

1st STEPS

**TAKING
ACTION
EARLY TO
PREVENT
VIOLENCE**





FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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www.preventioninstitute.org/firststeps.html and www.4children.org

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	ii
Introduction: Violence Prevention and Young Children	1
The Three Keys: A Violence Prevention Framework	9
Key 1: Violence is complex and requires a comprehensive approach	10
Key 2: Risk and resiliency factors must be addressed	12
Risk Factors	13
Community and Structural	13
Individual and Family	15
Resiliency Factors	19
Individual and Family	20
Community and Structural	21
Key 3: Violence prevention requires an integrated strategy for action	24
Conclusion: Take the First Steps	41
Appendices	43
A. Glossary of Terms	43
B. Resources	44
Books, Reports, and Videos	44
Campaigns, Curricula, Programs, and Tools	46
Organizations	47
C. Reviewers	51
D. Content Advisors	52
E. Partner Organizations	55
Endnotes	56

Executive Summary

This is a time when the knowledge about the causes of violence and how to prevent it is greater than ever. While violence is part of daily life in far too many homes and communities in the United States, there is an opportunity to make significant strides in preventing it. Taking advantage of this opportunity means starting as early as possible, before violence is learned or reinforced. Early experiences — those that take place prenatally and through 5 years of age — impact the rest of an individual's life. Thus, the first steps to preventing violence require action in these early years.

A wide range of people, from law enforcement officials to child development experts to policy makers, are becoming increasingly aware of the impact of violence on young children and the relationship between violence prevention and the healthy development of young children. A growing body of evidence shows that: 1) supporting healthy early childhood development is an essential element in preventing violence and 2) protecting young children from experiencing violence, as victims or witnesses, is an essential part of ensuring their healthy development.

To understand the crucial link between early childhood development and violence prevention, it is necessary to understand that:

- **Early childhood is a critical time** during which essential intellectual and emotional abilities form. Keeping young children safe and nurturing them is protective against lifelong problems, including the risk of becoming involved in violence.
- **Early experiences impact brain development**, shaping the brain's physical growth and sculpting neural connections. This occurs primarily between birth and school age years, when every encounter a child has or lacks is formative.
- **Violence affects young children**, resulting in a 're-wiring' of the child's brain in which survival skills are preferentially developed at the expense of learning and other social skills.
- **Family, community, and society** are powerful in shaping young children's development.



The last decade of research on violence prevention resulted in the understanding that violence prevention needs to start earlier and that acting as early as possible, in the first five years of life, is critical to success. Despite the potential benefits of implementing violence prevention strategy with young children, inadequate attention has been given to what can be done in the early years. However, a number of talented researchers and practitioners have contributed to an expansive knowledge base. *FIRST STEPS* captures and shapes what is known about the intersection of early childhood development and violence prevention into a coherent strategy, *The Three Keys to Violence Prevention*. Pulling together the range of information from research and practice, *FIRST STEPS* is a tool enabling policy makers, funders, service providers, administrators, parents, and advocates to take action that will make a difference, in both the current lives of young children and in their future.



The Three Keys to Violence Prevention

Key 1:

Violence is complex and requires a comprehensive approach

The determinants of violence are multiple, complex, and often interrelated. Success in addressing these problems is more likely when practitioners work across disciplines and address multiple issues at a time. A successful strategy must include the collaboration and mobilization of a broad group of individuals, and a range of activities that link with, build upon, and add value to each other. To understand the necessary range of activities, violence prevention practitioners have used the *Spectrum of Prevention*,¹ a tool that enables people and coalitions to develop a comprehensive plan while building on existing efforts.



The Spectrum of Prevention

SPECTRUM LEVEL

EXAMPLES

1

Strengthening Individual Knowledge & Skills

- Provide caregivers with information about child development and teach them stress management, problem solving and boundary setting skills, and positive communication and discipline techniques.
- Build developmentally appropriate literacy skills in young children, for example, by encouraging caregivers to read to children frequently and providing books that are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate.

2

Promoting Community Education

- Educate community members about the vulnerability of young children and the detrimental effects of abuse, neglect, and witnessing violence.
- Encourage safe gun storage in the home, including storing guns unloaded and away from ammunition, out of children's reach, and in locked boxes.

3

Educating Providers

- Ensure that professionals who work with young children and families are trained to identify substance abusing caregivers and affected children and provide them with developmentally and culturally appropriate care and support.
- Train childcare providers to model appropriate behaviors, understand how cultural beliefs influence behavior and socialization, provide consistent discipline, and offer a range of developmentally appropriate activities that support each child's unique learning style.

4

Fostering Coalitions & Networks

- Foster collaboration between city planners, transportation and housing authorities, law enforcement, business leaders, funders, and health and education service providers in the development of neighborhoods and services that promote young children's health and well-being.
- Foster partnerships that increase young children's access to positive male role models, including fathers and father figures. Partner with community organizations and networks to involve boys and young men in activities promoting interpersonal respect and cooperation.

5

Changing Organizational Practices

- Incorporate violence screening and assessment tools into existing healthcare protocols and training and promote their use to increase identification and intervention with pregnant women, caregivers, and young children who are at risk of violence.
- Contact television stations, advertising sponsors, and other media outlets, encouraging them to incorporate less violent and inappropriate content in children and family programming.

6

Influencing Policy & Legislation

- Advocate for a refundable per-child tax credit for all families that does not change if parents enter the workforce and for the provision of non-cash benefits such as childcare subsidies and housing and transportation vouchers to low-income families with young children.
- Advocate for policies that support family mental health, including expanding health insurance coverage to include infant and parental mental health and providing adequate training to ensure quality services and programs.

Early Childhood Development and Violence Prevention: Identified Risk and Resiliency Factors

	RISK	RESILIENCY
COMMUNITY AND STRUCTURAL FACTORS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Poverty & economic disparity ■ Bias & discrimination ■ Community deterioration ■ Media violence ■ Access to firearms ■ Gender socialization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Community networks & leadership ■ Financial resources ■ Empowerment & decision-making avenues ■ Community facilities ■ Health, education, & social service systems
INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY FACTORS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Prenatal risk, toxins, & poor nutrition ■ Child abuse & neglect ■ Negative family dynamics ■ Alcohol & other drug abuse ■ Witnessing violence ■ Mental illness ■ Illiteracy & poor academic achievement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Good physical & mental health ■ Positive attachments & relationships ■ Emotional competence ■ Cognitive competence ■ Self-esteem

Key 2:

Risk and resiliency factors must be addressed

Individuals, families, and communities have an enormous capacity to contribute to the resolution of the challenges they face, including violence. Successful violence prevention requires the strengthening of resiliency factors that protect and support children, families, and communities, as well as the reduction of risk factors that threaten their well-being.

Key 3:

Violence prevention requires an integrated strategy for action

Successful violence prevention integrates an understanding of the complex issues, policies, and systems that affect children, families, and communities into an action plan that strategically coordinates, supports, and strengthens multiple efforts.

Recommendations for integrated action:

- 1) Provide families with services and supports to foster health and empowerment.
- 2) Recognize poverty as a significant risk factor and take steps to minimize its impact.
- 3) Prevent and reduce the impact of abuse, neglect, and witnessing violence.
- 4) Increase wellness opportunities and access to quality healthcare for children and families.
- 5) Promote mental health and meet the mental health needs of all family members.
- 6) Reduce substance abuse among caregivers and pregnant women and their partners.
- 7) Provide affordable, available, and high-quality early care and education.
- 8) Improve the ability of families, communities, and schools to prepare children for school.
- 9) Implement measures to reduce young children's access to guns.
- 10) Reduce the impact of media violence on young children.
- 11) Intervene in early bullying behavior and address underlying causes.
- 12) Increase children's opportunities for appropriate play and creative exploration.
- 13) Enhance community connections, resources, and access to information and decision-making.
- 14) Increase local coordination of services and resources for families and their children.
- 15) Ensure that violence prevention efforts for young children are driven by effective strategy.

The evidence is overwhelming: barriers to positive, healthy early childhood development and early experiences of violence inversely affect children in ways that persist far beyond childhood, impacting brain development, academic achievement, relationships, and the risk of being involved in violence. It is critically important to

foster healthy development and prevent violence from occurring by reducing risks and fostering resiliency, working collaboratively, and comprehensively addressing underlying issues. Ensuring that young children have the supports and opportunities they need and deserve is a priority that requires great commitment. It is up to every one of us to take action — to take the first steps toward healthy child development and violence prevention.





INTRODUCTION

Violence Prevention & Young Children

This is a time when the knowledge about the causes of violence and how to prevent it is greater than ever. While violence is part of daily life in far too many homes and communities in the United States, there is an opportunity to make significant strides in preventing it. Taking advantage of this opportunity means starting as early as possible before violence is learned or reinforced. Early experiences — those that occur prenatally and through 5 years of age — impact the rest of an individual's life. As Rob Reiner, Chair of the California Children and Families Commission, has declared, "Violence prevention begins in the high chair, not the electric chair." Thus, the first steps to prevent violence require action in these early years.

Despite the need for focused violence prevention efforts earlier, there has been inadequate attention to what can be done in the early years. However, a number of talented researchers and practitioners have contributed to an expansive knowledge base. *FIRST STEPS* captures what is known about the intersection of early childhood development and violence prevention and shapes it into a coherent strategy. Pulling together a range of research and practice information, *FIRST STEPS* is a tool for taking action that will make a difference in both the current lives of young children and in their future.

Robert vividly remembers the sound of his sister being thrown down the stairwell when he was 3. He remembers diving behind the sofa when a stray bullet found its way from the street into his living room when he was 4½. He also has memories of watching his alcoholic father beat up his mother, which started before he was born and continued, even while she was pregnant with Robert. Now a 16 year old, he's reluctant to talk about it, and when he does the memories are overwhelming. Even though Robert has escaped his childhood home, he has not escaped the impact of these early experiences. He's been a gang member since he was 11. A high school dropout, he hangs out on a street corner, hair covered by a blue bandana that makes his gang allegiances clear. Last week, someone shot at him again. Two of his friends were hit; one died. Robert is also a father. His commitment to his baby is etched in his face every time he talks about him. But despite his pledges to never be like his father, despite the pain he knows so well, recently he beat up the mother of his son.

When children's needs for nurturing, protection, and learning are met, they are far less likely to become involved in violence.

Early childhood is a vulnerable time, when failure to nurture or protect can lead to lifelong problems.

In the last few years, people working to reduce violence have increasingly focused awareness on the experiences of very young children and on the relationship between violence prevention and early childhood development. They have realized that:

- **Supporting healthy early childhood development is essential in preventing violence.** There are a variety of elements related to the care, well-being, and development of young children that impact their risk of future violence. These elements range from the quality of bonding with caregivers to the food and toxins consumed to the stimulation of an environment. When children's needs for nurturing, protection, and learning are met, they are far less likely to become involved in violence when they grow older, as either perpetrators or victims. Ensuring a healthy childhood can therefore be characterized as violence prevention.
- **Protecting young children from experiencing violence, as victims or witnesses, is essential to ensure their healthy development.** Witnessing or experiencing violence at a young age increases a child's risk for a variety of future problems, including aggression, involvement in violence, and difficulties in learning, forming healthy relationships, and maintaining emotional health.

In order to understand the crucial link between early childhood development and violence prevention, it is necessary to understand the importance of early childhood development, the impact of early experience on brain development, the effect of violence on young children, and the important role of family and community.

Early childhood is a critical time

"During the early years of life, the ingredients for intellectual, emotional, and moral growth are laid down. If they are not, it is true that a developing child can still acquire them, but the price rises, and the chances of success decrease with each subsequent year,"² write T. Berry Brazelton and Stanley Greenspan in *The Irreducible Needs of Children*. According to the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development,³ for healthy development, young children need a range of "essential supports," including "health, nutrition, intellectual stimulation, [and] opportunities for exploration and active learning." In addition, "social and emotional care and

nurturing" are critical supports in helping children "realize [their] human potential and play an active role in their families and later in their communities." This description recognizes the synergistic effect of healthy physical, cognitive, and emotional development and the need to focus beyond the individual child to families and communities in ensuring healthy childhood development. Early childhood is a very significant and vulnerable time, when failure to



nurture, protect, or provide for a child can lead to lifelong emotional, behavioral, and developmental problems.

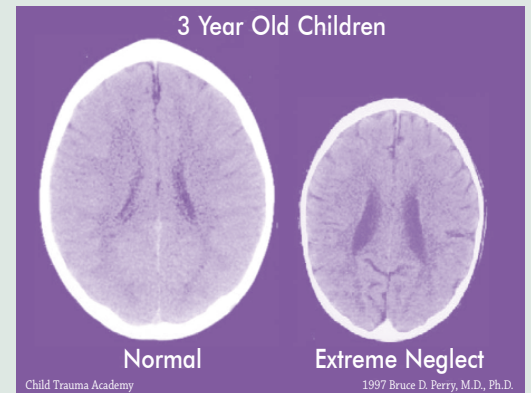
Early experiences impact brain development

Unlike the body, which takes 20 years to mature to 95% of its full size, the brain develops to 90% of its full size in the first five years.⁴ At birth, children's brains have almost all of the brain cells they will ever need. However, they are not yet linked into the necessary networks for learning and complex functioning. Between birth and school age, a process of 'sculpting' occurs: some neural connections are made or reinforced and others die away. Early childhood experiences shape these connections, helping to determine which ones are maintained and which are lost. From the womb to the home to the classroom, every encounter a child has or lacks is formative. According to Robin Karr-Morse, "While the human baby is born with literally trillions of unprogrammed circuits just waiting to be stimulated into great poetry or science or music, for many key capacities, circuits are not used and may die. The experiences of a child will determine the circuits connected."⁵ Early trauma can harm the part of the brain responsible for impulse control, problem solving, and empathy — elements that often play a role in preventing violence. Neglect and a lack of positive nurturing can also harm brain development, resulting in underdevelopment of key neural pathways that affect the child's capacity to bond with and relate to other people.⁶ There is a role for later intervention when development has been compromised; however, intervention can be much more difficult and costly, and result in less satisfactory outcomes.

Violence affects young children

Children who grow up with violence are at risk for pathological development. According to Dr. Bruce Perry, a leading expert on child and brain development, "Violence creates a pervasive sense of threat — an incubator of terror — for the developing child. The results are predictable."⁷ Experiencing violence, stress, and other trauma at a young age results not only in developmental delays, but also results in a 're-wiring' of the child's brain. Survival skills are preferentially developed at the expense of learning and other social skills.⁸ Survival skills include hypervigilance and disassociation, factors that often lead to increased aggression and violence.⁹ In addition, early aggressive behavior that is learned through observation, imitation, and direct experience is the single best predictor of later aggression.¹⁰

In the CT scan on the left is an image from a healthy 3 year old with an average head size. The image on the right is from a 3 year old child suffering from severe sensory-deprivation neglect.



SOURCE: These images are from studies conducted by a team of researchers from the Child Trauma Academy led by Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D.

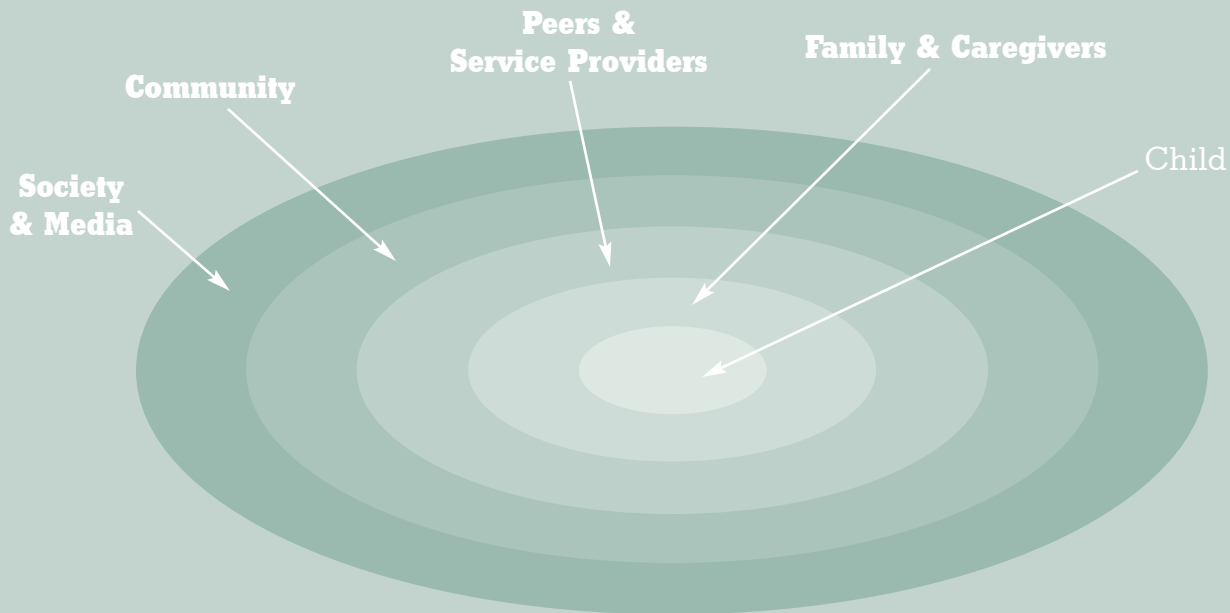
Early trauma can impact impulse control, problem solving, and empathy — elements that play a role in violence prevention.

**Children
are most apt to
flourish when
their parents do.**

Family and community have an important role to play

Children experience and learn to navigate their world through a variety of domains including family and other caregivers, peers, service providers, community, media, and broader society (see figure below). Dr. James Garbarino, Director of the Family Life Development Center and Professor of Human Development at Cornell University, has asserted that, “Although everyone is vulnerable to toxicity in the social environment, children are the most vulnerable.”¹¹ It is therefore critical to address the factors in a young child’s social environment. Further, because children are most apt to flourish when their parents do, strategies to improve child development outcomes must address issues that affect parental and family well-being. Since each of these domains affects a child’s development, solutions must address all of them and their interrelationships.

Domains of the Young Child



**Given the
complexity of
violence, the
solution requires
a comprehensive
strategy.**

The solution: No simple answers

For those concerned about preventing violence, there is a tendency to search for *the* program or curriculum that will ‘fix’ the problem. However, given the complexity of violence, the solution requires a comprehensive strategy that builds on what is already known about violence prevention and early childhood development and incorporates a variety of efforts. Violence prevention is not an outcome that a single program can achieve, but rather the outcome of a strategic approach that directly impacts children and families, the systems that affect them, and the communities in which they live.

Violence prevention efforts require the collaboration and mobilization of a broad group of constituencies. While specific violence prevention programs, such as conflict resolution, parenting classes, and counseling are necessary, they are even more effective as part of an interrelated set of activities. In addition, all efforts should not only ameliorate the effects of violence but also must focus on what can be done before violence occurs. Any violence prevention approach must also recognize that building resiliency is as critical as addressing known risk factors.

The prevention of violence is the outcome of a strategic, coordinated fabric of efforts.

The context: A growing awareness

In developing comprehensive strategies, the necessity of addressing the underlying social ills that contribute to violence has long been recognized. Several California foundations, including The David and Lucile Packard Foundation and The California Wellness Foundation, have made significant investments in violence prevention, bringing the value of prevention to the forefront of efforts to address the problem of violence. Other recent developments highlight the growing awareness of the need for attention specifically to early child development to achieve violence prevention outcomes. These include:

- **Accumulation of evidence:** A 1999 study by the Eisenhower Foundation concluded that in the 30 years since a National Commission report on the causes and prevention of violence, researchers had developed more than enough information about successful strategies, such as Head Start programs, to make significant progress in violence prevention, if those strategies were implemented nationally.
- **Law enforcement support:** Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, a national nonprofit organization whose membership includes sheriffs, police chiefs, district attorneys, and crime survivors, has published two major reports^{12,13} about the importance of quality child care and after-school programs in preventing crime and producing other positive results for young people, garnering significant support for such policies among law enforcement leaders.
- **Nationwide understanding:** The U.S. Department of Justice's nationwide *Safe from the Start* campaign, launched in 1999, increased awareness about the importance of early brain development and the detrimental effects of young children's exposure to violence. Several state initiatives have subsequently been launched. For example, a California campaign, initiated in 2000 by Attorney General Bill Lockyer in partnership with the Health and Human Services Agency and the California Children and Families Commission, brought





together over 1,500 local policy makers and advocates across the state, as well as state legislators at a joint legislative hearing in March 2001.

- **Government effectiveness:** *Never Too Early, Never Too Late to Prevent Youth Crime and Violence*, a June 2001 report by the California Little Hoover Commission, underscores the importance of beginning violence prevention efforts early and the government's role in reducing and preventing violence.

- **Collaborative efforts:** Others in California are working together to establish a system that understands the interrelationship between different kinds of violence (e.g., intimate partner/family violence, child abuse, youth violence, suicide) and the need to collaborate to address this continuum of violence, which often begins with young children. These efforts involve the Family Violence Prevention Fund, National Funding Collaborative on Violence Prevention, and *Shifting the Focus: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Advancing Violence Prevention in California*, a partnership of state departments, agencies, commissions, and organizations.

- **Public support:** In 1998, California voters passed Proposition 10, the California Children and Families Act, adding a 50-cent-per-pack cigarette tax to fund new programs for young children and their families. County- and state-level Children and Family Commissions, created and funded by the proposition, are in a position to provide leadership on violence prevention as it relates to young children.

In addition to playing a significant role in a child's healthy development and future well-being, starting violence prevention early is also cost effective. For example, the High/Scope study of the Perry Preschool program measured net savings of more than \$70,000 in per participant crime-related savings, and a total of \$88,000 saved when welfare, tax, and other savings were taken into consideration. In other words, every \$1 spent on the program returned \$7.16 to the public.¹⁴ Similarly, a RAND study demonstrated that the Nurse-Family Partnership home visiting program saves at least \$4 for every \$1 spent on the program.¹⁵

**Starting
prevention
early
is cost
effective.**

The objective: Take action early

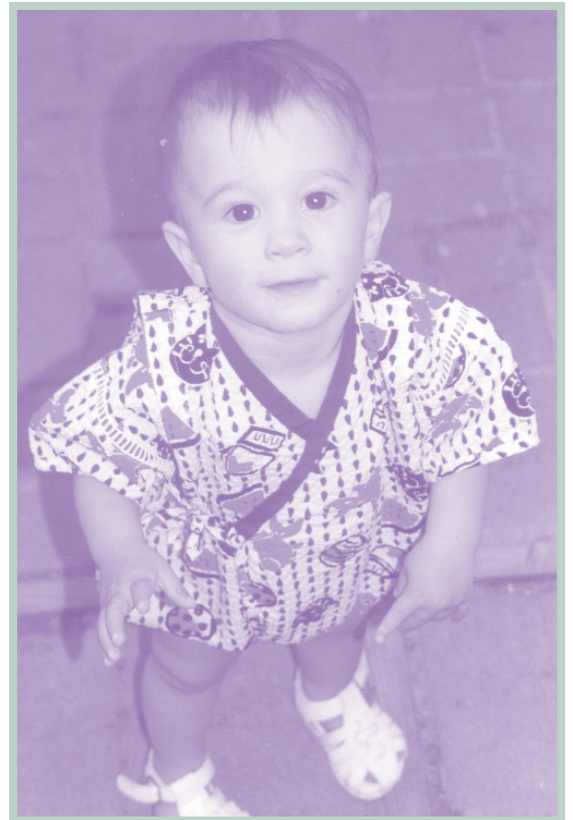
Violence is learned so it can be unlearned or conditions can be changed so it's not learned in the first place. It's never too late to change the behavior but it is much more difficult to do it later rather than earlier.

— Dr. Ron Slaby, Developmental Psychologist, Harvard University

The last decade of research on violence prevention resulted in the understanding that violence prevention needs to start earlier and that acting as early as possible, in the first five years of life, is critical to success. In the wake of September 11, 2001, our society has rekindled a commitment to community, safety, and leadership. Further, these tragic events reinforced the importance of responding to those who have experienced or witnessed violence to promote healing. Overall, however, the incidence of violence and aggression remains beyond what is acceptable for safety and quality of life in this culture. Changes must be systemic; changes in the early years will have the greatest impact. This report gives examples of best and promising practices and offers a policy direction for leaders and a practice direction for program providers and administrators. Specifically, it provides the following:

- *The Three Keys to Violence Prevention*, a framework for developing a comprehensive strategy to support healthy child development and prevent violence
- Essential information about key risk and resiliency factors relevant to early development and violence prevention
- Research on a broad range of violence prevention issues to enable those working on any of these issues to see how they interrelate in a broader strategic approach
- Recommendations for decreasing young children's risk of current and future violence

FIRST STEPS was developed as a resource for state and local Children and Families Commissions in California. However, it is relevant for other policy makers, funders, service providers, administrators, parents, and advocates as a guide to developing, implementing, supporting, evaluating, and/or funding initiatives that contribute to violence prevention and healthy child development.





The 3 KEYS

Violence Prevention Framework

Recognizing that law enforcement alone cannot solve the problem of violence, violence prevention practitioners have increasingly turned toward a broader, more comprehensive approach. *The Three Keys to Violence Prevention* is a framework that incorporates public health, law enforcement, social service, and education perspectives.

Key 1:

Violence is complex and requires a comprehensive approach

The determinants of violence are multiple, complex, and often interrelated. A successful strategy must include the participation of a broad group of individuals and a range of activities that link with, build upon, and add value to each other.

Key 2:

Risk and resiliency factors must be addressed

Successful violence prevention requires the strengthening of factors that protect and support children and families, as well as the reduction of factors that threaten child and family well-being.

Key 3:

Violence prevention requires an integrated strategy for action

Successful violence prevention integrates an understanding of the complex issues, policies, and systems that affect children, families, and communities into an action plan that strategically coordinates, supports, and strengthens multiple efforts.



Violence is a complex problem and requires a comprehensive approach

The complex determinants of violence include individual development and personality traits, family interactions, and socioeconomic factors that affect families' ability to raise children. A successful strategy must therefore include multiple activities involving a range of partners.

To understand the necessary range of activities, prevention practitioners have used the *Spectrum of Prevention*,¹⁶ a tool that enables people and coalitions to develop a comprehensive plan while building on existing efforts. The *Spectrum* encourages people to move beyond an educational or individual skill-building approach to address broader environmental and systems-level issues. When the six levels of the *Spectrum* are used together, they produce a more effective strategy than would be possible by implementing a single initiative or program in isolation.

The Spectrum of Prevention

SPECTRUM LEVEL	DEFINITION OF LEVEL
1 Strengthening Individual Knowledge & Skills	Enhancing individual capacity to prevent injury and illness and promote wellness and safety
2 Promoting Community Education	Reaching groups of people with information and resources
3 Educating Providers	Informing providers who will transmit skills and knowledge to others to improve prevention outcomes
4 Fostering Coalitions & Networks	Bringing together groups and individuals for broader goals and greater impact on early childhood development and violence prevention
5 Changing Organizational Practices	Adopting regulations and shaping norms to improve health and safety
6 Influencing Policy & Legislation	Developing strategies to change laws and policies for broader outcomes

Multidisciplinary Teams

The Police Action Counseling Team (PACT) of Riverside County, California partners licensed mental health professionals with law enforcement officers to respond jointly to emergency calls when children and families have been traumatized. PACT's objectives are to increase the possibility of a child's healthy recovery from trauma, interrupt familial cycles of violence, and create a culture within the police department that fosters relationships with community agencies. Police officers and mental health professionals receive intensive training in assessing the psychological needs of families in crisis and in providing immediate, informed intervention. Mental health professionals are on-call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to respond to calls from the police department. The mental health team also rides along with police officers regularly to increase accessibility and availability for follow-up services. Following an initial crisis assessment, PACT offers families appropriate and streamlined referrals. Agencies currently in the referral system include county mental health agencies, school districts, medical facilities, child protective services, probation services, victim witness assistance, and the district attorney's office. More than 300 children in the county are annually served by PACT. Outcomes include increased awareness of family trauma and violence within law enforcement, increased reporting to Child Protective Services, and more children and families being referred to and accessing mental health services. Initial evaluation shows that deputies involved in PACT referred 80% of children and families for mental health care, while deputies not involved in PACT only referred 10% of families. Evaluation also shows a four-fold reduction in negative symptoms among children and families who received referrals. Call the Riverside County Sheriff's Department at (760) 836-1600.



The *Spectrum* capitalizes on the power of collaboration and the synergy of working concurrently on multiple activities. Each community has unique resources and needs that impact not only how violence prevention initiatives are developed, but also how those initiatives are sustained and institutionalized. As communities develop such initiatives, attention to the range of *Spectrum* activities will allow for both greater effectiveness and better institutionalization of efforts and results.

Fostering Coalitions and Networks, Level 4 of the *Spectrum*, is especially important in violence prevention work. There is no one group that can do everything required to raise healthy children, support their families and communities, and prevent violence. Collaboration and coordination of efforts can:

- Ensure that needed services are more accessible and user-friendly for families
- Bring together people with different areas of expertise
- Promote strategic planning
- Reduce duplication of effort
- Increase impact
- Build credibility and political power
- Allow information sharing

In addition, data and evaluation should inform all levels of *Spectrum* activities. Any proposed activity should be based on data showing that: 1) the issue is important; 2) the target population is appropriate; and 3) the intervention is promising. Ongoing evaluation of the overall approach and of individual activities will provide the information needed to make adjustments as the strategies are implemented.

Potential Partners

businesses ■ childcare providers ■ community members
educators ■ faith institutions ■ families
family support services ■ government ■ healthcare providers
housing authorities ■ law enforcement ■ media
mental health ■ parks and recreation ■ planners
social services ■ transportation



Risk and resiliency factors must be addressed

To reduce violence, it is important to reduce risk factors for violence. Furthermore, it is equally important to foster resiliency, the ability of young children and their families to overcome risks and thrive. A growing body of research demonstrates the interrelationship between risk and resiliency,¹⁷ the ability of resiliency to mitigate the effect of some risks,^{18,19} and the importance of focusing on both factors.²⁰ Therefore, strategies that simultaneously reduce risk factors and increase resiliency factors have a greater chance of success.

Early Childhood Development and Violence Prevention: Identified Risk and Resiliency Factors

	RISK	RESILIENCY
COMMUNITY AND STRUCTURAL FACTORS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Poverty & economic disparity■ Bias & discrimination■ Community deterioration■ Media violence■ Access to firearms■ Gender socialization	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Community networks & leadership■ Financial resources■ Empowerment & decision-making avenues■ Community facilities■ Health, education, & social service systems
INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY FACTORS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Prenatal risk, toxins, & poor nutrition■ Child abuse & neglect■ Negative family dynamics■ Alcohol & other drug abuse■ Witnessing violence■ Mental illness■ Illiteracy & poor academic achievement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Good physical & mental health■ Positive attachments & relationships■ Emotional competence■ Cognitive competence■ Self-esteem

Risk Factors

Risk factors are characteristics or circumstances that increase the likelihood of an individual, family, or community being affected by or perpetrating violence. The effects of risk on child development and violence are complex, interactive, and cumulative. Not everyone exposed to risk factors will become involved in violence, but children who are exposed to multiple risk factors have a higher prevalence of antisocial behaviors and a greater likelihood of decreased intelligence and social competence, all of which correlate with an increased risk of violence.^{21,22,23} The combination, frequency, and severity of risks influence whether or not problems develop.²⁴ According to Dr. James Garbarino, “No one risk or asset counts for much by itself. It is only the overwhelming accumulation of risk without a compensatory accumulation of assets that puts kids in jeopardy.”²⁵

Thirteen risk factors for violence and their impact on early child development are delineated here. They are based on risk factors previously identified in youth violence prevention²⁶ and expanded to include factors specific to young children. These factors address community and structural as well as individual and family risks.

Community and Structural Risk Factors

1. Poverty and economic disparity

Young children are more likely than any other age group in America to live in poverty.^{27,28} Growing up in poverty restricts young children’s access to nutritious foods, quality housing, health care, childcare, safe living environments, and other necessities. Associated risks, such as lack of opportunity for parental employment and advancement, can increase family stress, intimate partner violence, children’s exposure to alcohol, drugs, and environmental toxins,²⁹ and risk for abuse, neglect, and maltreatment.³⁰ When young children live in poverty, they are at greater risk for current or future behavior problems, such as aggression, fighting, anxiety, withdrawal, depression,³¹ and delinquency.³² In addition, childhood poverty is associated with reduced cognitive abilities and increased learning disabilities, developmental delays,³³ and school failure³⁴ — all factors that increase the chance of future violent involvement.³⁵ Poverty and economic disparity also often underlie many of the other risk factors affecting children and families.

2. Bias and discrimination

If children are raised in an environment in which there is disrespect, inequality, or contempt for people of different races, cultures, genders, abilities, or life choices, they are more likely to develop biased attitudes³⁶, replicate them throughout their lifetime, and potentially express them in violent ways. Experiencing bias, which can also be

“It is only the overwhelming accumulation of risk without a compensatory accumulation of assets that puts kids in jeopardy.”

America has the highest child poverty rate when compared to 17 other industrialized nations.³⁷

12 to 14 million American children — about 1 in 5 — have lived in families whose income was at or below the official poverty threshold.³⁸

California has the highest child poverty rate in the nation; 1 in 6 poor children in the United States live in California.³⁹

Children living below the poverty line are 1.3 times more likely than non-poor children to experience learning disabilities and developmental delays.⁴⁰

The combination of neighborhood poverty and family poverty poses a double risk for young children.

American children will view approximately 100,000 acts of violence on television, including 8,000 murders, before completing elementary school.⁵³

Children who had watched more television at age 8 were more likely to commit serious crimes at age 30.⁵⁴

Children ages 2 to 4 spend over 4 hours a day exposed to media (primarily television), and over a quarter of them have televisions in their bedroom.⁵⁵

**“When I was watching a knife movie, I went to sleep and I woke up. I ran out the room because I was having a nightmare.”
— 3 year old⁵²**

institutionalized in discriminatory policies and practices, can contribute to caregiver and family stress, poor mental functioning, and reduced capacity of adults to care for young children.

3. Community deterioration

Community deterioration includes both a breakdown of supportive networks among community members and a lack of resources such as community recreation areas or health and educational facilities. Families living in such communities may be socially isolated, without the personal resources to make up for the lack of goods and services or to escape to a more affluent community. The combination of neighborhood poverty and family poverty poses a double risk for young children. Research suggests that moving to a more affluent community enhances the physical and psychological health of children as well as their academic performance, and reduces violent crimes committed by adolescents.^{41,42} In addition, the absence of networks and organizations that help reinforce positive values contributes significantly to high rates of violence.⁴³ For example, lack of validation of violence-free lifestyles in the community may undermine parents’ efforts to teach their young children positive behaviors.⁴⁴

4. Media violence

American children are exposed to violent images on a daily basis through media including television, movies, cartoons, music videos, newspapers, books, and magazines. Numerous studies have proved that excessive exposure to media violence increases aggressive behaviors in children and is associated with long-term negative effects.^{45,46,47}

Children under age 5 who witness television violence are especially vulnerable to its negative effects.⁴⁸ This is because young children have not yet fully developed the ability to critically process the images as acceptable or unacceptable, real or make-believe. Without appropriate guidance, children can internalize the message that violence is a common and appropriate way to solve problems. This results in an increased likelihood for children to behave violently towards others and a decreased sense of empathy when they observe violence being perpetrated against others.⁴⁹ Additional research shows that the more violence children watch at age 5, the lower their grades are later on in school.⁵⁰

Media violence can also increase young children’s fears that the world is a more dangerous place than it really is and cause them increased anxiety.⁵¹ Because some caregivers cannot provide guidance or are not aware of these negative effects, many young children are being left unsupervised to watch television and other media.

5. Access to firearms

Every day ten American children die and many more are seriously injured by guns.⁵⁶ Research conducted by the U.S. General Accounting Office found that in 8% of fatal unintentional firearms deaths, the shooters were younger than 6.⁵⁷ In a study of shootings among children in California, the most common cause in the fatal unintentional shooting of a child was the child's playing with a loaded and unlocked firearm.⁵⁸ Many parents often do not have an accurate sense of how their firearms are stored,⁵⁹ and many homes with young children have firearms that are improperly stored or within easy reach of young children. Research also shows that a substantial percentage of young children are strong enough to fire the handguns that are currently available.⁶⁰ Strength coupled with natural curiosity and tendency to explore puts young children at high risk by readily available and improperly stored firearms in their homes.

6. Gender socialization

Boys and men are disproportionately represented among both perpetrators and victims of violence, including physical and sexual assaults. Whatever their parents' views, most boys learn in a variety of ways that 'rough and tumble' play, fighting, risk-taking, and lack of emotional expression are typical and natural male characteristics.⁶¹ This kind of socialization can cause boys and men to be less empathetic than girls and women and more prone to engaging in bullying and violent behaviors. A growing body of research has documented a strong link between socialization into this stereotypical code of masculinity and an increased risk for experiencing violence.^{62,63,64}

Individual and Family Risks

7. Prenatal risk, toxins, and poor nutrition

Poor maternal diet, inadequate nutrition, lack of adequate doctor visits, exposure to lead, alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs and environmental toxins, as well as maternal exposure to stress, deprivation, or violence can significantly affect fetal and young children's brain development.^{65,66} Affected children exhibit low verbal IQ, attention deficits, hyperactivity, poor impulse control, lowered academic achievement, inadequate processing of information, inflexibility, restlessness, agitation, and difficulty processing social cues⁶⁷ — all characteristics that can predispose children to aggressive and violent behavior.

32% of households with children contained at least one gun, but only 30% of these households stored guns safely — unloaded and locked.⁶⁸

61% of gun-owning households with children had at least one gun unlocked, often a rifle, and 15% had at least one gun loaded, most often a handgun.⁶⁹

Boys and men are most often the perpetrators of interpersonal violence, including homicide,⁷⁰ physical assaults,⁷¹ and sexual assaults.⁷²

Most violence is committed by or against males and increasingly involves young men and boys.⁷³

Males are 3 to 5 times more likely than females to carry weapons.⁷⁴

Despite a significant drop since the late 1970s, more than 1.5 million children under age 6 had elevated blood lead levels by 1991.⁷⁵

Elevated blood lead levels continue to be more common among low-income children and children living in urban areas and older housing. Low-income children living in older housing had more than a 30-fold greater prevalence of blood lead levels than middle-income children in newer housing.⁷⁶

Neglect may cause as much, if not more, harm as other types of maltreatment.

Infants and toddlers 3 years of age and younger had the highest victimization rates among reports of child maltreatment in 1999.⁸⁸

More than 50% of all reports of maltreatment are for neglect; 20% are for physical abuse, and 11% for sexual abuse.⁸⁹

The child maltreatment victimization rate in California is among the highest compared to other states in the U.S.⁹⁰

Children less than 1 year old accounted for 42.6% of the abuse and neglect fatalities reported in 1999, and 86.1% of the victims were under 6 years old.⁹¹

8. Child abuse and neglect

The impact of abuse or neglect is severe at any age, but children under age 5 are especially vulnerable. Neglect may cause as much, if not more, harm as other types of maltreatment.⁷⁷ As James Garbarino notes, “In every culture in the world, when kids are rejected, they do badly.”⁷⁸ Infants who are subject to prolonged or chronic stressful situations due to inadequate care or abuse experience disrupted neurodevelopment and resulting developmental delays. The trauma results in the development of some skills at the sacrifice of others: for instance, survival and defense skills, such as extreme mistrust or avoidance of people, are developed in favor of positive learning and pro-social skills.

History of child maltreatment is a strong predictor of future behavior problems, including violence, aggressiveness, and delinquency. While not all children who experience abuse or neglect become involved in violence, many do become either victims or perpetrators as adults. A study conducted for the U.S. Department of Justice found that childhood experience of maltreatment increases the likelihood of an arrest as a juvenile by 59%, as an adult by 28%, and of arrest for a violent crime by 30%.⁷⁹ Other research has linked physical abuse with lower social skills and higher levels of aggression at school.⁸⁰ As young as 1 year old, physically abused children already demonstrate more aggressiveness with both peers and adults.⁸¹

9. Negative family dynamics

An increasing number of reports about violent events involving children who grew up in stable, resource-rich communities and families demonstrates that violence does not threaten only poor or unstable families and communities. At any income level, lack of nurturing interactions between parents and their children harms child development and increases the risk of involvement in violence. Parents’ failure to set clear expectations for children’s behavior, poor monitoring and supervision, lack of involvement, and severe and inconsistent discipline have been shown to consistently predict later delinquency.^{82,83} In addition, when parents have to choose between working or spending time at home with their children, or when they have to work long hours or in unsupportive environments, those stresses also affect their children.⁸⁴

10. Alcohol and other drug abuse

Parental alcohol and drug abuse, in addition to harming fetal brain development, also increases the chance that children will witness or experience violence. Nationwide, alcohol is the drug most closely associated with violent incidents; some researchers estimate that it is implicated in 50 to 66% of all homicides,⁸⁵ 20 to 36% of suicides,⁸⁶ and more than 50% of all cases of domestic violence.⁸⁷

Parental substance abuse has also been found to be a significant contributing factor to child abuse or neglect.⁹² A study from the Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research shows that substance abuse was one of the top two problems among families reported for child maltreatment.⁹³ Parents who abuse drugs and alcohol are less able to set priorities, provide guidance, and attend to their children's needs. Parental substance abuse may also interact with and underlie mental illness, another factor that places children at increased risk for maltreatment. In addition, the presence of alcohol at the community level seems to influence the degree of exposure to violence. For example, more assaults and homicides occur in communities or neighborhoods in which there are more bars.⁹⁴

11. Witnessing violence

Witnessing violence, either in the community or the home, is traumatizing to young children, leaving them feeling scared, helpless, and unsafe. Repeated (chronic) exposure to violence, such as that which occurs when living in a violent home or neighborhood, often results in negative effects that persist and accumulate over the long term.^{95,96} Witnessing violence at any age can contribute to mental illness and disorders, and studies have found symptoms of post-traumatic stress and disorders among infants and toddlers exposed to community violence.⁹⁷ Witnessing community and domestic violence is especially traumatic for young children because it also impacts the adults on whom they depend for safety and reassurance. Parents' ability to adequately care for their young children is compromised when they fear for their safety or when families live in communities racked by violence.⁹⁸

Witnessing violence when young can normalize and establish violence as an acceptable form of behavior, and increase children's risk for perpetrating or being victimized by violence later in life.⁹⁹ Young children who witness violence often mimic it and find it harder to control their own aggressive impulses and get along with parents, teachers, and other children. They also tend to exhibit poor problem solving skills, depression, inability to concentrate, low academic performance, and lower levels of empathy, social competence, and self-esteem.^{100,101,102} The results can be long lasting. For example, boys who witness violence against their mothers when young have an increased likelihood of using violence against their domestic partners when adults.¹⁰³

Substance abuse is one of the top two problems exhibited by families in 81% of cases reported to state protective services.¹⁰⁴

Among pregnant women in 1999, an estimated 17% smoked cigarettes and 3% engaged in "binge" alcohol use while pregnant.¹⁰⁵

One year after drug treatment, 40% of women eliminated or reduced their dependence on welfare.¹⁰⁶

Treatment of substance abuse decreased crime-related costs by 75%.¹⁰⁷

The average benefits of substance abuse treatment exceed the costs by 3 to 1.¹⁰⁸

**"Somebody threw
a rock at
my momma's
window when
I was sleeping.
It was my
bedroom.
I felt sad. Then
I was crying."
— 4 year old¹⁰⁹**

More than 3.3 million children are estimated to witness physical and verbal spousal abuse each year, with children under 5 being disproportionately represented in affected households.¹¹⁰

A survey of inner city students found that 10% of black and 1% of white first and second graders reported having seen someone get shot.¹¹¹

Children living in domestic violence situations are up to 15 times more likely to be abused or neglected than children from non-violent homes.¹¹²

12. Mental illness

Some estimate as many as six million children in America may suffer from a mental health disorder that severely disrupts their ability to function at home, in school, or in their community.¹¹³ Children with mental disorders may exhibit disruptive behaviors that make parenting, family dynamics, and general social functioning exceptionally difficult, and their future development may also be affected.

About two-thirds of all young people with mental health problems who need help are not getting it.¹³²

Impoverished children and families are less likely to be diagnosed and receive care for an existing mental illness because they often receive irregular and poorer quality health care.¹³³

Young children who have parents or caregivers with mental illness are also at increased risk.¹¹⁴ Mental illness can impair a parent's ability to provide the quality of care and support that a young child needs for optimal development.¹¹⁵ Maternal depression can be especially harmful to the young child. Mild maternal depression affects approximately 40% of all mothers, with about 10 to 15% of all new mothers experiencing moderate or severe postpartum depression.^{116,117} Research on the infants of depressed mothers suggests that maternal depression can have a permanent effect, not only on children's ability to feel safe and in control, but also on their cognitive functioning,¹¹⁸ all of which are associated with increased risk of future behavior problems and increased risk for involvement with violence.

13. Illiteracy and poor academic achievement

Illiteracy is correlated with delinquency,^{119,120} and the foundations for literacy are laid early. For example, emerging literacy skills are more likely to develop when children are read to or told stories,¹²¹ and children who are read to prior to entering school not only become better readers, but also perform better in school.¹²² Studies have shown that children's success or failure during the first years of school often predicts the level of later academic success.^{123,124} Academic success during adolescence has been shown to reduce delinquency and prevent involvement in violence,¹²⁵ and there is a strong correlation between school failure and aggressive or violent behavior.^{126,127} Academic achievement also enhances the development of positive self-esteem and self-efficacy. Family characteristics have an impact on the development of early literacy skills. For example, the likelihood that a child will be read to increases as a mother's education level increases.¹²⁶

Babies whose mothers provided them with opportunities to observe, imitate, and learn performed higher on IQ tests at age 4 than children who were exposed to the same teachings starting at age 1.¹³⁴

Chronic exposure to violence harms a child's ability to learn.¹²⁹ When children's energies are redirected because they are defending themselves against outside dangers or warding off their own fears, they have difficulty learning in school.¹³⁰ The relationship between exposure to violence and learning is particularly significant because cognitive skills form the foundation of academic success, self-esteem, coping, and overall resilience. As Prothrow-Stith and Quaday assert: "When our children's ability to learn is being dangerously undermined, the foundation of our society is being damaged in a manner that cannot be easily repaired."¹³¹

Resiliency Factors

Many children who experience risk factors for violence nevertheless grow up to become healthy, caring adults.¹³⁵ This capacity to develop positively despite harmful experiences is called resiliency. Fostering resiliency in young children has been shown to improve academic, emotional, social, and cognitive outcomes^{136,137,138,139} and to reduce violence later in life. In order to ensure healthy child development, it is therefore essential that resiliency is fostered while risks are reduced. Like risks, the effects of resiliency factors, or assets, accumulate, with children with more assets being less likely to engage in violence and other high-risk behaviors. According to Search Institute data, only 6% of children with more than 30 assets were violent, compared to 61% of the children with less than 10 assets.¹⁴⁰ Having more assets also increases the chances that young people will have positive attitudes and behaviors such as good health, success in school, self-control, and value for diversity.¹⁴¹

Building individual, family, and community assets is especially important during the first five years of life. As Dr. Jack Shonkoff, editor of *Neurons to Neighborhoods* has stated, “We know that it is easier to get children on a positive path early than to come in after the fact and try and make it up.”¹⁴² For healthy development during this time, children’s basic needs must be met, including the need for positive experiences that provide them with a sense of belonging, respect, safety, self-worth, autonomy, mastery, and meaning.¹⁴³ Spending quality time with young children and engaging them emotionally and cognitively helps build resiliency. Communities can also foster resiliency by creating support systems that strengthen families, empower parents, and promote the healthy development of young children. Communities that provide families with resources to protect, stimulate, and nurture their children increase children’s ability to respond positively in the face of risk. According to James Garbarino, “Neighborhoods supplement the individual-level factors associated with resilience by providing a context in which children can be exposed to positive influences.”¹⁴⁴ Some strengths-building activities are part of common-sense approaches adults can use with children,¹⁴⁵ while others require broader, more systemic change.

“We know that it is easier to get children on a positive path early than to come in after the fact and try and make it up.”

