Girls and Aggression

A Point of Departure

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On the evening of November 14, 1997, a group of teenage girls in Victoria, British Columbia participated in the brutal beating death of Reena Virk, an adolescent girl whom they all knew well, and alternately befriended and ostracized. The murder was not an accident, nor was it the result of impulsive lashing out that caused death without intention. On the contrary, the murder of Reena Virk was well planned, and it required vicious beatings that took place over several hours before she was left to drown. News of her death was a wake up call to Canadians. Although similar events involving teenage girls as the perpetrators of violent crime had occurred in the United States, Canada had remained relatively insulated in this regard. Reena’s murder provoked the public and academic researchers to ask whether rates of violence and aggression in girls were increasing, what factors contributed to such acts being carried out, and how we could intervene to prevent further tragedies. In response to these questions, we organized a conference in Vancouver during May 2001. The Vancouver Conference on Aggressive and Violent Girls brought together leading experts from across Canada and the U.S., representing knowledge from a diverse range of disciplines, to speak to the question of girls’ involvement in aggression and
violence (www.sfu.ca/gap/). This book grew out of that conference, and it reflects the current knowledge in the field, and importantly, the fundamental questions that remain unanswered.

What is clear is that rates of girls' involvement in aggressive acts are increasing. During the last decade in the United States the growth in person offense cases was greater for females (157%) than for males (71%) (Puzzanchera, Stahl, Finnegan, Tierney, & Snyder, 2003). Similarly, between 1990 and 2001, charges for violent crimes against Canadian youths increased 68% among females versus 22% among males (Statistics Canada, 2001). Self-report data also support the decreasing gender gap among adolescents' participation in violent acts (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Despite the fact that adolescent girls are the only sub-group of individuals that have displayed a consistent increase in rates of violent crime, boys still far outnumber girls as the perpetrators of the most severe violent acts. Nonetheless, the number of girls involved in serious aggressive acts represents a significant social and mental health issue. Furthermore, as research has progressed, it has become clear that a sizeable minority of girls are involved in other forms of persistent aggressive behavior, namely social and relational forms of aggression, which has for years persisted as a relatively invisible but destructive behavior. Unfortunately, because the vast majority of studies on aggression and violence have focused on boys and men, relatively little is known about the factors that precipitate and sustain such behavior in girls.

There are several important themes that emerge from the chapters of this book. The first is that there is no single perspective or linear combination of risk factors that explains aggression in girls, or for that matter, aggression in boys. The contributors to this book represent perspectives from a diverse range of disciplines. The chapters that follow address the interaction between gender and a variety of individual (see Geiger, Zimmerman-Gembeck, & Crick; Downey, Irwin, Ramsay, & Ayduk), family (see Moretti, Da Silva, & Holland), peer (see Vaillancourt & Hymel), school (see Loebe, Dhami, & Hogland), socio-cultural (see Artz; Jackson; Reitsma-Streel) and legal (see Connolly, Wayte, & Lee; Woolard) factors that contribute to aggressive and violent behavior. In this way, the current volume encompasses a multi-level ecological approach in understanding girls' involvement in aggressive and violent behavior. Some may argue that such an approach is too complex to offer useful guidance about violence and aggression. In response, we would say that human behavior is complex. As such, our responsibility as researchers and clinicians is to enter into dialogue across disciplines, with the goal of understanding the complexity of factors in which human behavior is embedded, so that we can offer meaningful rather than overly simplistic contributions to science and public welfare.
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The second theme that emerges from this work is the value of integrating knowledge across different populations of youths. While a tremendous amount of research has been conducted with adolescent males, there are very few studies that have focused on aggressive and violent behavior among girls. The central question that arises, therefore, is how, and perhaps whether, existing knowledge can be applied to the study of aggression among girls. In particular, questions are raised regarding the utility of existing measurement instruments, risk assessment tools (see Odgers, Schmidt, & Reppucci) and intervention programs (see Antonishak, Fried, & Reppucci) within samples of high-risk female adolescents.

Third, research increasingly points out that there is no single pathway across development. What we have learned in the larger field of aggressive and antisocial behavior is that there are multiple developmental trajectories; while some children who appear aggressive early on in life desist as they grow older, others continue on. As well, aggressive behavior may be associated with a diversity of mental health problems in adulthood, including serious depression, anxiety, and poor social functioning (see Lancôt, Emond, & Leblanc). This seems particularly the case for females, although research is too preliminary for us to know which girls will continue along which specific pathways as they move forward to adulthood. This work clearly illustrates two fundamental concepts of developmental psychopathology: multifinality—the notion that similar risk factors can result in diverse outcomes; and, equifinality—the notion that different risk factors can produce the similar outcome. As research progresses, it is our hope that we will better understand what determines how development unfolds for each individual child so that intervention can target specific points of risk, as well as windows of opportunity, to better support healthy development.

Admittedly, the study of individual level factors has dominated the majority of research on aggression and violence to date. The examination of aggression among girls throughout this volume, however, emphasizes the importance of developing a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of socio-cultural and gender role factors on the initiation, development, and contextual precursors of aggressive behavior, and understanding how these same factors can play a role in the victimization of girls (see Jackson; Artz). Contributors to this volume also provide a gendered analysis of the application of law and social policy to girls who become enmeshed in various systems due to their antisocial and aggressive behavior (see Connolly, Wayte, & Lee; Reitsma-Street; Woolard). This multi-level ecological approach is essential to an integrated multi-disciplinary understanding and an ecologically tailored and effective response to aggression for girls, and boys as well.
Finally, various chapters in this book address the issue of intervention (see Geiger, Zimmerman-Gembeck, & Crick; Levene, Walsh, & Augimeri; Moretti, Da Silva, & Holland; Pepler, Walsh, & Levene). The challenge of developing effective interventions for girls at different stages of development is sizeable. There are many important points to be gleaned from the research presented in this volume that we hope will inform those who are involved in the treatment of girls with aggressive and violent behavior problems. In particular, the importance of relationships in girls’ psychological development stands out as a salient factor to keep in the forefront of intervention (see Downey, Irwin, Ramsay, & Ayduk; Moretti, DaSilva, & Holland; Pepler, Walsh & Levene). At the same time, we must keep in mind that many risk factors for aggression and violence influence girls and boys similarly. Therefore, building girls’ programs on lessons we have learned from intervention trials with boys, while keeping in mind unique gender issues, is likely to be more productive than ignoring past research. For example, the chapter by Levene, Walsh, and Augimeri illustrates how programming can be tailored for pre-adolescent girls, yet inclusive of intervention components with demonstrated efficacy.

The work presented in this book reflects a point of departure in research on aggression, from a focus on boys to an examination of the etiology and developmental course of aggression in girls. We anticipate that the next decade will bring many insights into risk and protective factors, and models of intervention that target the social-psychological conditions that hamper healthy development in girls (see Underwood). Such advances are only possible with the support of granting agencies and institutions. In this respect, we wish to acknowledge the support of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Institute of Gender and Health, in partnership with the Institute of Human Development, Child and Youth Health, which provided funding for a New Emerging Team grant directed by Dr. Marlene Moretti. Their support has been instrumental in the publication of this book, and their vision of interdisciplinary partnership, in collaboration with community and government agencies, will stimulate innovative and rapid knowledge development in the field. Similarly, we would like to extend our appreciation to a number of agencies for their support of the Vancouver Conference on Aggressive and Violent Girls, namely: the Ministry for Child and Family Development; Department of Justice Canada, Youth Justice Policy; National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention; Vancouver Gonzaga Foundation; Simon Fraser University Centre for the Advancement of Child Health in conjunction with the Institute for Health, Research and Education; and, the Simon Fraser University Mental Health, Law and Policy Institute. We also wish to extend our appreciation...
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REFERENCES

