

Understanding Student Aggressive Behavior: Examples of Relevant Research*

Aggression has long fascinated and concerned societies, especially as it is manifested in social contexts. As Chesney-Lind & Eliason (2006) emphasize “psychological definitions of aggression include all behaviors that are intended to hurt or harm others.”
 [Chesney-Lind, M. & Eliason, M. (2006). From invisible to incorrigible: The demonization of marginalized women and girls. *Crime Media Culture*, 2, 29-47]

The definition encompasses a wide variety of actions (e.g., from rolling one’s eyes and deliberately ignoring people to physical, sexual, and emotional harassment and violence).

Aggression can have life-long negative effects. It can affect the development of children who manifest aggression and the peers with whom they interact. And parents and teachers experience stress and frustration in handling aggressive behaviors, which overtime can affect their well-being.

At school, aggressive behavior is a constant stressor for staff and students in and out of the classroom. The costs for schools in dealing with aggressive behaviors can be extensive, especially in efforts to reduce bullying and enhance safety.

With respect to intent, there is a special focus on *social* or *relational aggressive behavior* (e.g., behavior that directly or indirectly harms another’s social standing or interpersonal relationships). Such aggression (often referred to as *RA*) has been defined as behavior that is “directed toward harming another’s self-esteem, social status, or both, and may take such direct forms as verbal rejection, negative facial expression or body movement, or more indirect forms such as slanderous rumors or social exclusion” (Galen & Underwood, 1997 – abstract included in research examples on the following pages). Relational aggression may be proactive and reactive.

Beyond genetics, broad discussions of the psychological factors motivating aggression encompass not only notions of power and control, but the desire for popularity, needing security, and escaping from fear. Other motives reported include a desire to create excitement and wanting to develop connectedness and close intimate relationships (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000 – abstract included in examples). In addressing aggression in terms of efforts to gain dominance, Pellegrini (2002 – abstract included in examples) states:

Dominance can be characterized by physically assertive behaviors (e.g., fighting, bullying peers), as well as affiliative behaviors (e.g., leadership, reconciliation, focus of attention). This constellation of behaviors is used by individuals as they compete with each other for access to valued resources in the early phases of group organization. As a result of a series of aversive and affiliative exchanges, hierarchies are formed. The most dominant individuals are at the top of the hierarchy and have preferred access to resources. Once dominance hierarchies are established, they minimize within group aggression in that individuals know their place, and usually do not try to challenge the group order because of the high likelihood of defeat. The resulting social order also supports subsequent cooperation among group members. ... Changes in status occur when there are abrupt changes in circumstance, such as children changing schools or group members maturing at rapid rates.

Research on aggression also looks for differences between males and females. In her review of Marion Underwood’s 2003 book (*Social Aggression Among Girls*), Horn (2004) highlights two matters: (1) Are girls more socially aggressive than boys? and (2) Do girls engage in more social than physical aggression? With respect to the first question, the research is equivocal. With respect to the second, girls generally do engage in more social than physical aggression, but the reasons may be related more to cultural context than gender per se.

[Horn, S. (2004). Mean girls or cultural stereotypes? *Human Development*, 47, 314-320]

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Examples of Research and Other Papers

Crick, N. R. and Dodge, K. A. (1996). Social information? Processing mechanisms in reactive and proactive aggression. *Child Development*, 67, 993-1002.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/8706540>

Abstract: Theories of aggressive behavior and ethological observations in animals and children suggest the existence of distinct forms of reactive (hostile) and proactive (instrumental) aggression. Toward the validation of this distinction, groups of reactive aggressive, proactive aggressive, and nonaggressive children were identified (n = 624 9-12-year-olds). Social information-processing patterns were assessed in these groups by presenting hypothetical vignettes to subjects. 3 hypotheses were tested: (1) only the reactive-aggressive children would demonstrate hostile biases in their attributions of peers' intentions in provocation situations (because such biases are known to lead to reactive anger); (2) only proactive-aggressive children would evaluate aggression and its consequences in relatively positive ways (because proactive aggression is motivated by its expected external outcomes); and (3) proactive-aggressive children would select instrumental social goals rather than relational goals more often than nonaggressive children. All 3 hypotheses were at least partially supported.

Galen, B. & Underwood, M (1997). A developmental investigation of social aggression among children. *Developmental Psychology*, 33, 589-600. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9232374>

Abstract: Social aggression consists of actions directed at damaging another's self-esteem, social status, or both, and includes behaviors such as facial expressions of disdain, cruel gossiping, and the manipulation of friendship patterns. In Study 1, 4th, 7th, and 10th graders completed the Social Behavior Questionnaire; only boys viewed physical aggression as more hurtful than social aggression, and girls rated social aggression as more hurtful than did boys. In the 1st phase of Study 2, girls participated in a laboratory task in which elements of social-aggression were elicited and reliably coded. In the 2nd phase of Study 2, another sample of participants (elementary, middle, and high school boys and girls) viewed samples of socially aggressive behaviors from these sessions. Girls rated the aggressor as more angry than boys, and middle school and high school participants viewed the socially aggressive behaviors as indicating more dislike than elementary school children.

Kellam, S., Ling, X., Merisca, R., Brown, C., & Ialongo, N. (1998). The effect of the level of aggression in the first grade classroom on the course and malleability of aggressive behavior into middle school. *Development and Psychopathology*, 10, 165-185.

<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1998-04146-003>

Abstract: Examined the influences of the classroom context on the course and malleability of aggressive behavior from entrance into 1st grade through the transition to middle school. Participants included 1,084 children who entered 1st grade in 19 public elementary schools; 682 children received ratings in middle school, 6 yrs later. At the start of 1st grade, schools and teachers were randomly assigned to intervention or control conditions. Children were followed through 6th grade, where their aggressive behavior was rated by middle school teachers. The more aggressive 1st grade boys who were in higher aggressive 1st grade classrooms were at markedly increased risk for being highly aggressive in middle school. Boys were already behaving more aggressively than girls in 1st grade; and no similar classroom aggression effect was found among girls, although girls' own aggressive behavior did place them at increased risk. The Good Behavior Game preventative intervention, a classroom team-based behavior management strategy that promotes good behavior by rewarding teams that do not exceed maladaptive behavior standards, appeared to reduce high levels of classroom aggression.

Owens, L., Shute, R., & Slee, P. (2000). I'm in and you're out...: Explanations for teenage girls indirect aggression. *Psychology, Evolution and Gender*, 2, 19-46.
<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2001-01277-002>

Abstract: This paper reports on a qualitative investigation of explanations for teenage girls' indirect aggression (e.g., spreading false rumors, excluding peers from the group) which is part of a larger study on the nature of teenage girls' indirect aggression. Focus groups were conducted with 54 15—16-yr-old girls. These focus group data were supplemented with interviews with 6 pairs of girls and a focus group discussion with a pilot group of 8 16-yr-olds and separate individual interviews with 10 key teachers. The overall aim of this part of the study was to explore why girls are indirectly aggressive to their peers. The key explanations proposed by the girls and their teachers were a desire to create excitement in girls' lives together with a range of friendship and group processes, centered around having close intimate relationships and belonging to the peer group. This study enriches our understanding of girls' indirect aggression and adds to earlier research conducted mainly using quantitative methods

Salmivalli, C. and Nieminen, E. (2002), Proactive and reactive aggression among school bullies, victims, and bully victims. *Aggressive Behavior*, 28, 30-44.
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/ab.90004>

Abstract: Bullies, victims, bully-victims, and control children were identified from a sample of 1062 children (530 girls and 532 boys), aged 10 to 12 years, participating in the study. Their reactive and proactive aggression was measured by means of peer and teacher reports. Peer and teacher reports were more concordant with respect to reactive than proactive aggression. Comparing the children in different bullying roles in terms of their reactive and proactive aggression, bully-victims were found to be the most aggressive group of all. For this group, it was typical to be highly aggressive both reactively and proactively. Although bullies were significantly less aggressive than bully-victims, they scored higher than victims and controls on both reactive and proactive aggression. However, observations at the person level, i.e., cross-tabulational analyses, indicated that bullies were not only overrepresented among children who were both reactively and proactively aggressive but also among the only reactively aggressive as well as the only proactively aggressive groups. Victims scored higher than control children on reactive aggression, but they were not proactively aggressive. Furthermore, even their reactive aggression was at a significantly lower level than that of bullies and bully-victims.

Pellegrini, A. (2002). Affiliative and aggressive dimensions of dominance and possible functions during adolescence. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 7, 21-31.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1359178900000331>

Abstract: In this paper, the role of aggression and affiliation in the development and possible functions of dominance during early adolescence is reviewed. It is suggested that both aggression and affiliation relate to dominance at different phases in the formation of new group structures. This conclusion is based on ethological theory and data from human and nonhuman primates. In terms of function, it was noted that dominance should be considered in relation to some outcome, not as an end in its own right. Further, there are probably different goals in different developmental periods. Heterosexual relationships seem to be an important resource for the period of adolescence. Consistent with theory, both affiliative and aggressive dimensions of dominance predict boys' heterosexual relationships. Suggestions for future research are made.

Crockenberg, S., Leerkes, E., & BÁrrig JÓ, P. (2008). Predicting aggressive behavior in the third year from infant reactivity and regulation as moderated by maternal behavior. *Development and Psychopathology*, 20, 37-54. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18211727>

Abstract: The degree to which infant attention behaviors, together with infant reactivity to frustrating events, predict aggressive behavior at 2.5 years, and the moderating effect of maternal behavior were tested with 64 low-risk mothers and infants. Mothers rated infant negative reactivity at 5 months and aggressive behavior and maternal trait anger at 2.5 years; infant and maternal behaviors were observed at 6 months. Based on hierarchical multiple regressions, infant attention to frustrating events at 6 months positively predicted aggressive behavior, whereas looking away from frustrating events was associated with less aggressive behavior for girls only. High reactivity to limits predicted aggressive behavior only when mothers encouraged infant attention to the frustrating event, suggesting that maternal behavior amplifies developmental pathways associated with infant temperament.

Keenan, K. (2012). Development of physical aggression from early childhood to adulthood. In Tremblay, R.E., Boivin, M., Peters, R.DeV., (eds). Tremblay, R.E., (topic ed.). *Encyclopedia on early childhood development*. (online)

<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.569.3682&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

Conclusions: Contrary to traditional belief, children do not need to observe models of physical aggression to initiate the use of physical aggression. In 1972, Donald Hebb, a father of modern psychology, noted that children did not need to learn how to have a temper tantrum. In his 1979 book on social development, Robert Cairns reminded human development students that the most aggressive animals were those that had been isolated from the time they were born. Indeed, infants appear to use physical aggression spontaneously to achieve their goals when angry. Following the pioneering work of Charles Darwin, Michael Lewis and his colleagues showed that angry reactions could be observed as early as two months after birth. Children also seem to resort spontaneously to play-fighting. Thus, rather than learning to use physical aggression from their environment, human children learn not to use physical aggression through various forms of interaction with their environment.

Research on the development of aggression during the preschool years has not yet adequately elucidated the mechanisms that would explain:

- a) why some infants are more physically aggressive than others;
- b) why some engage in very little physical aggression;
- c) why it is that infant girls tend to engage in physical aggression less often than do infant boys;
- d) why most children learn to regulate physical aggression before they enter school;
- e) why some do not;
- f) why children start engaging in indirect aggression;
- g) why girls engage in indirect aggression more than boys do;
- h) to what extent engaging in indirect aggression reduces physical aggression;
- i) which interventions are most effective to help preschoolers who have problems learning to control their tendency to engage in physical aggression.

Service and Policy Implications: The research summarized above has two important implications for the prevention of physical aggression. First, there is the fact that most children learn alternatives to physical aggression during their preschool years. Therefore, early childhood is probably the best window of opportunity for helping children at risk of becoming chronic physical aggressors. Intensive support to high-risk families starting during pregnancy should have a long-term impact. Second, since most humans have used physical aggression during early childhood, most are probably at risk of using it again if they find themselves in a situation where there does not appear to be a satisfactory alternative. This would explain why many violent crimes are committed by individuals who do not have a history of chronic physical aggression, and why so many conflicts among families, ethnic groups, religious groups, socioeconomic classes and nations lead to physical aggression.

Policies that promote quality education during early childhood should reduce cases of chronic violence and the overall level of physical aggression in the population. But policies

that strive to maintain peaceful environments throughout society are also needed to prevent the primitive aggressive reactions from breaking through the thin layer of civility we acquire as we grow older.

Liu, J., Lewis, G., & Evans, L. (2013). Understanding aggressive behaviour across the lifespan. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 20, 156-168.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3411865/>

Abstract: Aggressive behavior is the observable manifestation of aggression and is often associated with developmental transitions and a range of medical and psychiatric diagnoses across the lifespan. As healthcare professionals involved in the medical and psychosocial care of patients from birth through death, nurses frequently encounter—and may serve as—both victims and perpetrators of aggressive behavior in the workplace. While the nursing literature has continually reported research on prevention and treatment approaches, less emphasis has been given to understanding the etiology, including contextual precipitants of aggressive behavior. This paper provides a brief review of the biological, social, and environmental risk factors that purportedly give rise to aggressive behavior. Further, many researchers have focused specifically on aggressive behavior in adolescence and adulthood. Less attention has been given to understanding the etiology of such behavior in young children and older adults. This paper emphasizes the unique risk factors for aggressive behavior across the developmental spectrum, including childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and late life. Appreciation of the risk factors of aggressive behavior, and, in particular, how they relate to age-specific manifestations, can aid nurses in better design and implementation of prevention and treatment programs.

Ellis, A. R. (.2018) A conceptual framework for preventing aggression in elementary schools. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 36,183- 206. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/crq.21231>

Abstract: Pervasive physical conflict generates negative outcomes. This paper (a) thoroughly describes the problem of early aggression, (b) identifies emotion regulation (ER) and social information processing (SIP) skills as targets for aggression prevention, and (c) locates skills training within a new conceptual framework. According to this framework, prevention programs should teach ER and SIP skills early and should target contextual factors. Multiple professions are well positioned to intervene using existing tools. Aggression prevention research should consider both emotion and cognition, improve measurement and study design, and incorporate theories that address skill development as well as the social justice implications of aggression prevention.

Lee, P. & Bierman, K.L. (2018). Longitudinal trends and year-to-year fluctuations in student–teacher conflict and closeness: Associations with aggressive behavior problems *Journal of School Psychology*, 70, 1-15.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022440518300736>

Abstract: Longitudinal research suggests that student–teacher relationships characterized by elevated (or increasing) conflict and low (or decreasing) closeness promote heightened aggression in elementary school. However, prior research has not explored fluctuations in the quality of student–teacher relationships across school years, which may also impact students. This study applied a new methodology to determine whether year-to-year fluctuations in student–teacher conflict or closeness also predicted increased student aggression. 154 children were followed from Head Start preschools through elementary school. Early elementary teachers (kindergarten through third grade) rated the quality of conflict and closeness with students. Fifth grade teachers rated student aggression. Regression analyses revealed that year-to-year fluctuations in student–teacher conflict, along with mean levels of student–teacher conflict, each made unique contributions to fifth grade aggression, controlling for baseline aggression. In addition, for students with low aggression at kindergarten entry, year-to-year fluctuations in student–teacher closeness predicted increased aggression. Possible mechanisms accounting for the detrimental effects of fluctuations in student–teacher relationship quality are discussed, along with implications for practice.

Scherzinger, M., & Wettstein, A. (2019). Classroom disruptions, the teacher–student relationship and classroom management from the perspective of teachers, students and external observers: A multimethod approach, *Learning Environments Research*, 22, 101–116. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10984-018-9269-x>

Abstract: This study used questionnaires and systematic behavioural observations to examine how teachers, students and external observers perceived classroom disruptions, the teacher–student relationship and classroom management in grade 5 and 6 classrooms in Switzerland. The questionnaire showed that the students of a class agreed to a certain extent in their ratings of classroom disruptions, the teacher–student relationship and classroom management. Comparison of teachers’ and students’ ratings showed that agreement on these constructs varied. We found weak to moderate agreement on classroom disruptions, a weak correspondence for the teacher–student relationship, and no association on classroom management. The results of the behavioural observation showed a moderate agreement between external observers’ and students’ ratings, but no association between external observers’ and class teachers’ ratings and only a weak correspondence with the subject teacher ratings. Thus external observers’ low-inference observations corresponded far better with students’ than teachers’ ratings. To sum up, students, teachers and observers perceive classroom processes differently.

Walker, S., & Graham, L. (2019). At risk students and teacher-student relationships: student characteristics, attitudes to school and classroom climate, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, online. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13603116.2019.1588925>

Abstract: Student characteristics, their attitude to school and classroom climate can influence teacher-student relationships and adjustment to school. Poor early school experiences are associated with school avoidance, disruptive behaviour, teacher conflict, and suspension and exclusion. The focus, however, remains on the behaviour of individual children, rather than seeing behaviour as the result of interactions between individuals and their pedagogical contexts. This paper presents findings from the first year of an Australian longitudinal project tracking 240 children (101 boys, 139 girls) from high suspending primary schools serving disadvantaged communities through the first six years of school. Analyses, using multiple measures, including classroom observations, assessments and questionnaires, and multiple informants, such as teacher and child reports, explore associations between child characteristics, children’s attitudes to school, teacher-student relationship quality and the quality of classroom interactions as children commence school. Findings point to the importance of self-regulation as children transition to school and the pivotal role of inclusive and emotionally supportive classroom contexts in supporting the development of positive teacher-student relationships in the first year of school.

One of the criticisms I've faced over the years is that I'm not aggressive enough or assertive enough, or maybe somehow, because I'm empathetic, it means I'm weak. I totally rebel against that. I refuse to believe that you cannot be both compassionate and strong.

Jacinda Ardern Prime Minister of New Zealand