



Neighborhood violence

A teen-ager is shot not far from your home, and you hear more often of violent crimes in or near your own neighborhood. You're worried about your family's safety and about how all of this will affect your children.

You have good reason to be worried.

Violence – whether experienced in person or witnessed – can have a profound effect on children. Not only can they be hurt or killed, but they also can be affected emotionally in a way that will influence their entire lives if they don't get counseling.

Effects of widespread violence

Living with violence can result in the normalization of violence, desensitization, post-traumatic stress disorder and destructive thinking and behavior. Children who witness violence show signs of depression and distress.

With widespread incidents of violence, children – and adults – may come to accept violence as “normal.” They may actually expect violence instead of working to prevent or stop it. Further, they may become desensitized. That is, violence may not bother them or alarm them, so they may not help someone affected by it.

If they're affected by post-traumatic stress disorder, they may suffer nightmares, panic attacks, unexplained rage and aggression against others, with numbness and indifference toward the suffering of others. Children may show signs of depression and distress. They may believe and act as if they have no control over what happens to them and may not take steps to prevent violence against themselves. People exposed to violence may suffer from destructive thinking and behavior. They may become fatalistic, taking risks with their own well-being and the well-being of others. They may behave as if they have no future, making no plans.

While teens are more often victims and perpetrators than any other age group, the effects of violence begin much earlier in a child's life. If a child has been exposed to violence early in life, counseling and a physically and emotionally safer environment are the best hopes of helping him or her survive emotionally. Otherwise, the effects of violence accumulate, often showing up most obviously in adolescence.

Causes of violence in the neighborhood

Causes of neighborhood violence are many. Experts say causes may include drug abuse, violence in individual homes, poverty, unemployment, extreme neglect, availability of handguns, and a general acceptance of violence in society. In the past, only the “bad guys” were violent. Now, even “good kids” may carry guns for protection – and they may use them.

Who's violent?

Young males – in their teens to their early 30s – are most likely to commit violent acts, especially those in neighborhoods of high unemployment and other social problems. Most homicides occur between people who have some sort of relationship, and more than half follow an argument. In about one in five homicides, the victim and assailant are members of the same family.

Violent children usually come from violent families. In these cases, children learn that violence is the way to solve problems of conflict and frustration. In addition, research shows that children and adolescents who watch aggressive acts on television increase their own aggressive behavior – especially those who are most inclined to aggression anyway.

What to do about neighborhood violence

With so many causes and so many instances of violence, many people believe the situation is hopeless and do nothing. However, adults can take steps to protect their own families – and they can also join with others to stop the violence in their own communities.

To protect your family ...

To protect your family, encourage your children to express their feelings without using physical or emotional violence. Don't let them hit people or call people names. Instead help them use words, coloring, drawing, sports or music to express frustration or other emotions.

Set an example in handling frustration and conflict. Honestly look at how you express your emotions. Find appropriate ways to do so.

Screen the TV programs and music your family watches and hears. Children – especially younger children – can be affected easily by aggression on television. Don't let youngsters watch explicit violence or hear explicit language.

If you watch such programs or listen to such music with your older children, talk about it with them – without lecturing.

To protect your neighborhood ...

- If people join together, they can make a difference in the neighborhood. Here are a few ways to get started.
- Talk to your neighbors. See if anyone else is worried and ask them to help you. You and your neighbors may agree to sit on your porches before and after school. Adult presence alone can keep teens from misbehaving.
- Report any violence you see to police.
- Help your neighbors and ask them to help you with the supervision of children in the neighborhood. A well supervised street is a safer street.
- Go to a town or school board meeting. At the public comment portion, tell the officials that you're concerned about violence in your neighborhood and ask them how you can help.
- Stop by the closest police station and tell them of your concerns and ask for advice.

Where to get help... Crisis Services at (810) 257-3740 or toll free at (877) 346-3648, where a counselor is always available. TTY users call (810) 232-6310. © www.genhs.org

