E. Domitrovich and Mark Greenberg, Professors at Pennsylvania State University, agree, suggesting that the future of prevention programs resides in generation, replication, and implementation.

The Need for Better Services

Most researchers agree that there is a pressing need to evaluate the effectiveness of programs, but very little money has been allocated to program evaluation. Offord is calling for increased collaboration between academic centres and the community organizations that implement aggression prevention programs. He says groups should be keeping detailed participant records, looking at proximal and distal outcomes, and conducting either a randomized control study or (at a minimum) a two-community comparison.

There is also a clear need for expanded knowledge, more services, and better policy-making for earlier intervention. Richard E. Tremblay is emphatic when he talks about the benefits of early intervention. "Early childhood is important. It’s been said over and over. Everyone has been saying it but for some reason or other, we forget it." He says that far too many Canadians are under the impression that aggression and violence are problems to be addressed in late childhood and adolescence. But nothing could be further from the truth. According to Tremblay, if Canada wants to ensure the well-being of future generations, "early intervention is one of the best investments that can be made."