

CHILDREN'S PERPETRATION OF VIOLENCE IN
EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTRES: BEYOND CONFLICT

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Introduction

Two extremely disturbing recent episodes of children either killing or playing a part in the death of others have attracted considerable media attention. One is the school murders in Colorado carried out by two boys, the other is the death of a young six year old boy with a disability who was pushed into a river by an eleven year old in Sydney.

While very important issues within the Australian criminal justice system are confronted and vital debate continues on gun laws in America, it is also vital that we step up our efforts to understand the processes leading children to such actions. Incidents of children killing highlight the need to direct intervention efforts at the youngest possible age.

The Commonwealth Government recently commissioned a research project examining the concepts of early intervention into crime prevention and carrying out an audit of programs that could be seen to intercept some of the risk factors leading to the practice of crime later in life. In the resultant report "Pathways to Prevention" (1999) the authors summarise a number of risk factors associated with progression into a life of crime. While some of these factors are inherent in the individual, a far greater number of the factors are characteristics of the social context in which a child grows up – the family, education/care institution and the broader community. The Australian Early Childhood Association's (1998) recent publication on bullying calls on all adults who work with and care for young children to challenge the wider societal issues that impact on children's actions. They argue strongly for early childhood settings to develop policies and procedures for dealing with bullying that occurs within them.

Much evidence is now available that demonstrates that social interventions early in life can successfully intercept an individual's progress into practices of violence and other crime (Farrington 1994). It is becoming accepted that interventions are required that target multiple risk factors over a period of time rather than single issue, 'one off' approaches. However, the authors of the report argue for a 'bias toward some (risk and protective) factors' (p24 full report). One of these factors is aggression presenting early in life.

***"Aggressive behaviour at an early age is a problem requiring immediate attention for its own sake, but intervention at an early age may also be the most cost effective way of heading off serious criminal problems ten years later. There is therefore a compelling case for early in life approaches, especially if they focus on factors which are established at an early age, are known to correlate with several forms of later offending, and are costly to deal with later. From this point of view it is never too early to intervene"* (summary report p.29).**

Children's violence¹ has been demonstrated to be a 'strikingly' consistent precursor to adult violence (Eron 1987; Olweus 1979). Given this, it is vital that the violent practices of children in the "foundation years", as Alloway (1995) describes it, are examined. However, it is not only in an endeavor to prevent violent offending in adults that a focus on aggression is warranted. Children in early childhood have the right to grow up in an environment safe from harassment and abuse, from each other as well as from adults.

¹ In this essay the term violence is used in preference to the term aggression as the term violence is believed to more easily encompass the social elements of the action, while aggression is traditionally associated with psychology. However the term aggression is used when drawing on literature that uses this term.

A common perception of aggression as it manifests in the early years has been that it is based upon conflicts over toys, resources or adult attention (see for example Stonehouse 1988; Arthur et al. 1993). An ethnographic research study on young children's violence has demonstrated a far richer array of aggression or violence being practiced by children than can be explained by conflict. Examining the nature of children's violence provides a case for a variety of prevention strategies to be made available to adults caring for children in this context. This paper draws upon the observational research of children and accompanying interviews with staff to argue the need for intervention approaches that recognise the complexity of children's violence.

It has been demonstrated that adults' lack of supervision of young children may lead to an environment of tolerance toward negative behaviours such as violence (Commonwealth Department 1999). The low levels of adult intervention in the study reported in this paper may, in part, be related to a belief that children need to sort out their own conflicts. It is likely that this is reinforced by the discourse of developmentally appropriate practice, which encourages 'free play' among children.

The study

The research study was carried out in a sample of four early childhood centres in 1994. The goals of the study were twofold: firstly, to contribute to the data available about children perpetrating violence in their earliest years, and secondly to explore and document how the adults caring for young children understand children's violent practices in the early years. 98 hours of non-participant observation were carried out of children in early childhood years including infants (six weeks – 18 months), toddlers (18 months – three years) and pre-schoolers (three years – five years). 20 hours of semi-structured interviews were carried out with 17 staff members of the selected child care organisations.

The observational data collection in the study was largely restricted to the observable phenomena of physical or verbal violence toward a child or their property by another child. The following categories of violence were used for the purpose of observation:

- physical assaults which cause pain or injury (for example pushing/pulling; hitting throwing an object at, hitting with object, pinching, pushing and biting)
- physical assaults that appear intended to injure (for example an object thrown and missed)
- physical assaults that humiliate and inconvenience (for example a physically confronting gesture for example doing a 'raspberry' in another's face; water throwing, spitting)
- physical force that restricts (for example squashing)
- physical behaviour that is unwanted and causes pain or discomfort (for example a hug or kiss continued despite protest)
- property violence/personal vandalism (for example breaking a doll a child is playing with, ripping up a picture)
- threatening physical behaviour which appears intended to hurt or frighten (for example brandishing a stick in the face of a child)

- verbal violence (for example name calling, ridicule)
- verbal threats (for example “I’ll kill you”)
- verbal assertion delivered with animosity (for example ‘you can’t come to my party’)
- incidents where one child incited another to be violent were also included²

The total number of violent incidents observed in the study was 1,441 in almost 100 hours. Violence was observed in every session. In over half the sessions an incident occurred every five minutes or less.³ Violence was observed in all age groups and in mixed age play between children of different ages. Quantitative analysis was carried out on the number and type of incident observed and qualitative analysis was carried out of the incidents and the context in which they occurred. Patterns emerged from the contextual information that led to the development of a taxonomy for the purpose of analysis. The patterns varied for each of the age groups, but similarities were evident between the groups.

Beyond conflict: the varied nature of children’s violence

Violence in the babies’ groups was restricted to actions such as pushing, biting and hitting. At times it appeared the babies were trying to push another out of the way of play equipment or out of their way. Some babies were observed hitting, biting and pushing more than others. This was a pattern observed in all the age groups, where a few children in each age group were responsible for many incidents. In the toddler groups the range of types of incidents was greater than in the babies groups. The following example demonstrates this.

A toddler boy hits a preschool girl on the body with a hard plastic rake. Later, he comes over to her and bites her. A staff member comes over and checks her for injury and comforts her. A little bit later the same boy threatens the same girl with a watering can, pushing it towards her face, she reaches over and pinches him. He runs off and throws sand at another girl.

Several children, in particular boys, were observed engaging in stylised violence accompanied by macho posturing, threats and using objects as weapons. In the preschool groups the patterns observed were similar to those in the toddler groups but there were more verbal violence and threats.

Jim⁴ and Fiona were the only two in the sandpit. Jim is digging fervently in the sand. Fiona is over in the corner of the sandpit. Jim goes over to her and threatens her, shaking the long handled sandpit spade and he says ‘move or I will hit you with it’.

² Early social advances of young children under three are often made in a physical way (Stephen 1993) so incidents such as gentle pokes or prods, pouring sand over the head, pulling a child’s fingers off the handles of a bike, or a gentle push were not recorded as violent. Similarly if children were engaging in what could be described as a ‘romp’, for example pushing each other while both were laughing, this was not recorded.

³ The research has previously been reported at the conference entitled Partnerships in Crime Prevention held in Hobart in 1998 run by the Australian Institute of Criminology and the (then) National Campaign against Violence and Crime. The paper developed for the conference includes a description of the study, methodology and a summary of the quantitative and qualitative observational data. In order to avoid repetition I refer readers to the Partnerships in Crime paper for a more detailed overview of the study.

⁴ Pseudonyms were used in some examples to assist with reading the text

Staff responses

A number of staff of the early childhood centres were interviewed and asked firstly what patterns of aggression or violence they observed in children and secondly what issues came up for them in relation to intervening in situations of violence between children.

In response to the question of patterns the staff who were interviewed had observed a great range. Conflict derived from sharing toys was the most commonly named context for children's violence mentioned by staff in the study. It was raised as an issue in the perpetration of incidents (by children of all ages) in 15 out of 18 (83%) of the interviews. It was the first, and major issue mentioned by 7 of the respondents in response to the question.

Mary: Oh, (the children's violence is related to) just basic sharing. The little ones don't like to share - they're very self-centred. Can't see anybody else's point-of-view; so therefore what ever is theirs is theirs and that's as simple as that....

Interviewer: So how does that impact on sort of aggression kinds of behaviour?

Mary: After a while they start hitting each other. You know they start hitting children for no reason - they'll come along and just hit them on the head or the leg.....in dramatic play you'll see a lot of violence. You'll be sitting there and the next minute you'll see someone just come over and pull out a drawer or something and whack it over a head or take something off someone. I mean at that stage they're not at a sharing stage anyway (Ann - Toddlers and Preschoolers).

The perception that much violence stems from the child's inability to share was congruent with early childhood literature of the 80's and early 90's. There was evidence in literature on the development of social skills in early childhood, particularly in the toddler years, of an emphasis on the issue of children learning to share toys (see for example Stonehouse 1988; Arthur et al. 1993). Possibly as a consequence of this, aggression in early childhood texts was commonly referred to as occurring in the context of conflict over toys (see for example Arthur et al. 1993).

Mary's view that sharing was the cause of much violence did not entirely fit with her observation of the children hitting for no reason. There were many incidents in the study that appeared 'out of the blue' or to occur for no reason.

In the following scene, Jim could possibly be seen to be in 'conflict' with the girls over the use of the pillows, however his violence towards Sybi and then towards Melanie appeared to be without any preceding conflict.

Jim moves from the computer that he has been using for about half an hour. He goes over to the corner, where Sal is playing with a group of girls on a pile of pillows. He growls at them, putting his face very close to theirs and grimacing. They scream and grab the pillows around them. Jim tells them to share the pillows. He then lies down on the pillows and the girls say 'We had them first'. Jim does not respond and the girls move away, going back only to retrieve their shoes. Jim then moves from the pillows and gets a piece of string. He grabs Sybi and puts the string around her neck, pulling it around her neck. Sybi cries. A member of staff comes over and tells him to play with Ian. He turns to Sybi and says 'Cry baby'. Jim then goes over to Melanie and, smiling, pulls her hair.

It was clear that Jim successfully gained what he wanted in the first instance as the girls left their game on the pillows. David Shantz has carried out much research on conflict and dominance between children. According to Shantz a common mistake is to conflate aggression and conflict in children. He offers a definition of conflict as ‘a type of interpersonal interaction in which two children are in disagreement, at variance or in opposition to one another’ (Shantz, D. 1986, p. 1323). With this definition it could therefore be argued that Jim’s violence preempted conflict, and the girls’ action of withdrawing left Jim in a position of having avoided a conflict over the pillows.

Hays’ research on children and conflict has shown that while sharing of toys is a common cause of conflict (Hay 1984 cited in Shantz, C. 1987), conflict is not the inevitable result of children taking toys from each other (Shantz, C. 1987) and is not always associated with struggles over objects (Strayer & Strayer 1980, p. 155). Data from this study demonstrated that conflict was often absent in many situations of violence. Indeed, many cases of violence may have actually had the result of avoiding conflict, a finding that is in line with many studies on dominance between children. Strayer and Strayer (1975) found that 92% of the observed ‘agonistic’ exchanges (exchanges which included an aggressive act and the response) conformed to a ‘linear dominance model’; that is, conforming to what is commonly referred to as a ‘pecking order’⁵ (see also Sluckin 1980, p. 167). Very few children counterattacked when targeted. Importantly, dominance is argued to be ‘established by a mutual agreement symbolised by the submissive response’ and Strayer and Strayer (1980, p. 155) conclude that the existence of dominance functions to minimise intragroup aggression (1980, p. 137). This was echoed on the words of one member of staff:

Janice: ... you know what I mean— ‘I’m bigger than you so I’m going to take that from you’, ...as in big and little and power play and stuff like that and they always know which child to pick on in that situation—the ones that freely give things away and like ‘oh yeh you have it because I’m scared of you’, you know what I mean.

The following example demonstrates the phenomena of one child being repeatedly violent to a variety of other children in such a way as to dominate the make believe game they were playing.

Luke is pretending to be the driver of a train. Annie comes near and he hits her on the head. Staff says ‘Drivers don’t hit people’ and moves the chairs so that he is up the front, and arranges Lucas to be the ‘copilot’. The girls come up beside the drivers, and the boys move further ahead. The member of staff tells all the children to move back, so the girls retreat. The boys either stay up the front, or move further ahead. The girls go back against the wall. Luke says ‘pff!’, and hits Tara in the face with his fist and tells her to get off the plane. Luke does lots of ‘macho’ stances: raising fists and shouting.

Luke pokes his tongue at Lucas and says ‘I want to go to Newcastle’. Luke starts ‘flying’ and leaves the others alone for a bit. Luke says to Annie ‘I’m not marrying you ‘cos you’re naughty ‘cos you’ve got your shoes off’.

⁵ For example child A is dominant over child B, child B is dominant over child C, child C is not dominant over child A or B.

Luke drops the drivers hat and vacates the driver's chair. He pushes Lucas over when Lucas comes near the vacated chair. Lucas then dances with Tara, Annie picks up the driver's hat that Luke had been wearing, Luke grabs the hat from her and hits her in the face twice.

Luke then hits Annie in the face very hard. She shouts very loudly and is scolded by the staff 'Annie!' While Luke is hitting Annie, Lucas sits in the chair that Luke had designated as his drivers chair, Luke comes back and shouts 'GET OFF !' to Lucas and then turns to Annie and shouts ' GET CHIPS!!' and turns to Lucas and shouts ' YOU'RE NOT GOING ON THE AEROPLANE!.'

Tara shouts at Lucas 'You're an idiot!' and then shouts something at Harriet. Luke hits Tara in the face and says 'Don't yell at her'.

The staff member who was nearby spoke to the children about making too much noise, but did not intervene with regard to the violence except early in the scene with Luke. This earlier action consisted of supporting his role of the Driver in the game, a role that could be argued to have been maintained through his use of violence. In the following example two boys were separated as they were shouting and throwing their play doh around the room. In addition Darryl was being repeatedly violent towards several children, including the younger, smaller boy he was playing with, Laurie.

At fruit time Laurie⁶ and Darryl sit together. A member of staff separates them. Darryl asks if he can help, and the staff member says he can wipe the table after fruit. Darryl puts a lot of energy into wiping the table, Laurie joins in. Darryl tells staff and she says 'That's okay'. Jasmine comes over to join in wiping the table and Laurie and Darryl say together 'not boy! not boy!' and both chase her and hit her very hard in the face with a wet rag. Laurie and Darryl get very loud and put the rags on their heads and shout, a staff member sees this and tells them it is time to go to the toilet.

In both the above examples the children being violent had demonstrated repeated violence toward a variety of different children. In the wiping the table scenario another pattern of violence emerges, that of two or more children carrying out violent actions together. The violence could have been argued to have been precipitated by a conflict caused by Jasmine wanting to join the boys activity, however, elements of this scene suggest factors beyond conflict operating. Firstly the overt sexism displayed by the boys shared understanding that because Jasmine was not a boy violent action was warranted to exclude her from the activity. Secondly the fact that the incident occurred in the context of repeated violence by Darryl in particular indicates a need to look beyond the particular conflict over the rights to wipe the table to seeing the practice of violence as part of ongoing intimidation of several children. This was reflected in staff comments such as:

Ann: Sometimes... depending on the ages, the older toddlers will pick on someone as a group. It might be a group of two or three, usually boys, that will single out a weak group...it's a power thing—you know, 'I can make you scream if I really want to'

Janice: ... you know what I mean— 'I'm bigger than you so I'm going to take that from you', ...as in big and little and power play and stuff like that and they always know which child to pick on in that situation—the ones that freely give things away and like ' oh yeh you have it because I'm scared of you', you know what I mean.

⁶ All names are pseudonyms

There were many incidents where there was a complete absence of any observable conflict and in several cases the violence appeared to be carried out for the amusement of the child or children engaging in it. This is consistent with other research findings mentioned above.

Tom is running around poking many children. He has a texta lid on his finger, and smiles as he pokes the children hard with it. He comes over to the observer and pokes her with his finger and says 'Do you want to see my powerful finger?' The observer responds that she is not interested because he had poked her with it. He runs off and continues to poke children with it. A little later, when the children have moved inside, he grabs Rob and pushes his face hard into a pillow and holds him down. Rob is very distressed. A member of staff suggests that Tom does some hammering. Tom replies 'No! I don't have to!'. The staff member says 'Do you want to sit in the bathroom (time out). You will have to if you keep that up'.

The propensity of children to engage in violence for reasons of enjoyment, status and to bolster self esteem has been recognised by recent research on bullying and violence (Olweus 1989; Tattum and Herbert 1992; Bessant and Watts 1993; Ainley et al 1994). In one particular study researchers Bessant and Watts (1993) interviewed young people about their stated reasons for being violent. Key factors contributing to the practice of violence that emerged from the interviews were gains of status, bonding and the enjoyment of violence. Bessant and Watts quoted arguments that the children gave for being violent such as 'the better fighter you are, the better you are, people think you are tough' (p. 6). They noted an attraction to 'doing bad' (p. 6) and that the children referred to 'aerobic, tactile and very emotional, expressive and physical enjoyment' in their experiences of being violent (p. 7).

A preschool boy throws a sandpit spade at a toddler girl as she comes out of the toddler's room. He misses and laughs with the other boys sitting with him. Then he grabs a sandpit spade from her and hits her hard on the body with it.

In this example it could be argued that the boys were engaging in bonding through their shared experience of fun. Male bonding and the opportunity to initiate new friendships was also articulated by the children in Bessant and Watts study as gained from the practice of violence⁷. The practice of repeated violence by one or two children toward a variety of other children could be evidence of early bullying behaviour.

According to Tattum and Herbert (1992) the essential element of bullying is a willful conscious desire to hurt, threaten or frighten someone. Intent in young children is very difficult to establish, however the repeated nature of much of the violence falls into the category of bullying according to Rigby and Slee's (1994) definition. They claim that the long duration of the behaviour is what distinguishes bullying from other aggression. Toch (1984, p. 136) included the element of pleasure and an assessment of characteristics of the victim in his definition of bullying: 'an orientation in which pleasure is obtained from the exercise of violence and terror against individuals uniquely susceptible to it'.

The amount of violence that occurred for what appeared enjoyment for the child carrying it out warrants further phenomenological research such as Bessant and Watts carried out but at an earlier age.

⁷ This is well illustrated by one boy, Peter: 'At the end of the fight we say "wow that was good mate, thanks - what's your name?" and we make friends over it' (Bessant & Watts 1993, p. 7).

A clear outcome of the research and work on bullying prevention is the need for adults to involve themselves directly with the lives of children as it has been found that there have been very few negative sanctions for bullying put in place by parents and teachers (Slee 1992; Olweus 1993). Anti-bullying programs that have been successful have approached the problem at a variety of levels. An important ingredient in programs to curb bullying is increased adult supervision of children with negative sanctions in place for children who bully.

Lack of intervention: free play

In many of the examples above it was noted that staff did not intervene at the time an incident occurred. In the example where Luke was the driver of the train, a staff member was nearby and chastised one of the girls for shouting while Lukes' violence went on unabated. Staff members in the study were observed to intervene in about a fifth of the incidents. This was similar to Smith and Green's (1975) research on aggressive behaviour in English nursery schools and play groups. They concluded that most aggression was not noticed or was ignored, with a 29% mean intervention rate.

The intention to intervene at some level was evident in many of the staff interviews of this study. Many of the staff members that were interviewed spoke of a range of different strategies used to deal with situations when they happened such as encouraging empathy for the victim or preventive actions such as teaching children how to deal with anger.

Penny: For biting I would put the child in time out and then deal with the child that has been bitten... they are in pain—they need ice; and then you can explain afterwards 'look it hurt... if you're angry with someone tell them to go away—tell them that it's mine'. You know, (say to them) 'would you like to be bitten, it hurts,...I mean, show them the mark...

However, in practice intervention was usually restricted to a staff member saying "don't", moving a child or distracting them.

There are many possible explanations for the limited intervention; for example a lack of time was pertinent at certain times of day. Times when children were arriving, moving outside, being helped with meals or helped with going to the toilet were characterised by staff being tied up with children on a one to one basis. There were increases in violence at these times. However, there was one time of day where staff appeared to sit back and allow the children a 'free rein' to a degree. In the interviews several staff members referred to the need to not interfere with children's creative play.

It was Piaget's belief that children's play revolved around set developmental stages⁸ and consequently their development would unfold if they were allowed to play unhindered (Hutt et al. 1989). This concept has led to a popular notion of 'free play', which is particularly emphasised for early childhood years. A key to free play is to minimise adult involvement beyond ensuring the child has access to developmentally appropriate materials, and, as they get older, with access to peer interaction.

⁸ By the age of 12 to 18 months the playing child was engaged in systematic exploration of the physical world. Following this stage, symbolic play begins, along with the development of representational thinking. Between four and seven play was seen to become closer to reality, with rules, cooperation, logic and collective discipline (Hutt et al. 1989).

The dominant philosophy evident in the Australian Early Childhood Association and the United States counterpart, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, reflects a strong commitment to developmentally appropriate practice (Alloway 1995). Alloway (1995, p. 54) outlined the following ways that early childhood educators are asked to translate child-centred philosophy into developmentally appropriate pedagogy:

- to recognise that independent, autonomous children construct their own knowledge and their own realities, more successfully the less adults intervene;
- to ensure that adults are ‘backgrounded’ while children are ‘foregrounded’ and take command of their own learning and their own knowledge;
- to allow the widest possible scope for children’s ‘free’, independent choice, and;
- implicitly to acknowledge childhood as a state of innocence.
- Piagetian inspired developmentally appropriate practice has influenced other more recent theorists such as Montessori. Montessori’s early childhood educator “must never be the obstacle between the child and his (sic) experience” (quoted in Alloway p. 55).

The tendency for early childhood workers to support the principles of free play was observed in a study by Davies (1997, p. 7). In her study of early childhood educators in outdoor playground settings she found that the tendency was for teachers to ‘stand around, watching children play, intervening only when a safety hazard arises or when a child requires some form of assistance’ and concluded that this appears to be a particular feature of teachers interpretation of their role on outdoor settings. This is supported by many other research studies (Brown & Burger 1984; Hutt et al. 1989; Wittmer and Honig 1994 quoted in Davies 1997).

It is possible that the popular concept of the need for children to engage in free play encourages staff to stand aside. Research on bullying has also reported that parents and teachers were not putting negative sanctions in place for the bullying behaviour (Slee 1992; Olweus 1993). Adults’ propensity to ignore and down play children’s violence has been argued to result in success for the aggressor (Smith & Green 1975) and to contribute to it’s continuation (Clark 1990; DEET 1993; Rigby 1994). Many authors now agree on the need for adults to intervene.

Another possible influence on staff is the desire for children to learn to “sort out their own problems”. In practice they were usually left to sort out their problems with little external assistance. Alternatively staff addressed the perceived conflict by rearranging the environment, providing resources or the use of distraction to diffuse the situation. This was a similar finding to C. Shantz’s (1987) research where she found that children’s conflicts were usually settled without adult intervention. In the following example children seek adult assistance but are sent to address the problem with the violent child directly.

Luke (preschool) chases Harriet (preschool) on a bike. Harriet runs over to a member of staff and tells her what happened. The staff member says to her ‘Why are you telling me? Tell Luke’. Luke then bashes his bike against Christian’s (toddler) bike. Christian bashes Harriet’s bike with his bike. When she and her friend Amy (preschool) tell the same member of staff she laughs and says ‘I think you are playing with me’. Amy pinches Christian. Luke threatens Amy and Harriet with his bike again. They both say ‘Don’t!’. Christian rams his bike hard into Amy and Harriet’s bikes and then hits Harriet hard on the body. The girls both shout ‘Don’t, we don’t like it’. They start to run to staff then appear to change their minds and run off.

The free play discourse sits well with a belief that children need to learn to sort out their conflicts by themselves. While there was clear evidence that staff thought children needed some assistance in conflict resolution, commonly this didn't happen.

Several staff members requested training in how to deal with violence and specifically to assist with dealing with particularly difficult situations. Often in the study, on the spot actions from staff were met with derision on the part of children.

Phillip hit Josh in the face with a sandpit spade. A member of staff comes over and says 'You really hurt him'. Ky kicks Emma, a member of staff comforts her. Ky pokes his tongue out at the staff member and makes 'raspberry'⁹ noises at her. Ky then hits Phillip in the face. The staff member is alerted by the observer, she runs over and gets Ky and then Kurt hits Phillip in the face with a sandpit spade. Another member of staff runs over and gets him.

Many programs and strategies are available which aim to prevent violence in the early childhood years, many of which are documented in the Pathways to Prevention report (1999). They emphasise the need to intervene at several different levels, at transition points in development and emphasise the need to continue programs over time. In early childhood settings educators need to develop policies for prevention and procedures for dealing with incidents. There is evidence that in some settings this may not be occurring in a systematic way. If adults caring for young children perceive children's violence as being primarily seated in conflict they are likely to approach intervening from a conflict resolution perspective. In doing this they may miss the opportunity to address other forms of violence such as repeated violence or bullying, sex or racially based violence and violence carried out in the company of others with associated bonding and status gains. All these need to be addressed in ways that alert the children to the impact of their actions and challenge some of the emerging attitudes that support the practice of violence.

Part of a comprehensive approach to early intervention is understanding the nature of the problem of violence as it presents in the early years. The more we understand about the manifestations of violence the more specific the strategies can be. Children need to learn at an early age that violence will not be a successful tool to command toys and resources, that it is not acceptable to derive pleasure from hurting others and that sexism or racism will not be tolerated. These need to be learnt through active intervention procedures at the time an incident occurs as well as being backed up by preventive education.

Staff in all the centres were often very busy with the practical details of looking after children, they were often exasperated with the question of how to deal with often frequent scenes of violence. Resources need to be committed to education, support and funding of greater numbers of child care workers to allow for staff to provide greater input to children's social development.

It will never be adequate to work on attitude and behaviour change alone to prevent violence. Continued action will be required on all fronts, challenging violence in the media, changing neighbourhoods, schools and families so that they are less conducive to violence. As Linke argues in her book on bullying in early childhood "From infancy on, many of us bring up our children in ways that value competition rather than community, and self reliance rather than

⁹ Blowing out through pursed lips, usually at someone's face.

interpersonal support. Practices such as teaching infants and young children to comfort themselves (e.g. not attending to their cries...) have their part to play in the way we react to and treat others” (Linke 1998, p. v). However, preschools and early childhood centres are a part of the big picture and as Wilson and Loury (1987) conclude, as they are the place which reach almost all families when children are at an early age, are the place to make a difference. Finally, in the words of one staff member:

Jenny: And aggression is the thing that is basically the most difficult because aggression is hurting other people...That's where you really need to intervene...in a child care centre—as in primary school—you know, a certain age they're not responsible for themselves; therefore they've got to be protected and we're in the business of protecting...It's not an easy thing to take on this responsibility trying to do something that's um—I mean there's a lot of things in child care that we haven't got the answers for and I find discipline is a very hard one, a very hard one.

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