

Violence and what to do about it

Extract from The WAVE Report, 2005



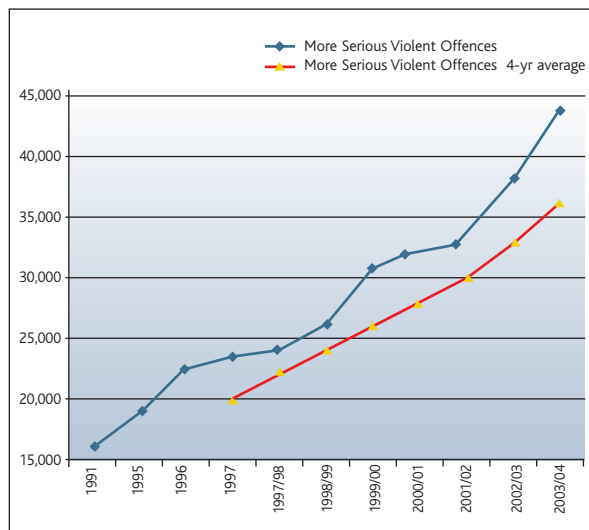
Authors: George Hosking
Ita Walsh

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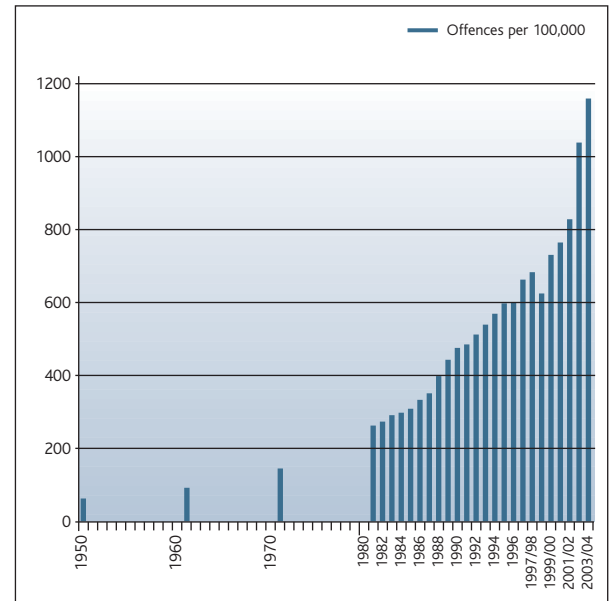
- Serious violence in England & Wales is rising alarmingly, to levels far above those of the 1950s
- This trend can be reversed by effective early interventions, focusing on the period from pregnancy to age 3
- Programmes which foster attunement in parents and empathy in young children are the key to success
- Large-scale *investment* in pilot studies of proven interventions is needed
- Effective interventions actually generate net *savings* in public money

Between 1991 and 2004 Serious Violence in England & Wales rose nearly threefold:

More Serious Violent Offences, England & Wales 1991-2003



This reflects a longer term pattern in which all recorded violence in England & Wales has risen 25-fold* since 1951:



*The figures for total violence may be slightly affected by changes in reporting of minor forms of violence, though the graph above has been adjusted to reflect the main (1998/99) change in reporting methodology.

Although violence is increasing alarmingly in our society, it is neither universal nor inevitable, but a behaviour that is caused and can be prevented. Many societies have existed without discernible inter-personal violence.

Violence is not inevitable. In a cross-cultural study of 90 different societies around the world anthropologist David Levinson found 16 communities where inter-personal violence was absent or rare. These societies came from all regions of the world (the Lapps were the only Europeans on his list).

Factors that predicted low or no family violence included monogamous marriage, economic equality between the sexes, equal access to divorce by men and women, availability of alternative caretakers for children, frequent and regular intervention by neighbours and kin in domestic disputes, and norms that encourage the non-violent settlement of disputes outside the home. Cultural norms recognised the dignity of every human being. These societies were not free of the emotions which elsewhere lead to violence – they were just dealt with in a non-violent manner. There are also examples of religious communities which have co-existed without violence.



A violent act results from an interaction between two components: an individual's propensity (personal factors) and external triggers (social factors). Social factors alone, however undesirable, lead to violence only when the internal propensity is also present. In the absence of a weapon, a trigger is harmless.

Definition of propensity to violence: the tendency to respond to a provoking trigger with violence. Using the analogy of an exploding bomb for violence, we can distinguish between the internal propensity (the bomb) and the external trigger (the fuse to explode it). Both propensity and trigger are needed for a violent act.

While the propensity to violence is very largely established in early childhood, there are exceptions. Traumatic experiences later in life, from natural disasters to battle combat, also lead to increases in violent behaviour.

The propensity to violence develops primarily from wrong treatment before age 3.

Male aggressive behaviour is highly stable as early as age 2. This is not because of genetic factors, which are weak and only activated by adverse early life experience, but due to the interplay between the development process of the infant brain and how the infant is treated (see following Section). The earlier aggression is established, the worse the long-term outcome tends to be.

Compelling evidence of the early age at which the roots of violence are firmly planted comes from the New Zealand Dunedin Study, in which nurses identified an "at risk" group of 3-year-olds on the basis of 90 minutes' observation. They were tracked and compared with other children of their age.

When these children were 21, 47% of males in the "at risk" group abused their partners (vs. 9.5% of others); two and a half times as many had two or more criminal convictions. 55% of "at risk" offences were violent (vs. 18% for others). "At risk" offences were much more severe, such as robbery, rape and homicide. The nurses were able to predict future criminals 18 years in advance.

The structure of the developing infant brain is a crucial factor in the creation (or not) of violent tendencies because early patterns are established not only psychologically but at the physiological level of brain formation.

Intelligence is the key survival tool for humans. This intelligence, however, implies a large brain, and a large brain needs a large skull. To allow this skull to pass through the mother's hips, human infants are born premature by the standards of other species. Part of the package of evolving into such intelligent beings includes the need to complete the development of much of the brain *after* birth, crucially before the age of 3.

At birth a baby's brain has 50 trillion synapses (connections). By age 3, the number of synapses has increased twenty-fold to 1,000 trillion. This is too large a number to be specified by genes alone; the new synapses are formed by experience, and associations in early life define which of these live or die. Synapses become "hard-wired", or protected, by repeated use, making early learned behaviour resistant to change. Unused synapses wither away in a process called pruning.

The experiences that serve to develop, hard-wire or prune different combinations of the trillions of synapses mean each baby's brain develops differently. Extreme examples can be seen in children such as the neglected Romanian orphans, who lacked activity in large areas of their brains, and native American Indians who develop acute hearing and balance skills.

Infant trauma

A downside of the brain's great plasticity is that it is acutely vulnerable to trauma. If the early experience is fear and stress, especially if these are overwhelming and repeated, then stress hormones such as cortisol wash over the tender brain like acid. The toxic effect means the brains of abused children are significantly smaller than those of non-abused – 20-30% smaller in the part governing emotions. Knowing this, it is horrifying to register that the peak age for children to suffer abuse is in the first year of their life.

Early emotional experience

Because the infant's brain requires time to mature, the child regulates its inner world primarily through aligning its state of mind with that of the caregiver, establishing a conduit of empathic attunement like an emotional umbilical chord, particularly through eye gaze. The nature of the child's first relationship, normally the one with the mother, is crucial, as it acts as a template that permanently moulds the individual's capacity to enter into all later emotional relationships.

Studies have demonstrated how children look to the facial expressions and other nonverbal aspects of the parent's emotional signals to determine how to feel and respond in an ambiguous situation.

Empathy is the single greatest inhibitor of the development of propensity to violence. Empathy fails to develop when parents or prime carers fail to attune with their infants. Absence of such parental attunement combined with harsh discipline is a recipe for violent, antisocial offspring.

Empathy: where the observed experiences of others come to affect our own thoughts and feelings in a caring fashion. Empathy entails the ability to step outside oneself emotionally and suppress temporarily one's own perspective on events to take on the perspective of another.

Attunement: where parent and child are emotionally functioning in tune with each other and the child learns from the parent that its emotional needs for love, acceptance and security are met and reciprocated.

Attunement: The core of emotional understanding

As an orchestra sounds better when the instruments are in tune, so it is with human relating. Psychiatrist Daniel Stern has videotaped, and analysed minutely, hours of interactions between mothers and babies. He observed the basic lessons of emotional understanding being created – and that the most critical are those letting babies know their emotions are met with empathy, accepted and reciprocated. In healthy relationships these micro-interactions occur about once a minute. From repeated attunements babies develop a sense that other people can and will share their feelings.

Empathy has its roots in this feeling of identification with the other. The sense of oneness is accompanied by a positive evaluation of the other. These nourishing emotions develop only in the context of a warm, loving infant-caregiver interaction, and not in conditions of parental hostility or rejection.

When a parent fails to show empathy with a particular emotion, the child can drop this from its repertoire. Infants also "catch" emotions from their parents. 3-month old babies of depressed mothers mirror their mothers' moods, displaying abnormally high feelings of anger and sadness, and far less curiosity and interest.

Parents who attune with their infants and sensitively read and respond to their signals are less likely to abuse or neglect, leading to fewer non-accidental injuries. Human babies thrive from parenting which is warm and responsive to their rhythms, preferences and moods, in which the parents use rocking, holding, touching, feeding and gazing to create "attunement" with the baby, reinforcing positive emotional responses and developing empathy in the child.

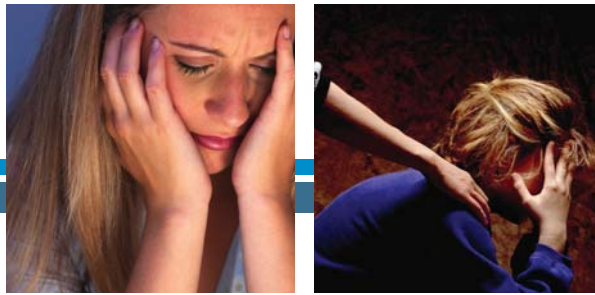
Lack of attunement – beginning on the road to violence

Sadly, for many parents attunement either does not come "naturally", or is disrupted by post-natal depression or domestic violence. If the child does not experience attunement, its development is retarded, and it may lack empathy altogether. Daily neglect conditions a baby to expect isolation – and a model for depression. Studies show maternal depression is a factor in the pathway to behaviour problems for many children.

Studies have found a "violence" pathway from low maternal responsiveness at 10-12 months through aggression, non-compliance and temper tantrums at 18 months; non-compliance, attention getting and hitting at 2 years; problems with other children at 3 years; coercive behaviour at age 4; and fighting and stealing at 6.

Empathy: a key to understanding violence

Even in their first year, children already show signs of whether their reaction to the suffering of another is empathy, indifference or hostility. These reactions are shaped by parental reactions to suffering. Empathy can be well developed by the time they are toddlers.



Not all children have this empathy. Psychologist Alan Sroufe tells of watching school children at play. One little girl complained of having a sore stomach. Most children expressed sympathy, but the response of one boy was to punch her hard in the stomach.

Lack of empathy – further on the road to violence

In James Gilligan's 10 years as director of mental health in the Massachusetts Prison Service he succeeded in reducing homicidal violence in the state's prisons almost to zero. In his book *Violence: Our Deadly Epidemic and its Causes*, he outlines his experience that there are certain essential preconditions for violence to take place. One is *"that the person lacks the emotional capacities or the feelings that normally inhibit the violent impulses..."*

He cites numerous examples of the absence of empathy – sometimes absence of any feeling at all – in violent offenders. One typical murderer, of a 14-year old girl, described his feelings immediately before the act thus: "I had no feelings. I just felt empty – no love, hate, sadness, remorse". Gilligan observes: *"This absence of feelings is described consistently by murderers throughout the world and throughout history ...the more violent the criminal, the more notable the lack of feelings...Children who fail to receive sufficient love from others fail to build reserves of self-love...Without feelings of love, the self feels numb, empty, and dead."*

Professor Donald Dutton, University of British Columbia, has worked with over 400 wife-batterers. In his book *The Abusive Personality* he describes how they too are characterised by lack of empathy and feeling.

Lack of empathy also has an impact on choice of parental discipline method. A plethora of studies indicate that harsh or explosive discipline leads to violence and criminality in children and that discipline styles run in families over many generations as people tend to copy the parenting styles of their own parents.

Perhaps 30% of children who suffer abuse or neglect go on to abuse or neglect their own children. Cambridge Professor of Psychological Criminology David Farrington, following a study of South London children between ages 8 and 32, stated it thus:

"Anti-social children grow up to become anti-social adults who go on to raise anti-social children".

What needs to be grasped here is that these parents are not wicked. They are simply "doing what comes naturally" by following the pathways laid down in their own early learning.

Violence is triggered in high-propensity people by social factors. Since these factors reflect long-term cultural trends that are difficult to reverse, investment in reducing the number of people with propensity to violence is a strategic imperative.

Society currently allows massive levels of child abuse and neglect, without effective intervention. This results in turning out large numbers of unexploded bombs, year after year (nursery teachers have been reporting this for the past decade) and it is to the impact of changing social factors on these unexploded bombs that we must look to understand the huge rise in violence since 1950.

Adolescents carry out most violence, and a large part of the huge rise in recent decades relates to a change in triggering factors affecting this group. The most likely contributory causes include:

1. Less social control of adolescents due to a longer period between adolescent males achieving puberty and beginning work.
2. A dramatic rise in teenage alcohol consumption.
3. Growth of television viewing, modelling violent behaviour.
4. Huge expansion in the territory young males can cover, far beyond areas where they are known, accompanied by much reduced supervision of their leisure behaviour.
5. A reduction in stable marital relationships to provide consistent parenting.
6. Growing drug consumption.

Without massive political will and commitment, it is unlikely we will successfully prevent alcohol consumption by under-18s, remove violence from television, send youngsters to work as soon as they finish their education, restrict their movements to areas where they are known, or return parental supervision to levels more typical of the 1930s.

Yet many people get drunk, watch violent television, eat fast food, own a car, and socialise in areas where they are not known, but do not turn to violence. In the absence of a bomb, fuses are not dangerous.

While WAVE's recommended long-term strategy gives priority to stopping the creation of the bombs rather than reducing the number of fuses, the best way forward would be to tackle the issue from both sides.

Violence costs the UK more than £20 billion per annum. A tiny fraction of this is spent on prevention, and most of that on the least effective age groups (e.g. 5-15). Early (0-3) intervention is fruitful and cost-effective. Negative cycles can be transformed and children given the opportunity to grow into contributing, personally fulfilled adults (and future parents).

In a House of Lords debate on 31 January 2001 the Home Office Minister, Lord Bassam, gave the cost of violent crime in the UK as £21 billion per annum. A report by the Institute of Psychiatry contrasted a £600 per child cost of parent training programmes with an estimated £70,000 per head direct cost to the public of children with severe conduct disorder. The £70,000 does not include the cost impact of crimes. The true "all-in" cost could be 7 times higher. How much is government spending on prevention? At a 1999 Conference on Children and Violence a Cabinet Office spokesman quoted the ratio of government spending on prevention of crime, compared with expenditure on its consequences, as being in the ratio 1 : 300. This country will have truly turned the corner in reducing violence when substantial investment in effective early interventions has wrought a significant change in that ratio.

Early intervention is cost-effective and saves resources for society

There is compelling research evidence that early intervention works. The financial benefits of early intervention far outweigh the costs. The earlier the intervention takes place, the more effective (and cost-effective) it is. A shift to higher priority for very early (pregnancy to 3 years) intervention would save money from the public purse.

MacLeod and Nelson (2000) studied 56 separate programmes designed to promote family wellness and prevent abuse. They distinguish between proactive and reactive approaches to abuse.

Proactive programmes begin pre-natally, at birth or in infancy. They include home visiting and social support. They take place before abuse occurs.

Reactive programmes tend to begin at school age and focus on teaching parenting strategies and methods. They take place after problems have developed with children.

Their conclusions were:

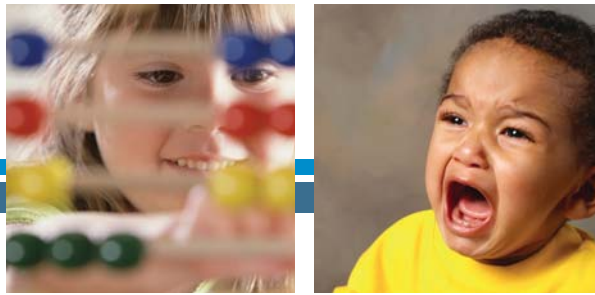
- Most interventions to promote family wellness, and prevent child maltreatment, are successful.
- The earlier the intervention the better.
- The benefits of Proactive interventions are sustained and even grow in effect over time.
- Reactive interventions tend to fade in effect, and relapse is a common problem.

The single most effective way to stop producing people with the propensity to violence is to ensure infants are reared in an environment that fosters their development of empathy. The surest way to achieve this is by supporting parents in developing attunement with their infants.

The core of WAVE's message

No child should leave school without receiving fundamental training in how to parent in a non-violent manner and, crucially, how to "attune" with babies and ensure they develop empathy.

Before the birth of the first child is an ideal time to provide support, so that new enriching habits can be established before bad habits have begun and become embedded. WAVE recommends that parents-to-be should receive focused support on how to attune through ante-natal classes during the first pregnancy.



In addition, it is crucial that those families with the greatest risk of abuse receive extra support, both during pregnancy and after birth, and that their children's progress be monitored until the age of 3.

WAVE's search for global best practice in prevention of violence identified many effective early interventions. These include programmes which develop attunement and empathy in (i) tomorrow's parents while they are still in school, (ii) current parents and (iii) parents-to-be

WAVE reviewed over 400 interventions from around the world which might reduce violence, or its root causes. Many excellent programmes were identified. Four were of particular interest:

- Roots of Empathy (preparing parents-to-be while still children).
- PIPPIN (preparing parents-to-be during the first pregnancy).
- Nurse-Family Partnership (supporting first time parents from pregnancy onwards).
- The Circle of Security (a programme to increase sensitivity between parents and children).

Roots of Empathy is a proven Canadian parenting programme for school children aged 3 to 14. It teaches attunement; fosters development of empathy; reduces bullying, aggression and violence in school; and prepares students for responsible and responsive parenting.

PIPPIN is a British charity which supplements the physical focus of typical ante-natal classes by bringing in the emotional dimension of childbirth and parenting. Children whose parents attended PIPPIN classes were more likely to enjoy "secure attachment" to their parents, and were less likely to be disruptive and anti-social. Parents were less anxious, less vulnerable to depression, more confident, and had better relationships.

The Nurse Family Partnership is a US based home visiting programme which uses highly educated nurses who make 33 visits to "at risk" families, beginning early in pregnancy and continuing until the child is two. Key elements include support for emotional attunement and non-violent parenting. Visits last 75-90 minutes, with each nurse caring for 25 families. UK health visitors rarely able to afford more than 20-30 minutes per visit because case loads are as high as 240 families will recognise the difference.

Nurse-Family Partnership is the most rigorously tested programme of its kind. Among its striking successes have been reductions in child abuse and neglect by 50% in one study and reduced hospitalisations due to non-accidental injuries by 75% in another. In a 15-year follow-up study nurse-visited children had 50% lower arrests, 80% fewer convictions, significantly lower drug, alcohol and tobacco abuse, and less promiscuous sexual activity than the control group. Mothers had fewer subsequent pregnancies and greater employment. Economic evaluation of the programme shows a payback to the public purse 4 times its cost.

The Circle of Security is a 20-week, group-based, parent intervention designed to improve caregiving in high-risk families. Using edited videotapes of interactions with their children, caregivers are encouraged to increase sensitivity and responsiveness to their children's signals for closeness, comfort and emotional regulation.

Other Interventions

The WAVE Report 2005 identifies many other effective early interventions, some cheap and easy such as front-pack baby carriers and baby massage. There are also effective later interventions such as parent training (e.g. Triple P or The Incredible Years). The Dorset Healthy Alliance Project virtually eliminated truancy, and reduced theft and vandalism. Child protection referrals fell 76% at a time when they increased by a third across Dorset as a whole.

Our recommendations

Government needs to increase the share of resources for early interventions

The first steps to reduce violence will take commitment to expand significantly the proportion of society's resources spent on effective, early, preventative interventions.

Large-scale implementation of a series of pilot studies of approved early intervention programmes is recommended

This would be in a combination of three thrusts:

1. Encouragement of adoption of effective programmes, as defined in this report, by local communities under the umbrella of Sure Start, with adequate funding made available to support them;
2. Provision of specific government funds, under a new project "The Early Prevention Initiative", to local authorities and local Primary Care Trusts willing to run pilot studies of a list of approved and recommended early prevention programmes;
3. Specific pilot studies funded by the DfES (e.g. Roots of Empathy) or the Department of Health (e.g. Nurse-Family Partnership).

Provision of sufficient funds to conduct high-quality research evaluations of these pilot studies is also recommended.

Select one British town or city as a large-scale test area for simultaneous implementation of a full range of effective intervention strategies, to see if their combined effects might be cumulative

This idea was proposed by people at senior level in both Labour and Conservative parties and is commended by WAVE.

Debate is invited on the merits of a focused, national crime prevention agency to coordinate, fund and drive effective early prevention strategies

In recent years Government has been moving laudably closer to an early prevention strategy. Taking this forward, as a matter of priority, a structure capable of delivering on a strategy of early prevention needs to be put in place. Professors Farrington and Coid have identified that the current structure, with responsibility scattered across a range of service agencies, lacks effectiveness. This view is borne out by countless professionals on the ground. Farrington and Coid recommend: "Therefore, a national agency should be established with a primary mandate of fostering and funding the prevention of crime and antisocial behaviour."

There are such agencies in other countries but their terms of reference are inappropriate to tackling the early causes of violence. Terms of reference would therefore be the crucial factor; an agency set up to encourage effective early interventions and the investment of funds and training to make these succeed, could be a major step towards creating a long-term downward trend in violence in this country.

WAVE Trust is an international charity dedicated to advancing awareness of the root causes of violence and abuse, and the means to reduce them. Violence and abuse are preventable through implementing known, economically viable programmes.

WAVE is advised by a panel of leading international academics in anti-social behaviour, juvenile delinquency, child abuse, domestic violence, criminal violence and the economics of interventions.

This document summarises 9 years of research by WAVE. A more comprehensive presentation of WAVE's findings, including full research underpinning and references, can be found in: "The WAVE Report 2005: Violence and what to do about it" published by WAVE Trust.

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WAVE Trust, Cameron House, 61 Friends Road, Croydon, Surrey CR0 1ED England

Tel: 020 8688 3773 Fax: 020 8688 6135

e-mail: office@wavetrust.org Web site: www.wavetrust.org

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