

Towards a new explicative model of antisocial behaviour¹

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Abstract

Antisocial behavior has been the object of investigation in many studies seeking to establish its etiological factors as well as risk factors which help to perpetuate such behaviour over the course of the individual's life. In this paper, we seek to classify and clarify risk factors underlying the origin and development of antisocial behaviours from childhood to adolescence. Our final goal is to establish an explicative model of antisocial behaviour that allows us to detect risk factors and to set up specific interventions for preventing and/or alleviating its effects. In this sense, we will observe the existence and influence of certain risk factors in the intrapersonal realm (temperament, verbal intelligence, etc.) as well as the interpersonal (family environment, child-raising, peer groups, social and cultural context), all of which have greater or lesser weight in the rise and evolution of antisocial behaviour. These factors are then essential in the design of intervention programmes.

Keywords: *antisocial behavior, risk factors, childhood, adolescence*

Introduction

When we speak of antisocial behavior, we are referring to the set of behaviors which infringe established rules or norms. To delimit this further, one should identify which behaviors can be classified as antisocial by taking into consideration the continuity of antisocial behavior from childhood through adolescence and later in adulthood. Along these lines, Farrington (2005) points out the following indicators of antisocial behavior in childhood and adolescence: behavioral disorders, impulsiveness, stealing, vandalism, resisting authority, physical and/or psychological aggression, bullying, running away from home, school absenteeism, cruelty toward animals, etc. As for adulthood, the author points to illegal or criminal behaviors, drug and/or alcohol abuse, marital breakdown, gender violence, neglect of one's children, reckless driving, etc. as primary indicators. It is important to note that conclusions from several studies show the predictability of adult antisocial behavior based on the existence of such indicators during childhood and adolescence--with all that this implies for development of intervention programs (Caspi, 2000; Farrington, 2003; Loeber, Green & Lahey, 2003).

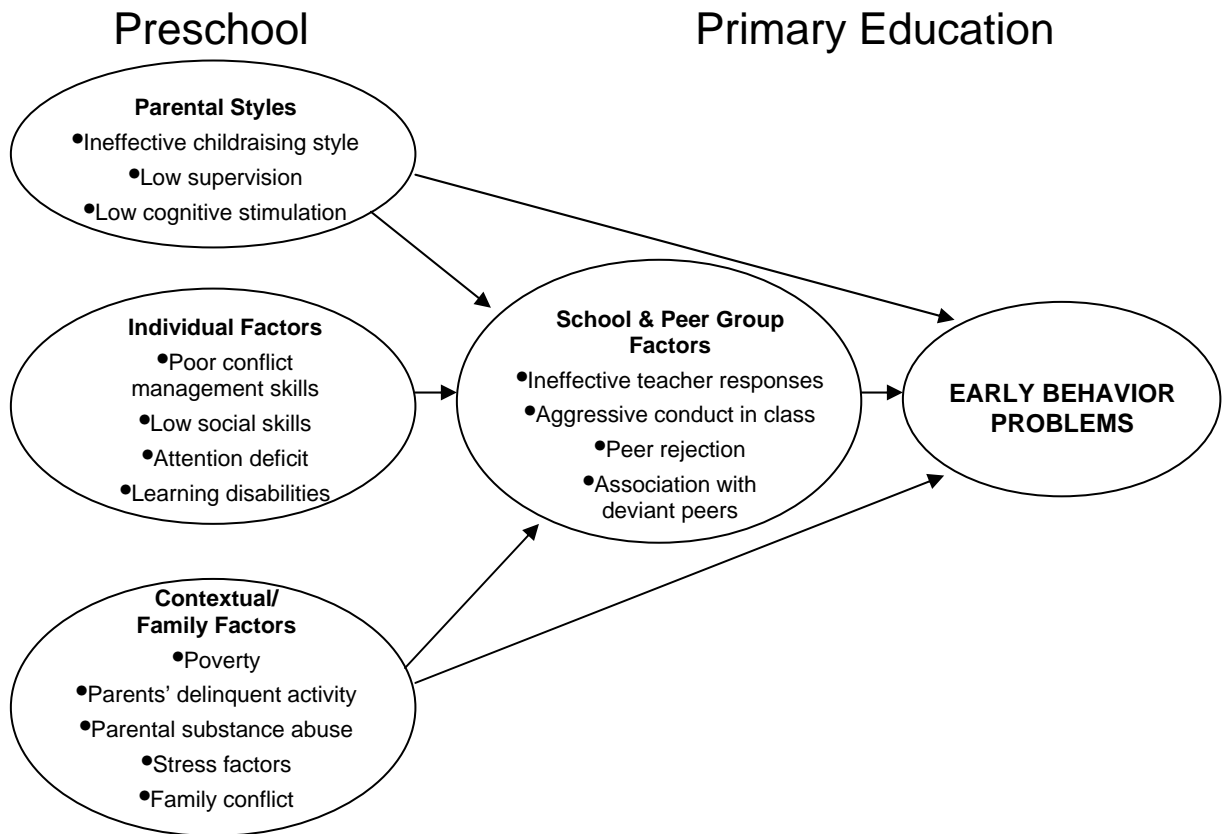
There have been diverse theories attempting to indicate factors which provoke the appearance of antisocial behavior and its later development, so that preventive intervention programs might be designed. Thus, some theories focus on the analysis of individual differences (learning problems, conscience, impulsiveness, intelligence, etc.), while others have paid more attention to variables external to the individual (social context, family context, exposure to violence, opportunities for delinquency, etc.) (Timmerman & Emmelkamp, 2005).

The present study seeks to identify the most important risk factors, those which count the most in contributing to the origin and development of antisocial behavior (Figure 3). Therefore, we will focus on those factors present during childhood and adolescence, recognizing from the start that it is difficult to establish cause-effect relationships from the small number of longitudinal studies that support this model. The studies which have been carried out, however, indicate the factors which we take as the most important ones for analysis. Likewise, even with their limitations for establishing such cause-effect relationships, there are many correlational and cross-sectional studies which concur in pointing toward these same factors as triggers for this problem.

Risk factors

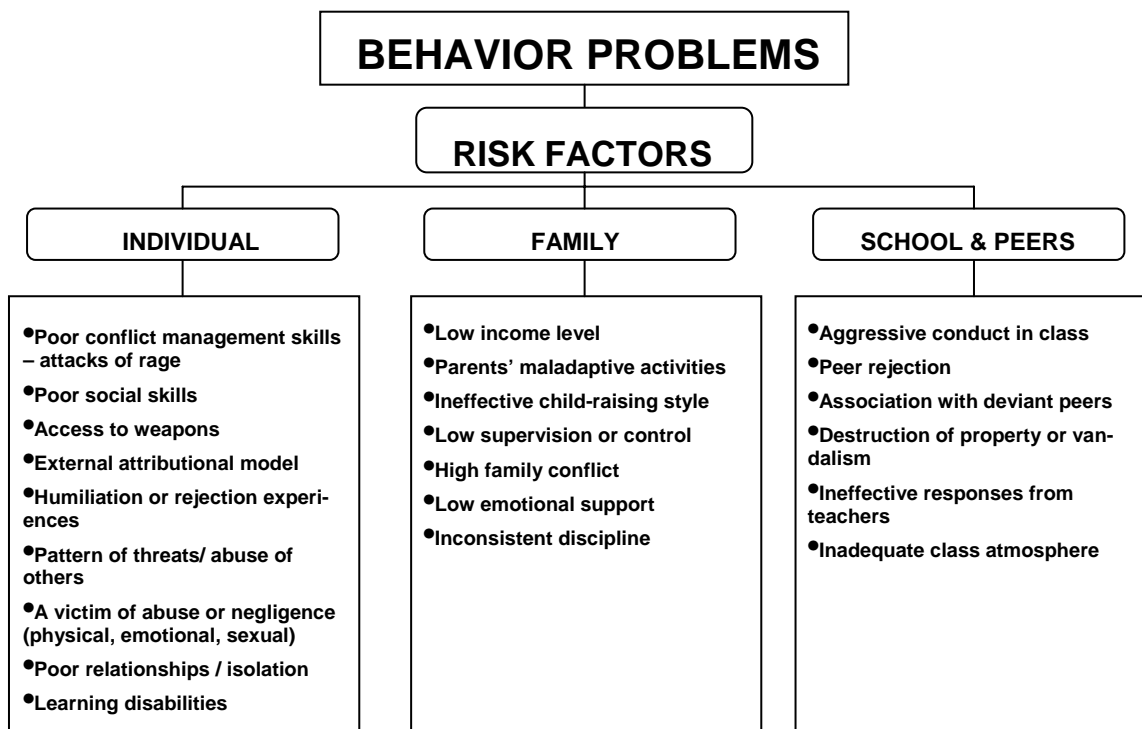
We understand risk to mean the increase of probability that a harmful or negative result or contingency will affect a given population of persons. Characteristics which increase such risk are defined as risk factors (Kazdin, 1993). Webster-Stratton and Taylor (2001) establish a model of risk factors associated with problem behaviors in children (Figure 1). During the first years of life and in preschool, the authors identify three areas of direct influence on children's behavior: parental styles of child-raising, individual factors, and finally, contextual factors. In Primary Education, the influence exerted by the school and peer group is added to these areas.

Figure 1. Risk factors according to Webster-Stratton and Taylor (2001)



When focusing on adolescents (Figure 2), the risk factors are not different from those proposed by Webster-Stratton and Taylor, although their relative weight may change. Thus, there are factors associated with the young persons' individual characteristics, as well as others which affect the family, school, or peer group environment. In any case, the combined presence of factors can increase risk more synergistically than additively (Webster-Stratton & Taylor, 2001), and the impact of a particular factor may depend entirely on the presence and number of other risk factors.

Figure 2. Risk factors during adolescence.



Individual factors

Temperament, impulsiveness and attention problems

The temperament can be defined as the physiological base for the development of affect, expressivity, and regulation of personality components, that is, one's character, interpersonal style, and way of reacting, showing a certain stability over time, although dependent on

the context and the individual's socialization. Such aspects justify its central role in the social and personal development of the individual, as well as his or her future psychological adjustment (Lengua & Kovacs, 2005). Rothbart (1989) indicates that the temperament is a construct characterized by individual differences in reactivity and self-regulation. With regard to reactivity, one can develop either a positive emotiveness (acceptance, sensitivity, ease in one's environment, etc.) or a negative one (low tolerance for frustration, low tolerance for fear, low adaptability, etc.), inasmuch as self-regulation inhibits or facilitates the affective response, since it is the set of processes, including attention, impulsiveness and control of inhibition, which modulates reactivity. In this sense, emotive response and the level of self-regulation can give rise to internalization and externalization of problems during childhood, provoking the appearance of behavior disorders that carry forward as antisocial behaviors during adolescence (Kokkinos & Panayiotou, 2004).

In the New York Longitudinal Study by Chess and Thomas (quoted in Farrington, 2005), it was indicated that a difficult temperament characterized by irritability, low obedience, poor adaptability and irregular habits at the age of 3-4 years was a predictor of poor psychological adjustment between 17 and 24 years of age. Another important result was obtained by Caspi (2000) in the Dunedin Longitudinal Study, where it was found that excessively restless, impulsive 3-year-olds, with attention problems, were seen to commit criminal acts between 18 and 21 years of age. In the Cambridge Study, results indicated a positive correlation--regardless of other variables (low intelligence, child-raising styles, etc.)--between externalization of problems and impulsiveness with development of behavior disorders and the appearance of violent behaviors. In all cases we observe a common denominator, impulsiveness, which is presented here as one of the dimensions which best predicts antisocial behavior. In the Pittsburgh Youth Study (White, Moffitt, Caspi, Bartusch, Needles & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1994), impulsiveness as reported by teachers and students, low self-control and attention problems correlated positively with the cases of 10- to 13-year-old students who claimed to have performed delinquent acts.

A temperament characterized by high levels of activity, attention problems, inflexibility, difficulty in life transitions, and prone to frustration and distraction, makes a child less understanding, have less self-control, and be more impulsive. Some of these children match clinical descriptions of hyperactivity or opposition conflicts, and a relationship exists between

these clinical profiles and the risk of committing delinquent or violent acts (Benítez & Justicia, 2006).

Intelligence and school adjustment

Limited intelligence and poor school achievement show themselves as important predictors of antisocial behavior. Several longitudinal studies present results where low verbal intelligence, low academic performance, lack of problem-solving skills and low social skills correlated with the development of violent behaviors (Eron & Huesmann, 1993; Moffitt, 1993). Similarly, better development of cognitive skills, especially verbal ones, acts as a factor which decreases the probability of developing antisocial behaviors (Lahey, 1999).

In the Cambridge Study, participants with antisocial behaviors at age 30 had presented lower scores in intelligence tests at age 3 than did their peers without behavior problems (Farrington, 2005). However, despite these results, we cannot focus on low intelligence as a risk factor, since poor school performance and school failure are also presented as factors and it is difficult to disentangle these from low intelligence.

Socio-cognitive skills

One of the primary characteristics of persons with antisocial behavior is that they differ in how they process social information which reaches them. There really are not many studies on conflict resolution styles used by aggressors, although research with aggressive students provides useful information on this matter. Dodge (1986) studied information processing and behaviors in a scenario with work groups and ambiguous, provocative situations. Students identified as *non-aggressive students* by their teachers were compared to those identified as *aggressive students* through use of questions about videos that describe such ambiguous, provocative situations. Furthermore, each subject participated in a cooperative work group and in an ambiguous situation involving provocation from another student. Results of the study showed that aggressive students tended to show hostile attributions when they found themselves in ambiguous social situations, situations they perceived as intentionally negative towards them. Similarly, Deluty (1981) found that even highly aggressive students were able to find different alternative solutions for a problem, although all the solutions had a strong aggressive connotation, perhaps due to the belief that such conflict solutions are more successful in solving interpersonal problems and they produce more tangible and immediate

benefits. The social problem-solving style, accompanied by aggressiveness and an impulsive temperament, seem to contribute to the pattern of antisocial behavior.

Family factors

Family environment and child-raising style

There are several functional variables related to the family context which can be triggers of antisocial behavior, since they directly affect the child's self-regulation and reactivity (Farrington, 2005; Patterson & Yoerger, 2002; Silver, Measelle, Armstrong & Essex, 2005; Timmerman & Emmelkamp, 2005):

- Family destructuring: death of one parent, single-parent homes, parental separation, changes of residence, etc.
- Conflicts between parents and domestic violence.
- Modeling of violence within the home.
- Child-raising styles: coercive, punitive and negligent, lack of affection from parents, maternal hostility, inconsistent discipline, lack of supervision, etc.
- Child abuse.

We take special interest in child-raising styles since they make a specific mark on the development of antisocial behavior as indicated by several studies which directly relate them to the appearance of antisocial behaviors (Prinzie, Onghena, Hellinckx, Grietens, Ghesquière & Colpin, 2004). Negative child-raising styles (authoritarian, coercive, punitive) on one hand, or inconsistent control and low parental supervision on the other hand, negatively affect the child's behavior. Data exist which support the affirmation that parents of aggressive children show coercive parental styles that have a negative effect on the child's development. In this line, evidence exists which shows that the use of corporal punishment plays a central role in the development of antisocial behaviors (Lahey & colls., 1999), since punishment is more frequent, more inconsistent and poorly reasoned. Parents are usually coercive and manipulative with their children, lacking positive reinforcement skills for appropriate behaviors and they fail to eliminate unsuitable behaviors. In this way, parents unconsciously model and reinforce the coercive behavior exhibited by their children, since the children learn that aggressive behavior normally leads to getting what they want. This way, children react with

aggressive responses to parental requests – learned or modeled by parental behavior – in order to escape from punishment, social judgments, etc. (Patterson, 1992). A tangible risk is the fact that the child can export and generalize this behavior from home to school, where it becomes part of the child's social repertory when dealing with classmates and teachers (Fraser, 1996). If children learn to respond to authority using aggression and manipulation, they will have difficulty interacting successfully in the school setting where adult authority figures are present in the children's day-to-day life. Their interaction style will be inclined toward a style of confrontation and opposition, potentially becoming violent.

Negligent or permissive parental styles are characterized by absence of or low supervision of the child during its childhood, and inconsistent disciplinary practices. In this sense, both have been classified as variables which predict appearance of antisocial behavior during adolescence (Farrington, 2005). Parents that are careless, that reject their children or are negligent caregivers are also at high risk that their children will become involved in violent acts (Benítez & Justicia, 2006).

Longitudinal studies have shown that low parental supervision, discipline based on physical punishment, and parents' rejection toward their children all predict violent behavior (Farrington, 2005). Likewise, we can integrate other variables such as inconsistent discipline, parental cruelty, passivity and detachment from their children: their existence doubles the possibility of development of violent behaviors during adolescence.

Another risk factor for the development of antisocial behaviors relates to having been the victim of physical and/or psychological abuse within the nuclear family. Farrington (2005) indicates that physical victimization during childhood is a strong predictor of violent behaviors during adolescence. Results of a study carried out by Thornberry (1994) indicate significant influence from the continued exposure to acts of violence and victimization as an underlying factor in the child's development of violence. This exposure also contributes to the child's exporting violent behavior from his home environment to his or her school (Flannery, Singer, Williams & Castro, 1997), and can contribute to low academic performance and inadequate social interaction with the child's peers. Along these lines, Widom (1994) indicates possible relationships between childhood victimization and violent behavior in adolescence, noting that child abuse: (a) gives rise to both short- and long-term effects; (b)

can lead to desensitization toward pain, increasing or encouraging future aggressions; (c) can develop impulsive or dissociative behavior patterns in facing problematic situations, leading to unsuitable problem solving styles; (d) harms self-esteem and cognitive skills; (e) provokes changes in family structure; and (f) leads to isolation of the victims and makes it more difficult for them to be in interpersonal contexts.

Contextual factors and peer groups

The media

Violence of a greater or lesser nature is present in the media to such an extent that it is presented to us as a normal, immediate, frequent aspect of daily life. Children take in the impact of these images directly, while the responsibility is left to parents and educators to help them discern the media message and above all to be critical with the information being transmitted. The message of the media, especially television, toward our children and toward the general population, forces us to feel that it provides a seemingly global and objective interpretation of reality in the eyes of the viewer.

Research in the United States estimates that by the time a child reaches the age of 18 he or she has witnessed more than 200,000 violent acts on television, including 33,000 murders (APA, 1993). Violent acts, defined as acts that seek to hurt or wound another, appear approximately 8 to 12 times per hour of television for general viewing, and some 20 times per hour in children's programming (Sege & Dietz, 1994). A survey on the extent of violence on public and pay television indicates that 67% of children's programs allude to violent acts integrated into a humorous context. It is notable that only 5% of violent acts occurring in children's programs show the negative consequences of the violence (Mediascope, 1996). Children and adolescents are frequently exposed to intense levels of televised violence whether in movies, music channels, videogames, mobile telephones, newspapers, Internet, etc., and it is reasonable to ask whether the frequent, continued exposure somehow affects the children. Some studies which specifically address this topic have shown that exposure to violent acts is strongly associated with the risk of suffering or being involved in aggressive, sometimes violent, behaviors (APA, 1993; Centerwall, 1992; Derksen & Strasburger, 1996; Gerbner & Signorielli, 1990; Huesmann, 1986). Similarly, several effects have been determined:

- Children exposed to high levels of violence accept aggressive attitudes as normal and in addition, they begin to behave aggressively.
- Prolonged, frequent exposure provokes desensitization toward violence and its consequences.
- Children exposed to violence in the media perceive a world where one must fight and struggle in order to subsist and not become a victim.

Comparative studies have been carried out between highly violent televised images of fictitious scenes vs. situations of real pain (wars, live murder scenes, accidents, etc.). In both cases, children and adolescents are insensitive to the personal state of the party suffering the aggression or experiencing war, associating the use of violence with power and securing one's wishes.

School

The general educational system itself, and the school in particular, can be the source of antisocial behavior in students being educated. To begin, the school has a strong hierarchical structure and internal organization which can provoke the appearance of conflicts and tensions among the members of the educational community. Fernández (1998) indicates the most significant components which may be risk factors:

- The school's own values crisis. It is complicated to establish common points of reference, not just among the teachers but among all the members of the educational community, such as would allow consistent, systematic response to school conflicts and problems.
- Discrepancies in the way space is distributed, in organization of time, and in behavior guidelines, and content based on creativity and experimentation objectives which do not correspond to the type of classroom space available.
- Emphasis on student performance with respect to a single standard, and the minimal individualized attention received by students are factors which favor school failure.

- Cultural values stipulated by the institution which are contrary to certain ethnic groups present in the schools, an increasingly common situation due to immigration.
- Teacher and student roles, and their asymmetry.
- The dimensions of the school and the large number of students impede individualized attention; in an overcrowded situation the individual does not create affective and personal ties with adults at the school.

In addition to the above, we can include:

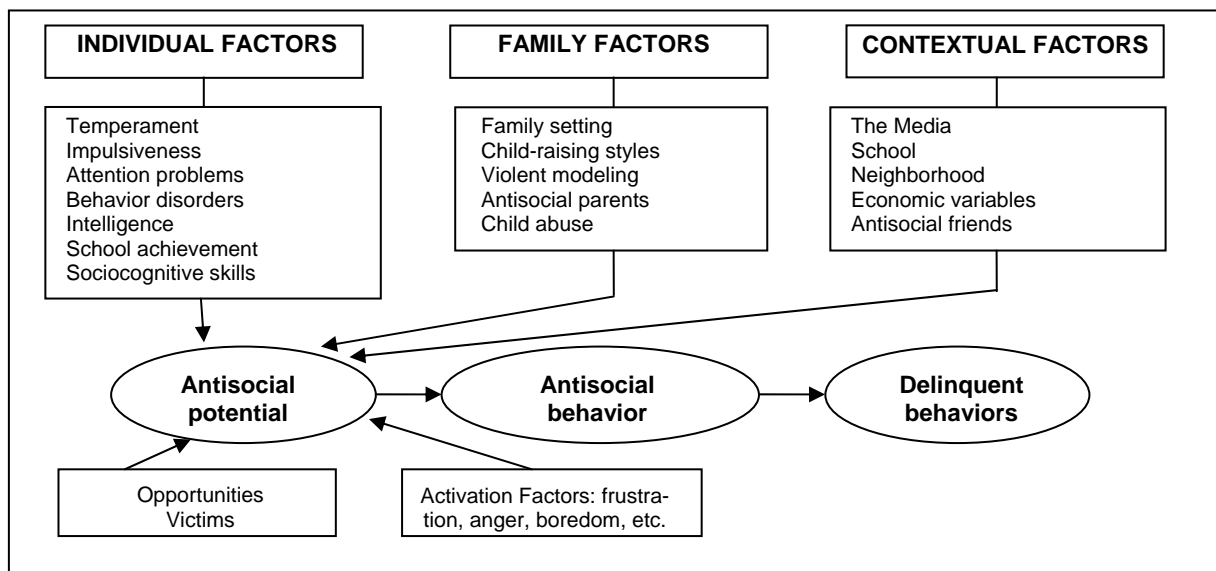
- Control exercised by the schools in order to culturize and socialize, regardless of the students' motivation for being at school.
- Strategies used by the schools which are based on heavy sanctions, separation of violent students from others, or expelling these students from school
- The school's lack of organization with regard to a normative response to indiscipline.
- The immigration phenomenon, which has turned schools into a place where students of different races, cultures and religions interact. Coexistence under these circumstances sometimes contributes to the appearance of violent incidents, due to racial tension and to cultural differences related to different attitudes and behaviors.

Sociocultural context and peer groups

The sociocultural context in which the individual lives influences his or her violent behavior. Thus, it is not unusual to observe persons with delinquent behaviors who belong to depressed social and cultural contexts characterized by: rundown urban environment, neighborhood upheaval, high levels of unemployment, low police surveillance, lack of recreational facilities, existence of gangs or organized groups for drug distribution, prostitution, etc. Furthermore, we cannot ignore financial factors such as low income, precarious employment, etc.

Likewise, we can highlight the influence of peer groups to which the individual belongs, since having delinquent friends usually predicts the development of delinquent behaviors. For this case, several studies indicate that delinquent youth usually have delinquent friends and that these friends influence the adolescent's own delinquent behavior, inciting it on some occasions, and modeling it on others (Elliot & Menard, 1996; Patterson, Capaldi & Bank, 1991; Reiss & Farrington, 1991).

Figure 3. Development Model of Antisocial Behavior



Conclusions

During recent years the concept of risk factor for different behavioral problems has started to become a widespread object of study, especially when we focus on the idea of prevention. This interest takes on special meaning in the areas of childhood and adolescence, since these are life stages which especially require preventive programs and/or activities. During childhood and adolescence, behavior patterns of great importance to lifelong physical, psychological and social health appear and are consolidated.

The need for including prevention programs particularly designed for preschool and primary age children would seem evident. These preventive interventions should aim to identify and modify factors and conditions which place minor children at risk for putting problem behaviors into practice, making proper social development impossible. We must not forget that, in order for a program for prevention of maladaptive behaviors in adolescents to be effective, it must take into account all variables, individual and contextual, which are involved in the subject's development, so as not only to decrease the probability of risk behaviors appearing, but at the same time to encourage positive development, well adjusted to the social environment in which the adolescent is immersed.

These programs should be based both on the young persons' characteristics as well as on contextual attributes which have been shown to be fundamental in encouraging healthy, whole development in youth. In order for the adolescent to become a healthy, productive adult over time, it is essential to satisfy a series of needs which include, among others, feeling valued as a person, completing one's education, establishing a network of satisfactory human relationships, feeling useful to others, building a support system, believing in a future with real opportunities.

Dryfoos (1994), based on evaluation of programs aimed at prevention of maladaptive behaviors in adolescents, identified characteristics which are usually present in programs that proved to be most effective. These characteristics refer both to individual aspects of the youth, as well as to the context in which they find themselves:

- Early identification and intervention. Given the association between age of initial risk behaviors and greater probability of obtaining negative consequences for the

adolescent's whole development, effective programs should begin intervention as early as possible, anticipating as much as possible the appearance of the problem.

- Individualized attention.
- Cooperation on the part of all agents and institutions in the community. In order to address needs and problems that can affect youth, programs are needed which actively involve all community institutions, so as to carry out a coordinated effort.
- Cooperation of peers and parents. On one hand, peer participation in the intervention is necessary, given the importance of the peer group during adolescence. On the other hand, parent participation as well, due to the importance of the family in adolescent behavior.
- Present both inside and outside of the school framework. School expectations and performance have been demonstrated to be fundamental variables in initiation of risk behaviors; for this reason, effective prevention programs are often located in the school setting. However, carrying out other joint community programs which introduce topics that cannot be dealt with at school can be very positive.
- Administration of school programs by agents external to the school setting. Due to the importance of community organizations and to the need for interdisciplinary intervention, the most effective programs were located at school but were run by community agencies from outside the school system.
- Training plans. Effective programs included guidance and training exercises for concrete skills. One clear example is found in the training of social skills. Most programs which proved to be effective included training in both personal and social skills among the youth.

We must not forget that early identification of risk factors, varying from one population to another and from one context to another, should be the cornerstone for preventing antisocial behaviors. Only through early detection of factors which give rise to the problem will it be possible to build effective intervention programs that prevent the development of violent behaviors and the subsequent need to invest efforts in programs aimed to remedy their negative effects.

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