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AUTHOR Dennis, Beneita L.  
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ABSTRACT

Some studies indicate that children exposed to acute violence can experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), showing symptoms such as avoidance and lack of concentration. Eighty-eight sixth graders in five different classes at a Central Virginia upper elementary school were observed for behavioral indicators of PTSD, including lack of concentration, sleepiness, and aggressive behavior. The checklist was divided into incidents caused by males and by females in order to test the hypothesis that boys would exhibit more behavioral indicators of PTSD than girls. In addition to being observed, the students were given a brief questionnaire asking whether they had trouble concentrating and what teachers could do to make them feel safer. In two of the five classes, there was an average of at least one incident of PTSD symptoms per student. These included not only yawning or staring off into space, but slamming objects, destroying property, and responding rudely to questions. The students' questionnaires also indicated that about 50% of the students had trouble concentrating on their work. The observation of classes showed that boys outnumbered girls in displaying behavioral indicators of PTSD, in one class by nearly 4 to 1. This study did not prove that chronic violence is the cause of developmental and learning problems in the classroom, but suggests further research is warranted. Contains 10 references. (CC)

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CHRONIC VIOLENCE: A SILENT ACTOR IN THE CLASSROOM

Beneita L. Dennis

The Curry School of Education

University of Virginia

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## Abstract

Violence is becoming an intrinsic part of our society. It is found in our neighborhoods, our schools, and our homes. Children are often the victims or witnesses of much of this violence. Although many studies have been done to discover the psychological effects of media violence, very little research has been done to determine the psychological effects of chronic violence. The research that has been done suggests that children exposed to chronic violence often display symptoms associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The goal of this study was to observe five sixth grade math classes at a Central Virginia Upper Elementary school to determine if they displayed behavioral indications of PTSD symptoms. In addition, students were asked if they had problems concentrating on their work and what teachers could do to make them feel safer at school. Results indicated that students were displaying behavioral indications of PTSD symptoms. Many stated that they felt that they had trouble concentrating. Although the author realizes that these results do not show a clear connection between PTSD symptoms and problems at school, it is felt that teachers need to be concerned with the possibility that PTSD symptoms resulting from chronic violence may be one factor

effecting how students are performing. Based on students responses, the author has compiled a list of ideas of what teachers can do to make students feel safer at school.

## Chronic Violence: The Silent Actor in the Classroom

### Introduction

During my teaching associateship, my clinical instructor became involved in a discussion with her second period class about the importance of math skills. She was telling the class that no matter what they decided to do in life, whether it be going to college, getting a job, or just shopping at the grocery store, math was needed. As the instructor continued talking along this vein, one of the students raised her hand and said, "Ms. G., who says we're going to be here tomorrow?"

Understandably, the clinical instructor was shocked that an eleven year old girl in the sixth grade was worried about death. She then asked the student why someone so young was so concerned about dying. The student had so much in life to look forward to. At the age of eleven, she should be planning her future, not her death.

The girl began to talk about life in her neighborhood. According to the student, she saw drug dealers near her bus stop, heard gun shots at night, and knew people who had been victims of some violent act. When the teacher tried to advise the student to avoid dangerous situations, to stay away from people who sold drugs and from people who were known to be

violent. The girl replied that she could not avoid dangerous situations because her neighborhood was a dangerous situation. What was she supposed to do? Move? Children could not help where they lived and if their parents could not afford to move, then the child was forced to stay there. "Bullets don't got names written on them," the student said.

For this student, it did not matter what she did or did not do. Violence could touch her at any time. She felt that she could have been killed by a stray bullet on her way home from her bus stop.

She is not the only student living in such a dangerous, violent environment. Many students live in areas where violence is a daily occurrence. The local paper has printed many stories in the last five months about people being shot, stabbed or otherwise assaulted in areas where many of the abovementioned student's classmates live. The Washington Post is continually carrying stories about students being shot in and around their homes and schools. The April 19, 1994 issue of the Washington Post printed a table entitled "Gunfire and shootings at area schools" listing many of the shootings occurring in the District of Columbia and Northern Virginia area. Violence is becoming prevalent in our society and the in the lives of our children.

As a future teacher, I began to wonder what the psychological effects of living in situations of chronic violence were for these children. Did these psychological effects affect the learning processes of our students? I found it hard to believe that living in a situation of chronic violence would have no effect on the learning and developmental processes of students.

The purpose of this study is to determine what, if any, are the psychological effects of chronic violence and if there is any connection between chronic violence and students experiencing learning problems in the classroom. I hypothesize that chronic violence may have some psychological effect on students and that these psychological effects can influence behavior and learning in the classroom. Since research studied for this project shows that males are exposed to more violence, I also hypothesize that males will exhibit more behavioral indications of PTSD symptoms.

In the next sections, I will first review the literature pertaining to the study. Then I will explain the design of the study. The results of the study will then be analyzed. This will be followed by a discussion of what the results mean to the field of education.

### Literature Review

Violence is becoming an intrinsic part of our society. It can be found in our neighborhoods, our schools, and our homes. Children are often the physical victims of much of the violence that is perpetuated in society. Children are also witness to some of most violent acts imaginable. Surely there is some psychological harm when children are constantly exposed to such violence. Although many studies have been done examining the psychological effects of violence viewed on television and violence in musical lyrics, very little study has been done to determine what psychological effects chronic violence has on the children forced to endure it.

As a first step in determining the effects of violence on students, one can look at the amounts and types of violence children are exposed to. More than previously thought, children are being exposed to incredible acts of violence. Many live in situations where violence is a way life; it is seen and often confronted every day. In his book, Children in Danger, Garbarino (1992) describes living in some inner-city communities as "living in a war zone". (p.49)

The exposure to violence questionnaire was developed by J. Gladstein, E. Rusonis, and F. Heald (1992) to compare the amount

of violence experienced by 403 Baltimore inner-city youths to 435 middle to upper class youths in a nearby resort. The questionnaire was composed of three subscales; victims of violence, knew a victim of violence, witnessed an act of violence. The findings of this study are very disturbing. Twenty percent of the inner city males had been robbed or assaulted. Ten percent of the inner-city females had been raped and another 16% had been threatened with rape. Seventeen percent of the females and 42% of the inner-city males had their lives threatened. Thirty-six percent of the inner-city males had witnessed a knifing and 31% had seen a murder. Of the resort males, 15.9% Had seen a knifing. Eighteen percent of the resort males had had their lives threatened. These are very large numbers for people between the ages of 11 and 24 years of age, but they are not the complete numbers. Overall, seventy percent of the inner-city youths had been victims of some violent act, 90% knew a victim of a violent act and 80% had witnessed a violent act. Although the numbers for the resort youths were not as high they are still disturbing. Whereas 95% of inner-city males and 75% of the females have been touched by an act of violence, it was 83% and 74% respectively at the resort. Although the purpose of this study was to compare the two groups

and to support the hypothesis that inner-city youths are confronted by more violence, the study also shows that violence is no longer just an inner-city problem alone. It is a problem that needs to be addressed by the entire American public.

This is not the only study done supporting the idea that violence has become a pressing environmental problem. A study done by Osofsky (1992) in the Desire/Florida housing development in New Orleans, also supports these findings. If anything, the numbers are more shocking. Approximately 91% of the elementary students in this study had witnessed some sort of violent act. Thirty-seven percent had witnessed a severe act of violence. Shootings, stabbings and rape were defined as severe acts of violence in this study. Ninety-eight percent had heard about some sort of violent act. The children in this study were elementary students. Most of them were younger than the youths in the other study, yet they had already experienced a great deal of violence in their young lives.

Both of the aforementioned studies support the hypothesis that for many children violence is becoming a daily occurrence. The youths in the studies have been exposed to a great deal of actual real violence, not violence viewed on television. As the

Gladstein, Rusonis, and Heald (1992) study showed, violence is not just a problem of the inner-city. However, very little study had been done on the effect of this chronic, everyday occurrence of violence on the psyches of children. What are the psychological effects of chronic violence on the children?

According to Garbarino (1991), "Chronic danger imposes a requirement for developmental adjustments that are likely to include persistent PTSD, alterations of personality and major changes in patterns of behavior (p.49)." Unfortunately, most studies about the effects of violence are centered on acute violence, isolated but traumatic incidents of violence such as sniper attacks, random shootings and kidnapping. Studies done on these children show that these children do experience posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms (PTSD) such as avoidance and lack of concentration. But what of children who deal with violence on a day to day basis in their environment. Although it is impossible to generalize about the effects of chronic violence from studies of acute violence, it is possible to hypothesize that PTSD symptoms are present and are perhaps more prevalent.

In "Sweating the Details of Dying Young", an article in the November 1, 1993 issue of the Washington Post, it is told that children as young as ten are planning their funerals. Eleven

year old Jessica Bradford, who knew five murder victims, has told her parents that if she dies before her sixth grade prom, she wants to be buried in her prom dress. This sense of foreshortened life is one of the classic PTSD symptoms .

Osofsky, Wewer, Hann, and Fick (1993) have found a significant relationship between exposure to community violence and reported stress indicators in children. According to Osofsky et al (1993), the following behaviors might be expected to occur more often in children living in situations of chronic violence.

1. In school, they may have difficulty concentrating because of both lack of sleep and intrusive imagery.
2. There may be memory impairment because of avoidance of intrusive thoughts.
3. They may develop anxious attachments with their mothers.
4. Play may become more aggressive. This is related to imitating behaviors they have seen as well as showing an effort to protect themselves.
5. May "act tough" to deal with fear, may develop counterphobic reactions.
6. May act uncaring because of having to deal with so

much hurt and loss.

7. May become severely constricted in activities, explorations, and thinking for fear of reexperiencing the traumatic event. (p.44)

A study done with a sample of 165 six to ten years old youth in the Washington D.C. area corroborates the Osofsky et al. findings. The NIMH Community Violence Project II results show that victimization by violence in the community and witnessing violence in the community were both related to greater levels of PTSD symptoms. They found that children with the greatest levels of exposure to violence were also the children found to possess more PTSD symptoms such as difficulty sleeping, trouble concentrating, depression and intrusive thoughts. (Martinez and Richters, 1993).

In Children in Danger, Garbarino (1992) says that children growing up in situations of chronic violence risk some developmental harm. These developmental problems and the actual stress indicators portrayed by the children must have some effect on how the children function in their society. School, especially, must be effected. According to Garbarino (1992), they may develop problems of school performance and intellectual development and they may employ defenses that will be manifested

as learning disabilities (54). Looking over the list of PTSD symptoms (Appendix A) one can see many symptoms which can act to inhibit classroom learning. Students that have trouble paying attention and are constantly daydreaming will naturally have a hard time concentrating in class. If a student is constantly worried about being safe, he or she will not have time to worry about grades on an exam or the answer to the math problem.

#### Design of Study

Using the information about posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms, a checklist of behavioral indicators of several PTSD symptoms was formulated (Appendix B). The PTSD symptoms looked at were lack of concentration, sleepiness, and aggressive behavior as they were the easiest to visually observe. Behavioral indicators of lack of concentration included staring blankly and doodling. Indicators of sleepiness included yawning, nodding off, and putting heads down. Aggressive behavior indicators include rudely responding, slamming objects and destroying property.

The checklist was divided into incidents rendered by males

and those rendered by females. This was done to test the hypothesis that boys would exhibit more behavioral indicators of PTSD symptoms than girls.

Each forty-five minute class period was evaluated separately. Every five minutes, the class was closely observed for one minute. For each incident observed, a check was placed in the proper column.

In addition to observing each class, the students were given a brief questionnaire. The questions which affect this study were as follows:

- 1) Do you have trouble concentrating on classwork?
- 2) Do you have trouble concentrating on homework?
- 3) What can teachers do to make you feel safer?

### Sample

The students involved in this study were sixth graders a Central Virginia upper elementary school. The students were between the ages of eleven and twelve. The math classes at this school were tracked according to ability. Two of the classes were considered below grade level, two were consider on grade

level, and the final class was considered above grade level. There were 49 girls and 39 boys in the study from diverse SES levels.

### Results

The data compiled from the checklist was computed by dividing the number of incidents into the number of students to find the average number of incidents per student. In order to determine male/female correlation with the number of incidents, the procedure was repeated using the number of males and the number of females. The following table lists the results for these computations.

Table 1: Incidents of Behavioral Indicators

Period (Total number of students)	Total number of incidents	Incidents per student	Incidents per male	Incidents per female
1 (13)	17	1.307	2.167	0.571
2 (16)	17	1.063	1.143	1.000
3 (19)	7	0.368	0.250	0.455
4 (19)	5	0.263	0.500	0.000
6 (21)	4	0.190		

When answering the questions "Do you have trouble concentrating on classwork?" and "Do you have trouble concentrating on homework?", the subjects responded with either a yes, no, sometimes, or with no answer. The two tables below report the percentage of each answer to these two questions. Period one was disregarded because only 4 questionnaire were returned.

Table 2: Do you have trouble concentrating on classwork?

Period	Number returned	% of Yes responses	% of No responses	% of Sometime	No answer
2	18	11.1	50.0	22.2	16.7
3	17	35.3	50.0	22.2	0.0
4	15	20.0	60.0	20.0	0.0
6	19	31.8	52.6	15.8	0.0

Table 3: Do you have trouble concentrating on homework?

Period	Number returned	% of yes responses	% of no responses	% of sometime	No answer
2	18	27.8	38.9	22.2	22.2
3	17	64.7	23.5	0.0	0.0
4	15	40.0	40.0	20.0	0.0
6	19	10.5	89.5	0.0	0.0

### Discussion

The first hypothesis of this study was that chronic violence would have some psychological effects which would influence behavior and learning in the classroom. The research reviewed on this subject supports the hypothesis that exposure to chronic violence is related to PTSD symptoms in children. Do these symptoms effect learning and behavior in the classroom?

In Table 1, the average number of incidents per student is shown. In the first two class periods, there was an average of at least one incident of behavioral indicators per student. For period one, that averages out to seventeen incidents in a forty-five minute period. Many of these incidents included staring off into space and yawning, but others, such as hitting and responding rudely disrupted the flow of classroom learning not only for the one behaving inappropriately, but for others as well.

Of course, the behavior of the students may not be directly linked to PTSD symptoms. Other factors, such as hunger, boredom, or sleepiness because they stayed up watching a movie, for example, could all be the culprits for the behavior observed in the classroom. However, the state of our society makes exposure to chronic violence a strong candidate.

The subjects response to the two questions about concentration should cause great concern to those in the field of education. By adding the percentage who say yes and the percentage who say sometimes, one comes up with a large percentage of students who are having trouble concentrating on their work. Overall, about 50% of the students surveyed had some trouble concentrating on classwork. If one discounts period six, about 55% -60% of the students in the study some have trouble concentrating on their homework. That is a large percentage of students who are not learning at their full potential.

Of course, these figures may not be directly related to the student's exposure to chronic violence. However, as a teacher, one must look at the neighborhoods where students live and consider the possibility that exposure to violence may be causing difficulty in the students' learning.

The second hypothesis of this study was that males would have more indications of PTSD symptoms because statistics show that they are exposed to more chronic violence than girls. In every class period, except one, incidents executed by boys outnumbered incidents executed by girls. In one class, average number of incidents executed by boys was double the average number executed by the class and four times that executed by girls.

### Conclusion

What does all this mean to those in the field of education? This information should cause teachers to think about how their students need to learn. If the teacher knows her/his students come from neighborhoods where violence is the norm, then the teacher should realize that her/his students may be suffering some of the PTSD symptoms. So, what is she/he to do to help the students?

According to Maslow's hierarchy (1987), humans must have their basic needs met before they can strive for other needs in lives. Safety is a basic need. Students need to be in an environment where they feel safe, if they are to learn. Of course, the teacher can not change the student's home environment so that the child can feel safe. However, there are some things teachers can do to make students feel safer at school.

The third question on the questionnaire asked students to list some things that teachers could do to make them feel safe (Appendix C). Many of the students' answers were concerned with keeping violence out of the school or the classroom. Some of these answers included locking the door when she goes out and in and keeping police officers in the school. The students also suggested metal detectors be used to keep weapons out of the

schools.

In conclusion, although this study of the psychological effects of chronic violence on children can not prove that chronic violence is the cause of developmental and learning problems in the classroom, it shows that a large percentage of this sample are having difficulty concentrating on homework and classwork. Although the connection between chronic violence and lack of concentration was not proven in this study, other studies have shown the connection between PTSD symptoms and chronic violence. Lack of concentration is one PTSD symptom.

Teachers should be aware that a large proportion of our children live in environments full of violence. If students who live in these areas are exhibiting behavior which coincides with PTSD symptoms, the teacher should wonder if the children are feeling the effects of exposure to chronic violence. Intensive research needs to be done to examine the full effects on chronic violence on our young in order to prevent extensive problems for these children in the future.

Appendix A

LIST OF DISTRESS SYMPTOMS ASSOCIATED WITH PTSD

Trouble paying attention

Daydreaming in class

Not feeling like doing fun things

Not caring about anything

Worrying about being safe

Intrusive thoughts about upsetting events

Difficulty getting/staying asleep

Having bad dreams

Avoiding upsetting situations

Difficulty avoiding fear

Feeling lonely

Feeling nervous, scared, or upset

Easily bothered

Afraid that may not live long

Afraid that may not have happy life

Have trouble remembering frightening events (Martinez, P. &  
Richters, J., 1993)

Appendix B  
Checklist

Period \_\_\_\_\_

PTSD symptom	Behavioral Indicator	Male	Female	Total
	Unfocused staring			
	Doodling			
	Sleeping			
	Yawning			
	Head down			
	Nodding			
	Fidgeting			
	Shaking			
	Lack of class participation			
	Not responding to general questions			
	Not staying on correct page			
	Responding rudely			
	Hitting			
	Slamming objects			
	Destroying property (pencils)			
	Acting startled			

## Appendix C

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO TO MAKE YOU FEEL SAFER AT  
SCHOOL?

## STUDENT RESPONSES

- \*\* Make sure no one can come into the school.
- \*\* Keep out people who look bad.
- \*\* Shut the door tightly when she goes out.
- \*\* Put locks on the doors.
- \*\* Lock the door when she goes out and comes in.
- \*\* Close the doors when teaching.
- \*\* [I would feel safer] if the school had metal detectors to keep out weapons.
- \*\* More teachers to be like police but different.
- \*\* Have police officers.
- \*\* Keep police officers in school.
- \*\* Police in halls and intercoms in rooms.
- \*\* Tell when we fight or fuss.
- \*\* Stop most fights.
- \*\* Less fights.
- \*\* Make fighting disappear.
- \*\* Suspend people who fight.
- \*\* Try to stop fights.
- \*\* Remove bad kids from class.
- \*\* Put bad kids in another class.
- \*\* Put distracting kids in another room.
- \*\* Be on the look out for trouble makers.
- \*\* Severer punishments.
- \*\* Tighter control over their class and students.
- \*\* Have more control of class
- \*\* Suitable punishment for misbehavior.
- \*\* Suspend people who fight.
- \*\* Tighten up rules.
- \*\* Don't put up with any violence.
- \*\* Stop violence.
- \*\* Talk to us about safety.

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