Facts for Teens: Aggression

Introduction

If you have ever been viciously teased, threatened, or bullied by another teen, you are well aware of how devastating such aggressive behavior can be. Aggressive behavior among teens can take many different forms:

- **Physical aggression** includes such behaviors as pushing, shoving, hitting, slapping, biting, kicking, hair-pulling, stabbing, shooting, and rape.
- **Verbal aggression** includes threatening and intimidating others and engaging in malicious teasing, taunting, and name-calling.
- **Indirect aggression** includes such behaviors as gossiping, spreading cruel rumors, and encouraging others to reject or exclude someone.

Whenever one person intentionally tries to harm another, it is an act of aggression.

Aggressive behavior is a serious problem among teens.

- Almost one in five students in grades 6 to 10 say they have bullied others in the past year.\(^1\)
- More than one in three high school students say they have been in a physical fight in the past year.\(^2\)
- Between 30 and 40 percent of male teens and 16 to 32 percent of female teens say they have committed a serious violent offense (e.g., aggravated assault, robbery, gang fights, or rape) by the age of 17.\(^3\)
- Over 1,700 youth under the age of 18 were arrested for homicide in this country in 1999.\(^4\)

While aggressive behavior is most common during the infant and toddler years, the most dangerous aggression occurs during the late teen years and in early adulthood.\(^5\)

Aggressive behavior is common in very small children When toddlers are angry or frustrated, they often will push, shove, bite, and hit other children. As they move into their preschool years, they tend to turn to verbal aggression—yelling at other children and having temper tantrums.\(^6\)

From early on, boys are much more likely than girls to engage in physical and verbal aggression against others. In contrast, girls tend to use indirect means of aggression, including withdrawing their friendship, spreading rumors and gossip about another girl, and encouraging others to ignore or reject someone.\(^7\)
Most children become less aggressive as they mature and develop more effective self-control and language and interpersonal skills. A few continue to be highly aggressive as they move into their elementary school years, getting into fights and bullying other children. These children are much more likely than other children to become involved in serious violence during their teenage years and to continue that violence into adulthood.

It is important to realize, however, that most aggressive children do not go on to engage in serious violence as teens and adults. And teens with no history of aggression as children can become aggressive and violent during their teenage years, often as they begin to spend time with other teens who are involved in antisocial activities.

Involvement in serious violence (e.g., aggravated assault, robbery, gang fights, and rape), rare before the age of 12, becomes much more common during the teenage years. For boys, serious violence and aggression appear to peak during the late teen years or in early adulthood and then decrease with age. Serious aggression peaks earlier in teenage girls. Teens who are aggressive are often engaged in a number of other behaviors that put them at risk, including substance abuse, early and risky sexual activity, and delinquency.

Why are some children and teens more aggressive than others?

People often seem to want a simple answer to the question of why some children and teens are more aggressive than others. Some want to blame the parents; others point to the impact of television violence or video games. In fact, the answer is much more complicated.

Researchers have found a number of different "risk factors" that increase the likelihood that a child or teen will engage in aggressive behavior. These include:

1. **Individual characteristics**
   A number of individual characteristics have been shown to increase a child's risk for aggressive behavior. These include a difficult temperament as an infant, low intelligence, hyperactivity, impulsivity, and attention problems. Additionally, aggressive children frequently have poor social problem-solving skills: they often misinterpret other children's behavior as hostile, and they are often unable to find non-aggressive solutions to conflicts.

2. **Home environment**
   Some characteristics of the home environment can increase the risk that a child will eventually become involved in aggressive behavior. Children and teens who come from homes where parents are coercive or manipulative with their children, provide little emotional support, do not monitor their activities, or have little involvement in their lives are at greater risk for engaging in aggressive behavior. Additionally, the use of harsh punishments or inconsistent discipline has been shown to be related to aggressive behavior in children.

3. **Relationships with peers**
   Because of their aggressive behavior and lack of social skills, highly aggressive children are
often rejected by their peers. This early rejection is predictive of later aggressive and violent behavior. However, by the teen years, most aggressive youth are not friendless, but have developed friendships with other teens with antisocial attitudes and behavior. Friendships with antisocial peers can be an important predictor of aggressive behavior and violence in the teenage years.

4. **School failure**
   Early behavior problems often lead to poor school achievement and school failure, which are important risk factors for delinquency and involvement with antisocial peer groups in the teenage years.

5. **Exposure to media violence**
   There is now solid evidence to suggest a relationship between aggressive behavior and exposure to violent television and movies. Researchers have found that children are more physically and verbally aggressive immediately after watching violent television and movies. It is also clear that aggressive children and teens watch more violent television than their less aggressive peers. A few studies have found that exposure to television and movie violence in childhood is related to increased aggression years later, but further research is needed in this area.

   The case is less strong for the link between youth violence and music videos and video games, because only a small amount of research has been conducted. There is some indication that violent music videos can increase aggressive thinking, but their impact on actual physical aggression has not been established. Violent video games do appear to have an effect on levels of physical aggression, but that effect is fairly small.

6. **Community and societal factors**
   Poverty, joblessness, discrimination, and societal acceptance of aggression all increase the risk of aggressive behavior. Neighborhood factors that increase the likelihood that children and teens will become aggressive and involved in other problem behaviors include exposure to violence, the availability of drugs, alcohol and firearms, extreme poverty, neighborhood disintegration (e.g., vacant lots, graffiti, crime, drug dealing, and boarded-up houses), and resident views that are tolerant of misbehavior and violence.

   Typically, the more risk factors present in a child's life, the higher the likelihood that a child or teen will tend to act aggressively. Different risk factors take on a greater or lesser importance at different stages of a child's life. While family factors appear to play an important role in the development of aggression in young children, the role of friends and peers becomes much more crucial during the teen years.

   Although many children are exposed to one or more of these risk factors, only a small number of children become highly aggressive. Researchers have proposed a number of protective factors, such as a commitment to school and a positive relationship with a supportive adult, may shield
children and teens from developing aggressive behavior, even in the presence of a number of risk factors.\textsuperscript{27}

**Interventions that seek to increase protective factors and reduce risk factors can significantly reduce aggressive behavior in children and teens.** See [Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/youthviolence/default.htm) and [Best Practices of Youth Violence Prevention: A Sourcebook for Community Action](http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/bestpractices.htm) to learn about interventions that have been shown to be effective in preventing or reducing aggressive behavior in children and teens.

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**What You Can Do**

**Make a commitment not to contribute to aggression and violence in any way.** Do not bully, tease, or spread negative gossip about others. Respect others and value differences.

**Get involved in your school and community.** Volunteer with a community group, play sports, write a play or poem, play a musical instrument, or join a club or after-school program.

**Talk with an adult you trust.** Do you often feel sad, depressed, angry, fearful, or anxious? Are you having trouble paying attention in school? Are you getting into major arguments and disagreements at school, at home, or with friends? You can get help to feel better. Talk with a parent, counselor, or another adult you trust.

**Avoid alcohol and drugs.** Stay away from alcohol and drugs as well as people who use them. There is a strong link between the use of alcohol and drugs and aggression.

**Learn about ways to resolve arguments and conflicts without resorting to aggression, and encourage your friends to do the same.** Many schools, churches, and after-school programs offer training in conflict resolution skills.

**Do not carry a gun or other weapons.** Carrying a gun is illegal and is not likely to make you safer. Guns often escalate conflicts and increase the chances that you will be seriously injured. If someone is threatening you and you feel that you are in serious danger, do not take matters into your own hands. Find an adult you can trust and discuss your fears, or contact school administrators or the police. Take precautions for your safety, such as avoiding being alone and staying with a group of friends if possible.

**If you know someone is planning to harm someone else, speak with a trusted adult.** Most of us have learned from an early age that it is wrong to tattle, but in some instances it is the most courageous thing you can do. Tell a trusted adult, such as a teacher, guidance counselor, principal, or parent. If you are afraid and believe that telling will put you in danger or lead to retaliation, find a way to anonymously contact the authorities.

**Take the initiative to reduce aggressive behavior in your school or community.** Join an existing group that is promoting non-violence in your school or community, or launch your own effort. Several of the online resources listed at the end of this document can help you get started. For example, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's [National Youth Network Website](http://www.usdoj.gov/kidspage/getinvolved) can connect you with national organizations and provide
you with information and resources to take action in your community. Learn about effective programs and what other teens are doing around the nation. Find out how to plan and start a program, run a meeting, develop publications, and work with the news media.

Helpful Links

America's Teens
www.afterschool.gov/kidsnteens2.html
General Services Administration
This site provides a gateway to federal and other publicly supported Web sites for teens. It includes links to information about teen safety and health issues, substance abuse, and community service/volunteering opportunities for teens.

Division of Adolescent and School Health
www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dash/index.htm
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
This site includes information about federal efforts to halt school violence and findings from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, a national survey of high school students. The survey asks teens about behaviors that put their health at risk, including physical fighting, weapon-carrying, dating violence, school violence, and suicidal thoughts and attempts.

Division of Violence Prevention
www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/dvp.htm
National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
This Web site includes fact sheets and publications on youth violence and suicide, with links to other valuable resources. It also discusses myths about youth violence, shares kids' stories, lists things teens can do to avoid violence, and provides a reading list for teens.

Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 2001
www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/iscs01.htm
U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice
A joint effort by the Bureau of Justice Statistics and National Center for Education Statistics, this report provides the most current detailed statistical information about crime in schools.

Juvenile Justice Facts & Figures
http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/facts/facts.html
Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention
This site links you to the latest facts and figures on juvenile justice, delinquency prevention, and youth violence and victimization.

The National Youth Network
www.usdoj.gov/kidspage/getinvolved
U.S. Department of Justice
The U.S. Department of Justice believes teens can be part of the solution, involve themselves in the process of sharing information with other teenagers across the country, and take responsibility for improving their neighborhoods. The National Youth Network provides young people with
information and resources and provides a unique opportunity for teens to share perspectives with other teens on issues related to delinquency and violence prevention.

**A Teenager’s Guide to... Fitting in, Getting involved, Finding yourself**
www.ncfy.com/expreng.pdf
Family and Youth Services Bureau, Department of Health and Human Services
When times get tough, it's important for teens to know there are people they can count on. The ideas in this booklet can help teens learn to deal with tough times and enjoy the good times by finding the people and places that are right for them.

**Virtual Library Reading Room**
http://ericcass.uncg.edu/virtuallib/newlibhome.html
ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services, Department of Education
This site connects offers virtual libraries of articles containing key youth violence topics. Libraries include:

- **School Violence Virtual Library**
  http://ericcass.uncg.edu/virtuallib/violence/violencebook.html

- **Conflict Resolution Virtual Library**
  http://ericcass.uncg.edu/virtuallib/conflict/conflictbook.html

- **Bullying in Schools Virtual Library**
  http://ericcass.uncg.edu/virtuallib/bullying/bullyingbook.html

- **Youth Gangs Virtual Library**
  http://ericcass.uncg.edu/virtuallib/gangs/gangsbook.html

**Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General**
www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/youthviolence/default.htm
Department of Health and Human Services
This 2001 report summarizes the newest research on youth violence and discusses the extent of the problem, its causes, and what we know about effective ways to prevent youth violence.

**References**


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