

# On the Journey to Prison: The Role of Family and Schools in the Lives of Angry, Aggressive Children

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## I. The Family as a Training Ground for Aggressive, Antisocial Behavior

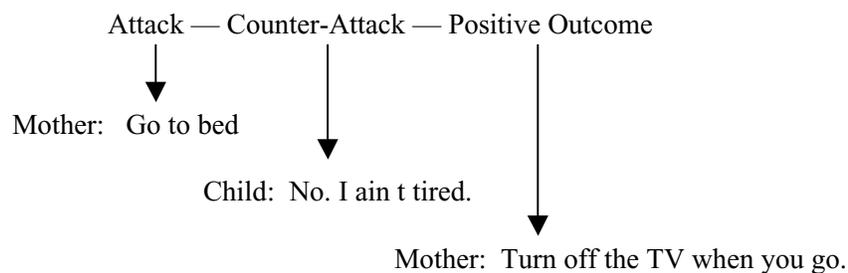
When parents are at their best, they can provide children with:

- ◆ Unconditional love and acceptance
- ◆ Safety from and skills to manage environmental threats
- ◆ Nurturing in a healthy lifestyle
- ◆ Introduction to religious or spiritual beliefs and practices
- ◆ Facilitation of cultural transference, including language, customs, rituals, and history
- ◆ Understanding and facilitation of developmental tasks
- ◆ Behavioral management and guidance
- ◆ Personal skills modeling — for example, anger control, conflict resolution, and empathy skills
- ◆ Academic encouragement and assistance

How do some parents unwittingly train their young children to start school with serious antisocial problem behavior?

*The Coercive Family Process:* Interaction between ineffective parental discipline and increasing child non-compliance

- ◆ *Coercive* refers to the pattern of interaction among individuals in the family: One person attempts to control the behavior of another through aversive means



- ◆ Children learn how to escape from parental compliance demands by counter-attacking with increasing intensity and severity, including the use of threats and physical assault
- ◆ As children's counter-attacks and non-compliance increase, parents become increasingly ineffective at managing behavior: The process becomes bi-directional
- ◆ Parents avoid angry confrontations with their children by giving in or avoiding the parental management responsibility entirely: Both parent and child behaviors are reinforced and thus likely to continue

### **What Else May Be Happening in the Family?**

- ◆ Prosocial behavior may go un-reinforced or reacted to aversively
- ◆ Children's behavior and whereabouts is poorly monitored
- ◆ Non-violent conflict resolution is neither modeled nor taught
- ◆ Punishment options are narrow and overly harsh
- ◆ Little training in non-coercive, self-management strategies
- ◆ School readiness skills are not attended to systematically

### **Family Stresses That Contribute**

- ◆ Financial problems
- ◆ Lack of bonding to positive community, cultural, or religious institution
- ◆ Divorce or separation
- ◆ Parental criminality and/or AODA problems
- ◆ Parent psychopathology
- ◆ High family density; poor ratio of capable parent figures to children in need of supervision

### **Child Stresses That Contribute**

- ◆ Difficult temperament
- ◆ Child psychopathology, such as ADHD

**And at five years old, off to school walks a child who has learned to control adults through coercion, uses aggression to resolve conflicts, inhibits strongly desired behavior only with threat of physical punishment, and has few or no pre-academic skills.**

## **II. Where is School on the Trajectory to Prison?**

- ◆ In kindergarten, child is unprepared for rule-governed environment
- ◆ Child has generalized coercive relationships to school adults and peers
- ◆ Poor academic/social readiness leads to low academic engagement
- ◆ Discipline encounters begin to increase
- ◆ Normal peers begin to reject aggressive child
- ◆ Academic failure gap increases into mid-elementary years
- ◆ Retention and special education are used, often unwisely
- ◆ Child's relationship with school becomes increasingly hostile
- ◆ Truancy, disruptive behaviors, and aggression escalate into middle school
- ◆ Gang affiliation, drug use, and community delinquency increase
- ◆ Reading achievement by ninth grade can show an in-class gap of up to six grade levels
- ◆ Exclusionary discipline measures begin to dominate
- ◆ Youth fails to become bonded to high school and may have magical beliefs about graduation
- ◆ Youth drops out, is expelled, or is incarcerated

## Lonnie's Story

*Lonnie K. is 6 years old and in the first grade. He lives with both parents, a paternal grandfather, one younger and one older brother. They all reside in the grandfather's home a few blocks from the school. His father is currently unemployed and is on court probation for assault and criminal damage to property following an incident at a local tavern. Lonnie's mother is a hairdresser at a local shop. She was recently let go from an assistant manager position in a nearby town due to absences she blames on bouts of depression. Lonnie's oldest brother, Raymond, is in the seventh grade in a special education program for emotionally disturbed/behaviorally disordered students and has had a number of juvenile court contacts. There have been six calls to Social Services by neighbors over the past 10 years, primarily for suspected neglect of the children.*

*In his first grade class, Lonnie is an enormous behavioral problem. He is extremely oppositional to teacher compliance requests, is aggressive toward the other children and unable to regularly participate in group games without hitting or pushing another child. He needs to be closely monitored on the playground due to his tendency to push children off swings and playground equipment rather than wait his turn. At his best, he can be charming and funny. His teacher laments, however, that "he is growing up to be the same mean kid his older brother is."*

In this section, using the family of six year-old Lonnie K. as an example, we are going to investigate the contributions of the home context to the development of aggressive behavior patterns in children. The great body of research in this area has come from Gerald Patterson and his colleagues at the Oregon Social Learning Center (e.g., Patterson, 1982; Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989; 1992; Patterson, Reid, Jones, & Conger, 1975; Reid & Patterson, 1991). It was Patterson (1982) who coined the term coercive family process to describe a family pattern composed of the interaction between ineffective parent management skills and escalating child behavior problems. This is a family process that actually trains children to be aggressive and noncompliant (Patterson, 1982; Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989).

Lonnie's family demographics carry some of the risk factors that have been found to be implicated in the development of aggression in the family context. Low socioeconomic status, parent substance abuse, parent criminality, and maternal depression have all been associated with exacerbating the coercive family process (Kazdin, 1987b; Reid & Patterson, 1991). These demographics, singly or together, do not cause aggressive or antisocial behavior to develop, but they do function as significant stressors that can undermine attempts at effective parenting.

*It's seven PM and Lonnie and his mother are watching a television show when 12 year-old brother Ray comes in and demands that he be allowed to watch his video. Lonnie stands and complains loudly, only to receive a shove from Ray, who then moves to insert his video in the VCR.*

*"Tell him I was here first," Lonnie demands of his mother.*

*"Ray," their mother finally says, looking up from her crossword puzzle. "Lonnie was watching that."*

*"Tough shit," returns Ray, now easily fending off wild punches thrown by Lonnie. One lands too near his genitals and Ray boxes Lonnie on the side of his head painfully. Lonnie howls in pain and screams at his mother.*

*"He hit me in the face!"*

*"Well, you were hitting him," returns his mother. "What did you expect? Now, if you both don't stop hitting, I'll get your father down here."*

*Lonnie ignores her and begins once again to flail away at his brother. Ray has finally had enough and wraps his arms around Lonnie's neck, squeezing.*

*When he finally loosens his hold, Lonnie runs from the room, shouting out his new mission to destroy some of Ray's property.*

*"I'll kill you if you touch my stuff!" shouts Ray, settling down in front of the set.*

*Their mother shakes her head and returns to her crossword.*

That interaction demonstrated two central characteristics of the coercive family process: ineffective parental management of aggressive, noncompliant behavior and the reinforcement of coercive child behaviors. This model posits that the effectiveness in which parents manage the aggressive and noncompliant behaviors of their children plays a critical role in the course of those behaviors as the child grows. In the coercive family, as the children's aggressive behaviors grow more and more frequent and increasingly intense, the parents' attempts to manage them become increasingly inadequate (Reid & Patterson, 1991).

In the example shown, rather than stepping in to manage the conflict, Lonnie's mother merely sat there making "parental noises." It is not uncommon to find parents, mothers especially, for whom years of ineffective parenting have led to an emotional detachment, often depression. Her vague threat about calling the father down, possibly to engage in physical aggression against the children, went ignored. Lonnie and his brother have presumably learned that she cannot physically control them herself and that her threats are rarely carried out. Consequently, they now control her to a large degree. Additionally, the two boys have learned that coercive behavior patterns pay off: Ray knew that he could muscle his way into Lonnie and his mother's television show without serious opposition. The fact that his mother ultimately allowed him to be successful only made it more likely that he will repeat the behavior in other circumstances.

Patterson and his colleagues found that, in families such as this, the effect of inept parenting practices is to permit literally dozens of daily interactions within the family in which coercive child behaviors are directly reinforced (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). Sometimes the reinforcement is through some form of positive regard from the parent for the coercive behavior, such as when a parent laughs at a scene of sibling bully behavior. In addition, scenes like the example in which the parent passively allows the child's coercive behavior to be successful (i.e., reinforced) increases the likelihood of later repetition.

The researchers found, however, that most of the reinforcement arises out of escape contingencies, or what has been called an attack, counter-attack, positive outcome sequence. In such a sequence, when a parent intrudes with a compliance request (e.g., attack: "Go to bed now") the child learns to use aversive behaviors to escape (counter-attack: "I ain't going and you can't make me!"). The inept parent, believing that escaping from this aversive interaction with the child is most important, submits (positive outcome: "Fine, stay up and be tired all day in school. I don't care"). As an unfortunate consequence, both the child's non-compliant, coercive response and the parent's escape behavior have been reinforced. The stage is further set for the sequence to be repeated.

One of the features of the coercive family process is an escalation of the intensity of the coercive interactions (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). Threats become violence, and violence becomes greater violence. With each successive interaction, the potential for either the "attack" or the "counter-attack" to escalate in intensity is very real. Among family members, fear of the intensity of the interaction produces children who can control their parents and parents unwilling to effectively discipline their children.

*It is nearly 3:30 PM and Lonnie is returning from school. He walks through the front door of his home and into the living room. His father is in front of the TV, beer cans spread about. Lonnie is just about to begin a loud complaining script which has successfully driven his father from the television in the past, when the man stands up from his chair. Lonnie recognizes the hostile, intoxicated look and starts to back away, but not quickly enough. His father grabs him by the front of his shirt and slaps his open palm hard against the side of Lonnie's face.*

*"Fighting again at school? Got your damn principal callin' me at home? I'll give you all the fighting you want!" his father yells, slamming his hand once again into the struggling boy. The beating continues until Lonnie is finally able to wrest himself free and bolt out the door.*

Harsh, inconsistent, physical discipline is often characteristic of the coercive family process (Patterson, 1982). Ineffective parents tend to have a very narrow repertoire of discipline strategies -- often limited to either verbal or physical aggression. In addition, when parental discipline is tied too closely to parental mood or whim, the outcome is to have a behavior ignored on one day and punished on the next. Parents who ignore (or even encourage) sibling fighting at home, then beat the child for the same behavior in school are doing more to increase the aggression rather than to eliminate it. Aggressive behavior that is punished with counter-aggression and in an unpredictable, erratic fashion becomes extremely resistant to change (Park & Slaby, 1983).

**From: *Helping Schoolchildren Cope with Anger: A Cognitive-Behavioral Intervention* by Jim Larson and John E. Lochman (Guilford Press)**

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## Parent Management Training

### Children:

#### **Defiant Children — Parent Management Training**

Russell Barkely, Ph.D.

Located in: Defiant Children — A Clinician's Manual for Assessment and Parent Training (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.) New York, Guilford Press

#### **A Social Learning Approach to Family Intervention: Families with Aggressive Children. (Vol. 1).**

Patterson, G. R., Reid, J. B., Jones, R. R., & Conger, R. E.

Eugene, OR: Castalia Publishing Company

### Adolescents:

#### **Brief Strategic Family Therapy**

Contact:

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#### **Multi-Systemic Therapy**

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For information about training and technical assistance as well as materials, contact

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# **Treating Angry, Aggressive Children and Youth: Group Interventions for the School Setting**

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