

# Childhood aggression risk factors



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*Childhood aggression*

Aggression in children has become an important issue for modern society, especially with the new means of entertainment which may include violence, and the collected evidence of aggressive behavior being detrimental to a child's development (Li, Putallaz & Su, 2011; Mitrofan, Paul, Spencer & Weich, 2014). For instance, children who demonstrates high levels of aggression in early childhood are much more likely to experience personal, social and academic difficulties as they age (Bierman, Powers, Thomas & Thompson, 2008). Prior research which used developmental models to study behavioral problems also highlight the role of familial situations in the development of early childhood aggression, such as severe parental discipline and negligence (Bierman, Powers, Thomas & Thompson, 2008).

Operationalizing the concept of aggression is difficult due to its many forms of manifestation (Mitrofan, Paul, Spencer & Weich, 2014). Mainly, researchers have created two categories: overt and covert aggression (Li, Putallaz & Su, 2011; Mitrofan, Paul, Spencer & Weich, 2014). The former involves the direct expressions of hostility, such as hitting and insulting, while the latter involves a person using indirect relational hostility to manipulate their victim's emotions, such as creating unspoken tension, making strategic alliances with peers, and scapegoating (Li, Putallaz & Su, 2011; Mitrofan, Paul, Spencer & Weich, 2014). In turn, overt aggression is also divided into two sub-types: physical and non-physical (Mitrofan, Paul, Spencer & Weich, 2014). Physical aggression comprises of hurting another person through physical contact, such as hitting and pushing (Li, Putallaz & Su, 2011). In contrast, non-physical aggression comprises of hurting another

person through means such as verbally (e. g. calling hurtful names), symbolically (e. g. using threatening gestures), and object-directed (e. g. breaking a vase) violent behavior (Mitrofan, Paul, Spencer & Weich, 2014). As a whole, aggression could be defined as follow: the action of hurting another physically or emotionally, whether the aggression is intentional or not.

Childhood aggression is when a child displays high levels of aggression from an early age, such as from the moment they enter school (Bierman, Powers, Thomas & Thompson, 2008). When unable to meet the expectations of behavioral compliance, sustained attention, and social integration in first grade, a child can demonstrate an increase in aggressive behavior (Bierman, Powers, Thomas & Thompson, 2008). This aggression, if left without interventions, can follow the child into middle/secondary school (Bierman, Powers, Thomas & Thompson, 2008). Unfortunately, teachers who become frustrated by the disruptive behavior of their student(s) may use ineffective and negative control strategies such as frequent commands and threats to increase the compliance of the aggressive children (Bierman, Powers, Thomas & Thompson, 2008).

The purpose of this paper will be to provide the risk factors for the development of aggression in children, followed by existing and proposed interventions to counter aggressive behavior. For the section on the risk factors, two terms which will be used to classify them are to be defined here: *personal exposure* refers to experiences gained directly, such as abuse, poverty and bullying, whereas *periphrastic exposure* refers to experiences gained through witnessing, whether (in this case) the children are directly

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involved or not, such as interparental conflict. Afterwards, an overall summary of the research will be provided along with identified limitations and suggestions for future researchers.

## Risk factors for the development of aggression in children

### Personal Exposure

Research has shown that negligence, bullying, abuse and even poverty increases the risk of behavioral problems (such as aggression) in children (Li, Putallaz & Su, 2011; Bierman, Powers, Thomas & Thompson, 2008).

However, many researchers agree that in general, the children's parents have the most influence on their children's behavior (Li, Putallaz & Su, 2011; Barnett, Cox, Gustafsson, Mills-Koonce & Towe-Goodman, 2014; Mitrofan, Paul, Spencer & Weich, 2014). Studies done on parenting styles found that a parent's use of harsh and coercive methods to control his or her child's behavior greatly increases the risk of aggressive behavior from the child (Bierman, Powers, Thomas & Thompson, 2008; Li, Putallaz & Su, 2011).

Although the main type of aggression resulting from harsh parenting is overt (both physical and non-physical), it was found that girls are more likely to develop covert aggression (Li, Putallaz & Su, 2011). Parental aggression towards the children also shows a difference between genders, based on whether the style of coercion used by the parents is physical or psychological (Li, Putallaz & Su, 2011). According to Li, Putallaz and Su (2011), physical parental aggression has a stronger positive correlation with the development of boys' aggression, while psychological parental aggression has a stronger positive correlation with the development of girl's

aggression. Some studies suggested that perhaps aggression is partly transmitted through inherited genes, thus not only through experience, which may explain why there are cases of children being as aggressive as their parents whom they never met, while the other studies show strong correlations between parental aggression and childhood aggression (Mitrofan, Paul, Spencer & Weich, 2014; Wilderman, 2010).

In addition to harsh parenting, research has shown that a permissive style of parenting involving a significantly low level of parental involvement in a child's upbringing, from unlimited privileges to complete neglect, leads to the same results of an increase in aggressive behavior (Li, Putallaz & Su, 2011; Wilderman, 2010). Moreover, researchers have found that children living through poverty and bullying (the latter being a possible consequence of the former) are also significantly at risk of developing aggression (Bierman, Powers, Thomas & Thompson, 2008; Wilderman, 2010).

#### Periphrastic Exposure

Studies show that children may develop aggression not only by experiencing it directly, such as by witnessing it in interparental conflict, in the peer context and in the virtual world (Barnett, Cox, Gustafsson, Mills-Koonce & Towe-Goodman, 2014; Li, Putallaz & Su, 2011; Mitrofan, Paul, Spencer & Weich, 2014). According to researchers, interparental conflict has a strong positive correlation with childhood aggression for multiple interesting reasons, such as conflict between parents working jointly with parenting behavior, the negative consequences in internalizing and externalizing in children, and the children learning the methods used by their parents to

control each other's behavior (Li, Putallaz & Su, 2011; Barnett, Cox, Gustafsson, Mills-Koonce & Towe-Goodman, 2014). This was supported by Mitrofan, Paul, Spencer and Weich (2014), who researched the extent at which the virtual world (games, TV shows) and the real world (school, family) influence a child's behavior. Children learn from the demonstrations of aggression they witness, whether they are directly involved or not, and the younger they are when it happens, the more difficult it is for them to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behavior (Mitrofan, Paul, Spencer & Weich, 2014).

Returning to interparental conflict in particular, research has shown that, surprisingly, paternal overt aggression towards the partner had a significant positive correlation with the development of aggression for boys, but not for girls, similarly to the results of parental aggression types directed at the children (Li, Putallaz & Su, 2011). Actually, research showed that girls are more likely to develop internalizing problems (e. g. anxiety) over externalizing problems (aggression) when witnessing interparental conflict, unlike boys (Li, Putallaz & Su, 2011).

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