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Violent girls rarely receive help they need

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THANKS TO two names- Reena Virk and Karla Homolka (one a teenage girl viciously slain by other girls, one a conscienceless murderer)- Canada had a steep learning curve on the subject of girls and violence in the last few years.

Maybe the learning curve wasn't steep enough. Conservative media practically licked their chops at the chance to push the idea that "girls are just as violent as boys." (Not really: The numbers are minuscule, but rising.) It must have seemed to them like a wonderful chance for a sly jab at the claims of the women's movement. But the coverage stopped there. In all the lurid news stories, did you see any about the causes of girls' violence or how it might be prevented?

No? That's a shame. Researchers have, in fact, been doing some ground-breaking work on the causes and cures for girls' aggressive behaviour. On a leafy street in mid-town Toronto, Earls court Child and Family Centre, a venerable treatment centre, has tailored programs specifically to violence-prone girls under the age of 12, aiming to keep them "in school and out of trouble" long enough to get them past the dangerous shoals of adolescence.

In 1996, Earls court's staff had to face the fact that girls in their programs were simply not making the same progress as boys.

"We were putting them in the same groups as boys, in treatment approaches designed for boys, and it wasn't working," said director Ken Goldberg. With some money from private foundations, Earls court designed its new Girls' Connection programs for those between the ages of 6 and 12.

It is the only long-running, continuous program in Canada designed purposefully for aggressive girls. That fact alone speaks to our shallow and sensationalist interest in the topic; if we really gave a damn, we wouldn't begrudge the tax dollars to support way more prevention.

It's astonishingly cheap (\$3,000 per child in total) and promising. At six months, one year and even two years post-treatment, almost all of Earls court's girls

continue with improved behaviour.

When you consider that angry, violent girls are most likely to drop out of school and become pregnant at a young age, the consequences of doing nothing become almost frightening. Aggressive boys may turn into adult criminals, and it's tougher to correct their violent behaviour because our culture gives them so much encouragement to act like macho aggressors. But violent girls- isolated, lonely and ostracized by their peer groups- almost inevitably gravitate to the company of deviant older boys. (The girls who helped murder Reena Virk were fighting over a boy- a sadly typical pattern for aggressive girls, whose self-esteem is so low that the approval of boys is worth killing for.) Too soon they are launching a new generation of babies who will grow up in poverty, chaos and with inadequate parenting.

It's a template for escalating societal grief, not to mention the sadness of the girls' lives.

Some of the causes of girls' violence are not so different from the pattern for boys: extreme poverty, abuse, emotional abandonment, harsh punishments, lax parent monitoring, learning disabilities. To the researchers' surprise, however, another consistent theme emerged: Most of the girls under scrutiny had endured a long separation from their mothers in early childhood.

If you could peek into the various rooms at Earlscourt, you might (according to the workers there) see a group of boys bouncing off the walls and trying to bop one another. In an all-girl group, they'll be "talking to each other and relating like mad." Relationships are so crucial to girls that they respond vibrantly to Earlscourt's innovations. In a room where 5- and 6-year-olds are learning some ingenious anger-management techniques, you would surely be moved to see how eagerly the girls role play, make friendships and earnestly practise their new temper-taming rules. In a group session of moms and pre-teens, you might see a tender light of amazement and understanding dawn on the girls' truculent faces when the mothers share their memories of their own first periods or first loves.

It's not a piece of cake. Aggressive girls test out as more severely disturbed than equally aggressive boys. (One screaming, hitting, out-of-control tyke had been suspended from school five times when she was only halfway through kindergarten.) And Earlscourt's workers are among the lowest paid in the city, due to a chintzy government funding formula.

Next time you read a shrill headline about violent girls, remember this: So many lives to be made whole; so much promise; so little support from our greedy, self-

righteous, blame-happy society.

Note(s):

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