

Why Young People Need Their Aggression

Aggression is an attempt to stay alive, to stay safe

There are plenty of young people whose aggression gets them into trouble. They pick verbal, physical and emotional fights, constantly trying to overpower other people in one way or another, as if being aggressive is the only way they know how to be, as if being aggressive gives them a sense of being alive, of feeling real. And there are other young people who get into different kinds of trouble because they *can't* be aggressive. They can't stick up for themselves. They give up without a fight. They're unable to ask for what they need and, as a result, become invisible, taken for granted by other people.

Anyone who lives or works with young people has to find a way of accounting for aggression. Is aggression a good thing or a bad thing, necessary or unnecessary? Is it okay to want to fight? To fight to win? To fight for things that matter? Terrible things happen in the world because of aggression, so perhaps we should be discouraging it in young people?

Whereas Freud (1923) argues that aggression is a primary instinctual drive, linked to a 'death instinct' and fundamentally destructive, Winnicott (1958) argues that aggression in babies is self-preservative. Yes, babies are born aggressive but "aggressiveness is almost synonymous with activity," he writes (p204). Babies insist on being noticed, demanding food, screaming and thrashing about if they don't get their way. But that initial aggression isn't necessarily intended to destroy anything. It's a response to frustration, because unless babies get what they need, they'll die. Aggression, Winnicott (1965) writes elsewhere, is 'evidence of life' (p127).

So following Winnicott, we accept a baby's aggression. We're not scared of it. However, we don't want our babies to become narcissistic tyrants, so when they're ready, gently and gradually we start to frustrate them, teaching them the limits of what they can and can't control. We contain their aggression as they acclimatise to the satisfactions and frustrations of the world. We don't crush aggression, nor do we allow it to ride roughshod over other people.

But if we're alarmed or frightened by a baby's aggression, by a baby's essential neediness, and if the baby senses this, then it learns to hide its aggression. If we always give in to a baby's aggression, if the aggression is never met, never contained, never experienced by the baby as boundaried and safe, then again the baby learns to hide its aggression.

Retaliating is equally unhelpful. If we meet a baby's infantile aggression with overwhelming adult aggression, then – again - the baby stops being aggressive because the situation is too dangerous. Its aggression is – again – uncontained, and so the baby stops asking for what it needs, giving up on other people, renouncing its own aggression and seeking satisfaction elsewhere, finding oblique ways of getting (or not getting) whatever it needs.

A baby with a history of uncontained aggression might either grow into a young person unable to regulate his or her own aggression, lashing out uncontrollably at the smallest frustration, or into a

Why Young People Need Their Aggression

Aggression is an attempt to stay alive, to stay safe

young person scared of his or her own aggression, scared to insist on anything, scared to fight for fear of damaging or being damaged by an opponent. A young person might turn inward, staying in a bedroom, reluctant ever to talk about the things that matter, losing confidence in himself or herself and becoming invisible. Winnicott (1958) observes that “...if society is in danger, it is not because of man’s aggressiveness but because of the repression of personal aggressiveness in individuals” (p204).

There are plenty of young people whose aggression appears to be repressed. Typically, they seem unusually passive and self-contained as children. Then as puberty kicks in with its attendant self-consciousness and sexual anxiety, they retreat further into themselves, never having developed the confidence to fight their corner. Young people never able to depend reliably and robustly on the containment of other people might come to depend absolutely on themselves, on their own company, on their own advice and (in some cases) on themselves as the objects of their own aggression, attacking themselves through self-harming, through self-loathing, or through endangering their academic prospects by staying in their rooms and refusing to go to school. I sometimes wonder whether parents and professionals become worried about withdrawn, shy, passive children because they sense something potentially dangerous in the child: a madness capable of erupting, a violence capable of lashing out. The danger is that the child never able to assert himself becomes the young person eventually attacking someone.

We have to understand aggression as essentially defensive, as a communication needing to be understood. I’m *not* suggesting that we should always give in to aggression any more than I’m suggesting that we should always crush it. I’m arguing that we should understand aggression as a kind of anxiety, a kind of panic. And of course, what will most help or hinder our ability to understand aggression and respond appropriately is the relationship we have with our own.

REFERENCES

- Freud, S. (1923) ‘The Ego and the Id.’ In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (Vol 19)*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Winnicott, D.W. (1958) *Through Paediatrics To Psychoanalysis*. London: Tavistock Publications Ltd.
- Winnicott, D.W. (1965) *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment*. London: Hogarth Press.