

Teach Nonviolence in Early Childhood

By Janet Gonzalez-Mena

The growing violence in America's streets and homes makes me feel helpless until I remember that there are solutions to the spreading menace. One of those solutions lies in early training.

Today's violent teens are the preschoolers of yesterday who didn't develop problem-solving skills. If they wanted a truck, they grabbed it from the boy who had it. If accidentally bumped--they shoved the offender.

Although these actions are the roots of violence, grabbing, shoving, and even hitting, are normal behaviors for young children. Tots who exhibit them aren't bad, they just need help, children can develop certain "habits of thought" which can lead eventually to teenage violence.

Three habits of thought have been identified in violent teens. One, they neglect to seek out information about a given situation. Two, they have a narrow vision of alternatives when faced with a problem. Three, they have little concept of the consequences of their actions. Let's look at each of those habits.

1. Teenage offenders neglect to get information about what's really happening when in a conflict situation. They seldom give anyone the benefit of the doubt, but see everyone as a potential adversary. This habit of thought starts early. The preschooler considers the accidental bump as intentional, for example.

Adults can help children learn to clarify situations by seeking more information. This teaching must be done on the spot when difficulties arise, preferable **before** the action gets physical. Adults can help children "talk it through" so they discover the truth. Perhaps the bump occurred because the boy fell. Through talking, this fact may emerge.

It takes diligent supervision to be on the spot early

enough to prevent aggression, but it's worth it. Prevention is better than cures.

2. Children who develop the habits of thought that lead to violence have a narrow vision on alternatives when faced with a problem. They only see one way out--physical aggression. Adults can help by stepping in with a remark like: "I wonder what you could do if he has the truck and you want it." If the child's response shows he can't think of anything but grabbing, the adult can list some other ideas.

The adult's tone is all important. Firmness should come through, "I won't let you grab or hurt." Empathy should come through too: "I know how much you want that truck." A problem-solving attitude must be part of the exchange: "He might give it to you if you ask him." Finally, persistence is critical: "Well, asking didn't work; I wonder what else you could try."

3. Violence-prone children don't consider the consequences when they lash out. Through calm talking, adults can help children sort out beforehand what might happen if they hurt someone.

To summarize: Firmness, empathy, a problem-solving attitude, and non-nagging persistence are the qualities an adult must have to approach a touchy situation. The adult must be clear, clean, and honest rather than manipulative. The objective is not to solve the problem in a particular way for the children, but to help them discover their own alternatives to violence as well begin to think about consequences.

Adults often short circuit this kind of learning by solving the problem themselves. If two children are struggling over a toy, often an adult takes the toy away saying, "You can't play with that if you're going to fight." That action may solve the problem for the moment, but it doesn't teach either child how to handle a similar situation nonviolently next time it arises.

Skillful adult intervention makes a big difference.

Children can learn nonviolent approaches to problems. Of course, other factors come into play also. If the child sees violence at home, on the streets or on TV, the modeling effect takes on importance. Children imitate what they see. Or if the child is a victim of abuse, the likelihood of his becoming a perpetrator is increased.

There is no one solution to the growing violence in America's streets and homes. If we are to live in a peaceful society, we must take a many-pronged approach. One way to start is by learning to deal nonviolently and effectively with the children in our lives.