Developmental origins of aggression: The “Original Sin” Hypothesis, Epigenetics and their Consequences for Prevention

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Two theoretical models strongly influenced developmental studies of physical aggression and other disruptive behaviour problems (DB): social learning and disease onset. According to these developmental perspective children learn DB (e.g. aggression, opposition, rule breaking, stealing) from their environment and onset of the disease is triggered by accumulated exposition to disruptive models in the environment, including the media. Most of the evidence came from studies of school age children and adolescents. Recent longitudinal studies tracing DB development during early childhood suggest an inversed developmental process. DB are universal during early childhood. With age children learn socially acceptable behaviours from interactions with their environment. A “disease” status is observed when a child uses DB significantly more often than his age group over long period of time. Generally this “disorder” starts in early childhood. The mechanisms that lead to the deficits in using socially accepted behaviours are strongly intergenerational, based on complex genetic and environmental contributions, including epigenetic mechanisms. Prevention of these deficits requires early, intensive and long term support to parents and child. Newly discovered epigenetic mechanisms suggest that intensive perinatal interventions will have impacts on numerous aspects of physical and mental health, as well as on social adjustment.