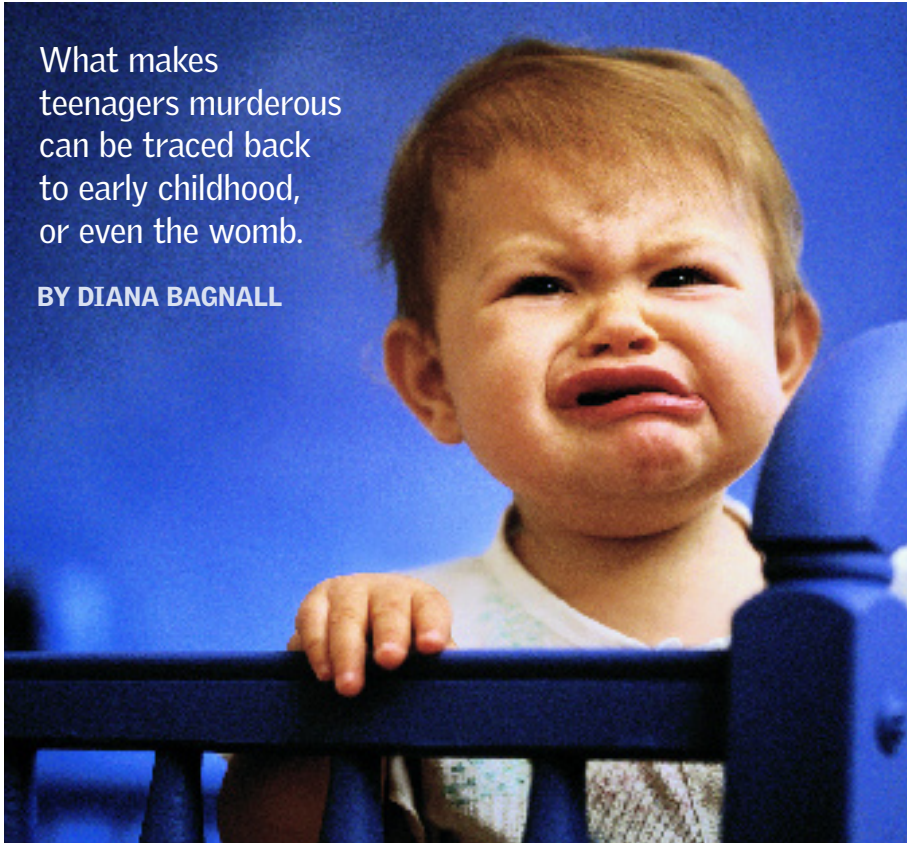


Baby-traced killers

What makes teenagers murderous can be traced back to early childhood, or even the womb.

BY DIANA BAGNALL



COT CASE Violent outbursts by the very young can be warnings of worse to come

follow a rising trajectory of modest aggression (58%) and finally a group (14%) which follows a rising trajectory of high physical aggression. Boys are more likely than girls to be in this last group. A sibling has the largest impact on the level of aggression during childhood (hardly surprising since, by definition, to hit out one needs a target), but other risk factors include having a mother with a history of anti-social behaviour during her school years or who started childbearing early, parents with a low income and those with serious problems living together.

Tremblay, professor of pediatrics, psychiatry and psychology at the University of Montreal, has followed a large cohort of children from kindergarten to adulthood and says about 5% maintain high aggression until adolescence, which might not abate until age 25 or after. Again, most are male and their path frequently leads to prison. "If we want to help, it's in those early years," says Tremblay, who will address the National Investment for the Early Years conference in Sydney on February 9.

He speaks enthusiastically of Australia's nurse home-visitation programs but says they could start pre-birth. "We know from experiments that parents at risk of producing highly aggressive children need a lot of support starting from early pregnancy. A lot of things are going on in early pregnancy that affect the brain development of their children." He stresses that children who are not aggressive in infancy do not develop sudden, late-onset physical aggression. "We have never seen in our different samples children who were low on physical aggression and then start to increase substantially during adolescence. The idea that these things start in adolescence doesn't come out in the data."

Tremblay disputes the conventional wisdom that violent movies, video games and, more recently, gangsta rap raise aggression levels in young people. "They sustain those who are already violent. It is like alcohol - it's good for most people but not for alcoholics. People are going to see more violent movies today than they were 30 years ago. These films exist because people like them, not because they make them violent. We are a machine that was built to do these things and it appears to be good to see and hear it without having to do it. That is part of what adolescents are going through. It is stimulating the animal in us without [us] having to behave like animals if we are in control." ●

WHEN TWO 14-YEAR-OLD girls were charged last week with the murder of a disabled taxi driver in Sydney, NSW Premier Morris Iemma blurted out in shock: "Where are their parents?" Good question, but poor timing, says visiting Canadian developmental psychologist Richard Tremblay. His point, and it's not trivial, is that a feral adolescent was once a feral toddler. Maybe her violent outbursts didn't seem so terrible or portentous at the time - she was little and cute - but human nature left to take its own uncivilised course can turn ugly. His published research suggests that people who don't learn to regulate their physical aggression in the pre-school years are at highest risk of serious violent behaviour during adolescence and adulthood.

The question asked for 50 years, and the one on which Tremblay has worked for 30 years, is how children learn to become violent. It's the wrong question, he now thinks. "Violence has been there from the start. Children are using physical aggression as soon as they can move at the end of their first year of life. If you put a two-year-old to bed at night, and he woke up six feet tall, you would put him in

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prison. Even the most physically aggressive adolescent has nowhere near the frequency of aggression of a two-year-old."

Physical aggression increases between the ages of two and four, and decreases as the little savages learn to tame their emotions and use language in a more sophisticated way. "If the environment isn't supporting that learning, they will simply continue [to be violent] but become bigger and taller and stronger and more of a threat."

Studies of physical aggression in infancy suggest that by 17 months, the large majority of children are aggressive towards siblings, peers and adults. Tremblay's research with children aged five months to 42 months divides them into three bands - those showing little or no violent tendencies (28%), those who