



The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AGGRESSION AND PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Coordinators' Notebook No. 10, October 1991

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Shortly after birth, the newborn displays early signs of both aggressive and socially constructive, or prosocial behavior. The first signs of aggression are evident in the angry responses of newborns whose rhythmic sucking has been interrupted. Signs of socially constructive behavior are manifested just as early when newborns cry in reaction to the cries of other infants. This contagious crying is the earliest form of empathy, the sharing of another's feelings, which is the basis for helping and a variety of other prosocial behaviors. The following discussion attempts to summarize some of what is known about the development of these complex human emotions during the early childhood period.

What is aggression?

Although difficult to define, aggression is based on the idea that one person commits an action that hurts another. It generally refers to behavior that is specifically intended to harm someone. Aggression appears as soon as children understand that they can cause another's distress. Two forms of aggressive behavior appear during the early childhood period. Instrumental aggression is directed at obtaining something desirable, while hostile aggression is specifically aimed at hurting another person either for revenge or for establishing dominance.

Between the first and third years of life, aggressive behaviors are characterized as instrumental, as shown in the brief conflicts over ownership rights. Between 3 and 6 years the expression of aggression undergoes several changes. As children mature there is a gradual shift from conflicts evoked by a desire for an object which is not directed at another individual to aggressive outbursts directed at a particular person whom they perceive as doing them wrong.

What causes aggression?

During this century, more people have died in war than in all prior centuries combined. Of all the facets related to human social relations, none is more fraught with concern and uncertainty

than the causes of human aggression. Some of the causes, such as frustration and poverty, are attributed to factors in the immediate environment. Other underlying causes can be related to an individual's prior experience and learning. Some suggest the origins of aggression emerge from our evolutionary past.

It has been suggested that aggression is an important evolutionary mechanism by which the characteristics of a species' most successful individuals are passed on to the next generation. Since individuals compete with other individuals for scarce resources necessary for survival and reproduction, evolution would seem to favor competitive and selfish behaviors. According to this perspective, aggression is a natural and necessary mechanism which automatically accompanies the biological maturation of the young.

A second explanation, proposed by social learning theorists, suggests that aggressive behavior is learned because of the rewards obtained by the aggressor. A third explanation proposes that children are taught to model the aggressive behavior characterizing their environments. More aggressive forms of behavior are exhibited by children who have been exposed to more frequent outbursts of aggression in their environments. Once children are old enough to understand that they can get their way by harming others, they learn from adults both specific types of aggression and the belief that aggressive behavior is acceptable.

As with other forms of complex human behavior, posing a biological-evolutionary perspective against environmental-learning theories of behavior is not sufficient for understanding. Rather, aggression should be viewed as a form of behavior that evolves from an interaction between deep-seated biological predispositions and culturally organized environmental influences. Nor can aggression be understood without looking at the various mechanisms societies have used to control and regulate the level of aggression shown by its members.

Controlling aggression in young children

Researchers have focused on two mechanisms used to control human aggression; the evolution of hierarchical systems of control, and the use of reward and punishment.

Mechanisms limiting aggression are widespread among animal species and include social structures that place members in a dominant/subordinate hierarchy. Dominance hierarchies where some animals are dominant and others are subordinate regulate interaction among members of the same species. Dominant animals need only to threaten without attacking to achieve their goals, thus diminishing the frequency of attack. In a similar fashion, child development researchers have observed a close connection between aggression and the formation of dominance hierarchies among 3- and 4-year old children in preschool settings. Dominance hierarchies influenced who would fight with whom and under what circumstances.

Although cross species similarities exist, it is important to recognize the unique attributes that distinguish the patterns and control of human aggression. While the youth of other species must rely entirely on dominance hierarchies, parents and older siblings of human offspring set limits to

the initial expression of aggression. In this way rules about proper behavior are internalized and pave the way for increasing levels of self-reflection and self-control.

It is often believed that aggression can be eliminated by punishment. While some studies confirm this belief, others have found that parents who control children's behavior through physical punishment often actually create more aggressive children. Moreover, severe punishment leading to physical harm leads a child to conceptualize the world in deviant ways that later perpetuate the cycle of violence. For example, harmed children are likely to develop deficient patterns of processing social information, a bias to attribute hostile intentions to others, and an inability to solve interpersonal problems.

Another strategy often used by caregivers is to reward non-aggressive behavior. Since young children use aggression to gain attention, one strategy is to ignore the aggression and show interest only when children are engaged in cooperative behavior. A closely allied technique in controlling children's aggressive behavior is to pay attention to the victim while ignoring the aggressor. In such selective attention techniques, the aggressor is not rewarded by either adult attention or by the submission behavior of the victim. In this way children are taught to be sympathetic to the victim of aggression and that nonviolent assertion in the face of aggression can be effective.

Another technique used to control aggression is reason, which has been found to reduce aggression even at an early age. For example, the following concepts can be explained to children in order to reduce aggressive behaviors: (1) aggression hurts another person and makes that person unhappy; (2) aggression does not solve problems, it only brings about the resentment of the other child; (3) conflicts can be solved by sharing, taking turns, and playing together. This strategy helps children control their aggression by making them aware of the feelings of those they reacted against.

Thus it appears that most of the successful techniques for teaching self-control of aggression go beyond mere suppression of aggressive impulses. Rather, when children are asked to consider and understand the value of other forms of behavior, aggression is understood and not merely suppressed.

The development of prosocial behavior

Darwinian notions of survival of the fittest have generated a one-sided version of evolution. Its proponents have ignored behaviors that benefit the group with no direct reward for the benefactors. Prosocial behaviors such as altruism, cooperation, helping and empathy are common forms of human interaction. There is little doubt that human beings have a biological potential for prosocial behaviors. But like aggression, immediate social circumstances and cultural tradition influence prosocial behaviors. How does the biological predisposition for prosocial behavior manifest itself, and how is it modified by the social environment?

Human prosocial behaviors are stimulated by empathy, the capacity to share another's emotional response. While very young children are able to empathize, this capacity matures with increasing

cognitive capacities. With these increasing skills, children become better able to recognize, interpret and respond appropriately to others' distress.

Child development researchers have identified at least four distinct stages in the development of empathy. Each stage corresponds to a growing capacity for children to understand themselves in relationship to others. The first stage occurs during the first year of life. Even before infants are aware of the existence of others, they will cry at the sound of another infant's cries. These early empathic behaviors are akin to innate reflexes, since babies have no understanding of the feelings of others. The second stage appears in the second year of life when infants are capable of understanding that another's distress or laughter is distinct from their own emotions. With this realization children can turn their attention from concern with their own comfort to comforting others.

The third stage in the development of empathy occurs between the ages of 3 and 6 years and corresponds to children's increasing command of language and symbols. Language allows children to empathize with a wider range of subtle feelings as well as with people who are not present. During this period, comforting behaviors in response to another's distress can be quite complex, even including suggestions for how to cope with the problem.

The fourth stage in the development of empathy occurs sometime between the ages of 6 and 9 when children appreciate their own feelings within the larger set of experiences. Children at this age are concerned about the general conditions of others, their poverty, oppression, illness or vulnerability. Children in this age are aware of classes of individuals and are capable of empathizing with groups of people.

In an effort to encourage prosocial behavior among their young, societies have identified a range of strategies. Recent research has underscored the effectiveness of two methods used by parents and caregivers in many societies. These include explicit modeling in which adults behave in ways they desire the child to imitate, and induction or giving explanations that appeal to children's pride, their desire to be grownups, and their concern for others.

In reality the strategies used to increase prosocial behaviors do not occur in isolation from efforts to decrease aggressive behavior. Rather, a great variety of techniques are likely to occur in combination with each other, creating the cross cultural diversity in overall patterns of socialization.

The information presented in this section has been adapted from Cole, M., and Cole, S. "Social Development in Early Childhood," *The Development of Children*, Scientific American Books: New York, 1989, pp. 360-372.

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