The Relative Contribution of Social Skills Deficits and Aggressive Classroom Contexts to Aggressive-Rejected vs. Aggressive-Accepted Peer Status

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Introduction

Social Skill Deficits
Deficits in emotion regulation and prosocial cooperation can lead to early starting aggression, contributing to parent-child conflict and aggressive interactions with peers and rejection from peer groups (Moffitt, 1993; Patterson, 1982). Although aggression is generally disliked by peers, some aggressive children are not rejected, leading researchers to suspect that some aggressive children possess a sufficient level of social competency to avoid rejection.

Classroom Context
Investigators have identified peer contagion supporting aggressive behavioral development as early as kindergarten (Synder, et al, 2005). In classrooms where aggressive behavior is more normative, there may be less pressure on aggressive individuals to use non-aggressive strategies (Henry, et al, 2000). An aggressive classroom context may increase the prevalence of aggression while increasing the acceptability of aggressive behavior.

Peers model and shape social behaviors (Rubin, et al, 2006). In early starting aggression, contributing to parent-child conflict and escalating conflicts and higher rates of victimization may undermine prosocial interaction and elicit emotion dysregulation among more vulnerable aggressive children. Further research is needed to clarify how aggressive peer contexts affect the developmental course of social competence as well as aggressive behavior.

Hypotheses

1. Aggressive/rejected children will exhibit greater social and regulatory skill deficits than aggressive/accepted children.

2. Aggressive/accepted children, possessing enough skill to be sensitive to their environment, will be found primarily in contexts with many aggressive peers.

3. Aggressive/rejected children, who are less sensitive to the environment, will be fairly evenly distributed across contexts. (This hypothesis is disconfirmed).

Results

Effect of Social and Regulatory Skill Deficits on Peer Status

Conclusions

1. Aggressive/rejected children exhibit greater social and regulatory skills deficits in 1st grade than aggressive/accepted children.

2. Aggressive peer contexts predict an increase in the frequency of aggressive behavior and the level of social and regulatory skill deficits in aggressive children.

3. Aggressive peer contexts have a non-significant net effect on the social preference of aggressive children: increased acceptance of aggression in high-aggression classrooms is offset by increases in skill deficits displayed in the same contexts.

Discussion

Consistent with social norm and peer contagion theories, elevated numbers of accepted-aggressive children were found in classrooms containing many aggressive peers. Not predicted by these models, however, were parallel increases in the number of rejected-aggressive children with social competence deficits found in these classrooms.

Aggressive peer groups may increase the social acceptability of aggression, paradoxically “protecting” the social status of some aggressive individuals. At the same time, these classrooms are likely stressful environments for many children. Frequent, escalating conflicts and higher rates of victimization may undermine prosocial interaction and elicit emotion dysregulation among more vulnerable aggressive children. Further research is needed to clarify how aggressive peer contexts affect the developmental course of social competence as well as aggressive behavior.

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Classroom Contexts

Deficits in emotion regulation and prosocial cooperation can lead to unskillful social interactions are not affected by group norms and lead to increasing dislike regardless of context (Stormshak, et al, 1999).

Social Competence

Aggressive/rejected children will exhibit greater social and regulatory skill deficits.

Conclusions

Aggressive Peer Context = classroom average authority acceptance subscale (10 Items; a = .92) of the Social Health Profile. Classroom averages for each student do not include their own scores.

Sample

• Age: 1st grade children
• 329 aggressive/accepted (A/A) and 359 aggressive/rejected (A/R) selected from a sample of 406 students
• 193 classrooms in 26 schools at 4 locations (Durham, NC; Rural NC; Nashville, TN; Seattle, WA)
• 55% European-American, 36% African-American
• 86% male (aggressive subsample)

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