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Kids and Anger: Let's get them while they're young
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This is the second article in the anger series, followed closely by a third article: Children and violent behaviour – what does self-esteem have to do with it?

If we are really going to approach any kind of solution to violent behaviour in our society, we need to start with children. By allowing them to acknowledge their anger and giving them tools to deal with issues that make them angry, we will create kids who are able to confront their emotions without resorting to their fists.

To address issues of violence, we need to start with children, and boys in particular. As social reformer, writer and statesman, Frederick Douglass said, "It's easier to build strong children than to repair broken men."

What are the issues that drive violent behaviour in later years? For most part, violent or aggressive tendencies don't suddenly begin in adulthood; they are present in the psychological make-up of the person, starting from relationships and messages from parents and society, or in the classroom and interactions with other children on the playground. These triggers are set at an early age, with insecurity and lack of self-esteem being the launchpad for out-of-control aggressive emotions that are unleashed at a later stage.

Where do we start?
One has to look at parenting techniques when assessing how to build strong children. There is a vast amount of literature on parenting strategies aimed at raising healthy, well-balanced individuals.

It's not rocket science that self-esteem is one of the crucial building blocks of a happy life. The objective is to raise children who have a healthy sense of self. In turn, this will assist in reducing the default position of resorting to aggression and violence towards others by creating adults who have internalised the necessary emotional and psychological resources to navigate the ever-present frustrations and challenges of life.

Excellent research conducted by Nancy G Guerra and Catherine P Bradshaw illustrates the vital connection between a positive sense of self and becoming a positively contributing adult member of society. Through analysis of the literature pertaining to the most effective parenting strategies and techniques, the researchers identified five core competencies that contribute to positive youth development: a positive sense of self; the ability to practice self-control; effective decision-making skills; a moral system of belief; and pro-social connectedness.

In my practice, I see how a positive sense of self is the starting point that often leads to the other four competencies mentioned in Guerra and Bradshaw's research. I discuss the issue of self-esteem further in the next article, The Issue of Self-Esteem and Anger.

Anger is normal
The acknowledgement and acceptance of anger as a "normal" emotion is key. Children should not be told that anger is bad or that they are bad because they experience angry emotions. We need to teach them to sit with their anger so that they can uncover the triggers and find ways of working it out of their systems (be it going for a run, writing feelings down, or even arguing for what they believe is right).

We also need them to understand that while "healthy anger" is part of being human, violence is not. They need to be aware of the difference between the two.
At home and at school, children need to know that there are ways of dealing with anger, and that allowing anger to get so out of control that it causes damage to others and to property comes with consequences.

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Tools to help kids deal with anger

Emotional behaviours are learnt from a young age and should be addressed early on. When it comes to dealing with tantrums in younger children and toddlers, two methods have proven successful.

The first is simply to ignore the child, stepping over them or around them if you have to. (Yes, even in a shopping centre.) This is known as 'extinction' in psychological terms. Once the child realises they are not receiving the desired attention, they "come out" of the tantrum of their own accord. The parent then continues with the business of the day without any praise or reward for the child. The tantrums may well become worse initially as the child tests how serious the parent is by pushing the boundaries even more. However, if the parent stands their ground, the child will learn that they aren't going to receive attention (even negative attention).

The other technique is known as 'paradoxical intention', where the child is encouraged to give their tantrum their best shot. So instead of creating a power struggle, the child is encouraged to engage in behaviour they know you don't approve of, which removes the resistance.

A crucial aspect of change is that things tend to get a bit worse before they get better. The long-term expectation is that the child starts to develop their own internal controls of effective emotional management.

Open communication

As children grow older, their verbal abilities improve. Clichéd as it may seem, open communication is all-important and it is the first step I adopt with all older children and teens in my practice: I provide a platform for them to talk. The relationship between simply being heard and feeling better is grossly underestimated.

Expressing feelings and thoughts doesn't necessarily resolve anything, however , but it does neutralise many of the defences the child has built up over time. In addition, the child is also more likely to evaluate their own behaviour objectively and to be willing to concede that they might be at fault or unreasonable.

The simplest way to provide such a platform at home is for the family to instil a culture of creating opportunities for regular interaction; and to do this, parents need to make themselves available. The parents set the tone – for instance, if they employ a discussion/debate approach to resolving conflict, the children will internalise it, accept it as the norm, and thus replicate this behaviour in society at large.

Acknowledging our fractured society

Developing countries like South Africa, where more than 30 million people live in poverty or on the breadline, offer a different set of circumstances. . Kids are often left to their own devices in townships and areas that are not equipped to put children's needs first.

Much of the violence in developing countries comes from adults who, as children, were themselves exposed to violence at an early age; they never had a chance at "normality" and learnt that violence is the norm for conflict resolution. So, while we may look at many ways of nurturing children in an environment where going to school and having a decent home and a present guardian or parent is a given, there are thousands upon thousands of other children who are simply falling through the system.

The sad truth is that until the issue of poverty and its ills change, the situation will perpetuate. In the meantime, what is needed is for schools to become safe spaces for children to be, to learn, to grow and thrive – and to be shown that they can be so much more than their circumstances.

It is an achievable goal. We may not be able to immediately change the domestic circumstances of these children, but what we can do is to take the violence – physical and sexual – out of their schools and create safe spaces for them to thrive.