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Loss of loved one link to child violence. By Natalie O'Brien

A West Australian study into violent high school students has shown that almost all the teenagers had suffered the loss of, or separation from, a close family member in their early childhood years.

The Curtin University study, published by teacher and academic Elizabeth Parry, gives a rare insight into the background of students most at risk of violent or aggressive behaviour and reveals many suffer from stress-related disorders.

In the research, the first of its kind, Dr Parry found that the students displaying violent behaviour were unhappy in themselves, fearful, afraid of the future and concerned they would die with no identity.

"It seemed that the loss of the family member had triggered a whole range of behaviours and symptoms that suggest they are suffering from post-traumatic stress," Dr Parry said.

Definitions of loss of a family member included death, divorce and moving away or separation from the child.

Curtin Education Dean Graham Dellar said the study "was an attempt to go beyond the confines of the classroom to seek other factors that may contribute to violent behaviour".

Clinical child psychologist Julia Solomon supported the findings, saying that society had "underestimated the effect on children of forms of separation".

But Dr Solomon said that because of high divorce rates, up to a third of the school population could be vulnerable. Adults might believe children would adapt, but they often found it much harder and repressed their feelings.

"If they don't have an outlet to talk through their feelings, internalised anger is eventually then externalised . . . and the target is often not related to the original person."

Dr Parry's PhD research was conducted in two parts, took four years and involved 11 government senior high schools in three different locations. Out of 600 students who took part, eight students were chosen as case studies to have their lives documented for a year.

Their stories will be published in book form next month.

Dr Parry said: "To some, these stories might appear unrealistic and imaginative, but to the students concerned they were real.

"This is how they perceive their lives and their world. And for all of them their perceptions were all they had."

Dr Parry, who has 40 years' teaching experience, found that the violent behaviour began in primary school years.

"All had a deep fear and hostility against anyone in authority.

"They appeared to have a siege mentality, although they were craving love."