

Book Review

Ghosts from the Nursery: Tracing the Roots of Violence

Robin Karr-Morse and Meredith S. Wiley
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Reviewed by Jean Hughes

One in every 20 American children will spend some part of his or her life in jail. This riveting text, with an introduction by Berry Brazelton, presents compelling research demonstrating the linkage between violent crime and abuse/neglect during the first two years of life. It reinforces an earlier notion, introduced by psychoanalyst Selma Fraiberg, that unresolved issues from the childhoods of the parents, influence, in turn, their own child-rearing practices. The authors add another dimension to this argument: that even the most violent citizens in our society are forever haunted by "ghosts from the nursery" — the spirits of the babies they once were and the forces that killed their promise.

Each chapter begins with a graphic excerpt from the life story of Jeffrey, a young murderer who typifies the violent, impulsive, but not premeditative or sociopathic killer. The excerpts focus on specific developmental issues and are followed by summaries of related brain research. The research underscores the notion that while no one biological or social factor, in isolation, predisposes a child to violent crime, negative factors such as fetal alcohol syndrome, early neglect and physical abuse, and the mother's chronic alcoholism, working in combination, create the conditions that promote violent behaviour later (often, not very much later) in a child's life.

The first two chapters introduce the theoretical arguments linking brain anatomy and violence. An understanding of the interaction between internal vulnerability (biological variables) and external risk factors (social variables) is essential to an understanding of this linkage. Evidence now suggests that the interplay of the developing brain during the nine months of gestation and the first two years of life creates the core of a person's ability to think, feel, and relate to others. In contrast to earlier research results, evidence now suggests that the

brain is a dynamic (rather than rigid, preset) organism, constantly reflecting and adjusting to its environment. The authors of *Ghosts from the Nursery* argue that while genetics does establish the parameters of the brain, the actual brain matter is formed according to the type and degree of stimulation it receives. At birth, all the basic neurons that the brain will ever have are already formed, while the structures that connect the neurons are just beginning to develop. These synapses are entirely dependent on stimulation from the outside world. It is the quality of the baby's stimulation that determines whether, and how, these vital brain connections will be made.

It has been shown that children who receive positive stimulation (sensitive, warm nurturing) are more likely to learn how to manage their world in successful and satisfying ways, while children who experience negative stimulation (abusive, neglectful conditions) fail to develop critical brain functioning and, in the extreme, are more likely to become violent. For much of the remaining text the authors demonstrate the effects of aversive factors on child outcomes. Four chapters focus on the short- and long-term traumatic effects of specific prenatal experiences: drugs (street, over-the-counter, prescription); malnutrition; birth injury; early deprivation; and absence of father. Three chapters concentrate on child behaviour, temperament, trauma, and head injury.

In the two final chapters the authors observe the misguidedness of current child-care policy in viewing violence as "the problem" rather than as "a late-stage symptom." The facts are clear, and "still we wait" — for the babies of overwhelmed families to be abused or neglected, and for those same abused children to fail in school and, in turn, become delinquent or pregnant. The costs in terms of human productivity are great, yet society is, with few exceptions, unwilling to take preventive action. Karr-Morse and Wiley identify a number of proven assessment and intervention programs for health professionals to use when dealing with emotional, behavioural, and interactional problems in young children and their parents. They also identify the barriers (personal history, previous actions, feelings of helplessness) that must be overcome before preventive action is supported. The future of our society, the authors contend, lies in our investment in those who nurture our children.

The text ends with a series of relevant, practical appendices: factors associated with violence that are amenable to early intervention; myths about the human brain; behavioural effects of drug exposure; reliable primary prevention initiatives; and resources.

Ghosts from the Nursery is a most readable text designed for professionals, policy makers, and members of the public who are committed to making children the social priority. Karr-Morse and Wiley's ability to distil information from volumes of related research is their most important contribution to the study of children. Perhaps it is through a book such as this that professionals and lay stakeholders will find the common ground on which to build a commitment to society's most precious resource, and thereby break the cycle of violence.

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