

2000

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## Recommended Citation

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## Aggressive Personality: When Does It Develop and Why?

Rita Cantrell Schellenberg

*In this review, three primary agents of social learning (parent-child interaction, peer interaction and television) are examined in relation to the development of aggressive personality during the formative years (infancy, early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence). Research has revealed all three agents as influential in the development of aggression, with the majority of research emphasizing middle childhood as a critical period for peer relationships. This paper suggests that the success or failure of peer relationships during middle childhood is a direct reflection of the social learning that took place during parent-infant and early childhood interactions. Hence, each stage, infancy through adolescence, is a developmental building block which must be equally strong to support subsequent stages.*

Over the years psychology has focused on personality development of the unique individual and sociology has focused on the individual as a member of society or part of a group. Many mental health professionals, counselors, psychologists and sociologists have come to realize that both are equally responsible in the process of personality development. As pointed out by Harris (1995), one should strive to see the uniqueness of individuals, but not without also considering their group relations. In fact, many researchers have begun to realize that individual differences develop from the way in which a person conforms to social norms, hence, one aspect of the process of personality development is dependent upon the other, seemingly built upon a paradox (Damon, 1983; Hurrelmann, 1988). This integration has become the Zeitgeist of the later half of this century, and the focus for community counselors.

This author takes an interdisciplinary approach to the issue of aggressive personality development by integrating the two sciences of sociology and psychology, person and environment. Furthermore, this paper consists of research based on the social learning of aggression, emphasizing behavior, environment, and

cognition. It is not this author's intent to imply that social learning theory can account for the development of all types of personality characteristics. It is, however, this author's intent to demonstrate, through relevant literature and research, that social learning theory offers the most probable explanation for the development of aggressive personality and to underscore the powerful effects of environmental influences on behavior.

### SOCIAL LEARNING, PERSONALITY, AND AGGRESSION

Social learning occurs through social interaction, allowing an individual to internalize the norms, roles, and values of a particular society. Primary agents for the social learning of aggressive personality examined in this review are parent-child interaction, peer interaction and school, and television. For the purpose of this review, schools will be referenced only in so far as serving as optimal media for peer socialization.

Definitions of personality vary depending upon theoretical perspective. Understanding the nature of personality from a social learning perspective is vital. For the purpose of this review, personality will be considered a distinctive style of behavior, thought, and emotional responses characteristic of an individual's adaption to surrounding circumstances learned through the norms, values, and standards of society (Wortman, Loftus & Marshall, 1985).

Just as there are controversial views on the meaning of personality, there are also controversial views on the stability of personality across the life span. Alwin (1993) contends that personality, by its nature, is malleable early in life and grows increasingly persistent or rigid with age. McCrae (1993) conducted longitudinal research dedicated to the study of the stability of personality and found that personality does not change much in adulthood. Olweus (1979) examined the results of 16 studies which found aggression to be a highly stable personality characteristic. In fact, Olweus found the degree of consistency over time in aggressive behavior to be much greater than has been maintained by proponents of a situational behavior position in the personality field. Extensive longitudinal research on personality development from birth to adulthood conducted at Fels Research Institute, also found aggression to be highly stable into adulthood, once internalized during childhood or adolescence (Moss & Susman, 1980). This review will focus on the social learning of aggression during the formative years of infancy through adolescence. Physical fighting among preschoolers, verbal insults among school-aged children, social rejection among children and teens, and ruthless business dealing among adults might all be defined as aggression (Moss & Susman, 1980).

### PROBLEM AND PURPOSE

The United States has a higher rate of violent crime, with homicides rates between 4 and 73 times higher, than any other industrialized country in the world THE VIRGINIA COUNSELORS JOURNAL, Vol. 26, June 2000, pages 67-76

(Kendall & Hammen, 1998). Our society is at risk of becoming one of ruthlessness, violence and chaos. Pressing social issues, such as family violence, violence in the schools and on the streets, drug abuse, suicide, and a growing lower-class, indicate a need for timely empirical research and administrative policy in order to contain the antisocial behavior that is "running amok" in our communities (Hoffman, 1996; Kaufman, Chen, Choy, Chandler, Chapman, Rand & Ringel, 1998; Kendall & Hammen, 1998; Theilheimer, 1992). There is a need to attack the root of the problem. Focus should be on prevention during the formative years, instead of treatment in adulthood. Too often clinicians and counselors focus on symptoms rather than causes, which offers only short term value. This author's purpose is three-fold: a) to identify parent-child, peer interactions, and television as primary agents responsible for the development of aggressive personality during the formative years (infancy through adolescence), b) to underscore parent-child interactions during infancy and early childhood as predictive of the success or failure of a child's future social interactions with peers, and c) to stress the need for prevention, outreach, and counseling emphasizing the formative years.

### THEORETICAL VIEWS AND EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

#### *Parent-Child Interaction*

Research conducted by Harris (1995) concluded that parental behaviors have no effect on personality characteristics their children will have as adults, due to the overwhelming influence of peer interaction. In contrast, research conducted by Coie, Lochman, Terry, and Hyman (1992) revealed that the characteristics of a child will determine the outcome of peer interactions. In agreement, this author firmly believes that the acceptance or rejection of a child by peers will be due, at least in part, to the personality characteristics the child has learned through their interactions with parents during infancy and early childhood. For example, if the child is withdrawn, overly shy, or aggressive, other children will reject or ignore the child. In turn, the child acts increasingly more aggressive toward peers, creating a seemingly inescapable cycle. In fact, research indicates that aggression and its related characteristics of impulsiveness and disruptiveness underlie a child's being rejected about half the time, and approximately 10 to 20 percent of rejected children are withdrawn or shy (Santrock, 1995).

The importance of early parent-child interactions cannot be overemphasized. Behaviors that are learned in infancy and early childhood are among the first aspects of personality to be carried into middle childhood, then into adolescence, and finally adulthood. Adult personality characteristics have been traced back to early parent-child interactions (Austin, 1991; MacDonald, 1988). Hence, while a large amount of research considers middle childhood peer-interactions to be the most powerful predictor of aggressive personality, one cannot be considered without the other. One form of parent-child interaction occurs as

children observe and imitate their parents who serve as role models. It has been found that children raised in homes where physical discipline is emphasized become aggressive (Singer, Singer & Rapaczynski, 1984), and, as adults, often treat their own children in the same fashion. These children will in turn develop aggressive personalities. In other words, aggressive behavior breeds aggressive behavior.

"Contact comfort" is an important form of parent-child interaction which is essential to prosocial personality development. Child psychologists have demonstrated that this type of interaction (i.e., cuddling, embracing) aids in the proper social development of the child. A child furnished with such warmth develops a sense of security, greater tolerance to frustration, and emotional maturity (Lundin, 1974). As the infant matures into early childhood, physical contact continues to be an important aspect of personality development. There are associations between the amount of physical play between parents and their preschool children, and the social competence of children with their peers. Research has indicated that children who received ample physical play (tickling, chasing, wrestling) with their parents exhibited self-control and emotional security while neglected and rejected children became over stimulated more easily, and exhibited less emotional control and higher levels of aggression (MacDonald, 1988).

Recent research revealed that infant responses to brief separations from the parent varied depending upon security of attachment between parent and infant. Infants with a secure attachment sought comfort from the parent upon her return, while infants with an insecure attachment became angry upon the parent's return (Oatley & Jenkins, 1992). Disorganized, disorientated attachment is among the strongest predictors of deviant levels of hostile peer relations (Lyons-Ruth, Alpern & Repacholi, 1993). Youngblade and Belsky (1992), using a longitudinal study, found that positive and secure parent-child relationships were associated with children's positive friendships while negative parent-child relationships were associated with negative friendships. Additional studies exploring the connection between attachment and peer-related interactions in children from preschool age to 5<sup>th</sup> grade, found that those with secure attachments to parents had more positive peer feelings than did the insecure children.

In addition to parent-infant and parent-child interactions, parent-adolescent interactions have been found to be directly related to later aggressive personality development (Montemayer, Adams & Gullotta, 1990). Thus, parents should be supportive, emphasize autonomy, maintain stable disciplinary practices, and practice democratic decision making in the home (Santrock, 1995). Parents must be willing to accept that the child is maturing, and as such, communication and disciplinary patterns should reflect the maturity of the young adult. This type of behavior and communication will maintain the social and emotional bonds between parent and adolescent (Montemayer, Adams & Gullotta, 1990), decreasing the likelihood of problematic interactions.

Research has identified the elementary school years as a critical period for the development of peer relationships, adult social competence, and personality development (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Handell, 1988; Sullivan, 1953). During middle childhood defiance of adult rules become more flagrant (Harris, 1995). The child slowly but steadily shifts toward independence and develops considerable anxiety regarding social acceptability by peers.

Middle childhood peer interaction has been underscored by researchers as a key predictor in the development of aggressive adult personality. By middle childhood, a variety of social forces have begun to influence children. Attending school rapidly expands a child's network of social interactions. Morison and Masten (1991) conducted research that found peer relations during middle childhood to be a reliable predictor of future personality adjustment. Parker and Asher (1987) reviewed numerous studies that revealed children rejected by their peers during middle childhood were at risk for later personality maladjustment. An important point made by Olweus (1993), "founding father" of research on bullying and victimization, is that children who bully are displaying aggressive characteristics which, if not stopped, may continue into adulthood. Thus, these children are at risk, as well as the child being rejected, and in need of intervention. This view is often overlooked by those who research the consequences of peer rejection. Parker and Asher concluded that socially withdrawn, socially incompetent, and aggressive children become socially inept adults, and noted that the most famous mass murderers of almost every country (e.g., Christie, the Black Panther, Blue Beard, the Michigan Murderer, the Boston Strangler) were found to have had abnormal social experiences in childhood.

Research on childhood conduct disorder has documented that aggressive behavior begins long before the age when it is first recognized in acts of violence and anti-social behavior. In fact, the decline in such behavior between the ages of 17 and 30 is mirrored by the steep rise in aggressive behavior as early as middle childhood (Moffitt, 1993). Numerous studies have indicated that aggression toward peers during middle childhood and peer rejection are key predictors of delinquent behavior, juvenile and adult crime, and adult psychopathology (Bandura, 1973; Morison & Masten, 1991; Olweus, 1993; Parker & Asher, 1987; Santrock, 1995).

In an effort to avoid peer rejection, children and adolescents attempt to conform to peer expectations. The power of peer influence should not be underestimated. Maccoby and Jacklin (1987) spoke with an 11-year-old girl who explained to them that if she were to break the group taboo of sitting by a boy in school it would be worse than peeing in her pants. She would be shunned by friends and teased for months. Studies on temperament found that this type of peer-enforced conformity is genuine and aggravated during adolescence, as well as middle childhood, and can have long term effects on personality (Kagan & Snidman, 1991).

Middle childhood and adolescence marks an especially sensitive period for peer conformity. Antisocial behavior peaks during adolescence, particularly early adolescence. Thus, adolescents are more likely to participate in aggressive behavior as they begin to associate with other adolescents who are aggressive as a result of peer rejection, forming a deviant peer group (Coie, Lochman, Terry & Hyman, 1992). Unfortunately, group identity then overrides personal identity (Santrock, 1995). A recent study found a relationship between aggressive adolescents and criminal activity up to age 26 (Coie, et al., 1992).

Children and adolescents are continuously exploring and evaluating self, and seeking personal identity. The evaluation of self is black or white, good or bad, and is made according to rules, standards, stereotypes, and expectations. The highest goal is interpersonal conformity. The credo is "what I can do is who I am"; the crisis to be resolved is the issue of competence or inadequacy, creating a sense of self-worth, be it positive or negative (Alcohol, Drug Abuse & Mental Health Administration, 1991).

Positive self-worth is central to the promotion and maintenance of psychological health and successful personality adjustment. Self-worth determines the mood and general affective state of the child or adolescent (Montemayor, Adams & Gullotta, 1990). Thus, if the child or adolescent has a positive sense of self-worth, the mood will likely be a friendly one, and peer interactions will most likely be favorable. However, if the child or adolescent has a poor sense of self-worth, peer interactions will not be as fruitful. Thus, interactions with peers determine self-worth, and sense of self-worth determines the outcome of interactions with peers, a vicious cycle.

Puberty brings about changes in physical appearance, which, according to research, adolescents use as the number one means for comparing themselves to others (Montemayer, et al., 1990). For example, the female adolescent whose breasts have begun to develop may become more integrated into her peer group, and gain a more positive sense of self-worth than the adolescent who has not yet begun to mature. An impressive accumulation of studies supports the theory that pubertal change affects aggression and peer relations (Montemayer, et al., 1990). In short, poor self-esteem increases the likelihood of peer rejection, which is a determinant of aggressive personality development.

Adolescents who are rejected by peers may try to anesthetize themselves against their miserable existence with drugs or alcohol, which may intensify the feelings of aggression or worthlessness (Bandura, 1973). It is easy to understand the effects of going through the school years in a state of permanent anxiety and poor self-esteem. As such, it is not surprising that victims' devaluation of themselves become so overwhelming that they seek escape, or even see suicide as the only possible solution (Olweus, 1993).

#### *Television*

Television, has repeatedly been implicated as contributing to aggressive

behavior in children. The work of Albert Bandura stresses the powerful effect of television on observational learning. The effects are not merely transient but can have a long lasting influence on personality development (Eron & Huesmann, 1987). Children and adolescents viewing aggressive behavior on television believe the behavior to be socially acceptable; and, depending upon the age of the child, he or she may believe that violence on television is an accurate portrayal of the real world.

Research conducted by Friedrich and Stein (1975) confirmed that the viewing of violence on television increases aggressive behavior. Preschool children were exposed to neutral programs, prosocial programs, or violent cartoons. Results indicated that children who were exposed to the violent cartoons exhibited a lack of tolerance for rules, a lack of patience, and reacted with aggression in frustrating peer interactions. Another interesting point uncovered in this study was that those children who were exposed to the neutral programs behaved more aggressively than those who were exposed to prosocial programs. This may mean that even what is considered to be a neutral program is likely to promote aggression in children. Another major study which found a positive relationship between the viewing of violent programs and aggressive behavior in children, also revealed that children who watched less television but more violent adult programs were more aggressive than those who watched more television (Singer, Singer & Rapaczynski, 1984). In spite of the many studies depicting television as a window to aggression, it is not the intent of this author to imply that children learn only antisocial behavior from television viewing. Research indicates that children exposed to prosocial programs such as "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood", demonstrated increased patience, acceptance of rules, and improved task performance (Fredrich & Stein, 1975). These children also exhibited an increase in social competence, which in turn will lead to peer acceptance, thereby, decreasing the likelihood of becoming an aggressive adult. Additionally, the viewing of prosocial programs has been shown to elicit children's fantasy play. Research conducted by van der Voort and Valkenberg (1994) found that children who engaged in fantasy play were happier, more confident, more creative, and better able to concentrate. Findings also indicated that the viewing of neutral programs does not effect fantasy play, while the viewing of violent programs inhibits fantasy play.

### CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The intent of this review was to explore how parent-infant/child interaction, peer interaction, and television contribute to the social learning of aggression. Research has indicated aggression is a stable personality characteristic; thus, once aggression has been internalized it will likely continue into adulthood.

Middle childhood has been deemed by many researchers and theorists as the crucial period for lasting aggressive personality development, as a result of peer rejection. Studies also indicate that poor peer relations during adolescence,

especially when coupled by poor parent-adolescent relations, have a strong influence on the development of adult aggressive personality (Patterson & Dishion, 1985). While research and theoretical perspectives are limited, it seems only logical that the characteristics of the child would determine the outcome of peer interactions making initial parent-child interactions, during infancy and early childhood, as crucial as peer interactions during middle childhood, and adolescence, in the development of aggression. Children bring characteristics to middle childhood and adolescence that contribute to peer rejection in the first place (Coie, et. al, 1992; Santrock, 1995). Hence, this author believes that each stage builds upon the other, dependent upon the other, contributing equally to the development of aggressive personality.

In support of this author's "equal dependency" theory, future research should consider infancy, early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence, as equally important stages, each one building upon the other progressively. Infancy and early childhood should be stressed as important for "setting the stage" for future social interactions.

In addition to social learning through human interaction, children learn social behaviors through the viewing of television programs. Unfortunately, research has indicated that children learn antisocial and aggressive behavior more often than prosocial behavior, due to the overwhelming amount of violent programs and a lack of parental supervision. Thus, television viewing time and programs must be monitored by parents, and programs must be rated so that parents will be better able to screen their child's television programs. Television programming personnel should be conscientious about which programs they plan to air, and when, in order to safeguard our children from violence and adult content.

### PREVENTION, OUTREACH, AND COUNSELING

There is enough empirical research to warrant the implementation of school-based prevention, outreach, and counseling programs for children, parents, and educators. Counseling programs should be made available to adults with aggressive behavioral disorders in the event that prevention fails to reach them. Prevention programs should include educating parents about the developmental and psychological impact of social learning on their children. This cannot be taken for granted. Prevention programs should be implemented for educators and parents in conflict prevention/resolution, problem-solving, communication, and avoiding power struggles. These programs should reiterate the importance of regular classroom and family meetings in fostering children's trust, cooperation, and social learning (Lewis & Lewis, 1989).

Teachers, school and community counselors, and school administrative personnel must actively seek out children who are shunned, teased, bullied or bullying. These children should be placed in intervention programs that will

reduce the likelihood of aggressive personality development. Intervention programs that have proved to be successful in the past include peer helping which teaches antisocial youth to think and act responsibly (Gibbs, Potter & Goldstien, 1996), group counseling designed to enhance students' social skills and reduce aggressive behavior through role playing and discussion activities (Stewart, 1995), small group counseling sessions with bullies and victims (Garrity, Jens, Porter, Sager, & Short-Camilli, 1994), and conflict mediation (Edelson, 1981; Hughes, Grossman, & Hart, 1993).

Conflict mediation is a recurring theme in the treatment of aggressive children and adults. While this method of intervention has been found to be most effective for managing aggressive behavior/conflict, if mastered at an early age, it may serve to prevent the development of aggressive behavior. Counseling programs in conflict mediation teach individuals to resolve conflict through negotiation, communication, and problem-solving, inadvertently enhancing social skills. Counselors may wish to use this method in family counseling situations where aggressive behavior often occurs. The counselor would serve as mediator, assisting each party in obtaining a clearer understanding of each other's position. Aggression, a key predictor of violent behavior in adulthood, is caused by social factors such as neglect, rejection, and modeled behavior (Kendall & Hammen, 1998). According to social learning theory, aggressive personality is learned and can be prevented and/or cured (unlearned). Prevention, outreach, and counseling methods during the formative years may be less expensive, less time consuming, and more effective, than intervention methods in adulthood.

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Volume 26

June 2000

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