



# Psychiatry & Behavioral Science Section - 2015

---

## I31 Assessing and Addressing Preteen Violence

*John L. Young, MD\*, 203 Maple Street, New Haven, CT 06511-4048*

---

After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the unique, relevant features characterizing the very youngest perpetrators of violence, including possible causes and means for prevention.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by facilitating the direction of critical professional attention to the social impact of violence by pre-adolescent youths.

Traditionally, seven years of age is regarded as the “age of reason,” the time by which a substantial level of moral discernment can be expected. There is a long legal history that at least loosely follows this notion. Yet it is known from many investigators, including James, Kohlberg, and Piaget, that for many purposes, it is an oversimplification. Moreover, current work by Paul Bloom has been uncovering the ability to express morally based preferences in infants during their first year.

While still quite young, children may in extreme cases give violent expression to their choices. Examples include a first-grader in Michigan shooting a classmate, two English schoolboys killing toddler James Bulger, and an 11-year-old Chicago boy accused in the slaying of a 14-year-old girl. These perpetrators are all preteens and appear to form a class distinct from the likes of adolescent school shooters, bullies, hazers, or so-called gang bangers. Unlike their older counterparts whose violence surprised most of those who knew them, these younger children are more likely to show serious disturbances as early as their fourth year. Fortunately, they are apparently rare, but hard to count accurately or to even discuss.

Suggested causes for pre-teen violence range widely. Brain imaging and genetic techniques so far have not yielded any distinguishing findings. Early attachment disturbances are suspect. A wide range of substances misuse may be a factor, including herbal remedies that appeal to the very young. The easy availability of guns may play at least a secondary role. Significant controversy continues regarding the causal role of media violence, whether through the internet, films, television, radio, video games, printed periodicals, or even books.

Potential remedies are many and many can be applied simultaneously. Preventive measures focus on decreasing violence in the environment with alternative positive opportunities to socialize. Parental training efforts have proven welcome and helpful. Introducing enforcement of existing but ignored laws at all levels can be effective. Close attention to day-care operations is probably warranted, in view of a study showing that length of exposure to day care may correlate at least slightly with disruptive behavior in the early years of school. School-based programs can systematically encourage appropriate responses to routine experiences that would otherwise elicit violence. When prevention fails, there is a minority advocating school-based corporal punishment.

Finally, pre-teen violence does not respect international boundaries. Thus, it is important to make the effort needed to compare relevant concerns and experiences across diverse cultural and political contexts. History judges societies according to their treatment of their most vulnerable members.

---

### **Violent Children, Violence Prevention, Assessment**