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REVIEW ARTICLE

The effects of submission and exposure to real-world and virtual violence during childhood and adolescence

Q1 Luci Pfeiffer *

Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR), PhD in Child and Adolescent Health, Curitiba, PR, Brazil

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KEYWORDS

Children;
Adolescents;
Exposure to violence;
Real world;
Virtual world

Abstract

Objective: This text proposes a discussion and analysis of the effects of exposure to real-world and virtual violence in childhood and adolescence, and its repercussions on development.

Data sources: literature review on the topic of children's and adolescents' exposure to real-world and virtual violence, and observations from case studies of children and adolescents who were victims of serious and very serious violence, assisted by the DEDICA Program – Defense of the Rights of Children and Adolescents in Curitiba in the first semester of 2025.

Summary of findings: It is observed that a significant number of children and adolescents, regardless of their origins, ethnicities, beliefs, cultures, and the sociocultural condition of their guardians, are being exposed to various forms of violence, whether intrafamilial, domestic, institutional, or from their surroundings, through what they observe, witness, and experience in the real or virtual world.

Conclusions: It is concluded that exposure to situations of violence through direct aggression, witnessing, cohabitation, and/or participation can promote desensitization and the normalization of causing harm to others. Without protection or contestation of violent acts, whatever their source, those who are learning their own value and the value of others, and how to fight for life, come to accept them as an inevitable part of life, either suffering them or perpetrating them. The need for pediatric consultations to include guidance for caregivers and patients on preventing exposure to any form of violence, as well as the adoption of protective measures, including legal ones, against the harm to which they may be subjected, is evident.

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Introduction

Children develop physically and psychologically from the care and stimulation they receive, from the transmission of concepts and values, which should include basic limits and

Institution: Sociedade Paranaense de Pediatria: President of the Scientific Department for Prevention and Coping with External Causes

* Corresponding author.

E-mail: lucipfeiffer@gmail.com

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5 prohibitions of protection and respect for oneself and
6 others, from those who will perform the maternal and pater-
7 nal functions. This learning, progressive and continuous, will
8 occur not only through the word of this other, but also
9 through the attempt to copy the model presented to them
10 by their caregivers, in order to be accepted as an equal.

11 After birth, the human being goes through a long period
12 of absolute dependence on someone who feeds, cares for,
13 and protects them, who should be stable figures in their life,
14 offering them care, attention, stimulation, and the under-
15 standing that they are welcome and sufficient to awaken the
16 affection of this other.¹

17 It is the adult caregivers, who are expected to be the
18 parents, the main figures of affection, who will introduce
19 the world to the newborn child and the child to the world,
20 from their first days of life.²

21 Up to the age of seven or eight, depending on the quality
22 and type of affectionate bonds with their caregivers, and
23 what they observe and begin to understand in their sur-
24 roundings, the child will build the foundations of their
25 personality.^{2,3} They will retain what is taught directly, but
26 also indirectly, through their impressive capacity for obser-
27 vation and mirroring, to support their primary actions and
28 reactions in dealing with themselves and others, creating
29 the psychological tools with which they will face life and
30 base their choices.

31 In the absence of a healthy adult role model, sometimes
32 growing up in an environment of mutual aggression between
33 their caregivers and guardians, which is replicated in the
34 most vulnerable, children and adolescents will repeat the
35 place where they managed to survive, whether as victims,
36 hostages of new aggressors, or abusers.

37 Even in early childhood, the child's gaze turns from their
38 intrafamilial environment to their surroundings. As a recipi-
39 ent of all the influences of the adult world that surrounds
40 them, they expand their sources of knowledge and recogni-
41 tion of their environment, comparing the attention they
42 receive with the different ways in which those who are part
43 of their days, and their actions and reactions, are cared for.

44 Until adolescence, the child will seek and achieve greater
45 freedom to expand their environments and the view and val-
46 ues of themselves and others, seeking to establish their con-
47 cepts of right and wrong, of the real, the imaginary and the
48 fantastical, but still within the principles that the adult
49 world around them will be passing on or showing them and
50 what they have access to, whether in the real world or in
51 the virtual world.

52 The closer, in the physical sense, but especially in terms
53 of bonds of dependence and affection, the earlier, more
54 intense, and longer the child's exposure to situations of vio-
55 lence, the greater the damage to their neuropsychomotor
56 development and to the structuring of their personality,
57 leading to the normalization and naturalization of the suf-
58 fering imposed by another.

59 With puberty, the adolescent's gaze and attention will
60 turn, eagerly, in search of new knowledge and values from
61 others, initially from their peers, their families, and those
62 who make up their environment, which will be compared
63 with what they received from their family and are receiving
64 from their nuclear environment. The institutions they
65 attend, such as school and social environments, will play a
66 very important role in presenting and teaching models of

right and wrong, and it is expected that they will be healthy
in their proposals and examples.

These should be the solid foundations for guaranteeing
the rights to the structuring of psychological instruments for
respect for oneself and others.

To control and protect from the influence of the environ-
ment, the external world, both real and virtual, where vio-
lence resides, and social media makes it common news,
what has been offered by the family, community, and society
in general as a way and model of living and growing for chil-
dren and adolescents?

Objectives

The damaging effects of violent environments on the structur-
ing of a child's and adolescent's personality, from birth, are
undeniable, as are the formation and deformation of their val-
ues, concepts of good or bad living with themselves and with
others, leading to greater harm to themselves and society in
general, the earlier and longer their exposure to violence lasts.

Under these concepts and principles, this text aims to:

General objective

To present a study and analysis of the effects of exposure to
the various forms of violence that invade everyone's daily
life and, consequently, the life and physical and psychologi-
cal development of children and adolescents, through
threats, suffering, witnessing, or involvement with situa-
tions of violence, over which there is no command or control
in their origins.

This study and analysis raise an alert about the lack of
comprehensive epidemiological data to measure the magni-
tude of the problem in Brazil and the world, and, especially,
the need to seek ways and means of protecting children and
adolescents.

Specific objectives

- To analyze the main presentations and forms of violence
present in Brazilian childhood and adolescence, from
intrafamilial to structural, community, and societal vio-
lence, in both the real and virtual worlds.
- To raise awareness of the effects of children and adoles-
cents' exposure to direct and indirect forms of violence
with which they live.
- To recommend that healthcare professionals who provide
care to children and adolescents, especially pediatri-
cians, include in their diagnostic assessments the recog-
nition of signs and symptoms of direct and/or indirect
exposure to situations of violence to which they may be
subjected, as well as their treatment and the protective
measures they need.
- To propose a joint effort with the education, social action,
security, and justice sectors to take action to stop this situa-
tion, starting by minimizing the exposure of children and
adolescents to instances of violence, whether through wit-
nessing, threats, cohabitation, or subjugation, both within
the family and originating from the environments in which
they live, the communities they frequent, and society in
general, disseminated in the real and virtual world.

123 Results

124 Violence has always been part of human history, with chil- 182
125 dren and adolescents being its most vulnerable victims, 183
126 bearing the brunt of the damage, which multiplies due to 184
127 the sequential harm to their development. 185

128 The WHO emphasizes that violence is the greatest public 186
129 health and human rights concern in the world. It estimates 187
130 that 1 billion children – half the world’s children – are vic- 188
131 tims of some type of violence every year. Furthermore, 189
132 exposure to violence at an early age can impair brain devel- 190
133 opment and cause damage to other parts of the Central Ner- 191
134 vus System, as well as the Endocrine, Circulatory, 192
135 Musculoskeletal, Reproductive, Respiratory and Immune Sys- 193
136 tems, with lifelong consequences.⁴ 194

137 In a global context, international organizations such as 195
138 the UN, WHO and UNICEF have collected alarming data on 196
139 the prevalence of violence against youth. Regarding violence 197
140 in schools, UNICEF estimates that half of students aged 13 to 198
141 15 –approximately 150 million young people – have been 199
142 victims of violence by peers inside or outside of school.⁵

143 Among the age group analyzed, just over one in three stu- 200
144 dents suffers bullying. According to the UN agency, the same 201
145 proportion is involved in physical fights. In 39 wealthy coun- 202
146 tries, three out of ten students admit to having bullied their 203
147 peers. In the short term, this affects their learning and, in 204
148 the long term, can lead to depression, anxiety, and even sui- 205
149 cide. “Violence is an unforgettable lesson that no child 206
150 needs to learn”.⁵ 207

151 Regarding violence committed in armed conflicts, 208
152 between 2005 and 2022, the UN recorded approximately 209
153 315,000 serious violations against children in conflict areas, 210
154 with >120,000 killed or maimed 12. Other violations 211
155 included the recruitment of 105,000 minors by armed 212
156 groups, >32,500 kidnappings, and 16,000 cases of sexual 213
157 violence.⁶ 214

158 The report from the Brazilian Forum on Public Security 215
159 (FBSP) points to 44,127 victims of Intentional Violent Deaths 216
160 (IVD) between 2023 and 2024. IVD is a category that includes 217
161 intentional homicide, femicide, robbery resulting in death, 218
162 injury followed by death, and Deaths Resulting from Police 219
163 Intervention (DRPI).⁷ 220

164 According to UNICEF reports on the panorama of lethal 221
165 and sexual violence against children and adolescents in Bra- 222
166 zil, 4803 violent deaths of children and adolescents were 223
167 recorded in 2021, 5354 in 2022, and 4944 in 2023. The 224
168 majority of victims (91.6%) were aged between 15 and 225
169 19 years old.⁸ 226

170 The normalization of violence from the intrafamilial 227 171 and domestic sphere 228

172 Intrafamilial and domestic violence against children and ado- 229
173 lescents can be defined as a highly prevalent, chronic, and pro- 230
174 gressive transgenerational disease that does not depend on 231
175 ethnicity, creed, or sociocultural situation, with a higher fre- 232
176 quency of intrafamilial and domestic origin, which can leave 233
177 lifelong physical, psychological, and sexual sequelae if not pre- 234
178 vented, interrupted, and treated adequately.⁹ It consists of its 235
179 own signs and symptoms, and in the case of physical and sexual 236
180 violence, there is also the possibility of diagnostic confirmation 237
181 through specific examinations.⁹ 238

For those who suffer abuse within their homes, which 182
should be a primary place of care and protection, and a 183
model of life, they grow up in a toxic and disruptive environ- 184
ment. And, learning evil, because, through observation and 185
identification with the adult world that surrounds them, vio- 186
lence can become an effective method for resolving con- 187
flicts. 188

Intrafamily violence committed by those who should have 189
the satisfaction and duty of caring for and protecting their 190
descendants has a triple deleterious effect on childhood and 191
adolescence, both because of direct physical, psychological, 192
and sexual aggression, and because of the loss of develop- 193
mental potential, with the distortion of the adult model in 194
which they will mirror their way of being and living. As a 195
result, if not prevented and its damage treated early, vio- 196
lence against developing beings, children and adolescents, 197
will determine the inability to fight for a dignified life or the 198
capacity to be cruel.⁹ 199

The use of violence as consumer material by the 200 media - desensitization, tolerance, saturation and 201 impunity 202

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, passive 203
exposure to violence by the media is becoming an uncontrol- 204
lable component of the lives of children and adolescents.⁹ 205

The media’s commercialization of violence, especially in 206
Brazil, illustrates this process well. Research indicates that 207
exposure to violent content, such as news and films, is asso- 208
ciated with harmful effects on its viewers, including the 209
effects of post-traumatic stress, such as fear, anxiety, and 210
depression.¹⁰ 211

In parts of the world, including the studied country, vio- 212
lence, in all its forms, is news that attracts audiences and, 213
due to the increased consumption aimed at profit, has been 214
a topic at any time on television news programs, especially 215
during the so-called “prime time,” when families are suppo- 216
sedly gathered together. 217

Furthermore, it will be available on internet platforms 218
and applications, freely accessible to any age where the use 219
of internet-connected screens is permitted, frequently 220
detailing and showing domestic, urban, or conflict and war 221
scenes that surpass many horror films. They enter the living 222
rooms, bedrooms, and minds of children and adolescents, 223
normalizing violence as something always possible and pres- 224
ent, and harm to people of all ages and death as a natural 225
possibility of living, or inevitable and even deserved. 226

The earlier and more continuous this exposure, the 227
greater the chances of leading to brain alterations and a dis- 228
torted view of reality.¹⁰ Depending on the intensity and fre- 229
quency of this exposure to violence, whether direct or 230
indirect, reactions can occur that may affect the neuropsy- 231
chomotor development of children and adolescents, leading 232
to alterations in the formation of their psychological instru- 233
ments for coping with life. 234

As initial and warning symptoms, it will be possible to 235
identify several signs of psychological suffering, such as non- 236
localized fear, insecurity, anxiety reactions, isolation, pho- 237
bias, and lack of trust in the world and in life. In the continu- 238
ation of these excesses, which invade the developing mind, 239
the desensitization and normalization of violent acts may 240
transform them into a natural part of their lives. 241

242 **Violence in the virtual world**

243 Unlike the information sought in books, magazines, and
244 newspapers, printed material would be assumed to be auth-
245 ored and the responsibility of someone, and the message
246 would be ready, and the reader could choose whether to be
247 interested in it or reject it before it invaded our vision and
248 minds, and those of children and adolescents.

249 In the world of screens, what went from a basic and
250 practical means of communication, like the first cell
251 phones offered to people, to an instrument for locating,
252 identifying, analyzing, and trading information about its
253 owners, who no longer determine what is received and
254 shared from this supposedly exclusive property. It has also
255 become a means and instrument for reaching people, and
256 especially a childhood and adolescence unprepared for the
257 good and evil it conveys.

258 It would not be expected that parents would allow their
259 children free access to screens, and especially to the inter-
260 net and all its users, access to them. Thus, anyone who has
261 this interest will have access to their stories, routines, pref-
262 erences, and difficulties, making contact and the offering of
263 content directed to the researched profile an easy and sup-
264 posedly protected means for all kinds of approaches and
265 harassment. Luckily, the content chosen for this approach
266 may only be for the purpose of stimulating consumption,
267 with financial profit as payment.

268 According to HAI DT, the transition from basic cell phones
269 to smartphones in the early 2010s intensified and diversified
270 digital activities, exacerbating their four fundamental
271 harms: social deprivation, sleep deprivation, fragmented
272 attention, and addiction.¹¹

273 Safernet Brasil warns about the growing use of Genera-
274 tive Artificial Intelligence in the production of content
275 depicting sexual violence against children, whether through
276 image manipulation or the creation of synthetic content. In
277 2023, there was a record number of 71,867 reports of some
278 form of violence against children and adolescents.¹²

279 With the sending and receiving of information, and with
280 the evolution of virtual media and artificial intelligence con-
281 trolling the interests of those behind the screens, control
282 has been lost, not only regarding privacy, which has ceased
283 to exist, but also due to the invasion of content that encour-
284 ages access, consumption, and profit from anything that can
285 be negotiated, for anyone, including the amoral and per-
286 verse side of humanity, at any price.

287 Ethics and respect for childhood and adolescence do not
288 seem to exist in parts of the real world and in most virtual
289 environments, and the anonymity that is maintained if there
290 is no legal intervention allows all cybercrimes to evolve in
291 time to cause irreparable damage to this population.

292 Normalization, therefore, is not just a process of habitua-
293 tion, but video games with a violent basis can lead to cogni-
294 tive and affective alterations, which increase the
295 predisposition to aggression, the struggle for dominance and
296 power, as well as the distortion of human life values.

297 Beyond the so-called cybercrimes against childhood and
298 adolescence, which are already quite well-defined and are
299 becoming increasingly present in the lives of millions of chil-
300 dren and adolescents, the discussion of which would exceed
301 the scope of this text, there is also the encouragement,
302 teaching, and provision of tools for the practice of

devastating violence among peers, such as the so-called 303
"Dangerous Challenges and Games," which, in truth, can 304
become deadly. 305

The so-called "Dangerous Challenges" can be defined, 306
according to CHAVES GAMA, as the inducement to practice 307
acts and attitudes of extreme risk for those who are led to 308
practice them, disseminated through platforms and applica- 309
tions of the virtual world, especially children and adoles- 310
cents with some psychological fragility that leads them to 311
believe that they would be games of proof of courage and a 312
way of mistreating another, often presented and dissemi- 313
nated by "influencers" seeking fame at any cost, from the 314
other.¹³ 315

Research from TC Kids Online Brazil, 2024, indicates that, 316
between January and July 2025, SaferNet Brazil National 317
Cybercrime Reporting Channel registered 49,336 anonymous 318
reports of child sexual abuse and exploitation, classified as 319
child pornography, an increase of 18.9% compared to the 320
same period in 2024. The total number of reports received 321
in 2024 corresponds to 64% of all notifications received dur- 322
ing the period, confirming the centrality of this crime in the 323
Brazilian digital environment.¹⁴ 324

Data on the frequency and types of use showed that 93% 325
of the Brazilian population aged 9 to 17 are internet users, 326
with 20,801,145 children and adolescents accessing the 327
internet at least once a day in 12 months. More than eleven 328
million children and adolescents shared text, images, or vid- 329
eos, and 49.1% of the total watched advertising or publicity 330
that was not appropriate for their age.¹⁴ 331

The use of smartphones is becoming increasingly early in 332
a child's life, where they learn very quickly how to handle 333
them, but will know nothing about protection and defense 334
against the possibility of being captured by networks of per- 335
verse individuals offering them violent content. Through a 336
"fishing" process using artificial intelligence programming, 337
children and adolescents are identified as being connected 338
for long periods without interruption, or late at night or in 339
the early morning, indicating a lack of adult supervision. 340

As vulnerable targets identified by their internet searches 341
and preferences, content of all kinds, often involving violent 342
practices, including sexual ones, is used to desensitize them 343
and make them easy prey for obtaining material for other 344
aggressive practices, including pornography, and also real 345
scenes of sadomasochism, torture, and terror, among others. 346

Studies on the effects of children and adolescents' access 347
to violent content, including games, social media, apps, and 348
platforms, lead to conclusions that converge on the same 349
result: the dissemination and propagation of violent mate- 350
rial favors, in the short and medium term, the emergence of 351
aggressive feelings at all ages.¹⁵ 352

Commerce and the consumer industry in the virtual world 353
have created ways to present violence at all levels, for all 354
ages. An example of this induction is "Discord," which, by defi- 355
nition, is a real-time communication platform that functions as 356
a set of virtual communities. It differs from other social net- 357
works by being composed of more closed and private servers 358
(groups), where moderation and control can be less rigorous, 359
facilitating the circulation of extreme content.¹⁶ 360

It hosts violence desensitization and normalization 361
groups, environments for the propagation of hate speech, 362
recruiting and radicalizing young people, leading many to 363
aggressive and antisocial behaviors.¹⁶ 364

365 **Effects of exposure to violence**

366 According to DESMURGET, the exposure of children and ado-
 367 lescents to all types of proposals and practices of violence
 368 presented through news and digital games will determine
 369 changes in behavior such as the intensification of aggressive
 370 thoughts and behaviors, desensitization, and decreased
 371 empathy, and the unfounded exacerbation of the subjective
 372 feeling of insecurity.¹⁷

373 The violence witnessed is not a passive event, but a trau-
 374 matic experience that shapes the psyche, behavior, and per-
 375 ception of reality, culminating, in continuity, in a systemic
 376 process of normalization. This normalization facilitates vio-
 377 lence, as a desensitized public tends to mobilize less against
 378 the problem, reinforcing the inaction of people involved,
 379 institutions, and powers, perpetuating its cycle.¹⁸

380 Intrafamily and domestic violence, the most serious for
 381 development, will distort the child's and adolescent's under-
 382 standing of the aggressions imposed on them, whether physi-
 383 cal, psychological, or sexual, leading them to accept them as a
 384 natural and deserved form of care and education. They induce
 385 the child to accept cruelty against the other, even in a relation-
 386 ship of total dependence and supposed good affection, as "nor-
 387 mal" and, therefore, replicable in their other relationships.²

388 Among community violence, urban violence imposes life
 389 under threat, and its constant media exposure, as material
 390 to attract the audience through horror, makes it common-
 391 place, desensitizing its viewers.

392 The damage to neuropsychomotor development will be all
 393 the more severe the earlier, more intense, and longer the
 394 exposure to any type of violence. There is no doubt that the
 395 marks of violence will be deeper in intrafamily violence, where
 396 the victim is kept as a permanent hostage of their aggressors,
 397 from whom they would expect love, care, and protection.¹⁹

398 **Conclusions**

399 The suffering, coexistence, witnessing, hearing, and practice,
 400 even if imaginative, of any form of violence in childhood and
 401 adolescence, phases of greatest neuropsychological develop-
 402 ment of the human being, can lead to distortions in the vision
 403 they are forming of the world and how to live in it.

404 It would be extremely important that guidance on not
 405 exposing children to any type of violence and to screens and
 406 the virtual world without strict rules, selection, and supervi-
 407 sion of the content to be permanently accessed be included
 408 in childcare services, from prenatal care and birth.

409 The normalization, desensitization, and minimization of
 410 the effects resulting from the exposure of children and ado-
 411 lescents to various forms of violence, whether intrafamilial,
 412 domestic, community, urban, or global, is a central chal-
 413 lenge to be faced in the care and protection of childhood
 414 and adolescence.

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417 **Data availability statement**

418 The entire dataset supporting the results of this study is
 419 available upon request to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Editor

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