

# An Investigation of Violent and Nonviolent Adolescents' Family Functioning, Problems Concerning Family Members, Anger and Anger Expression

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to (a) investigate the families of violent and nonviolent adolescents in terms of family functioning, trait anger and anger expression, and (b) compare incidence of psychological problems, alcohol usage and delinquent behaviors. The sample consisted of families of both violent (n=54) and nonviolent adolescents (n=54) whose age range was between 14 and 18 years. In order to investigate the anger levels and anger expressions the State-Trait Anger Scale (STAS) was used. Additionally, the McMaster Family Assessment Device (FAD) was used to investigate families' functions. The data about the problems concerning family members such as alcohol use of family members, having psychological problems and criminal behaviors were collected via 'Personal Information Form' prepared by the researcher. In accordance with the purpose of the study, data were analyzed with "t" test and chi-square test. Results showed that families of violent adolescents had more deficits and conflicts in problem-solving, communication, role assignment, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, behavior control and general functioning when compared to the families of nonviolent adolescents. When analyzed in terms of anger, families of violent adolescents scored significantly higher on "trait anger", "anger-in" and "anger-out" when compared to the families of nonviolent adolescents. Families of nonviolent adolescents had more "anger control" than the other group. Families in the violent group reported more problem behaviors, more use of alcohol and more delinquent behaviors than control group.

## **Key Words**

Adolescence, Violence, Family Functioning, Anger, Anger Expression Styles.

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The acts of violence have been dramatically increased especially among young people in schools, which has been accepted as a universal problem (Alikasifoğlu, Ercan, Erginöz, Uysal & Kaymak, 2004; Kepenkçi & Çınkır, 2005; Rosenberg Powell & Hammond, 1997; U.S. Department of Education, 2007; Wike & Fraser, 2009; Yell & Rozaski, 2000). In the west, violence among adolescents has increased since the 1980s (Riner & Saywell, 2002). In the USA, 130.000 adolescents whose ages range from 10 to 17 years were arrested in 1991 due to crimes such as rape, robbery, and murder. In the light of this data, it can be said that there has been % 48 increase in the crime rate since 1986 (Lerner, 1995). Every year, three million people commit crimes in schools (Yell & Rozalski, 2000). 25000 people die from murder and 31.000 people die from suicide and violence which is the second highest cause of death among adolescents (Rosenberg, Powell & Hammond, 1997). According Yell and Rozaski (2000), % 41 percent of teachers in public schools believe that violence is a serious problem in schools.

We come up with similar findings in our country. According to Kepenkçi and Çınkır (2005), 35.5% of high school students attempt violence at least once in a single academic year. Alikasifoğlu and others (2004) investigated the prevalence of violent behaviors among high school students in İstanbul. They found that % 42 of students (n=1720) involved in a fight at least once in the last year. In a study by Turkish Grand National Assembly Research Commission (2007), the rate of violent behaviors in secondary education in the last one month and three months was analyzed. According to the findings of this research, 18.9% of adolescents encounter with violence in the last three months and 14.4 of adolescents encounter with violence in the last month. When the rate of adolescents who attempt violent behavior was analyzed, it was found that 29.3 % of adolescents attempted violence in the last three months and 25% of them attempted violence in the last month. The study by Ministry of Education (2003) associated the aggressive and violent behavior among adolescents with the crime rates in the forensic records. It was found that the crime rate of boys in the forensic records is % 28.2 and the crime rate of girls in the forensic records is % 1.5. Moreover, it was found that this rate is % 14.3 in the high schools and % 15.3 in the elementary schools. These findings oriented the researchers to the studies about violence in schools who have studied the risk factors of adolescents' behaviors like violence, aggressiveness, and committing

crime have mentioned that these kinds of behaviors are resulted from both genetic and environmental factors (Cole, 1995; Dahlenberg, 1998; Dahlenberg, 2001; Dishion, McCord & Poulin, 1999; Dusenbury, Falco & Lake, 1997; Garbarino, 1999; Mayer, 2001; Peterson, Capaldi & Bank, 1991; Sutton, Cowen, Crean, Wyhman & Work, 1999; Tolan, Gorman-Smith, Huesmann & Zelli, 1997). Besides personal, peer and school, environmental and regional factors, it is observed that family is an important factor in shaping adolescents' violent behavior. It is found that there is a relation between adolescents' violent behaviors and parents' problematic attitudes (anti-social attitudes, alcohol and drug usage...etc.), inexistence of a warm relationship between parents and children, style of bringing up a child (disciplining, and controlling), and inadequate family functions (communication, adaptation, conflict between family members or violence) (Boulter, 2004; Dahlenberg, 1998; Doğan, 2001; Gorman-Smith, Tolan, Zelli & Huesmann, 1996; Gorman-Smith, Henry & Tolan, 2004; Patterson, Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984; Tolan, 2001).

On the other hand, another predictive variable of a violent behavior is the feeling of anger. Anger, violence, existence of a negative emotional environment in the family cause child to experience and show negative behavior in his/her social relationships (Graner, Jones & Miner, 1994, cited in İnanç, Bilgin & Atıcı, 2004). According to Kashani and Confield (1995), children learn to express their anger when they are at a small age. Results have shown that extrinsic anger implies that there is a problem in the family and social support system. Besides, uncontrolled anger of parents against children is thought to be strongly connected with child's violent actions (Kolko, Oommen and Paul 2002).

While the role of parental style in expressing anger cannot be identified in parent-child relationship, research pointed out the relation between anger and following coercive and destructive parental behaviors. It was found that there is a high relationship between uncontrolled anger of parents to their children and children's commitment to violence (Kolko, Oommen & Paul 2002; Novaco, 1975, cited in Furlong & Smith 1998; Vasta, 1982, cited in Furlong & Smith 1998). Rodrigez and Green (1997) emphasized that anger expression styles are very important in children's commitment to violence. Limited parental self regulation, strict discipline and high anger levels are the risk factors for violent behaviors (Kolko, 1996).

To summarize, in the light of related literature, the aim of this study is to analyze, if there are any differences between the issues of family functioning, anger and anger expression styles, problematic behaviors, alcohol usage and delinquent behaviors between parents of children who had violent acts and parents of children who never had violent acts.

## Method

### Participants

**Family of adolescents showing violent behavior (FASV):** This group was formed with the family members of 47 boys and 7 girls whose ages ranged from 14 to 18 years, who study in high schools in the center of Adana (Seyhan and Yüreğir) and took place in a violent event and got discipline punishment by the school or legally proceeded by Adana Police Department due to involving in a violent event. The sample group consisted of 26 women (mother) and 28 men (20 fathers and 8 brothers), totally 54 people and the average age was 42.2 years. 32 of these people (% 59.3) graduated from elementary school, 12 of them (% 22.2) were illiterate, 6 of them were literate (% 11.1) and 4 of them graduated from high school. Family members were volunteers in participating to the research.

**Comparison group (FACG):** The adolescents in this group were given 'Personal Information Form' and the group has similar characteristics to the adolescents showing violent behaviors in terms of age, socio-economic status, and class level. Moreover, in the inclusion of the students to this group, the ideas of class guidance teachers and school psychological counselors were taken. This group consisted of family members of 47 boys and 7 girls, totally 54 adolescents. The family members in the research were 29 women (28 mothers and 1 sister) and 25 men (father). The average age of the family members was 44 years. When we look at the education level of family members, 30 of them (% 55.6) graduated from elementary school, 12 of them (% 22.2) graduated from high school, 8 of them (% 14.8) graduated from university, 3 of them (% 5.6) were literate and 1 was illiterate (% 0.9). Family members were volunteers in participating in the research.

### Materials

**Personal Information Form:** In this form, there are items on the is-

sues of socio-demographic aspects of attendee families, their alcohol usage, acts that involve violence, and whether or not they have psychological problems. The content of this form which is prepared as a structured interview form is used as base and interviews are made with adolescents' families.

**The State-Trait Anger and Anger Expression Style Scale (STA-AES):**

It is developed by Spielberger (1988) in order to evaluate the feeling of anger and how it is expressed. Özer (1994) have adapted the scale into Turkish. The scale is made of 34 items and 4 subscales. Trait anger sub-scale (10 items) is about a person's feelings and his/her level of anger. Anger expression style sub-scales are; "Anger Control" (8 items) "Anger-out" (8 items) and "Anger-in" (8 items). These sub-scales are generally designed for evaluating the tendencies of anger-out, anger-in, and anger control. The scale is a four-point Likert typed self-report scale where the responses vary from "almost never (1)" to "almost always (4)". The lowest score that can be obtained from the scale is 34, while the highest score is 136 (Özer, 1994). In this research, reliability coefficients for the scale is .72 for trait anger, .76 for anger control, .69 for anger out and .72 anger in. Test-retest reliability coefficients range between .68 and .72. When we look at the literature, we can see that the scale was used in many research in inside and outside of Turkey (Çeçen, 2006, Esen & Çelikkaleli, 2008).

**The Family Assessment Device (FAD):**

It is developed by Epstein, Baldwin and Bishop (1983) in order to evaluate family functions. Bulut (1990) have adapted the scale into Turkish. The scale includes 7 sub-scales; problem solving (the way in which the family resolves problems), communication, roles (the clarity and directness of the family's exchange of verbal information), affective responsiveness (the appropriateness of quantity and quality of feeling with which members respond to events), affective involvement (the extent to which family members are interested in each other's activities and concerns), behavior control (the clarity of family rules), general functioning (the overall health/pathology of the family), includes 60 items, and perception of family members about their families are evaluated. Internal consistency coefficient in the scale's original form is found to be .78. Internal consistency coefficient of sub-scales varies from .75 to .92. (Epstein, Baldwin & Bishop, 1983).

## Results

Data were analyzed by independent sample “t” test on each dependent variable separately. It is found that there are meaningful differences between FASV and FACG when the sub-scale of the FAD that are; problem solving [ $t(100) = 9.07; p < .001$ ], communication in family [ $t(106) = 10.22; p < .001$ ], role distribution [ $t(106) = 10.22; p < .001$ ], affective responsiveness [ $t(106) = 9.17; p < .01$ ], affective involvement [ $t(90) = 8.28; p < .01$ ], behavior control [ $t(106) = 7.68; p < .01$ ], and general functioning [ $t(85) = 10.77; p < .01$ ] are evaluated. It is seen that problems in FASV on the issues of problem solving, communication in family, role distribution, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, behavior control, general functioning are more than the problems in FACG.

When the data are analyzed in terms of trait anger and anger expression style, it is found that there are meaningful differences between FASV and FACG on the issues of trait anger [ $t(96.78) = 10.77; p < .01$ ], controlled anger [ $t(106) = -4.34; p < .01$ ], anger-out [ $t(93.39) = 4.06; p < .01$ ] and anger-in [ $t(106) = 5.26; p < .01$ ]. Anger levels in FASV are found to be higher than; anger levels of the families in anger-in and anger-out comparison groups, and their anger-in and anger-out levels. On the other hand, it is seen that FACG’s controlled anger is higher than FASV’s controlled anger.

Frequency values of families are evaluated in order to compare psychological problems, alcohol usage and frequency of delinquent behaviors. At the end of this process, it is found that % 46,3 of FASV has a psychological problem while frequency of having psychological problem in FACG is % 5, 6. On the other hand, when the attendees’ rates of delinquent behavior are analyzed while in FASV, % 44,4 are punished by judicial authority, there is no record of violence in FACG. When the groups are compared in terms of alcohol usage, it is seen that % 38,9 in FASV uses alcohol while % 9,3 in FACG uses alcohol. This difference is also statistically significant [ $\chi^2(1) = 12.67, p < .001$ ].

## Discussion

In this research, families of violent adolescents and families of adolescents in the comparison group are analyzed in terms of family functioning, trait anger and anger expression styles, problematic attitudes, alcohol usage, and acts of violence. At the end of the analyses, it is seen

that there are important differences between those families in favor of the families of adolescent who never had violent acts. The FAD scores used in measuring family functioning demonstrated that the differences were statically significant between FASV and FACG in terms of problem solving, communication, roles, behavior control, affective involvement, affective responses and general functioning. This result indicated that violent adolescents experienced higher problem in the family. The literature was suggested this findings (Aspy, Oman, Vesley, McLeroy, Rodine & Marshall 2004; Bağcivan-Saydam & Gençöz; 2005; Doğan, 2001; Flannery, 2000; Garbarino, 1999; Gorman-Smith, Tolan, Zelli & Huesman, 1996; Gorman-Smith, Tolan, Loehear & Henry 1998; Gorman-Smith, Tolan & Henry 2000; Karabıyık, 2003 Patterson, Chamberlain & Reid 1982, cited in Dahlenberg, 1998; Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber 1984; Tolan. 2001). As in the families of adolescents who have acted violently, the members of the family do not generally function properly, as a result of its nature, the possibility of having problems in such families is seen more often.

Anger levels, anger-in and anger-out levels of the families of adolescents who have acted violently are higher than the comparison group. This result is supported the research findings of Gümüş (2000) and Fryxell (2000). Studies have shown that if families are highly aggressive and their anger is extroversive, abusive and compelling parent behaviors often appear, which is also proved by various researches (Kolko, 1996; McKay, Fanning, Paleg, & Landis, 1996; Reid, Patterson & Snyder 2002). On the other hand, in the families of adolescents who had violent acts, the level of anger-in high; and this causes depression and somatic problems in the members of the family. This finding is also consistent with the fact that such families are inefficient in giving emotional reactions. It is found that family members of adolescents in the comparison group have lower anger-in levels. In this context, adolescents brought up in those families can improve their abilities of communication, expressing emotions and solving problems. Moreover, families in the comparison group can control their anger. These findings show that adolescents in this group can have a better and healthier communication with their families and express their emotions (Fryxell, 2000; Hollenhorst, 1998).

Research findings in the literature support that families of adolescents who have acted violently have differences on the issues of having psychological problems (Miller, Martin & Schamess, 2003; Reid, Peter-

son & Snyder, 2002; Richman & Fraser 2001), delinquent behaviors (Corvo & Williams 2000) and alcohol usage (Corvo & Williams 2000; Dahlenberg, 1998; Gümüş, 2000). While psychological problems of a parent may cause him/her to have some problems in controlling a child, his alcohol usage can also cause having low capabilities of raising a child. Social learning theory puts forward that families can make adolescents learn violent behaviors by being models of violent activities, or by reinforcing violent activities. Seeing violent activities of parents can lead children learn those acts and see them as acceptable and efficient techniques in reaching whatever the aim is (Brendgen, Vitaro, Tremblay & Wanner, 2002).

This research points out important findings between the family of adolescents showing violent behavior and the family of comparison groups in terms of family role, constant anger and anger expression style, problem behaviors of family members, alcohol use and criminal behaviors. The research also has some limitations. It is a limitation of the research that these individuals were evaluated according to their verbal statements in the interviews about the problem behaviors of family members, alcohol use and criminal behaviors and assessed with three items. It is another limitation of the research that both the family of adolescents showing violent behavior and the family of comparison group are not large sampling groups. However, large sampling group could not be formed because the researchers only studied with the family of adolescents showing violent behavior.

As a result, it was found that adolescents showing violent behavior experience more difficulties than comparison groups in terms of family role, constant anger and anger expression style, problem behaviors of family members, alcohol use and criminal behaviors. In the light of these findings, it can be said that not only adolescents but also families should be included in the studies for prevention and intervention of violent behavior. For preventing and dealing with violent behavior, community agencies, school counselors and other practitioners can arrange programs that include anger management against family members, problem solution in family, communication, affective reaction, role distribution, controlling the behavior and showing concern to adolescents. Moreover, school counselors and other practitioners can arrange educational programs for providing adolescents with anger management, problem solving, communication skills, and coping skills.

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