

# "VIOLENCE AND AGGRESSIVENESS IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS"



Dr. Roberto Parga



*It is a great pleasure and honor for me, that the National Institute for Minors has given me the opportunity to participate in this Consultation Seminar on Aggressiveness and Violence in Children and Adolescents, knowing my solidarity with the Directorate's struggle on behalf of children.*

*For these reasons, I am not inclined to expound on an academic issue, so that I may better serve and help to divulge ideas and organize principles, which I consider to be the best way, since the problems of aggressiveness and violence in minors is the responsibility of the whole community and it is the community that must find the solution.*



On the subject of children, there are no absolute truths.

There have been various polemics. Well-known ideas, doctrines and principles have been discussed.

I reiterate that on this subject, there are no absolute truths or undisputable affirmations.

*It is the integral contribution of the national community, in terms of resources as well as in terms of active participation, that will make it possible to make significant achievements and find solutions for this sector; for this purpose, perhaps our most important task is to encourage joint work, adding and channeling the efforts of all and making optimal use of resources to promote well-being.*

This becomes more necessary from the current standpoint, as today's children and adolescents are subject to unlimited social movement, whose latest impulses are unknown and impossible to predict.

For this reason, it is necessary to insist that we are facing an essentially unknown problem, and we

We should remember that, ultimately, we are dealing with children and adolescents – human beings whose behavior and psycho-social manifestations are unique and personal, and cannot be the object of generalizations.

The dogmatism on this subject is pernicious. Beyond principles are the realities, and these realities are precisely the children and adolescents, among whom we cannot find two who are bio-psycho-socially identical.

Human behavior is still the province of philosophy, and thus it is impossible to passionately defend "our truths," as if they were the only absolute truths, without risking error.

Further, on the subject of minors, it is essential to rectify this every second, and to study more and more every day, and renew our points of view according to experience and systematic observation.

naively encourage theories and doctrines that could, in time, prove to be wrong.

Therefore, there is no need to endorse our position in the belief that it is the specific truth for each and every one of us, when we are working with a problem that is ever-changing and complex.

## Interdisciplinary Teams

For this reason, it is necessary to overcome any unilateral attempt, by any professional group, to claim that they have the absolute truth on this subject. On the contrary, we must recognize that psychologists alone will not be able to explain the profound causes of violence and aggressiveness in minors, who are labeled anti-social, nor will sociologists, social workers, jurists, educators or the media.

This problem is extremely complex and isolated diagnoses by certain professionals do not work for it; rather, uniting all of them to form an interdisciplinary team that is capable of delving deeper into the diverse spheres that can unleash violence and aggressiveness in children and adolescents.

The children and adolescents who are aggressive and/or violent are not only those with epilepsy or brain damage, which used to be believed. The children and adolescents who are violent and aggressive are not only those who are psychopaths or neurotics, or simply unadapted, as argued by some psychologists who favor personal and non-associated work.

These children and adolescents are not exclusively the product of destitution, family breakdown, the lack of a father figure, or family abandonment, either, as argued by some sociologists.

These children and adolescents are the product and consequence of a set of extremely complex causes and reasons, a complexity that must be scrutinized by a team, using the methods of the Social Sciences, the progress made in Psychology, the experience of Education, and medical exams.

All references, all facts, and all contributions are indispensable. If there is one thing that characterizes those who are linked to these problems or experience them up close, it is their willingness to listen, to observe, to ask for help, to try, to reflect, and – why not? – to make mistakes.

Behind the problem is human nature. Luckily, the children and young people who transgress social norms are human beings, not robots who obey unavoidable mandates with a certain endogenous and exogenous strength.

Every day, children and young people in irregular situations experience things that are not controlled in any way; they are abandoned by their parents, by their families, by the State, and by Society as a whole, and they live only due to their will to live.

Until what has to happen, does happen: they commit an anti-social act, they are caught, and they are placed in an institution, where they are studied and diagnosed.

Once these children have had all of the (generally “bad”) experiences to which Society subjects those who have been abandoned, it is only now, in the institution, that technical experts concern themselves about details of their birth, and such specific information as the point at which they learned sphincter control, whether they had more emotional attachment to the mother or the father, etc.

Without criticizing any methodology, we can imagine the disorientation of this child, who, for years, did not go to school, did not work, did not have parents, and did not have the resources that all of the children in the world should be able to enjoy. Then, in an instant, having committed a bad act and having been caught, he or she is placed in a protective institution that is very technical and scientific, but perhaps not effective.

We must ask ourselves whether we should wait for children to commit a bad act to start worrying about them, when, at that point, there is no time to do anything to improve their future.

I am not claiming that nothing is done for these children; however, we must acknowledge that we know of the existence of violent, aggressive children and youth, who may be without resources, and who may be exploited and punished, receiving nothing from Society.

We are rewarding an anti-social act when it is the event that awakens our concern, because, for various reasons, nothing was done for them when there was still time to prevent it.

For this reason, I argue that it is necessary to put a greater emphasis on prevention rather than treatment.

It is necessary to reflect on this point, because we cannot say that there is real treatment for anti-social minors.

Institutionalization and reformatory centers – are they so effective that they can really demonstrate their aptitude for reeducating these minors?

This question remains, without abandoning all of the efforts that have been made to achieve this objective.

However, I believe that the time has come for everyone who is interested in this issue to take time to reflect and think about possible ways out of the problem, and that these individuals approach those with decision-making power, to ask that they implement prevention programs in all of the areas in which there is aggressiveness and violence.

We should recognize that, in our country, the public sphere (INAME) as well as the private sphere, through non-governmental organizations, have implemented and are running programs with this orientation, which would seem to mean that they are on the right track. However, the lack of resources has been an obstacle that must be overcome in order to establish a network of protection that includes society as a whole.

We should also, as a proof of cooperation, make known the efforts of international organizations, both worldwide and regional, and UNICEF's willingness to collaborate with policy-makers in order to change the current situation.

The system of complementing the State activity in the protection of children and adolescents is generally accepted, leaving open a wide-ranging field for private activity.

We can distinguish three major systems of this kind:

**First System** – Private associations and all other forms of community action are in charge of solving the major problems pertaining to the care and protection of children and adolescents, creating, for this purpose, private protection and welfare associations for the public interest, working on behalf of the family and society.

**Second System** – Maintains that the State cannot, and should not, do everything outside its specific responsibilities regulated by Law, and its work is to guide, complement, stimulate and orient in the field of protection.

**Third System** – That all work must report to, and be directed by, official action. This system has fallen into disuse.

It is undeniable that the most important protection institution is the family, and when we face family breakdown it is necessary to pay it the attention it deserves and include it in the programs that are established to assist and protect aggressive and violent minors, and for the benefit of all children and adolescents in general.

## **The Minor is Positively not imputable of Crime**

Those in favor of Juvenile Law are eager to proclaim the notion that the minor is not imputable of crime.

There is perhaps an illusion that this Juvenile Law protects and understands minors; however, this theory is not brought to practice, and we are facing a reality that shows us the need to propose the inclusion of certain issues within Juvenile Law.

The discussion of these points must be well-received, because it will lead to the solidification of solutions that benefit those being protected and, by extension, society as a whole.

Mainly, minors are classified by the anti-social act they committed. More and more, the features of their personalities are being used to classify them as well.

Profuse declarations are made about the integrity of the minor, and it is argued that Juvenile Law is totally different from Criminal Law, and does not participate in its expiatory and punishing character. On the other hand, law enforcement is allowed impunity in punishing minors, and institutions, which call themselves re-education centers, deprive young people of their freedom; in fact, in some countries, these young people are under the control of armed guards and these institutions are organized more or less in the same way as adult penal institutions.

It is said that children are not imputable of crime and we institutionalize them in closed establishments, isolating them from their families and from society, and we do everything necessary to create in them an unavoidable guilt complex.

It is said that children are not imputable of crime and those who have committed serious anti-social acts are held in custody, to the point that there are statistics on the population of children who are wards of the state because of the act they committed, not because of other factors.

For this reason, we can argue that there is truly a gap between legal theory that protects children and the reality that is imposed on them in these establishments.

If we wish to verify this reality, we would merely have to converse with the children and adolescents in these establishments, and we would find that they do not believe the story of "non-imputability." In fact,

they know very well that they are being punished by, or are paying a debt to, society.

These statements are proven by observing the walls that are put up, the bedrooms that are controlled by security, and the supervision methods used in these institutions.

It is for this reason that, in reality, we have not been able to get away from the traditional concept.

The media also give us elements of judgment that allow us to confirm these statements.

The anti-social minor is treated much in the same way as an adult who has been sentenced.

References are made to juvenile delinquency, and this qualification is not protested.

We should also acknowledge that official and private efforts are being made to rethink the solutions that have been proposed, stating that there are also urgent requirements that have resulted from the changes in society, which is becoming more and more violent and aggressive, and thus there is a need for an increase in both individual and collective action, recognizing that the necessary means to better solve this problem are not available.

Prevention and reparation are difficult, because there are factors working against them.

There have been theories on the psychological or psychiatric concepts, and others of a social nature.

There has been in-depth exploration of these theories, which recognize that there is a series of social conditioning factors that undoubtedly influence behavior that is aggressive and against the law.

All of these theories are important in that they help us to formulate prevention and treatment programs for children and adolescents, because, if they are not useful for this purpose, from a practical standpoint, then they should be discarded.

We urge theory to be oriented into action and taken into practice, serving Society and abandoning scientific speculation in favor of entering the realm of applied Science at the service of Society.

We must consider those theories that are amenable to all possibilities of study, while discarding those that are not, and that do not make action possible.

As stated above, the problems of children and young people are the product of diverse factors, and for this reason they must be investigated and action must be taken; we must not stand idly by, waiting for an eruption in child and adolescent behavior.

We must encourage scientific study, and to this end, we may refer to the principle of Criminology, considering it as a theory of crime, which assists us with its explanation of the genesis of the anti-social act. From this, we may deduce the following:

- a) The explanation of the anti-social cycle (Etiology).
- b) The regime to follow with anti-social individuals (Treatment).
- c) The way to prevent these acts (Prevention).

To encourage re-education centers to adhere to a theory and take it into practice, constantly evaluating whether or not it is valid.

To look for a theory that offers possibilities for action in the realms of prevention and treatment for children and adolescents in irregular situations.

In this search, we may mention Southerland and Cressey's theory of differential association, which argues the following:

- a) An individual violates the Law because of an excess of definitions that are favorable to its violation, over definitions that are unfavorable to it.
- b) Anti-social behavior is learned in personal groups (close individuals) or by processes of intercommunication.
- c) The anti-social act is not individual; it involves the person's group, society and subculture.
- d) Behavioral manifestations are not unique; they are common, and they operate in much the same way in various persons.
- e) There is a feeling of identification between all anti-social individuals.

These US sociologists agree that the anti-social act is the product of a certain subculture, where the definition of crime is promoted as "only fools work for a living," "the success of the sly," "money can buy anything," "honesty is dead," etc.

In these social groups that promote these definitions, crime becomes a natural and logical human expression.

Here, a series of loyalties are created around these negative definitions.

This theory can be turned into a plan of action, either for prevention or treatment.

**Prevention.** In the subcultures where definitions that are favorable to breaking the Law are dominant, we must create public awareness of the idea that positive behavior is good.

We must work intensely to prove that "crime does not pay" and that honesty is a value that should be cultivated.

This campaign should be carried out in schools, in neighborhoods, in settlements, and (why not?) in the community in general.

**Treatment.** We must change the image of behavior for anti-social minors. We must give prestige to those who give up bad habits; we must form interdisciplinary orientation groups, of course, with participation by individuals who have managed to find a way out; we must completely destroy the favorable definitions that these minors have learned in their environments.

The modern tendency is the idea that not only children and adolescents require assistance, but the entire family as well. The diagnosis should include the family, with an examination of each one of its members, considered separately and in terms of their relationships with the others.

The family needs both individual and collective treatment, that takes into account the complexity of reciprocal action between individuals and their environment.

We must admit that this is not an easy task; in fact, it is extremely difficult, and is very tiring for those who are involved in the program outlined, because there is no doubt that achievements are not made immediately, and failures can be greater than successes. For this reason, it is necessary for these groups not to be static, but rather dynamic and open to change in terms of members as well. They must constantly be evaluating, allowing for humanized action, while doing justice to the value of all that is done by children and adolescents in the most difficult conditions. Priority must be placed on the need for interpersonal and interprofessional

collaboration and coordination, always recognizing that we are dealing with a person who has problems.

The interests of the individual and society are considered to be interdependent and thus individual rights and well-being should be promoted together with the rights and well-being of society as a whole.

And if it is necessary and indispensable to think and develop the spirit of research, we clearly appreciate its importance and necessity in the field of morality, which cannot be left aside.

Manifestations of violence and aggressiveness by children and adolescents have occurred throughout time, and continue today (or we know more about them today), in developed countries as well as developing and "third world" countries, with all social classes affected.

There are explosive situations that lead us to rethink solutions, but there is no doubt that there is a raising of consciousness, and it must be accompanied by a certain evolution of society as a whole, which is more and more affected. For this reason, we demand education at the level of global society.

## CONCLUSIONS:

- To increase and give priority to social policies for the prevention of anti-social behavior in children and adolescents.
- The spirit of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the UN General Assembly on November 20, 1990, should be actively incorporated into Society by various means.
- To become aware of the fact that the problems of children and adolescents are the product of diverse factors, and thus they require study, research, and action, and we cannot just wait passively for their behaviors to erupt.
- To recognize the existence of a gap between legal theories (Juvenile Law) and the reality that these establishments offer to those who have committed anti-social acts.
- It is necessary to put more emphasis on Prevention rather than Treatment, encouraging prevention programs in all of the areas where phenomena of aggressiveness and violence are present, while researching and concretizing diverse plans for treatment, as

long as they are specifically adjusted to the various situations being addressed.

**Commentary:**

**Dr. Elena Sarli de Erro**

To comment on a paper by Dr. Parga Lista is a great responsibility. I have been honored to be invited to participate in this Consultation Group convened by the INAME, and although I have been obligated to take up this responsibility, it does offer me the invaluable opportunity to meet with and exchange ideas with highly qualified individuals from heterogeneous disciplines, but who have been united by this concern for children.

Because of time constraints, I will limit myself to stating the elements of the paper that I consider to be fundamental.

**1. The humility required for addressing the issue and the solutions that are planned**

He has affirmed that "on the subject of children, there are no absolute truths." He thus postulates an attitude of study, of systematic observation, of constant analysis and perpetual evaluation of decisions and actions, which is always open to critique and revision.

He suggests abandoning professional vanities and recognizing that the work is interdisciplinary, because each subject is unique in the diversity of his or her person and needs.

He states that the social problem of child and adolescent violence is a problem for the entire community, and thus the entire community should be involved in the solutions.

**2. The need for action, and not just theory: all theory must be at the service of action**

To act in prevention: to act before anti-social behavior occurs; to seek change in the subcultures that give prestige to anti-social behavior, with programs that reverse these value systems.

To act in the realm of treatment: to bring theory closer to reality.

To not falsify facts, affirming children's non-imputability while, in reality, locking them up, isolating them, not re-educating them, and stigmatizing them.

**3. The proposals**

Dr. Parga favors preventive programs over corrective ones, social participation in solutions, and (recognizing that the phenomenon of violence in children and adolescents is the product of multiple causes), and the need to maintain an attitude of constant study and research, aiming toward planned actions and continual revision.

His opinions are those of an expert who, for years, has faced situations of children engaged in anti-social behavior, and thus his characteristic modesty does not hide the importance and pertinence of all of his observations and recommendations, with which I am, of course, in full agreement.

**3. Outline of a study on domestic violence**

In accordance with what was mentioned by Dr. Parga Lista, I would like to briefly outline the results of a study on Domestic Violence that was done in the Faculty of Law at the University of the Republic.

This study's pertinence to the subject we are addressing today, lies in the fact that if, in general, children and adolescents who engage in violent and anti-social behavior grow up in a subculture of anti-values and violence, then it is easy to conclude that it is, to a great extent, in the household or "nucleus of coexistence" (as I prefer to call it) where their violent behavior will be forged and nourished.

Thus, down the path of origins (not of causes, which we know are multiple), our research becomes linked with the issue of violent minors or minors who could be potentially ready for anti-social behavior.

Domestic violence generates violent individuals. The minor who is a victim or spectator of violence will absorb these anti-values and, sooner or later, reproduce them.

Our research took into account the following facts:

a) The legislation that classifies new domestic violence crimes (Law 16.707 of 12/7/95 – Law on Citizen Security), to be effective, requires this information to somehow reach the judicial system.

b) There are few situations that reach the judicial system (because of fear, lack of knowledge, etc.). When the person suffering the violence is a minor, it is factually almost certain that he or she will not take the situation to the judicial system.

c) Mindful of the fact that children, unconsciously and through their behavior, tend to reveal the tensions and anguish affecting them, it was thought that they may be taken as the point of departure toward the detection of cases that are not openly manifested in the social sphere.

d) We worked with the hypothesis that, because schoolteachers have direct, daily contact with children, and because of the particular way in which they interact with the environment, they are in the right position to detect cases of domestic violence that do not reach the formal systems of protection and prevention.

The study used the techniques of surveys and personal interviews with teachers, in accordance with a sample pattern. I will not go deeper into the results, but I will highlight some of the information that was obtained:

a) Out of the teachers surveyed, 94% have detected cases of domestic violence through children's behavior.

b) Once the suspicious situation has been detected, the teacher and the school principal's office immediately take extremely strong action, calling the parents for meetings and mobilizing the school's resources. In 31% of cases, they themselves visit the children's homes and, outside of their working hours, they work to change or influence the situations.

c) However, it is significant that in only 9% of the cases was a political or judicial report filed. In one case only, a specialized NGO was consulted. This would seem to indicate that the formal systems are not adequately reaching the social group.

d) Another important fact: after having met with the parents or guardians of these children, 34% of responses state that they cooperated in finding a solution to the problem. Can we afford to lose them?

e) However, the other 47% resist action of the School. This refers to a center of violence whose actors prefer to keep the situation hidden. Could we act there anyway?

Due to time constraints, let us move on to the conclusions. If we conclude that this mostly hidden and silent violence appears, in many cases, in the origins of violent behavior by children and adolescents, we must take advantage of the schools' potential to reach situations that generate and reproduce models of violence (and the

subcultures of anti-values mentioned by Dr. Parga a moment ago), con programas preventivos o de tratamiento.

Thus, we believe that, on the road to prevention, it would be advisable to:

- Establish multidisciplinary teams to which the School may turn immediately when it detects cases of domestic violence involving children.
- Plan specialized training on issues of domestic violence and children (causes, prevention, treatment, etc.) for the members of those teams, with the participation of individuals from the INAME, CODICEN, the University of the Republic, etc. This training must take very special care to respect the child, including respect for codes of coexistence, which should be replaced by value codes that reinsert them socially, through actions that do not provoke rejection or resistance. Perhaps it could be action through self-help and autonomous decision-making groups with the participation of their peers.
- Decentralize the material means available, for example: the Police Commission for Women and the Family, with some of its delegates in the various Police Stations.
- Use all of the means available in society: social NGOs, the mass media, schools, high schools, neighborhood centers, etc.
- Continue down the path of periodically holding these fora for dialogue and collaboration, allowing for follow-up and evaluation of the action taken.