Parental presence and aggressive proneness: A goodness-of-fit model on the evolution and prevention of child aggressiveness in the family

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Abstract

The development of child aggressiveness is a function of the interaction between the child's inborn expansive restlessness and the parents' ability to restrain it by an affirmation of parental presence. Parental presence is manifested by acts that convey the message that the parents will not give up their parental role and will "stay there" in person and in duty whatever happens. Parental presence is affected by physical availability, systemic support and parental emotional/ideological readiness to engage in the restraining and containing role. The lack of parental presence, that manifests itself either by parental giving in or by alternations of parental hostile outbursts with giving in, leads to the aggravation and perpetuation of the child's aggressiveness. Parental presence is an integrative concept linked to behavioral views on effective discipline, to the views of attachment theory on the need for a secure parental figure and to systemic ideas on parental systemic support and weakening. A practical approach to the parents of aggressive children is derived from the model, leading to distinctive predictions.

Does parental behavior play a causal role in the development of child aggressiveness or merely a facilitative or hindering one? This seemingly small difference may be crucial for the parents of aggressive children. When the parents are viewed as playing a causal role, they may be held responsible for the bad consequences of their failed parenting. The almost inevitable result is then the blaming of parents by therapists and educators or even by the parents themselves. On the other hand, if the parents play only a hindering or facilitative role, they cannot be blamed for the child's aggressiveness, for they have not caused it in the first place. At worst, one might say that they were unable to check or correct the child's troublesome propensities. The whole dialogue with parents changes when it is based on such an assumption. Most, if not all, psychological models in the past have described the role of parental behavior as causal. Genetic models, on the other hand, have tended to minimize or discount the role of parental behavior altogether. Less has been written, however, from an interactive or a "goodness of fit" perspective, according to which, children with an inborn aggressive proneness may require a special kind of parenting style (Bates, Petit, Dodge, & Ridge, 1998; Rothbart & Bates, 1998). This paper presents a theoretical and clinical contribution of this kind.

The present model postulates an interaction between the child's inborn aggressive proneness and the parents' ability to deal with it by an affirmation of parental

presence: children who are at risk for developing aggressive behaviors[1] have an inborn weakness in their ability to evolve self-containment mechanisms. These children are characterized by an expansive restlessness (cognitive, behavioral and emotional); consequently, they have a special need for effective external containment to compensate for their original lack. To complicate matters, these children seem to experience external restrictions more aversively than other children. Parental presence, which refers to the parents' ability to restrain the child's expansive restlessness by using themselves as containers (through acts that consistently convey the messages: "We are here and stay here!" "We won't stop being your parents!" "We won't be discounted, ignored or shaken off!" "We won't let you hurt us, others or yourself!"), is the optimal antidote to this condition. Precisely the agressively prone child, however, often leads the parents to give in (out of anxiety, helplessness or a permissive ideology) or to hit back erratically. These parental responses institute a situation of virtual parental absence that leads to a double escalation: parental giving-in leads to increased expansiveness and demandingness, and parental hostility to counter-hostility. This double escalation further potentiates the child's aggressive proneness. Unrestrained by parental presence, the child's restless expansiveness may then degenerate into a violent and dominance oriented life-style.

This model may be viewed as a modified integrative version of Patterson's coercion theory (e.g., Patterson, Reid & Dishion, 1992). One of the modifications touches on the role of reinforcement contingencies: what is here viewed as central in the parents' behavior is not so much the reinforcement, as the parents' ability to restrain the child's aggressiveness through their presence. This difference, as we shall see, leads to some divergent predictions as well as to distinct counseling practices. I shall argue that the practices derived from the model of parental presence may improve on those that are derived from coercion theory on two counts: by being less conducive to escalation and by being more acceptable to parents, professionals, and, eventually to the child. This will, in turn, lead to better cooperation.

The Parental Presence Model

Proposition I: Most children who display longterm aggressive behavior patterns have an inborn aggressive proneness

The child's inborn aggressive proneness has been conceptualized in developmental theorizing and research either in terms of neurophsychological deficits (e.g., Moffitt & Henry, 1991) or of temperamental characteristics (e.g., Rothbart & Bates, 1998): (a) In terms of neurophsychological deficits it has been shown that children with the inattentive, overactive and impulsive symptoms of ADHD are at a high risk for developing aggressive and other anti-social behaviors. (Moffit 1993; Moffit & Henry, 1991). (b) In temperamental terms, it has been shown that children high in impulsivity-unmanageability, who display oppositionality and a consistent failure to comply, are at a high risk for developing aggressive behavior patterns (e.g., Bates,

[1]By aggressive behavior we mean a broader category than that designated by violent behavior. Aggressive behavior would subsume both actual physical violence (against people and objects) and also nonphysical hostile displays such as cursing, threatening, blackmailing and tantruming,. Although aggressive behavior within the family is, with all probability, a necessary condition for the development of an anti-social career without, it is not a sufficient one. Additional factors, such as association with anti-social peers and school drop-out may play a crucial role.

Petit, Dodge & Ridge, 1998). Although the child characteristics that are subsumed by the neurophysiological and the temperamental perspectives surely overlap, their different emphases might be helpfully kept in mind: the neurophysiological description refers mainly to children whose restless expansiveness and self-control deficits (ADHD) are experienced by others as invasive; the temperamental perspective refers to children who are not only restless and impulsive, but who are also characterized by oppositional attitudes and by the tendency to think and act in terms of "Who is the boss?" in interpersonal relations.

From the point of view of parental counseling, temperamental and neuropsychological studies help to do away with the unhelpful tendency of many practitioners to assume that the parents are to blame for the child's aggressive tendencies. Genetic research completes the picture, by showing that children's inherited characteristics contribute much to the kind of interactions that develop between them and the parents. Thus, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that the biological children of anti-social mothers evoke more hostile responses from their adoptive parents than the biological children of mothers who were not anti-social (Ge et al., 1996; Neiderhiser, Reiss, Hetherington & Plomin, 1999; O'Connor, Deater-Deckard, Fulker, Rutter & Plomin, 1998; Plomin, Chipuer, & Lehlin, 1990; Plomin, Nitz, & Rowe, 1990).

The child's inborn aggressive proneness, however, tells only part of the story. Thus it has been shown that when the biological children of anti-social parents grow up with parents who are also anti-social, the chances that they will develop an anti-social career grows by as much as fourfold (Bohman, 1996; Cadoret, Cain, & Crow, 1983; Moffit, 1990). On the other hand, as described below, there is abundant evidence that parental attitudes and practices may also lead to a diminution in the risk for aggressive and anti-social behavior. I shall argue that the unifying characteristic of these positive parental attitudes and practices is that the parents respond to the child's aggressiveness by affirmations of parental presence.

Proposition II: Parental presence counters the child's aggressive proneness; parental absence abets it.

By parental presence I mean the readiness of parents (and the concomitant experience of this parental readiness by the child) to set themselves as boundaries to the child's unruly expansiveness. They will do so by personally supervising the child's doings, containing the child's outbursts and demands and protecting themselves, the other children and the house from the aggressive child's attacks. The attempt to control the child's behavior by physical punishments, by the institution of fear and by angry self-withdrawal have nothing to do with parental presence. On the contrary, the spanking parent minimizes contact, the fear-inspiring parent remains distant and unapproachable, and the self-withdrawing parent attempts to achieve influence through parental absence. These are attempts to achieve authority by remote control or hit and run methods. Authority that is achieved by parental presence is, in contrast, contact-demanding.

Our thesis is then that, given a child who is high in aggressive proneness, the lower the parental presence, the higher the chances that this child will maintain and escalate

his or her aggressive patterns. On the other hand, if the parents succeed in reestablishing their presence, chances grow that the aggressive patterns will be curtailed. Let us consider a number of pathways to parental absence.

(a) Physical absence. Children who grow up in single-parent families are at greater risk for evolving an aggressive and anti-social life-style (Loeber & Hay, 1997). Perhaps the most extensive study dealing with this issue is that of Dornbusch et al. (1985), who investigated the family constitution of a sample of close to 7,000 adolescents (aged 12 to 17). Adolescents who grew up in single parent households were far more liable to be involved in various forms of anti-social activity. This risk was partially reduced if, besides the single parent, there was also another adult living in the house. Steinberg (1987) investigated the susceptibility of children and adolescents to anti-social peer pressure and found that those that lived with both parents were less susceptible than those who lived in single-parent households. In terms of parental presence, we would say that the absent parent creates a lacuna in the restraining and containing parental net that the single remaining parent is not always capable of filling up.

Other forms of parental unavailability may cause similar problems. A study conducted in Germany showed that in households where the parents were away at work for most of the day, the children were more frequently involved in violent episodes (Funk, 1996). Parental unavailability through exhaustion or depression have been similarly linked to higher rates of child aggressive behavior (Downey & Coyne, 1990; Ratzke & Cierpka, 1999; Schweitzer, 1987;1997).

It would be wrong to conclude, however, that single parents or parents that work long hours are thereby doomed to fail with their aggressively prone children. The partial parental unavailability can in many cases be compensated for. With aggressively prone children it has been found that this can be achieved by a more restrictive and controlling attitude on the side of the parent. Thus, children's early temperamental unmanageability and resistance to control predicted later aggressive behavior more accurately when the mother was less controlling than when she was more controlling (Bates, Petit, Dodge, & Ridge, 1998). In single-parent families, in particular, an authoritative and highly structured style of parenting may outweigh the negative effects of a missing parent (Florsheim, Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 1998; Hetherington et al, 1992). From our perspective, this compensation could be understood as a result of the parent's being more effectively present.

(b) Systemic weakening. The experience of parental presence is heightened when both parents and children see the parents as backed and confirmed by others. Parents do not act in a vacuum but are continuously influenced by one another and by the people, institutions and culture in the midst of which they live. The single parent, the parental couple that is cut-off from all extensive family ties, the family of immigrants in a foreign society are thus systemically disadvantaged, particularly vis-à-vis the aggressive child. The single parent, for instance, may be unable to meet the multiple parenting challenges without some measure of external support (Wahler, 1980). This difficulty is most evident in the relationship between a single mother and an aggressive adolescent son or daughter. Therapists who simply encourage such mothers to be more self-assertive and militant, without at the same time addressing the issue of support, may be unwittingly exposing the mothers to risk. The occurrence

of separation or divorce may, in itself, cause systemic weakening: a rise in child aggression in the home is a common sequela of the father's leaving (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1975). This is often interpreted as resulting from the child's emotional tension in the wake of the separation. There is however another possibility: the child's aggressiveness may grow because of the lacuna created by the father's leaving and the consequent weakening of the mother.

Another source of systemic parental weakening, closely related to isolation, is secrecy. Out of shame or in order to keep the child free from stigma, many parents choose to keep the child's aggressive doings secret. Secrecy, however, invariably works against the victim (as is known from cases of child or wife battering and abuse). The same is true with the aggressive child: secrecy cuts the parent(s) off from sources of help, often leaving the child's aggressiveness unchecked. As we shall see, not only the parents, but also the aggressive child's siblings may pay the price of this secrecy.

Not only the physical presence of the father, but also the quality of his involvement have an impact on the child's aggressiveness: the more positively involved the father, the lower the risk of child aggression (Patterson, 1980). Endemic marital conflict, in addition, is a sure recipe for the aggravation of the child's aggressiveness (Dadds & Powell, 1991; Jouriles et al., 1991). In terms of parental presence, marital conflict furthers aggressiveness by undermining the restraining ability of the parents: the child's negative power grows as each parent counters the other's efforts. Similarly, parental presence can be affected by the role played by other family members. Just as the emotional support of parents by grandparents, uncles and aunts can prove an invaluable asset, sabotage by them may be highly detrimental.

The parents' hostile or avoidant attitude towards the school system is known to weaken the school's authority. The parents, however, are equally weakened by clashes with the school. Why is this so? Because parents who are viewed by school staff as hostile will receive only minimal information about the child's doings. After all, why should the teachers give themselves the trouble of informing the parents, if they expect the parents to use the information against them? Conflicts between parents and teachers thus contribute to the creation of blind spots in the child's life. Such conflicts, therefore, inevitably weaken the parental presence and strengthen the child's negative power (Omer, 2000).

Another potentially weakening influence is that of the helping professions. Therapists often treat parents unkindly. Parents have been blamed for the child's every problem, they have been routinely described as lacking in empathy and sensitivity and they have been told that children are so vulnerable that the slightest mistake in parenting must cause indelible scars. Professionals have often held the healing of such scars to be the exclusive province of the therapist, but almost in the same breath they have implied that the therapy could only be of help if the parents changed their attitude towards the child. The required change, however, has usually been left hazy. It is not a specific change in behavior, but an inner one: the mother, for instance, should become more “motherly.” Actually, what is sometimes expected is that she become more like the therapist. Thus, a good mother should be invariably acceptant, warm, non-judgmental and non-punishing. The mother often feels she cannot compete with the therapist on these terms.

Professionals also sometimes convey the message that demands and rules are irrelevant or noxious if the child's problem behaviors are due to deeper causes, such as traumatic experiences or unconscious conflicts. In such cases, it is assumed, therapy is needed, rather than discipline. On this view, parents are only justified in restraining the child, once these deeper problems have been ruled out or adequately treated. This contention is almost tantamount to an eviction of the parents from the parenting role, for matters such as unconscious conflict and repressed trauma are felt to be beyond their ken. When this feeling is compounded by a child therapy about which the parents are kept jealously uninformed, the parental presence is furthered curtailed. The unwitiing upshot of the encounter with professionals may thus be that the parents are left feeling even more incompetent and alone. In a comparison between the effects of individual therapy for juvenile offenders with multi-systemic therapy (in which the parents, the child and members of other systems are involved), Borduin and his colleagues (Borduin et al., 1995) have shown that this may often be so: the mothers of juvenile offenders whose children underwent individual therapy suffered a significant increase in psychiatric symptoms (mainly depression and anxiety), whereas mothers in the multi-systemic group had a significant improvement. In addition, parents of juvenile offenders in individual therapy reported a reduction in family cohesion and adaptability, compared to a significant increase in the multi-systemic group. Finally, mothers of children in individual therapy reported an increase in the child's behavior problems, compared to a decrease in the multi-systemic group.

(c) Ideological and affective weakening. Baumrind's by now classical studies (1971; 1991) documented the negative influence of permissive parenting upon children's aggressive and anti-social behaviors (see also Chamberlain and Patterson, 1995 and Eisenberg & Murphy, 1995 for partial reviews of more recent findings on this line). The permissive ideology views all kinds of restraint as bad and thereby delegitimizes the parental barrier to the child's aggressiveness. Even today, despite massive research evidence to the contrary, the belief that parental restraint and frustration causes child aggression lingers on, not only among the general public, but also among therapists, counselors and educators.

Parental pity, anxiety and guilt work in the same direction, making the parents walk on eggshells, fearing that any assertion of parental presence may have dire consequences for the child's growth. Pity, guilt and anxiety are related feelings, for guilt feeds pity and both guarantee a steady supply of anxiety. The three can reduce the clearest parental voice to a faint whisper. Although there is hardly any systematic research linking these parental feelings to the evolution of child aggression, they are clearly at work in furthering parental giving-in, which in turn has been repeatedly shown to further the child's aggressiveness (Patterson, 1982; Patterson, Reid & Dishion, 1992).

The evidence on parental physical absence, systemic weakening and ideological/affective weakening is consistent: gaps in the parents' containing and restraining ability aggravate the child's aggressiveness. Let us now look at the positive evidence showing that parental presence can counter aggressive and anti-social behavior.

(d) Parental supervision. There is abundant evidence, from families from diverse social layers, cultures and countries, that parental supervision is linked to lower levels of child aggression and anti-social activities (Frick et al., 1992; Funk, 1996; Kolvin, Miller, Fleeting & Kolvin, 1988; Laub & Sampson, 1988; Loeber & Dishion, 1984; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986; Wilson, 1987). Even the mere fact that the parents know where and with whom the child spends his or her after-school hours may have a significant deterrent effect over the child's susceptibility to anti-social peer pressure (Steinberg, 1986). From the point of view of parental presence, this robust finding makes clear sense: the child can be sure that the parents "will be there," even when they are not physically present. In our counseling program for the parents of aggressive children, we help the parents develop ways to be informed and let the children know, that they know where they are. For instance, the parents are encouraged to contact the parents of their children's friends, the school, the child's sports or dance instructors and, sometimes, those friends of their children who are not involved in anti-social activities. They ask about the child's whereabouts and leave messages for the child with the contacted persons. Sometimes, this parental manifestation of virtual presence is topped by the parents' personal arrival at the scene of the child's problem activities. The readiness of the parents to perform these activities often constituted a turning point. It was as if the parents began once again to feel that they were capable and the children, that the parents "were back" (Omer, 2000).

It should be noted, however, that supervision is not an absolute value. With a dependent and insecure child who is not aggressive and displays no signs of anti-social behavior, parental supervision should be rather stepped down. The present is a goodness-of-fit model of parenting: it is the aggressively prone child that requires a restraining and containing parental style and not any child whatsoever.

(e) Parental consistency. The more consistent the parents (in their discipline and attitudes), the lesser the child's aggression (Frick et al., 1992; McCord, 1986; Wahler & Dumas, 1986; Wahler & Sansbury, 1990). Parental inconsistency can be intraparental (e.g., mixed or unclear messages and haphazard folow-through) or interparental (contradictory messages and mutual sabotage). As Patterson and his associates pointed out (Patterson, & Capaldi, 1991; Patterson, Dishion, & Bank, 1984; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992) much of the criticism that is undifferentiatedly leveled at punishment of all sorts should be actually directed at inconsistent punishments and not at consistent discipline. According to Patterson, the better alternative to erratic punitiveness is not unconditional acceptance, but consistent discipline. In terms of parental presence, the findings on parental consistency make clear sense: consistent messages, attitudes and disciplinary practices convey to the child the experience that the parents are continuously "there", that there are no yawning gaps in their containing and restraining net and that they can be trusted to level up their differences. In distinction from Patterson, however, the present view emphasizes the child's cognitive and emotional experience of the parents, rather than the immediate reinforcement contingencies. It is the child's evolving certainty that the parents will be there to stop the aggressive behavior that plays the chief role. Actually, the parents can effectively convey their readiness to contain the child's aggression also without punishment. Especially with older children and adolescents, this may make the whole difference between a parental policy that leads to escalation

and one that does not. To understand this, we must now turn to the role of escalation in the evolution of aggressive patterns.

Proposition III: Escalation plays a central role in chanelling the child's aggressive proneness into an aggressive life-style

If we think about the child's aggressive proneness as flammable material and of parental presence as a safety container, escalation is then the process whereby the flammable material is brought ever closer to conflagration.

The escalation of mutual of hostility between parents and children is complemented and abetted by the escalation of giving-in, whereby the parent gives in to the child's demands, the child increases the demands, the parent gives in again, and so forth. The interplay between these two kinds of escalation is one of the central insights of Patterson's coercion theory (Patterson, Reid & Dishion, 1992). Specifically, Patterson showed that parental giving-in not only increases the child's demands, but also the chances that either the parent or the child will display higher levels of hostility on the next bout.

The impact of this double-escalation is manifold: (a) the child becomes progressively more power-sure and power-oriented, while the parent grows more and more hopeless and helpless; (b) there is a gradual habituation to aggression, with both sides becoming inured to its effects; in this process, many helpless parents "learn" to disregard "daily" levels of aggression (Patterson, 1980); (c) there is a narrowing down of the parent-child interaction, to the point where all there is left of the relationship is the conflict; (d) parental fear of further escalation may lead to paralysis and to lack of cooperation with treatment programs, and (e) an investment in escalation may lead the child to dangerous acts (in an attempt to validate threats).

Most counseling programs for parents focus on one kind of escalation, to the detriment of the other. Programs such as Toughlove (Everts, 1990; York, York & Wachtel, 1997) help prevent the escalation of giving-in, whereas programs that focus on parental warmth and acceptance, focus on the prevention of mutual hostility. The behavioral program developed by Patterson (Patterson, 1982; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992) tries to take the dilemma by both horns. However, behavioral treatment programs may carry an inherent risk of escalation, due to the assumption that the child's negative behavior must be proportionately and immediatley negatively reinforced, otherwise it will be perpetuated. Behavior therapists have been very clear on this point (e.g., Patterson, Dishion & Bank, 1984): the parents must be encouraged to react to the child's aggressive behavior by an aversive consequence of "at least the same duration and intensity as the antecedent stimuli" (Patterson, Dishion & Bank, 1984, p. 257). This principle may have untoward consequences, once the children make the important discovery that when the parents punish them they can punish them harder in return. Parental fears of such retalliation is probably one of the reasons why the rates of parental drop-out and of treatment failure increase with the child's age (Dishion & Patterson, 1992; Patterson, Dishion & Chamberlain, 1993).

A program based on the idea of parental presence may be less liable to escalation. In effect, the messages of parental presence are similar to those of Gandhi's strategy of non-violent resistance, which aimed precisely at the prevention of escalation. Thus,

the parents are helped to react to the child's aggressive behaviors by acts that say: "I cannot accept your behavior and will do all I can to stop it, except for hitting you or attacking you!" Like Gandhi's political variety of non-violent resistance, this strategy is geared to helping parents effectively oppose the child's unacceptable behaviors, while refusing to be drawn into aggressive interchanges. How is this achieved?

Consider the following processes: (a) escalation grows when the parties view the interaction in terms of "Who is the boss?" (Bugenthal, Lyon, Krantz & Cortez, 1997). Thus it has been shown that the risk of aggressive outbursts by the parents (Bugental, Blue & Cruzcosa, 1989) as well as by the child (Patterson, Dishion & Bank, 1984) grows when they think in terms of "Who is the boss?" and interpret each other's behavior as a threat to their own dominant position. (b) The risk of escalation is higher, the higher the psychophysiological arousal of each party. Animal research shows that reducing by pharmacological means the arousal level of one participant in a conflictual interaction lowers steeply the aggressive behavior of both (Cairns, Santoyo & Holly, 1994). It has also been shown that parents who think in terms of "Who is the boss?" tend to react with higher physiological arousal (and with a higher probability of aggressive outbursts) to situations in which they think the child is trying to control them (Bugental et al., 1993). (c) Parental exhorting, blaming and threatening are often escalatory processes, as exhorting turns to heated arguing, arguing to screaming, and so forth. The negative influence of these processes can be minimized by a manifestation of parental presence that is judiciously planned to avoid "I am the boss!" messages, to reduce psychophysiological arousal and to prevent spiralling arguments. The following two parental strategies illustrate this stance (Omer, 2000, Omer, in press).

The sit-in. In the sit-in, the parents enter the child's room and sit down, preferably on a chair that blocks the room's door (like Gandhi's non-violent resistance, this parental stance is not at all passive. The message must be conveyed that the parents will do all they can to stop the unacceptable behavior). Once in the room, they tell the child that they cannot accept his or her behavior and that they will wait for ideas how it may be stopped. The parents sit silently, refraining from explaining, exhorting, preaching, blaming or threatening. They refuse to be drawn into any kind of argument. Time, silence and determined presence carry the message of non-violent resistance. If the child makes a proposal, the parents examine it with the child for a short while and then leave the room, avoiding any threatening or warning remarks, however subdued. If the child raises no proposal, the parents stay in the room for as long as they had decided beforehand. In such cases (or when the child's proposals did not materialize), the procedure is repeated the next day or the day after. If the child attacks them physically, the parents defend themselves without hitting back. If the child attacks them verbally, they stay silent, so as to avoid an escalatory sequence. If the parents feel unable to defend themselves against a physical attack, they should ask for a third party (a friend or relative) to be present in the adjoining room during the procedure. The mere presence of a third party has, almost always, an inhibitory effect on the child's aggressiveness. The fact that the sit-in is undertaken at a quiet time contributes to de-escalation by sidestepping the psychophysiological arousal that obtains at the time of the original disturbance (I have termed this the "hit the iron when cold" principle). In addition, although the sit-in is unpleasant, it is not a typical punishment: it does not involve a withdrawal of privileges, it does not follow immediately after the misbehavior (a sit-in can take place a week after the event) and, in addition, the

parents do not inflict it from above, but participate in it. It is important that the parents' initial declaration be so framed as to prevent escalation as much as possible. Thus, the parents should never say "You will do what we want!" or "This is for your own good!" (assertions that lead almost invariably to an argument or an aggressive spiral) but "We cannot live like this!" The "sit-in" is a perfect manifestation of parental presence, in that the parents contain the child's negative behaviors by being personally there and not by any remote control or hit-and-run practice.

Non-violent obstruction. In this strategy, the parents arrive at the scene of the child's problem behavior (discotheque, street corner, acid party, etc.) and refuse to budge unless the child comes home with them (or runs away, in which case, the procedure is repeated on a later occasion). The difference between the sit-in and non-violent obstruction is that in the latter, the parents appear *in situ*.

Since non-violent obstruction may require more daring than the sit-in, it may be vital for the parents to prepare their support net beforehand (some members of the net optimally accompany the parents in their expeditions). Canvassing for support is no less crucial in this strategy than in the political forms of non-violent resistance. To this end, the parents may have to step out of their self-imposed secrecy (thereby reducing their systemic weakness).

Besides providing the parents with practical help and encouragement, the support net awards to the parents' resistance the seal of social confirmation. Say that the parents were to undertake, all by themselves, something highly unusual, such as entering a discotheque to search for their adolescent child in the middle of the night. In all probability, the teenager would discount this as a crazy, one-time act. If, however, the same act were performed before a chorus of confirming voices (the net), it would no longer be a discountable event, but a new reality to be reckoned with. Thus, the parents become more present when backed by a support net.

Proposition IV: The availability of defenseless victims in the family greatly increase the chances of the child's evolving an aggressive life-style.

An aggressive life-style requires training and the home is the first and often the foremost training ground. Much has been said about the fact that children who were victims of parental violence are at greater risk of becoming violent adults. This is certainly true, but a crucial link is ommitted in this description: the child who becomes a violent adult must also undergo training as an aggressor. Thus, it is either children who, without being themselves victims of aggression, found available victims for their aggression at home, or children who were the victims of aggression but also found available victims for their own aggression who develop an aggressive life-style. In both cases, the necessary condition is training as an aggressor, which, in turn, presupposes victim availability.

Loeber, Weissman and Reid's (1983) study of assaultive adolescents was one of the first to draw a picture of these youngsters as family tyrants who terrorized parents and siblings alike. The authors hypothesized that the family served as a training ground for violence, especially by supplying them with defenseless victims. Thus, assaultive adolescents were found to have more older sisters than older brothers (the authors hypothesized that older brothers would be less liable to become victims of

aggression), a finding that replicates that of another study (Farrington & West, 1971). The authors also hypothesized that parental non-intervention in episodes of violence between siblings might have additionally furthered the assaultive adolescents' career. Indeed, there is evidence that parental non-intervention in children's fights may lead to an increase in the readiness of the aggressor to attack and perhaps induce in the aggressed, a condition of learned helplessness (Bennett, 1990; Perlman & Ross, 1997).

Public and professional selective blindness to the extent and gravity of sibling violence and abuse is no less damaging than the blindness that once obtained regarding the extent and gravity of parental abuse and battering. According to the best estimates, the commonest perpetrators of violence and abuse against children are siblings (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994). In addition, the frequency of sexual abuse by cousins comes very close to abuse by siblings (de Jong, 1989): jointly, abuse by siblings and by cousins is, in all probability, at least twice as frequent as abuse by parents. In every single published comparison to date, severe victimization of children by other children, and most of all by older siblings, proved more frequent than victimization by adults. Thus, in an investigation of reported cases of family violence in Salvador, Brazil, in 1998, half of the cases involved sibling aggression and an additional 25% aggression of sons against mothers (Santos Cunha, 1998)! The importance of professional and social awareness regarding these phenomena cannot be overestimated. Fortunately professional awareness about sibling violence is gradually rising, as evinced by the growing number of publications (see, for instance, Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998), but it still lags way behind professional and social awareness of parental violence.

One reason for the perpetuation of the selective blindness to these phenomena, is the assumption that child violence is a direct result of parent violence. On this view, if one attended to the cause (parent violence), the effect (child violence) would disappear. The mass of the evidence on child violence does not bear this interpretation: parent violence is certainly a facilitative but not a necessary condition of child violence. The necessary conditions are aggressive proneness and parental absence. Indeed, from the point of view of prevention and treatment, developing effective strategies for dealing with child violence may prove a no less crucial (if longer term) avenue for combating adult family violence than the other way round. But what is then the connection between parent and child aggressiveness?

Proposition V: Aggressiveness is not instilled in the child by the parents' aggressive behavior; parental aggressiveness, however, greatly facilitates the evolution of an aggressive life-style in the aggressively-prone child

The link between parental aggressiveness, and child aggressiveness and anti-social behavior is well established (e.g., Olweus, 1980; Patterson, 1982). The question is how is this link to be explained. The common view that parental aggressiveness or harsh punitiveness causes child aggressiveness and anti-social-behavior fails to fit much of the evidence. Thus, on this view rigid and harsh authoritarian parents (compared with highly permissive and non-punishing or with flexibly authoritative parents) should have children who were higher in aggressive and anti-social behaviors. It is not so: the children of rigid and harsh authoritarian parents are considerably lower then the children of permissive, non-punishing parents and as low as the children of flexibily authoritative parents in aggressive and anti-social

behaviors (Baumrind, 1971; Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991). Of course, harsh authoritarianism does exact a price: the children of such parents are less socially competent, independent and self-assured than the children of flexibly authoritative parents: but they are not more aggressive or anti-social. The harshly-punitive parents who do have aggressive and anti-social children are, as a rule, not the authoritarian ones, but the neglectful, impulsive and inconsistent ones (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991; Parke & Slaby, 1983; Patterson, 1982).

This picture of the neglectful aggressive parent fits well with our description of parental absence. The harsh punishments inflicted by these parents, far from constituting a restraining and containing parental presence, would more aptly be characterized as a form of hit-and-run parenting. The children of these parents experience, most of the time, a mixture of parental uninvolvement, helplessness and giving-in, which is now and then punctured by aggressive outbursts. That this parental picture characterizes many parents of aggressive and anti-social children was amply documented by Patterson and his colleagues (Patterson, 1980; Patterson, 1982; Patterson & Capaldi, 1991).

This parental oscillation between feelings of helplessness and aggressive outbursts has been also highlighted by the studies of Bugental and her colleagues (Bugental et al., 1993; Bugental, Blue & Cruzcosa, 1989; Bugental, Lyon, Krantz, & Cortez, 1997). These authors argued that parents with low feelings of control, especially when confronted with an oppositional and aggressive child, come to feel that the child is trying to dominate or manipulate them. They may react to these perceptions with high psychophysiological arousal and abrupt aggressive attempts to regain control. The child's concomitant experience may well be that of a predominantly absent parent, with unpredictable aggressive outbursts.

Additionally, parents who are neglectful and aggressive further the child's aggressive career by creating the conditions for a double escalation: their characteristic helplessness, lack of persistence and uninvolvement is conducive to giving-in, whereas their high arousal and their tendency to view relationships in terms of "Who is the boss?" is conducive to recurrent bouts of mutual hostility. This is precisely the picture of coercive family relations that Patterson linked to the evolution of an aggressive life-style in the child (Patterson, 1982).

The present propposition surely does not imply that parental aggression that is not accompanied by parental absence has no damaging effects. Parental aggression may be linked to a host of negative conditions in the growing child, such as depression, anxiety disorders, sexual dysfunctions, suicidal tendencies, post-traumatic stress disorders, and anti-social patterns, as well as to endless other forms of human misery which are not subsumed by the DSM-IV. However, it is neither true that the child who was the victim of parental aggression becomes necessarily an aggressor, nor that only children who are victims of parental aggression become aggressors. Indeed, although parental aggressiveness may facilitate the evolution of an aggressive life-style in the aggressively prone child, there are also innumerable families in which parents who are not aggressive have highly aggressive children. It would also be a mistake to assume that these parents must surely have somehow neglected or rejected the child, otherwise the child would not have become aggressive. This parent-blaming stance is totally unjustified: the parents of aggressive children are often

caring parents who simply failed to make their restraining presence clear and effective enough.

Proposition VI: Counseling programs for parents of violent children are successful to the extent that they help the parents become present and restrain the child's aggressiveness in non-escalatory ways.

In the present view, the success of counseling programs for the parents of aggressive children is due to their helping the parents reclaim their presence in the the child's life. However, to the extent that these programs also carry the risk of escalation, they will be less successful. Thus, the success of behavioral programs can be explained by their furthering of parental presence no less well than by the reinforcement contingencies per se. By their emphasis on parental monitoring, consistency and follow-through, these programs help the parents experience themselves and be experienced by the child as an ongoing presence. However, the behavioral emphasis on reinforcement contingencies (particularly on punishments) may carry the risk of higher rates of escalation (particularly with older children and adolescents) and therefore also of higher rates of parental drop-out and of treatment failure. Research has shown that this is so: the older the child, the higher the rate of parental drop-out and the lower the rate of treatment success among parents that do remain in treatment (Dishion & Patterson, 1992; Patterson, Dishion & Chamberlain, 1993).

This difference in interpretation between thepresent model and the behavioral one, leads to some divergent practices and predictions: (a) The sit-in, that was described above, follows the principle "hit the iron when cold" (so as to minimize the effects of high arousal and reduce the risk of escalation). This principle is opposed to the behavioral principle that the reinforcement should follow closely upon the target behavior. From a behavioral point of view, one would predict that a parental sit-in that occurs hours or even days after the event, should be less effective than an immediate punishment. Because of the reduced risk of escalation, we predict the opposite. We also predict that this difference in effectiveness in favor of a delayed instead of an immediate response would grow with the child's age (as the child grows more able to retalliate). (b) There are manifestations of parental presence that involve no punishment and no specific positive reinforcement of the desired behavior. For instance, I have often utilized the following procedure with children who are aggressive at school: in the wake of an aggressive episode, the child must stay the next day with one of the parents at his or her place of work. The parents are instructed not to turn the occasion into a party, but also not to act in any punitive way. The parents and school personnel to whom I brought this proposal objected, initially, that this was tantamount to giving a prize to the child's aggressiveness. Arguing from the principles of parental presence, I convinced them to try out the procedure. In the six cases up to now the procedure effectively reduced aggressiveness at school.

In the present view, the factor that contributes to the effectiveness of family therapy programs based on the idea of re-establishing a parents-on-top family structure (Haley, 1980; Price, 1996) and self-help programs such as Toughlove (York, York & Wachtel, 1997) is, once again, the furthering of parental presence. To the extent that these programs encourage the parents to come out of the periphery, to stop giving-in, and to recover their personal and parental voice, they will be successful in countering the evolution of an aggressive life-style. On the other hand, the power orientation of these programs (which is manifest in the hierarchic emphasis of some family

programs and in the "if you don't comply you can leave" message of the more militant Toughlove groups) increase the risk of to escalation and thereby compromise parental cooperation and effectiveness. Particularly with adolescents with a strong "I am the boss!" orientation, it is highly counterproductive to stress that the parent is the boss.

As for programs that focus chiefly on helping the parents become more understanding, acceptant and warm, we predict that unless these programs also include specific procedures for restraining the aggressiveness, they will fail with the aggressive child. We also predict that in such cases, the victimized siblings will continue to suffer. In effect, if we consider the siblings' well-being, humane programs based on understanding and acceptance towards the aggressive child may badly miss the mark.

Proposition VII: The development of an aggressive life-style outside the family requires additional factors beyond aggressive proneness and parental absence; even in the absence of these factors, however, aggressive children may turn into adults with an aggressive life-style wihin their original or their new families.

A child without a "basic practice" in home violence would be probably handicapped in the development of an aggressive life-style outside. However, aggressive proneness and parental absence, even when abetted by the availability of defenseless victims in the home, may not suffice for the establishment of an aggressive life-style outside. Both individual factors (such as low cognitive ability and anxiety level) and environmental ones (such as low socio-economic status and a crime infested neighborhood) are known to play a role in this transition (Henggeler, 1991; Moffit, 1993). Lacking these factors, many children who are aggressive at home may not be aggressive outside. One common example of this kind is that of children whose aggressive behavior is linked to obsessive-compulsive symptoms. In our sample, there are fifteen cases of children and adolescents with obsessive-compulsive disorder, who were highly aggressive at home and not at all outside. For these children, some of the further requirements for the development of an extra-familial aggressive career simply do not obtain. For instance, they may be too anxious to be involved in fights outside the home (at home they can trust the parents not to fight back), they may be scholastically talented and ambitious, and their socio-economic status and neighborhood may be of the kind that do not further an aggressive life-style. Some of these children, however, are known to persist in their aggressiveness towards parents also as adults (we have three such cases in our sample). I have argued elsewhere (Omer, 1999) that a proportion of the recently publicized cases of adult aggression against elderly parents may reflect this kind of lifelong aggressive relationship. No study was made to investigate whether adults who are violent against spouses and children, but are not violent outside the family, fit with this picture of a lifelong aggressive career within the home. We would predict that in most cases it would be so.

Conclusion

The present model differs conceptually and practically from other models on child aggression in the family.

Biological models. In contrast to strict biological models, the present model views biological aggressive proneness as a necessary but not sufficient condition for the

development of an aggressive life-style inside or outside the home. The mutual synergism between aggressive proneness and parental absence can be viewed as a multiplicative function: thus, children with very low aggressive proneness will rarely (if ever) develop an aggressive life-style, whereas children who are very aggressive-prone may require a high degree of parental presence not to do so. This multiplicative function is evinced by the finding that when both neuropsychological predisposition and a negative family environment are present, the chances of the child's developing an aggressive life-style may be four times as high as when only one of the two factors obtain (Bohman, 1996; Cadoret, Cain, & Crow, 1983; Moffit, 1990).

On a practical level, the present model's assumption that biological factors play a central role in the evolution of child aggressiveness helps in the development of a good working alliance with parents. The fear that this biological emphasis might reduce the motivation of parents to change their parental behavior is unjustified: on the contrary, parents display a particularly high motivation for treatment, once they feel that they are not being blamed and that their perception that the aggressive child's peculiarities may be inborn is justified (Omer, 2000). This assumption also facilitates collaboration with neurologists and psychiatrists. A good working relationship between psychotherapists and physicians may be crucial in the treatment of aggressive children. Thus, the parents' readiness to collaborate with the decision to medicate a child with ADHD or OCD grows when the psychotherapist upholds it.

Attachment models

Attachment models view the origin of aggressiveness basically in the parents' (especially the mother's) early failure to respond in a supportive and comforting manner to the child's attachment behaviors (Bowlby, 1980; Case, 1991). This failure leads to the child's internalization of rejecting and hostile objects, which in turn furthers a suspicious and aggressive attitude towards the surroundings. Longitudinal studies have shown that a low quality of early attachment predicts a series of problem behaviors, including aggressive patterns (Elicker, Englund & Stroufe, 1992; Erickson, Stroufe & Egeland, 1985). It is further assumed that, in order to treat the child's aggressiveness, it is necessary to achieve a restructuring of the child's inner object schemas by a provision of dependable attachment experiences.

The present model offers a different interpretation for the obtained correlations between bad attachment history and aggressiveness: (a) the parents' rejecting, impulsive and violent behavior may be biologically linked (through genetic commonalities) to the child's behavior; (b) the child's aggressive proneness may play an evocative role in arousing negative parental reactions; (c) the parents' ongoing neglectful attitude may contribute to the perpetuation of the child's aggressiveness by failing to restrain it (parental absence), and (d) parental aggressiveness may variously facilitate the evolution of an aggressive life-style in the child (see proposition V).

This alternative interpretation touch on the difference between causation and facilitation, with which we opened this article. As we mentioned, this difference may be crucial in the therapeutic dialogue with parents. In addition, it leads to a different view on treatment. Specifically, we would predict that in the absence of a determined strategy for restraining the aggressive behavior, changes in the home emotional atmosphere or the provision of positive relational (therapeutic) figures would not suffice to interrupt the aggressive career (Borduin et al., 1995).

There is also an important common point between between attachment theory and the parental presence model: parents who are present provide their children with an ongoing secure attachment figure, whereas parents who are functionally absent do not. Still, there is a different in emphasis, for some attachment theorists overemphasize the warmth-acceptance pole of the parent-child relationship to the detriment of the restraining pole. This contemporary bias may well run contrary to some major insights of classical object-relational formulations. For instance, in Winnicott's (1958) description of the required parental response to the child's aggression, there is an emphasis on tough determination that is all but absent in more recent expositions. For Winnicott, the holding that the growing child needs is no less the experience of the parents' strong arms than that of their soft embrace.

Family therapy models

From the rich variety of systemic hypotheses concerning child violence, two can be singled out as most relevant for the present discussion: (a) that child aggression in the family results from a reversal of the family hierarchy (Haley, 1980), and (b) that the (small) child can only become more powerful than a parent, when he or she is systemically supported either by the other parent or by other systemic factors (Minuchin, 1974). The role of the therapist on this view would be to help re-reverse the family hierarchy, putting the parents back on top and to spot and stop the systemic influences that weaken the parents and strengthen the violent child.

The present approach draws from family therapy models in the understanding that "systemic leaks" weaken parental presence. In distinction from the focus on family hierarchy, however, we believe that developing parental presence is not the same as turning the parent into the boss (Omer, submitted). On the contrary, a strict hierarchic emphasis may, at times, lead to escalation and to intergenerational war rather than to parental presence. We would predict, therefore, that a formulation in terms of parental presence would lead to better collaboration with parents than one in terms of family hierarchy (many parents are averse to the values implied by a "parents on top" formulation) and that it would cause less escalation.

Systemic influences may be not only negative (conducive to "leaks") but also positive, that is, they may strengthen the parental presence. In this respect, the present model is at one with systemic models that favor the development of parental support nets and emphasize the need to improve the interactions between parents and other relevant systems, such as the school and the community (Henggeler, 1996, 1999).

Learning theory models

The present model differs from learning-theory formulations on various counts: (a) traditional learning models are strictly environmental, while the present one posits an ongoing interaction between inborn predisposition and environmental factors; (b) in the present view it is not the reinforcement value of parental acts that stops the child's aggression, but its restraint through parental presence. Thus, forms of restraint and containment that are not at all experienced as aversive, may be as effective than such as are so experienced; (c) whereas immediacy of parental response is central for learning models, in the present view an immediate response is often unadvisable (particularly when parents and child are at a pitch of arousal). A parental response that comes hours or even days after the problem behavior may be more effective than

one that follows immediately upon it; (d) we predict that a strategy planned as a display of parental presence will be less escalation-prone than one that is based on punishment.

The commonalities between the present approach and the behavioral one (especially as developed by Patterson) are no less deep than the differences. Thus, both approaches attempt to help the parents to become active, to supervise the child's activities, to react decidedly to manifestations of violence, to become more consistent in their reactions and to coordinate their actions between themselves. In addition, we follow Patterson's analysis of the double nature of escalation.

The conceptual, practical and moral acceptability of the present model

An optimal approach for dealing with child aggression should prove conceptually acceptable to workers of different orientations. The reason for this is that in the treatment of these cases many parties (parents, school staff, police, probation officers, therapists, psychiatrists, social workers) are often involved. As cogently argued by Elizur and Minuchin (1993), when different treatment agencies are involved, the case's success may depend far more on the agencies' ability to coordinate their efforts, than on the particular approach of any one therapist or organization. An optimal treatment concept should therefore be acceptable to the different parties, helping them to work out a common plan. The present model provides such a common language: the terms of many different approaches can be easily translated into the language of parental presence. Our experience with a wide spectrum of professional and non-professional collaborators confirms this wide acceptability.

An optimal concept for dealing with child aggression should, in addition, provide parents with relatively simple guidelines that allow for quick decision-making under pressure. The present model allows both for an intuitive grasp of burning issuse, as well as for the development of more longterm plans. Thus, in distinction from more complex theoretical schemas, the idea of parental presence brings to mind a gallery of very practical concrete images: the parents sitting in the child's room; preventing the child from hurting himself or herself; getting in touch with the child, even in odd ways and places; getting in touch with the people who are in touch with the child, and spreading a net of people to contact and protect the child. The gallery also displays counterinstances of parental absence: hitting the child; sending the child away; cutting off communication with the child; giving in to the child to buy peace and quiet, and sabotaging the spouse. These images serve as a quick reference-guide for practitioners and parents. Many an emergency will call to mind one or more of these pictures. The images are not to be applied literally. In many cases considerable modifications are needed. But this is precisely what is meant by a practical guideline: that it provides us with a basic model that can be adapted to changing circumstances.

Finally, a conceptually acceptable and practically relevant model should also be morally legitimate. But legitimate in whose eyes? Surely in the eyes of the parents. Therapeutic measures that fail to pass the test of the parents' mores are bound to fail. It is legitimate, of course, to negotiate with the parents, trying to bring them over to one's point of view. In the end, however, only what the parents fully accept can be viewed as a valid step. The model should also be morally legitimate in the eyes of the other professionals involved with the case. I would venture that any approach that

rises moral indignation in a large number of professionals stands little chance of being consistently embraced by parents. In our experience the concept and practices of parental presence pass these tests of legitimacy better than other extant models. But what about the children? Should they also not view the parental acts as legitimate? Perhaps not from the very start, for children of all ages will try to shake off any limit to their habitual freedom. If, however, the children cannot grow to accept the parental steps, but persist in viewing them as totally illegitimate, something must be wrong with the steps. As a final prediction, therefore, I would venture, that parental moves that evince parental presence stand more chances than acts that reflect power, hierarchy or reinforcement of being eventually viewed as legitimate also by the child. Little by little, as the parents make it clear that their goal is not to show the child "who is the boss" nor to punish them highhandedly, but to be fully present as parents, the child will learn not only to accommodate him or herself, but also to accept the parents' right to do so.

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