

The Roots of Violence: How to Stop the Shoots from Growing

How many of you have had, at the least, fleeting fears of your children turning violent in future years? When we see consistent sibling slugs, pushing on the playground, provoking a pet, throwing something in a rage, threatening to “kill” someone, it’s generally our path of least resistance to catastrophize and project our child into the future as the next serial killer! We all do it in a nano second. Those thoughts provoke fear, and we react out of fear. It’s important in those moments to understand the real roots of violence and learn how to avoid those roots from growing in the direction you don’t want. We typically try to stop hitting, yelling, and angry outbursts with threats, punishment, or our own angry outbursts in an attempt to raise kind, peaceful children. We set the stage for just the opposite.

Angry energy can develop two ways, passionately or violently, depending on how it’s handled in the family. Anger is a natural human feeling. We needn’t fear it. But most of us were taught that anger is bad. Some of us learned to repress our anger under restrictive parenting and now continue that legacy. “I turned out okay. I’m not violent,” is the argument for continuing the parenting techniques of generations past. But what is the cost of repression? When we learn as children that we *shouldn’t* feel a certain way, we believe we are bad when those natural feelings arise. We learned this from parents who didn’t want to deal with our feelings because theirs were squashed as children. None of us learned how to express our anger appropriately and so fear it in our children.

Those who learned to suppress feelings from overly strict childhood censorship suffer more than we may realize. Many are depressed, never reach potential for fear of standing up for themselves, become paralyzed at challenges, cannot make decisions, etc. Often these ailments result in medications and addictions.

Many children are less able to suppress angry energy due to more volatile, aggressive inborn temperaments. If they continue to receive negative feedback through punishment, threats, and disapproval, they may become bullies, power hungry in the workplace, greedy, or dictatorial and angry parents. Many do progress toward more violent behavior. When natural energies are thwarted by the threat of punishment,

withdrawal of a parent's love, isolation, or the removal of loved activities, those energies fester and grow and eventually retaliation becomes the only option. Sudden outbursts, unrealistic meltdowns, and violent behavior may result.

To insure peaceful children, we need to empower them and parent in a way that may feel counterintuitive because it is the opposite of how most of us were brought up. First be sure to parent the child you have, not the child you wish you had. Aggressive energy does not have to turn violent if given proper outlets and support. Instead of trying to suppress your child's feelings, telling her "it's not nice to say things like that about your friends/brother," allow the feelings, acknowledge that all of us get angry and frustrated. Give your child an appropriate outlet, be her sounding board, allow total venting of those feelings. Give her permission to yell and scream whatever she wishes she could say. Let her squish a clay ball representing that person, draw how she feels, punch a pillow representing that person's head or stomach. You are facilitating the energy outlet, you are in control of the situation, you are steering the boat. Your child releases her feelings and gains self-confidence in the release.

ONLY WHEN all the feelings are purged, discuss what she would like to do or say for real. Don't tell her; give her the authority to decide for herself. In this space where feelings have been accepted, she will be clear to see what is right and what is wrong. In some cases, the feelings need to keep coming out for a long time. Your fears will emerge telling you that this will lead to no good. Trust the process.

If your child is mad at you, your first task is: Don't take it personally! It's more about your child than about you. When you are not reactive, you can offer ways for your child to express his feelings. Hold a pillow in front of you and allow him to punch it. Offer similar vents to the ones suggested above. The key is to know that they are normal feelings that will not harm you or your child. When you stay calm, he can yell what he wants. Then, he will calm, be better able to say what he really means, or spontaneously apologize or make amends. Sometimes you need to walk away, do nothing, and wait until later when you are both calm.

Often parents fear that indulging negative feelings gives permission for negative behavior. Just the opposite is true. Bear witness to your child's feelings, and your child

will feel accepted and self-assured. From this place there will be no need for negative or violent behavior. It is only when feelings are not allowed that the child feels wrong, questions himself, resists requests, is uncooperative, feels unacceptable and will likely indulge in negative behavior in order to find power and satisfy that empty hole inside.