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WHO ARE THE “PROBLEM KIDS”?

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Many teachers will say that one of the hardest parts of their job is dealing with disruptions caused by children with behaviour problems. Whether their actions are labelled as disruptive, antisocial, aggressive, or conduct disorder, certain children take up an inordinate amount of teachers' and other students' time. One teacher has described how two such students — one with a special needs designation of moderate behaviour disorder and the other not designated — took up most of her time, leaving the other 26 children in the classroom “overlooked because they do not ‘rock the boat’”. If my class size were increased, that would simply mean that even more students would be neglected.” (BCTF, 1997)

A recent analysis of data from Human Resources Development Canada and Statistics Canada's *National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth* (NLSCY) (www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/arb/conferences/nlscyconf/flyer-e.shtml) sheds some light on family factors that may predispose children to engage in disruptive behaviours. Kathryn Stevenson's article in the Winter 1999 issue of *Canadian Social Trends* focuses only on information collected in 1994-1995 on 8- to 11-year-old children. As more data is collected over time, it should be possible to see what patterns emerge as these children enter adolescence.

While there is much speculation that teens who engage in criminal activity often exhibited behaviour problems when younger, many children outgrow these behaviours. Obviously not all children with conduct disorder will engage in a life of crime, and not all criminals displayed conduct problems as children. However, the data now available may suggest what types of programs at the family level are most likely to be effective to help children, teachers, and families in the shorter run.

Conduct disorder in this study is “characterized by either physical or indirect aggression against persons or property, or a severe violation of societal norms.” Children are designated as having conduct disorder if they score in the highest 10% of a scale developed for the NLSCY. Using this criterion, about 20% of 8- to 11-year olds are considered to have conduct disorder. Many readers would consider this figure too high; however, including children who do not really have behavioural problems in the analysis probably only serves to weaken the strength of the observed associations.

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More boys (26%) fall into the category than girls (13%). **Parenting style is the single most important factor associated with conduct disorder.** For instance, **ineffective** parenting practices are characterized by a parent who is “often annoyed with child, telling child he/she is bad or not as good as others.” Almost two-thirds (63%) of children whose parents *very often* use this style exhibit conduct disorder, compared to 4% of children whose parents use this style *rarely*. Holding constant the effects of other variables — such as **socioeconomic status (SES)**, **lone-parent status**, **number of siblings**, **mother’s age at birth of child**, and **mother’s work status** — children of parents who *very often* used an ineffective parenting style were 36 times more likely to have conduct disorder than those whose parents used it *rarely*.

It should be noted, however, that the data clearly indicate that other factors are at work, beyond those accounted for in the study. For example, while 38% of children whose parents *rarely* use a **consistent** parenting style exhibit conduct disorder, the same applies to 16% of children whose parents are consistent *very often*. By the same token, 27% of those whose parents *rarely* use a **positive** parenting style have conduct disorder, yet 14% of those whose parents are *very often* positive manifest the same problem.

When all other factors are held constant, the **mother’s work status** (*full-time, part-time, or not in paid workforce*) has no significant impact on the occurrence of conduct disorder in children. Similarly, **birth to a teenage mother** was not significant when other factors such as low income were accounted for; however, conduct disorder was significantly lower among women who were at least 30 when the child was born than among children born to women in their 20s.

Number of parents in household is also significant. A child with a lone parent is twice as likely to have conduct disorder as a child with two parents. And a child with lower **socioeconomic status (SES)** is twice as likely as a child with higher SES to exhibit conduct disorder, probably because of factors such as opportunities to participate in various activities, and neighbourhood resources including peer groups. SES includes parental education, job status, and income.

Number of siblings also matters. A child with two or more siblings is 2.6 times more likely to exhibit aggressive tendencies than an only child.

What are the policy implications of this research for schools and communities? Programs to teach parenting skills could improve parenting styles. Parents could be supported in the community through drop-in programs and high-quality daycare, accessible no matter what their income level or work status. The federal government could reinstate social assistance and education transfers to the provinces, cut severely in the last few budgets. Lone parents who are not attached to the workforce could be encouraged to continue their education through incentives such as on-campus support, daycare, and mentors. Many programs are already in place, but clearly not enough is being done.

Sources:

BCTF. Education Funding Brief. April 1997.

Online: www.bctf.bc.ca/bargain/EdFunding/97Brief/97brief.pdf

Stevenson, Kathryn. “Family characteristics of problem kids.” *Canadian Social Trends* (Statistics Canada Catalogue 11-008), Winter 1999 (No. 55): 2-6.