

#7 COULD BOOK-SHARING CONTRIBUTE TO THE CHALLENGE OF REDUCING LEVELS OF VIOLENCE?

Introduction

South Africa suffers from one of the highest levels of violence in the world. Reducing this level is a major challenge requiring intervention on several fronts. An intriguing possibility is that book-sharing may be able to play a role in meeting this challenge.

The basis to this speculation is that there are a number of factors known to increase the risk of child aggression - and thereby, later resulting in increased levels of adolescent and adult violence. Several of these factors are directly and indirectly targeted by book-sharing training programmes.

If reduction in these risk factors were shown to reduce levels of violence, this would be of major significance, because roll out of book-sharing training programmes across low and middle income countries like South Africa could be achieved relatively inexpensively.

This argument was recently made in a [blog post](#) entitled '*Could supporting parents in sharing picture books with their young children help prevent violence?*', by Peter Cooper, David Jeffery, Joseph Murray, Mark Tomlinson, Nicholas Dowdall and Lynne Murray.

In which ways can violence in South Africa be addressed?



High levels of violence and related crime has long been one of South Africa's major challenges. Aside from tragic personal and social consequences, the national cost of violence in South Africa accounts for a fifth of the country's GDP.

Addressing this violence requires interventions at several levels – from improved policing to family and community interventions. One target of intervention that may hold great promise is the area of early childhood development.

Why is it important to address aggression in young children?

The behaviour pattern of persistent and pervasive aggression in childhood is a strong predictor of violent behaviour in adolescence and adulthood.





Typically, in the course of the natural history of a person, the point at which they are most aggressive is when they are two years old. Usually, after this age, children learn ways of controlling their emotions, including managing their aggressive impulses.

Previous research has shown that if a young child does not learn to control their emotions and contain their aggressive impulses by 3 or 4 years of age this behaviour can become entrenched, increasing their risk of violence in adulthood.

Did you know?

Research has shown that very young children with persistent and pervasive aggressive behaviour account for over half of adolescent and adult violent crimes.



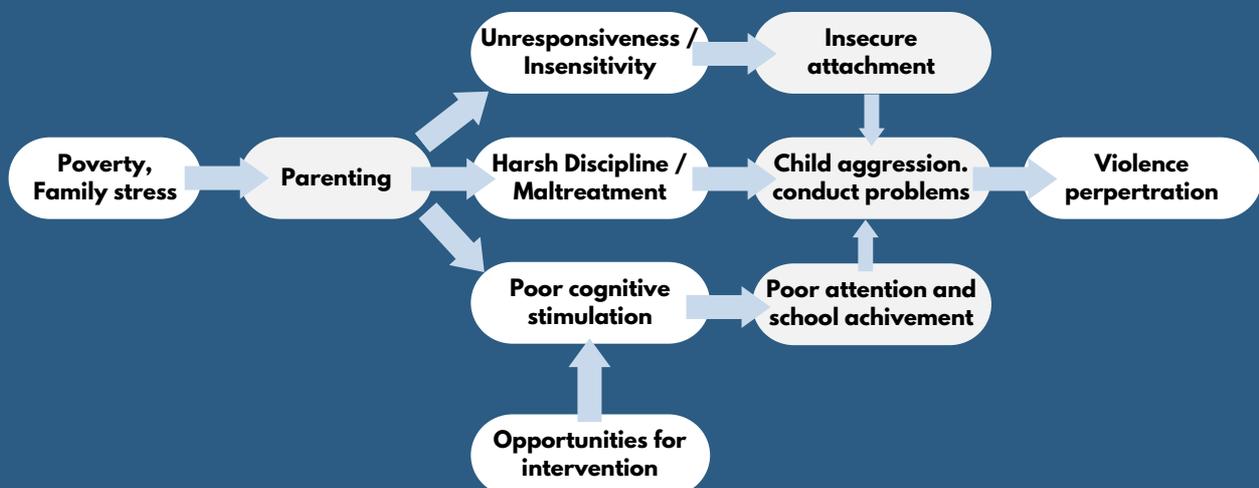
50%

Risk factors for persistent and pervasive childhood aggression

Three childhood risk factors that raise the risk of children developing persistent and pervasive aggressive behaviour are:

- insecure attachment
- aggressive behaviour and,
- poor attention and associated educational difficulty.

The way in which these risk factors relate to children's early experience is shown schematically below:



It can be seen from the figure above that each of these three childhood risk factors are associated with three parenting difficulties:

- insensitive and unresponsive parenting,
- harsh discipline and,
- inadequate stimulation of child cognitive development.

The speculation that sharing books with children could reduce the level of violence rests on the fact that when parents are trained in book-sharing, they show changes in their parenting. Indeed, parents trained in book-sharing become more sensitive and responsive in their interactions with their children (both when book-sharing and in other contexts).

While we know that such parents become better at helping to improve their child's attention and stimulating their child's language development, the impact of training in book-sharing on harsh parenting is more uncertain. Certainly increased sensitivity and responsiveness are in opposition to harshness. However, it is not known whether such parenting generalises to wider discipline practices. This remains a possibility.

For more information on the impacts of book sharing, check out Infographics #2, #3, #4 and #5 in this series.

Long-term studies on violence reveal that early book-sharing is one of the few predictors of reduced levels of adult violence.

Why is this important in a country like South Africa?



South Africa suffers from very high levels of violence. At the same time, South Africa is considered to be a 'lower middle income country'. This means that government programmes have to be planned in the context of limited resources.

Investing in programmes that focus on Early Childhood Development 'pay off' in the future as they lead to reduced social disturbance and crime. A UK study found that there was a 16% drop in crime amongst the children who took part in an early childhood programme. This 16% drop saved the government double the amount of money it invested in the programme.

Since book-sharing is inexpensive and can be delivered by local community workers in conditions of adversity, book-sharing could potentially play an important role in reducing violence in South Africa.

Conclusion

Early childhood is a vital time in which to identify aggressive behaviour and prevent it becoming a set pattern that endures into adolescence and adulthood. There are particular early childhood and parenting factors known to raise the risk of persistent and pervasive aggression in children, themselves strongly predictive of later violence. Providing families and other carers with book-sharing training could reduce risk factors for persistent and pervasive aggression in children and thereby, potentially, contribute to the reduction of violence.

It is important to emphasise that there are many other factors contributing to violence not included in the figure above.

While programmes for young children and parents could make a major contribution to violence prevention, they need to be part of a wider, multi-level strategy.



About this series

The 'Making Sense at Mikhulu' infographic series includes a summary of the following research findings:

- #1** How we gathered data for our first major research project on book-sharing in South Africa
- #2** Book-sharing improves children's language skills
- #3** Book-sharing improves children's attention span
- #4** Book-sharing improves carer-child relationships
- #5** Book-sharing makes children more emotionally aware
- #6** Book-sharing has an especially large benefit for children with the lowest language and attention skills
- #7** Could book-sharing contribute to the challenge of reducing levels of violence?



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