

## The Link Between Popularity, Social Status and Aggression in Children

Researchers interested in child and adolescent peer relations have frequently focused on the role of aggression in the peer group. Traditionally, aggression has been considered a negative behavior with negative consequences. For example, aggressive children and adolescents tend to be rejected by their peers in their classroom or grade.

We discovered that this view of aggression changes when researchers consider different *forms* of aggression and social status. For instance, there is an important distinction between physical aggression (e.g., starting fights) and relational aggression (e.g., excluding someone from a group or spreading a rumor about someone).

There are also different forms of popularity or status in the peer group. For instance, a child or adolescent may be highly liked in the peer group (known as *sociometric popularity*), or may be very influential and powerful in the peer group (known as *peer-perceived popularity*). Additionally, popular students are not necessarily liked, and well-liked students are not necessarily popular. In fact, peers hold a number of negative opinions about students they view as popular.

We presented a new view of the role of aggression in the peer group by examining the interplay between the two forms of popularity and the two forms of aggression.

We measured physical aggression, relational aggression, sociometric popularity, and perceived popularity in the same group of 905 students from fifth to ninth grade. Among our findings:

- The two forms of aggression and popularity changed over time. For example, in fifth grade, the popular girls were also well-liked, but by ninth grade, the popular girls and the well-liked girls were no longer one and the same.

- Although many children engaged in both physical and relational aggression, the two forms of aggression did not overlap completely; some children tended to favor one kind of aggression over the other.

- The role of aggression in the peer group is not always negative. For instance, we found that relational aggression (especially for girls) and physical aggression, rather than leading to rejection and ostracism, actually predicted high status in the peer group for some adolescents. It seems that across development, aggressive and manipulative behavior is rewarded and reinforced by high status in the peer group rather than punished through isolation or ostracism.

- As participants moved from middle childhood into early adolescence, relational aggression increasingly predicted high popularity in the peer group, but low levels of liking. On the other hand, it appears that peers dislike physical aggression *less* over time.

- Once adolescents become "popular," their popularity led to increases in physically and relationally aggressive behavior. It appears as though adolescents use both forms of aggression to maintain their dominant, influential position in the peer group. They also use it to reestablish their status when they move to a new peer group during the transition from elementary to middle school,

and again from middle to high school. Some adolescents seem to be quite savvy at using negative behaviors in very useful ways.

The results of this study suggests that peer relation researchers should consider that the relationship between social status and social behaviors changes with development and is not identical in all age groups. In intervention studies aimed at reducing aggressive behaviors such as bullying, the status enhancing and rewarding qualities of the aggression should be taken into account.

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