



Boys Can Be Socially Aggressive, Too

Research has implications for schools and parents

By Jeff Harrison, University Communications

The study shows that boys still hit and shove, but also use subtler forms of aggression once thought only used by girls.

A long-held notion about gender and aggressive behavior in children, it turns out, is not entirely accurate. True, boys are more apt to hit and shove, and girls are more likely to mete out subtler forms of punishment to their peers.

However, researchers have begun to note that boys also use less physical forms of aggression, often called indirect, relational or social aggression, against others. An analysis by a University of Arizona researcher and his colleagues of 148 studies of aggression in children and adolescents has found that the stereotype of physically aggressive boys masks the fact that boys are just as apt to take part in social aggression as girls.

This research also has implications for schools and parents who may be on the lookout for problem behavior. According to the researchers of this latest study, “we need to also consider social aggression among boys as well as the more direct, physical forms.”

The work, published in the September/October 2008 issue of the journal *Child Development*, was done by Noel A. Card, an assistant professor of family studies and human development in the Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences at The University of Arizona, and his

collaborators at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the University of Kansas.

Their research analyzed results of studies of more than 73,000 young people, mostly in schools. They examined both direct aggression, usually defined as physical in nature, and indirect aggression, the kind of covert behavior that is designed to damage another’s social standing.

The researchers suggest that the myth that girls are more likely to be indirectly or socially aggressive than boys has persisted among teachers, parents and even other researchers because of social expectations that develop early in life. These stereotypes often are perpetuated by recent movies and books, such as “Mean Girls” and “Odd Girl Out,” where girls ruthlessly target one another.

“While we might easily think of examples of ‘catty’ behaviors among girls, we should not forget that boys also make statements like ‘don’t invite him, he’s a loser,’” Card notes. “This sort of exclusion is also harmful to the victim, and we should consider it an act of social aggression.”

Based on their analysis, Card and his colleagues suggest that children who carry out one form of aggression also may be inclined to carry out the other form. They also found ties between both forms of

aggression and adjustment problems. Specifically, direct aggression is related to problems like delinquency and ADHD-type symptoms, poor relationships with peers, and low prosocial behavior such as helping and sharing.

In contrast, indirect aggression is related to problems like depression and anxiety, as well as higher prosocial behavior, perhaps because a child must use prosocial skills to encourage peers to exclude or gossip about others.

Card said that the concern is that schools and parents will only look for social aggression in girls and neglect to look for it among boys.

“An interesting aspect of the gender differences is that we found a small tendency, when you ask teachers and parents, they perceive girls as acting more indirectly aggressive than boys. But observational studies found absolutely no differences. It might be the case that the reporters themselves, the teachers and parents, are subject to that same bias of girls being more indirectly aggressive.”

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