

Perspectives on Childhood and Adolescent Aggression

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There is a pressing need to understand the factors that give rise to and maintain aggressive behavior across childhood and adolescence. As several papers in this issue note, juvenile justice statistics point to rising levels of antisocial behavior among youth. Even more concerning are the recent findings of Collishaw, Maughan, Goodman and Pickles (2004) who assessed rates of conduct, hyperactive and emotional problems in three general population samples of UK adolescents over a 25 year period from 1974 to 1999. Their results showed that the proportion of adolescents with severe conduct problems more than doubled over this period; this increase occurred similarly for girls and boys across social class and family structure.

The papers contained in this volume touch upon a number of important issues in the developmental study of aggression, yet we must recognize that the field is still in its infancy. Research is challenged by basic questions such as how to define aggression; how it is different from antisocial behavior on the one hand and violent behavior on the other. Many children and adolescents engage in antisocial behavior but far fewer engage in aggressive or violent acts: the developmental trajectories of these two groups appear different. The traditional definition of aggression as a physical act fails to capture other forms of harmful behavior, such as social aggression, which has tangible negative impacts on victims. We must be mindful of the fact that aggression and violence are different: violent acts have a much lower base rate and are more difficult to predict. Questions of how we define and measure aggression and violence become even more complicated when we study developing children because what constitutes aggression at one age does not necessarily map on to later developmental periods. Until we grapple with these basic measurement questions our progress will be stifled. Measurement studies are required to assess the extent to which different measures tap the same construct of aggression over development.

Beyond measurement issues are fundamental questions about how developmental psychopathology unfolds from early to later childhood and beyond. Although early childhood aggression has been identified as a marker of life course aggressive problems, Tremblay and his colleagues show that early childhood aggression is not uncommon and what is most important is learning adaptive skills to inhibit aggression and express needs in socially acceptable ways. From this perspective, perhaps we should not expect early childhood aggression to have high diagnostic specificity. Indeed Keenan & Wakschlag (2000) report that aggressive behavior spans across several diagnoses in preschoolers. What may be more important is understanding the complex factors that shape developmental trajectories over time, including factors outside the child such as the capacity of parents to socialize their children and support healthy development. Until we intensively measure both child factors and contextual factors

over time we will be limited in determining how each carries the child forward on a trajectory toward aggression and violence.

Not only do we need to move beyond the child to measure the family and other social factors that influence developmental trajectories, but we need to understand the developmental processes and failures therein that mediate continuity. If parents are unable to provide the necessary socialization and support to help children manage aggressive behavior, through what key psychological mechanisms is continued aggression mediated? One likely possibility, discussed in this issue, is the failure of the child to master effective emotion regulation. Another possibility is the failure of the child to learn to quickly read others emotional cues and to adjust their behavior accordingly. Identifying how socialization failures influence the development of key self-regulatory mechanisms will offer important avenues to develop prevention and intervention programs.

In addition to raising these basic questions, this special issue of CACP is an attempt to touch upon issues that are germane to clinicians' daily life. Why are some preschoolers suspended from preschools and daycare for aggressive behavior? Why is it that multiple attachment disruptions are conducive of making some but not all children vulnerable to aggression? And what is it that shared environment and genetics tell us?

This issue is the result of combined efforts and time spent by the experts in the field and time spent by the reviewers and our editor and her staff.

We hope that these papers will stimulate interest in the fast expanding field of child and adolescent aggression.

We end with the quote from Fonagy "The answer to the riddle of how individuals can lose restraint over their propensity to injure others must lie in what is ordinary rather than extraordinary: normal human development."

REFERENCES

- Fonagy P (2003). Towards a developmental understanding of violence. *British Journal of Psychiatry* (2003), 183, 190-192.
- Collishaw S, Maughan B, Goodman R, Pickles A (2004). Time trends in adolescent mental health. *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry*, 45, 1350-1362.

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