The Power of Peers: Contextual Effects on Peer Influences on Aggression

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Overview
This study adds to the literature on peer influences on aggression in four important ways.

1. Aggressive classrooms are shown to have an indirect, as well as direct, influence on later aggression.
2. At odds with the dominant theoretical model that early rejection leads to later deviant friendships, but in support of other recent research (e.g., Snyder, et al., 2008), the results indicate 1) that aggressive friends and low social preference are unique and independent pathways to later aggression, and 2) that low social preference is not related to having more aggressive friendships.
3. This study supports a growing body of research that indicates that aggressive friends influence a child’s aggression earlier than is currently recognized.
4. All three influences on aggression are shown to have developmental significance, influencing behavior a year later and in a different context.

Implications
The results indicate that in addition to focusing on remediating social skills deficits common in aggressive children, interventions that hope to shape the developmental course of aggression should begin to 1) take steps at earlier ages to reduce the influence of more aggressive friends, and 2) reduce the mean rate of aggression in classrooms.

Conceptual Model and Results

Question: Does classroom context have a direct, indirect, or combined effect on an individual’s aggression?
Conclusion: Classroom context has a direct and indirect effect on later aggression.

Question: Does having aggressive friends influence a child’s behavior during middle childhood?
Conclusion: Aggressive friends influence behavior earlier than is currently recognized.

Important point: Peer and classroom level influences affect outcomes a year later, suggesting an impact on development that persists across time and context.

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