# RAGE OF INNOC ENTS

**More and more children show a worrisome violent trait in everyday behaviour. Just how bad is the problem, and what can parents do about it?**

■ by Shefalee VASUDEV

AS SIX-YEAR-OLD HIMANshu climbed on to the sofa in the drawing room of his south Delhi home, his mother asked him what he would like to do when he grew up. "Dadagiri," replied Himanshu, with an expression that evoked grins. Himanshu knows that it is bullying that makes his nine-year-old brother, Dewang, the most obeyed boy in his group. The only problem: Dewang is currently under psychotherapeutic care. One evening when their grandmother became persistent about homework, Dewang gave her a "choke slam", a wrestling move picked up from WWF that sprained the old lady's neck. Shocking? Meet Vinay Anand, 4, from suburban Mumbai, who spews deadly anger. He shouts, "I'll kill you," as he pummels his father.

Delhi alone has witnessed several cases of manic rage among children in recent days. Last week, two-year-old Bhavana (name changed) was raped by her 14-year-old neighbour in his house, where Bhavana's mother had left her and subsequently found her bleeding. A few weeks ago, a 12-year-old girl from west Delhi was gangraped by three teenagers, who too left her bleeding and numb with shock.

Earlier, on January 13, Arihant Jain, 8, committed suicide because his parents insisted on sending him back to the hateful hostel life in Dehradun. Five days later, a 17-year-old boy bludgeoned his mother to death with a hammer as he was fed up with her for haranguing him about neglecting his studies and spending time with his girlfriend instead. All are uncommon cases, but "they need to be seen as a background for the individual vulnerabilities of children in problems of impulse control", says Shekhar Seshadri, associate professor of psychiatry at NIMHANS, Bangalore.

Every decade has had psychologists observing aggression in children as a regular pattern of growing up. But now, not only are there more aggressive youngsters but this anger is being manifested in violent, at times ruthless, behaviour. What were earlier sweet squeals of protest among children are now turning into rebellious "give-it-to-me-or-else" violent screams. The stabbed Barbie dolls and beheaded G.I. Joes found in cupboards are symbols of the latent anger that brews in their minds. When parents say that innocence in children is vanishing, they are not exaggerating. Normal, functional family children are learning to shout at and abuse their peers, even parents and teachers, or hit people on impulse as forms of everyday communication, not as a personality disorder.

Though there haven't been many relevant studies in India on this issue, some recent ones show a rise in violence among children. A study conducted by the Indian Council for Medical Research quoted in the World Health Report released by WHO in December 2001 says 12 per cent of children in India below 16 years have behavioural problems—an increase of approximately 4 per cent in the past six years. The study was conducted in Lucknow and Bangalore and included rural and urban children and slum children from urban areas.

Expressions, a programme started by VIMHANS (Vidyasagar Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences) in Delhi in 1998, which covers 90-110 government and public schools in Delhi and adjoining satellite towns, studies child and adolescent behaviour. In its figures for 2001-2, 12 per cent of the children studied (3-12 years) are listed as aggressive. The project coordinator of Expressions, psychiatrist Jitendra Nagpal, says the project involved the use of 8,000 questionnaires with 48 questions each and answered by parents and teachers. The parents were asked to list specifics like their wards breaking TV sets or using kitchen knives for assault.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, the number of children

Digital illustration by NILANJAN DAS

## WHAT THE STUDIES SAY

■ **An epidemiological study conducted by the Indian Council for Medical Research quoted in the World Health Report released by WHO in December 2001 says 12 per cent of children in India below 16 years have behavioural problems.**

■ **A study by VIMHANS, Delhi, which studied primary and middle level students (3-12 years) from 110 schools from Delhi and adjoining towns also found 12 per cent of the children displaying aggressive behaviour.**

## FACETS OF FURY

**"I feel very tense before my exams.**
**I beat my brother and hit my mother if she intervenes.**
**I feel angry with my father for beating me if I do badly in school. I feel so worthless."**
***17-year-old Ashok Banerjee from Kolkata***

**rape**

**"I raped a three-month-old baby.**
**The supervisor here says that I can make up for my sin if I marry her. But I don't want to marry her."**
***14-year-old Islammuddin at the child supervision home run by the Social Welfare Department, Delhi***

**kill**

**"Kill him, shoot him, break his neck and leg."**
***Children at an apperception test at a Mumbai clinic on what they would do if they had to overcome competition***

**attack**

**"When Gurmeet (my friend) said bad words about my Papa being always drunk, I wanted to kill him.**
**I hit him with my bat and he had to be taken to the doctor.**
**But I am not sorry.**
**If he abuses my papa, I will beat him again."**
***12-year-old Naman from Delhi***

**slap**

**"My mom once yelled at me and said that if I continued to be a misbehaved child, I could not be her son.**
**I broke the TV set, the windows in the drawing room and set fire to my books.**
**I have never spoken to her after that."**
***12-year-old K. Jayaram from Chennai***

**Normal, healthy children are displaying violence as a form of communication, not a personality disorder.**

**Parents mishandle a child's anger due to ignorance or oscillation in their own behaviour.**

apprehended under the IPC for juvenile violence rose from 17,203 (7-18 years) in 1994 to 18,460 in 2000. But Amod Kanth, joint commissioner of police, Delhi Police, one of the members who drafted the new Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act, 2000, emphasises that the NCRB figures give an understated picture of juvenile crimes because many such acts in affluent families go unreported. "Also, children who are arrested by the police are often wrongfully produced in adult courts," he says.

The fury of children is not restricted to homes. School campuses too are becoming grounds of volatile communication. "If one youngster finds something humiliating, the entire classroom turns hostile towards the teacher," says educationist Shyama Chona, principal of Delhi Public School, R.K. Puram, Delhi.

This anger in children, caution experts, should be heeded as a ticking bomb. Sarah Santhini of Christian Medical College, Vellore, says that violent children need immediate psychological first aid.

The innocence with which children relate to the world is the first casualty. Gone is the fascination for fairy tales. The favoured content on films, TV and computer war games is umpteen frames of violence. "Boredom time is imagination time, but TV is taking that away, making even the playground uninteresting," says Nagpal.

This trend of violence due to media influences has not been observed only in India. In April 2001, a US study reported evidence that violence in media spurs aggression. "The brains of children treat entertainment violence as real violence," wrote John P. Murray, psychology professor at Kansas State University.

THE underlying causes of the angry demeanour of children are numerous. Though many parents now claim they are "good friends" with their children, the difference between preaching and practice is gaping. Super expectations from ambitious parents, peer pressure, low tolerance for peer rejection, working and often warring parents as soulless icons of nuclear families with more money but less time for children, lonely sons and daughters left in day care or with domestic helps and lack of space to play and vent emotions is a complicated bundle of factors that contribute to rage. It doesn't help that most adult-child relationships are based on expectation, instruction and control instead of recognition of the child as a person.

Parents, who are realising with dismay that parenting is a tricky, trial-and-error process with no absolute answers, are now being counselled to try non-aggressive problem solving. Liza Hazarika, a counsellor in Kolkata, says that "parents end up mishandling a child's anger due to ignorance or extreme oscillation in their own behaviour".

Old ways of dealing with children like emotional blackmail, punishment or sweet talking and cajoling by materialistic bribing seem to have flipsides. "Don't give them turf, teach them also how to run and the consequences of running on the wrong track," advises Nagpal, who expresses concern that only 10 per cent of Delhi schools have counsellors.

Workshops are now being held in metros like Delhi and Bangalore, based on the life skills management modules for children prescribed by WHO. Parents and teachers are trained to become emotional cushions for children. Psychiatrists Shobha Srinath and Seshadri at NIMHANS, who constantly face questions from concerned guardians, advise that the exposure of children to violence at home, community and media should be decreased. Violence begets violence.

"Give me a child and I will make him a thief, a lawyer or doctor," said British behavioural psychologist J.B. Watson, emphasising nurture as the force that moulds nature. A lot depends on what gets written on the blank slate of a mind that a child is born with.

**—with Arun Ram, Stephen David, Labonita Ghosh and Sandeep Unnithan**

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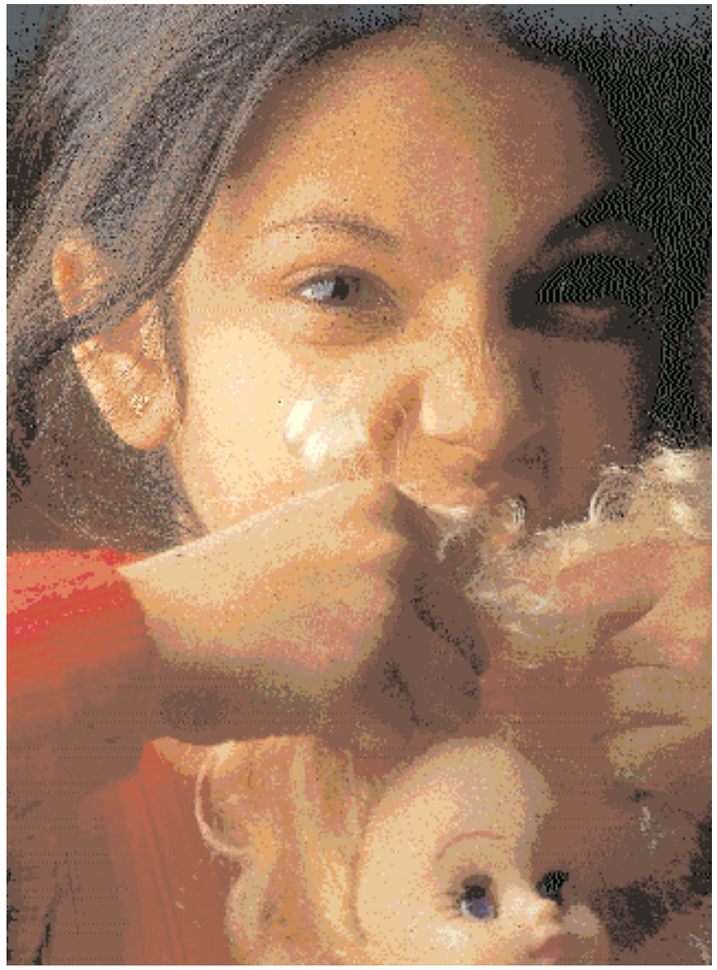
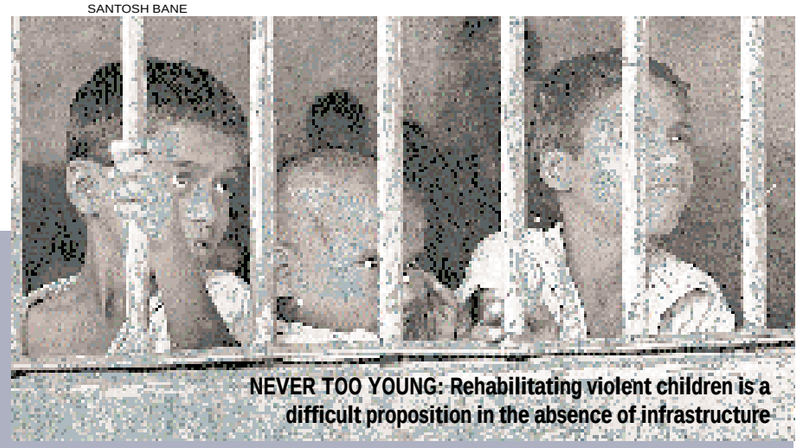


**BAD DOLL: Children give vent to anger by stabbing Barbies and beheading GI Joes**

SANTOSH BANE



**NEVER TOO YOUNG: Rehabilitating violent children is a difficult proposition in the absence of infrastructure**

THE LAW AND VIOLENT CHILDREN

# Little Justice

AT THE CHILD COURT IN Delhi's GTB Nagar, a kindly constable is leading two boys by the wrists (no handcuffs) towards the chamber where their case will be heard by a judge. Their crime? Breaking car windows. But there won't be any of the sharp cross-questioning usually seen when a criminal case is being heard in court. And post hearing, they won't go to jail. They'll go to the government-run observation home a few kilometres away.

But this is a recent development—as late as 1988, children were routinely being held in adult lock-ups. This is because the Indian Penal Code (IPC), which defines what constitutes crimes like "hurt" (causing physical injury) or "murder", does not specifically define "child" but treats anyone above the age of 12 as an adult (Section 32 of IPC lays down that "Nothing is an offence which is done by a child under seven years of age" while Section 33 says that "Nothing is an offence which is done by a child above seven years of age and under 12"). In response to a petition filed by an *Indian Express* journalist about the widespread abuse of children in Tihar (*Sanjay Suri vs Delhi Administration*), the Supreme Court in 1988 held that children cannot be jailed with adults.

It's an issue that evokes passionate response across the world, and the advocates of therapy are often shouted down by those who want harsher punishment. An estimated 8,000 children are in the US jails meant for adults every year, France's highest court has allowed city authorities to ban unaccompanied minors after dark following a wave of juvenile crime and Britain's remand homes report almost 1,000 cases of self-inflicted harm by the incarcerated youth—eating glass, cutting wrists—every year. The prevailing Indian law, given in the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act, 2000, is relatively gentle, differentiating between children who break the law and their adult counterparts. It takes those less than 18 years of age to be "children" and recommends a probe by a Juvenile Justice Board as opposed to trial in the open court. But it's not without problems.

The Act leaves it to the states to establish juvenile justice boards, officers and homes, but many fail to do so. Inquiries are supposed to last a maximum of four months, but often take years. Says Supreme Court advocate Renu George, closely associated with several childcare NGOs: "There are too many hurdles in rehabilitating children who commit violent crimes: the boards are politicised as they are supervised by the government of the day. And unlike many other countries, we do not have the facilities to monitor the child's progress after he leaves the observation home."

**—Shuchi Sinha**