

## Exploring the Relationship between Learners' Aggressive Behaviour and Disrupted Family Life

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**KEYWORDS** Antisocial Behaviour. Aggressiveness. Disruptive Parenting

**ABSTRACT** This paper debates the assumption that the disrupted family life contributes to aggressive behaviour exhibited by learners. The literature review showed that some aspects of the disrupted family life contribute to aggressive behaviour in learners. A small-scale research study was conducted in the Free State province of South Africa to explore whether the framework and findings taken from the literature on learners' aggressive behaviour are applicable in the context of South Africa. The data indicated that negativity in some families potentially results in learners' aggressive behaviour. The paper recommends intervention strategies that target learners and family members in order to reduce learners' aggressive behaviour. The inclusive intervention programmes outlined in the article are essential for reducing the negative effects on individuals, in the schools and in the family

### INTRODUCTION

Learners' aggressive behaviour has become a serious problem in South African secondary schools in recent decades. South African communities, in general, are affected and frustrated by this issue. Young people in South Africa are disproportionately involved in crime and violence both as victims and as perpetrators. According to the 2005 National Youth Victimization Study, 41% of young people had been the victims of some crime in the 12 months prior to the study. There have been several other studies on the endemic nature of violence in South African schools. The National Youth Victimization Study, for instance, reports that one in five learners (21%) has been threatened or hurt by someone at school, and a third (33%) have been verbally abused by someone at school. The perpetrators of school violence are often learners at school, classmates and other young people in the community. Statistics on the numbers of young people in prison provide some indication of the extent of the involvement

of youth as perpetrators of crime and violence. In June 2002, 36% of the prison population was below the age of 26 years, and over half of awaiting trial prisoners (53%) were in the same age group (Burton 2006).

Another study conducted in two of the biggest and most densely populated provinces in South Africa revealed that in the Johannesburg area of Gauteng Province 36% of male learners reported that they had kicked, punched or beaten another learner in the previous year (Fineran et al. 2001). Similarly, a study conducted in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands revealed that 73% of learners reported that they had witnessed violence at school in the previous 12 months, while 10% reported that they had been part of a group that had killed a person, and 4% indicated that they had killed a person without being part of a group (Govender and Killian 2001). Collings and Magojo (2003) also report that, in Durban, 78.8% of high school males had a history of violent behaviour, with 8.2% reporting that they had killed a person.

The premise of the arguments presented throughout this review is that schools reflect what is happening in the home. Family is regarded as an important support system available to the child. Consequently, any disturbance in this support system through factors such as parental separation or divorce, domestic violence, abusive parents, negative parenting style, substance dependency and the socio-economic status of the parents, may have implications for learners' functioning (Richardson 2007).

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Unhealthy home environment combined with parents' personal problems may contribute to children's emotional disturbance. Certain parental and family patterns and events may lead children to be more susceptible to emotional and behavioural problems. For example, hostile and aggressive children are more generally found in hostile and aggressive families (Kincheloe and Steinberg 2005). This is confirmed by Bandura's (cited in Hill 2002) theory that children tend to imitate aggressive behaviour modelled by their parents. Baron and Richardson (1994) also confirm that observational learning and direct experience are the most influential factors in the acquisition of aggressive responses. This article therefore aims to explore the link between disrupted family life and learners' aggressiveness.

#### RELATED LITERATURE REVIEW

The disrupted family life seems to play an important role in shaping the aggressive behaviour of learners (Fomby and Cherlin 2007). A disrupted family life is defined as one in which there is marital disruption such as divorce, separation and/or single parenthood (Zionts et al. 2002). Some seemingly intact families may be characterised by spousal violence, child abuse and alcoholism. The disrupted family life can be said to feature inadequate/negative family relations and other adjustment issues, family stress, conflict and poor communication between its members. The above are caused by different problems that the family have to deal with, like divorce and separation, domestic violence, abusive parents, substance dependency and the socio-economic status of the parents. Researchers have argued that there is a root to all the aggression that a person demonstrates (Zionts et al. 2002). One may wonder why these learners manifest their frustration outside the context in which it takes place. One answer may be found in the Freudian process, labelled as "the defence mechanism of displacement" (Phaneuf 2008). When applied to frustration, this process is sometimes referred to as the "kick the cat" phenomenon. This means, for example, that when a learner is frustrated, he or she cannot retaliate against the person causing the frustration but may choose to kick the cat instead. The cat may not be the true object but is a symbolic substitute for the true object of the learner's aggression. Most learners resort to the

displacement "kick the cat" phenomenon because they are charged with an aggressive drive emanating from the circumstances of their family environment (Moeller 2001).

Divorce and separation have been identified as causes of stress in the whole family. High rates of divorce or separation have serious harmful effects on children. Learners who are part of this situation feel frustrated and their frustration issues may be discharged through behavioural problems. These behavioural problems take the form of anger, disruptive behaviour and aggression (Neuhaus 1974; Lösel et al. 2007). The trauma they experience may not be easily erased from their minds. It may create a syndrome that troubles them and destroys their sense of self-esteem. They tend to dwell on the many upheavals that occur during the conflict leading up to divorce and find this unbearable. These experiences sometimes become part of their daily lives at home, at school, in the community and in the playground. In short, wherever they are or go their life may be characterised by these traumatic events. This trauma usually causes high rates of instability which is manifested in aggressive behaviour (Fomby and Cherlin 2007). Parents who are going through a process of divorce and separation are likely to become frustrated and start to retaliate. Some parents abuse their children physically or emotionally, especially after having resorted to alcohol. In some cases, parental hostility becomes so extreme and gets out of control that it results in serious abuse of the learners. Learners who are exposed to this kind of home life may eventually become traumatised and start to show deviant behaviour, delinquency and maladjustment. Another motive for resorting to aggression may be to gain attention (Mabitla 2006).

Learners' aggression may also be aggravated by the marital discord of their parents. A home filled with continual conflict and coldness can be extremely damaging to the children. Records show that unhappy homes produce children with deviant behaviour, delinquency and maladjustment (Lauer 1986). Downs and Miller (1998) confirm that childhood experiences of parental discord can cause immoral behaviour in adulthood. Some children may not cope with the traumatic memories of their parents' violence. They feel powerless to control people and events. They sometimes feel overwhelmed by emotions which they find difficult to express. Failure to

express emotions may affect behaviour and cause outbursts of aggressiveness (Ammerman and Hersen 1991). According to Robbins (2000), witnessing angry exchanges between parents causes distress in the child. Children who witness episodes of domestic violence, such as their father striking and injuring their mother, experience a great deal of distress. Although these children may want to retaliate, they are powerless to do so. This may cause them to react with anger, anxiety and despair. This means the child may be at risk of becoming aggressive. Fraczek and Zumkley (1992: 172) articulate this clearly: "Parents influence the child's behaviour intentionally or unintentionally, depending on how they themselves behave. Aggressive children often have aggressive parents as a model for their behaviour." Parental conflict is so highly disturbing to children that it can, in turn, provoke conflict in the children. When learners observe high levels of destructive conflict, it may affect their functioning to such an extent that they tend to take responsibility for causing or resolving it. This is sometimes accompanied by feelings of anxiety, depression or helplessness that may develop into aggressive behaviour (Grych and Jouriles 2000).

To be abused by a parent is an extremely traumatic event that may break the bond between parent and child. It may disrupt the child's trust in the parent and eventually in any grown-up. The child may end up being so sensitive that he or she resorts to aggressive behaviour (Stacks 2005). This may also give rise to avoidance of any direct conversation with peers, because of fear that they may discover what has happened in the home. In such instances, children may lose adult and peer accompaniment, which has a direct and detrimental impact on child development as a whole. Some children resort to attention-seeking behaviour by being disruptive and aggressive. It has been pointed out that learners who have been abused during their childhood are likely to be aggressive when they grow older. The abuse they experience in their early life sometimes destroys their ability to trust people and leads them to believe that inflicting pain on others is the only acceptable norm (Gasa 2006).

According to Havemann and Lehtinen (1990), alcoholism results in poor relationships, abuse problems and the breakup of marriages or relationships. As Le Roux (1992: 155) puts it:

"Alcoholism is a stressor, which disturbs family harmony, and leads to increased indecent aggressive activity." A home with an alcoholic parent tends to be characterised by family conflicts, arguments, incongruent communication, spousal abuse, emotional neglect and isolation of children. The children may carry the scars of the emotionally disturbing experience for the rest of their lives. Observing the unpredictable behaviour of the parent concerned who says one thing and does another, sometimes leaves the child not knowing what message to respond to (Lawson et al. 1983). Children of alcoholics tend to be exposed to the distressing situation in which their parents – apart from assaulting each other – refrain from disciplining the children yet abuse and neglect them. The children sometimes become terrified, have behaviour problems in the home and beyond, may be confused, inattentive at school, hostile, rebellious, insecure and defensive. Some act out their resentment and frustration by engaging in vandalism, truancy and may even display neurotic disturbance, antisocial behaviour and suicidal tendencies (Saitoh et al. 1992).

Children – especially school-going children – of alcoholics, who are subjected to daily tension and pressure, sometimes suffer from severe stress. In these families, children's basic emotional needs are likely to be ignored and their feelings unacknowledged. They are sometimes deprived of concrete limits and guidelines for behaviour. This may ruin their lives and cause depression, temper tantrums and disruptive classroom behaviour (Wilson and Blocher 1990). Gress (1988) finds that the emotional scars that children of alcoholics retain are sometimes so severe that their social development is retarded in a way that distorts the view they have of themselves. Some children learn survival mechanisms by being aggressive or choosing ingratiating peers who agree with everything they suggest.

There is a link between economic hardship and children's problem behaviour, such as aggression. Experiencing intense economic stress sometimes produces negative exchanges in the family. As negativity between the parents increases, short-tempered responses to children may also increase (Skinner et al. 1992). According to Ushasree (1990), parents in disadvantaged families tend to be indecisive, disorganised, apathetic and rejecting, and they themselves

have low self-esteem. They believe that they can control neither their children's lives nor their own. They are likely to allow their children immediate gratification instead of guiding them towards long-term gratification. The findings of Marshall (1992) show that children of low-status parents are marginalised and reside in rundown neighbourhoods – all of which may cause staggering obstacles to achieving decency and dignity and making well-informed decisions. Low socio-economic status is linked with a variety of behaviour problems. Poverty directly or indirectly affects parenting behaviour which, in turn, may affect youthful antisocial behaviour (Moeller 2001).

Economic deprivations can be a major source of unhappiness. The family's financial problems may contribute to aggressive tendencies because depression sometimes causes many low-income couples to fight or assault each other (Theo 2007). "People whose occupations, education and income are low on the social ladder have a greater probability of being assaultive than do people who rank higher. High [sic] proportion of abusive families have 'insufficient income'" (Berkowitz 1993:259). The indication is that learners who are brought up in a family with low socio-economic status may develop a variety of behavioural problems. As may be expected, these problems may be caused by growing up in a socially and economically deprived family. Continual financial squabbles at home sometimes give rise to learners who themselves become aggressive.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A quantitative approach was followed in this research study. Such an approach is explanatory in nature. The instrument used to collect data was a standardised questionnaire which Ross (2005: 3) defines as a "set of fixed format", self-report items that respondents completed at their own pace.

### The Instrument

A literature review enabled the researcher to compile questions suitable for the problem. The questions that were compiled with the help of a literature review were categorised into the following broad areas: biographical data of the respondents, family climate, aggression instinct and learners' interaction with the family members.

The draft instrument was developed from the items categorised above. The researcher decided that the draft instrument would take the form of a self-report instrument. The justification for using a self-report measure was that it allows anonymity. More candid responses can be obtained when using a self-report measure than with a personal interview (Avery and Walker 1993). This type of questionnaire was also regarded as the most appropriate for scoring purposes. The questionnaire implemented a Likert-type response scale. Respondents were required to respond with "No", "Undecided" or "Yes". The researcher decided to format the self-report instrument into a series of short statements. To prevent misinterpretation of questions, some guidelines provided by Babbie (1998) were considered in the formulation of items.

### Data Collection

Seven secondary schools in the Thabo Mofutsanyane District of the Free State Province, South Africa, were selected. These schools were selected because they were deemed to represent learners from all backgrounds and different environmental upbringing, who had been directly and indirectly involved in aggressive behaviour. Grade-10 learners were selected randomly as respondents because all the schools identified had Grade-10 classes. Some of the learners in these schools were directly involved in violence because they were among the gangsters who were involved in committing the deeds. Others were indirectly involved because they had witnessed aggressive behaviour in their community and their schools and among their friends. The list of names of all the learners in each of the Grade-10 classes was obtained. The names of the respondents were selected randomly, using each names list. The list of selected names in each school was drawn up. The instrument was applied in the natural school environment during the Life Orientation period. The sample consisted of 198 learners, comprising 90 boys and 108 girls, aged between 15 and 19.

### Data Analysis

The raw data were computerised and analysed. The interpretations were done through inspection of the data integrated with the literature. Tables were drawn up to show the

results. Most depicted that, one way or another, aggression was present in the learners' home environment.

### Validity and Reliability

Two aspects of validity were considered, namely content validity and face validity. According to Ary et al. (1990), content validity refers to whether the items are adequate for measuring what they are supposed to measure and whether they constitute a representative sample of the behaviour domain under investigation. Face validity, however, refers to the extent to which, on the face of it, the questions measure the construct they are supposed to measure. In this case, the questionnaire was evaluated by two experts and, according to their judgment, the questionnaire had content and face validity. The reliability of the questionnaire was ascertained through Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficient, 0.743, (Babbie 2008) that was used to analyse the results of this research. A questionnaire is reliable to the extent that, independent of its administration or that of a comparable instrument, it consistently yields similar results under comparable conditions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section deals with the results relating to how learners perceive the influence of the family in their daily lives. It also looks at the influence of the family climate on learners' behaviour, inherent behaviour of learners in a family characterised by aggression, as well as learners' interaction with the family members.

### The Influence of Family Climate on Learners' Behaviour

Table 1 indicates that most of the respondents are from functional families who are employed, educated, married, loving and reasonably strict. A small number of respondents may be labelled as being exposed to disrupted family life: they may be living with people who are violent, uninvolved, unreasonably strict and who do not exercise discipline. Although this reflects a small number, it is still a worrying factor, especially when one looks at the percentage (26.8%) of those who responded "Other" when asked about

their father's work. The "Other" may mean that the respondents were never exposed to or never knew their fathers or it may be that the father is deceased. This concurs with the commonly held view that the absence of paternal authority and the paternal role model leads to a higher rate of aggression and violence (Popenoe 2009). More than half (54%) of the respondents live in small houses and a small percentage (13.6%) live in shacks, followed by a few (4.5%) who cannot identify themselves as living in one of the above options. The above percentages are important for the incidence of aggression, and Fraczek and Zumkley (1992:172) supported this as follows: "The socio-economic conditions of the family are related to child aggression." A small percentage of respondents indicate aggressiveness in their families (3.5%) followed by those who are uninvolved (1.5%). Of the respondents, 9.6% are exposed to unreasonably strict discipline, while a small percentage (2.5%) are not being disciplined at home.

**Table 1: The influence of family climate on learners' behaviour**

	<i>Factor</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Parents' Marital Status</i>	Married	60.6
	Never married	17.7
	Divorced	7.6
	Other	14.1
<i>Father's Work</i>	Unemployed	22.7
	Self-employed	26.3
	Gardener/Cleaner/Labourer	17.7
	Professional employee	6.6
	Other	26.8
<i>Mother's Work</i>	Unemployed	38.4
	Self-employed	16.7
	Gardener/Cleaner/Labourer	31.3
	Professional employee	4.0
	Other	9.6
<i>Father's Education</i>	None	17.7
	Grades 1 to 7	31.3
	Grades 8 to 12	37.9
	Diploma/Degree	13.1
<i>Mother's Education</i>	None	14.6
	Grades 1 to 7	32.3
	Grades 8 to 12	40.9
	Diploma/Degree	12.1
<i>The Type of House You Live in</i>	Big house	27.8
	Small house	54.0
	Shack	13.6
	Other	4.5
<i>The Type of People You Live With at Home</i>	Loving	94.9
	Aggressive/Violent	3.5
	Uninvolved	1.5
<i>Type of Discipline at Home</i>	Unreasonably strict	9.6
	Strict but reasonable	87.9
	No discipline	2.5

The fact that the proportion of aggressive behaviour in the home is insignificant (3.5%) raises critical issues/questions. For instance, a large proportion of parents (see table 1) possess only Grades 8 to 12 qualifications (mothers' education – 40.9%; fathers' education – 37.9%). The data also show relatively high proportions of unemployment among the parents (mothers' unemployment rate – 38.4%; fathers' unemployment rate – 22.7%). Similarly, the type of work in which parents are involved is generally manual (mothers – 31.3%; fathers – 17.7%). What emerges from the data is indeed fascinating. It disproves the assumption that households that can be described as disrupted have the propensity for violent dispositions (Sen 2008). The findings of this study are consistent with Amartya Sen's (2007, 2008) view that unemployment and poverty do not necessarily lead to violence. Sen (2007, 2008) argues that the perception that poverty is responsible for crime and violence draws on an oversimplification of empirical connections that are far from universal. The relationship is also contingent on many other factors, including political, social and cultural circumstances, which make the world in which we live far more complex.

### The Influence of Family Members' Behaviour on Learners' Behaviour

Table 2 shows that the family climate of most of the respondents is supportive (86.9%). The data also show that a large proportion of parents (81.3%) discourage any form of aggression in households. There is evidence that not many parents abused alcohol (mothers – 10.1%; fathers – 25.3%). But there is also evidence from respondents (20.7%) that the conduct of some fathers was not exemplary. For example, 30.3% felt that their fathers neglected them in that they spent little time with them; 18.2% reported that parents scolded them for no apparent reason. The data show pockets of aggressive behaviour, for instance, 16.7% of the respondents witnessed fighting between their parents, while 3.5% reported that their parents encouraged them to fight. Despite the preceding findings, the data show that a large proportion of households (81.3%) discouraged aggression. The above data, like the findings of Sen (2008, 2007) who disputed the link between poverty and crime, appear to dispute the view that broken homes and homes

in which parents frequently quarrel have been linked to stress in learners and that stress often results in physical and emotional illness (Lauer 1986:449).

**Table 2: The perception of the influence of family members on learners' behaviour**

<i>Item</i>	<i>% No</i>	<i>% Undecided</i>	<i>% Yes</i>
Supportive parents	7.6	5.6	86.9
Parents fighting	75.8	7.6	16.7
Good exemplary father	20.7	14.1	65.2
Scolding for no apparent reason	79.3	2.5	18.2
Good exemplary mother	10.1	5.1	84.8
Discouragement of aggression	15.2	3.5	81.3
Little time spent with father	50.0	19.7	30.3
Excessive drinking by father	57.1	17.7	25.3
Excessive drinking by mother	82.8	7.1	10.1
Parents' encouragement to fight	96.0	.5	3.5

### Typical Behaviour of Learners in a Family Characterised by Aggression

The effects of learners' instinctive reactions when it comes to fighting were investigated. There is a minimal connection between the aggression instinct and aggressive behaviour depicted in Table 3. Only 11.1% of respondents felt positive about fighting, 22.7% felt that fighting is good when someone is angry and 22.2% confirmed that they became aggressive when they were really upset. However, the above percentages (11.1%, 22.2% and 22.7%) are important in terms of learners' attitude to aggression. They also indicate that some learners felt positive about fighting. It shows that these learners had become desensitised to violence and perceived joining the fighting gangs as morally acceptable. This attitude is confirmed by Moeller (2001) who maintains that learners who are aggressive believe that aggression will yield tangible pay-offs and will terminate others' noxious behaviour. This is also confirmed by Berkowitz (1993:187) who claims that, if children are exposed to aggression, they become aggressively inclined themselves: "violence breeds violence".

**Table 3: Aggression instinct**

<i>Item</i>	<i>% No</i>	<i>% Undecided</i>	<i>% Yes</i>
Fighting is good when one is angry.	74.2	3.0	22.7
Fighting is bad.	11.1	1.0	87.9
Becomes aggressive when upset.	76.3	1.5	22.2
Belonging to a fighting gang is cool.	88.4	1.5	10.1

### CONCLUSION

The aims of this article were to explore the link between learners' aggressive behaviour and disrupted family life. The literature revealed that the extent to which learners are exposed to a number of different family risk factors may lead them to be susceptible to aggressive behaviour. Learners' aggression is viewed as a reaction to frustration in an attempt to reduce adverse stimuli. Disruptive parenting practices are likely to be causally related to learners' antisocial behaviour. This aggressiveness may also occur when family members are distant and disengaged from each other and have little emotional bonding. The starting point for aggression may be learners' feelings of powerlessness in their disrupted family. The intense levels of anger and anxiety that are present when learners resort to aggression may be significantly related to parental behaviour.

Learners, teachers and parents need empowerment, knowledge and skills to cope with aggressive behaviour. It is the responsibility of the parents to seek help and the duty of the school to identify behaviour problems and to implement effective behaviour modification and preventive programmes. Schools can intervene effectively in the lives of aggressive learners by making it compulsory for parents to be involved in the intervention or prevention programme.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Parents of aggressive learners – regardless of their contribution to the origin or maintenance of their children's aggression – face a daunting task. Family, friends and professionals expect these parents to both love and discipline their children. Their failure to perform these tasks adequately may leave them tired, discouraged

and perhaps even resentful. Outsiders are often unable to appreciate the skill and effort needed to turn the tide on a developing aggressive child. Building a productive alliance with these parents is one of the more challenging tasks a school has to face. Most parents with aggressive children want to know what they can do to make things better in their troubled family. In fact, for some parents, the strength of the alliance will depend more on the skills and information they receive than on the emotional support they are given.

It often happens that school personnel tends to point their fingers at parents when it comes to determining the reason for the disruptive, aggressive behaviour of their children. However, in the light of the above discussion about the possible role of families in the development of aggression, this attribution can often be substantially accurate. Even school-based professionals often ask: "How can we provide one set of skills in school, only to have the learners go home to learn the opposite set of skills? If the parents continue to use aggressive disciplinary procedures, model aggression in their interactions, fail to monitor aggression in siblings, and do not discourage violent television or video games, isn't the school swimming against an irresistible current?"

The positive aspects of the above questions are that, if such parents can be persuaded to participate fully in a well-designed and structured parent management training (PMT) programme, positive results may be achieved. The idea is that, if parents monitor the child's behaviour inside and outside the school, and also recognise, reinforce and model pro-social behaviour, aggressive behaviour may be reduced. Another approach to parent training, behaviour management parent training (BMPT), began to unfold some years ago. This approach assumed a predominant role by virtue of the vast amount of empirical work supporting its conceptual base and therapeutic efficacy. It began as an approach to train parents to use the same behaviour modification techniques, such as social reinforcement, extinction and token economy, as behaviour therapists use to reprogramme the social environment. It was designed to increase parents' control over their children's behaviour.

Multi-systemic therapy, unlike other approaches which locate psychopathology within the child, views the child's antisocial

behaviour as a symptom of the malfunctioning family. Multi-systemic therapy is based on the participation of all the members of the family in the therapy sessions which occur either in the home or in community settings. The initial assessment involves an attempt to determine strengths and weaknesses in the child, the individual parents, the marriage, the sibling subsystem, the school and the peer and social networks of both learner and family. After the assessment, interventions such as joining, reframing and enactment may be used. Issues such as the parents' marital adjustment, parent-school relationships and the child's peer relationships are addressed. Individual treatment of the child, the parents – or both – may also be included in the therapy.

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