Aggression in Toddlers: Responses to the Assertive Acts of Boys and Girls

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Forty-eight toddler boys and girls, 18 to 36 months of age, were observed in play groups. The assertive acts of each child and the responses of peers and teachers were recorded. The most common type of assertion for both groups was grab or take objects, then hit, and then verbal assault. Boys produced more assertive acts than did girls. Girls' assertive acts were ignored significantly more than boys. Boys responded more to the acts of other boys than to the acts of girls, while girls responded more equally to the assertive acts of boys and girls. Hitting and taking objects received similar responses from peers. Responses to assertive acts are seen as information sources for the assertive child. The higher response rate to boys' acts informs the child that this kind of behavior will produce an effect in his world, while the lack of response to girls' acts suggest the opposite to girls.

Most parents worry about controlling aggressive behavior in their toddler children. Of those who bring their children to mental health centers for treatment, one-third do so because of unacceptable levels of aggressive child behavior (Patterson, 1975; Roach, 1958). While psychologists usually define the acts of the 1- and 2-year-old as assertive rather than aggressive, parents know that if their child hits another child or takes another's toy away with any regularity, their child will be labeled as aggressive by other

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parents. In the study reported in this paper, we examine the effects of assertive behaviors, which the parents take as signifying aggressiveness, on the responses of peers and teachers.

It should be made clear at the outset of this paper that assertive behaviors make up a very small percentage of the total behaviors even in the young child. In this paper we consider that each individual act of these very young children is an attempt to assert control over their environment. However, a child who emits such acts at a high frequency is labeled aggressive by others in the environment. Young children do emit assertive acts at higher rates than older children: for example, 3-year-old boys in normal families emit an average of one such act every minute and a half, compared to an average of one such act every 10 min for 13- to 14-year-olds, but compared to those of older children the assertive acts of preschool children are brief (Patterson, 1982). Nevertheless, aggressive behavior is the primary concern of most parents of toddlers, and the most common questions received in our lab from parents are addressed to the control of such behaviors.

Despite the concern of parents, we know very little about the origins of aggressive behavior in young children, and in fact our knowledge is at about the same place as that described by Hartup (1974). We know almost nothing about (a) the development of particular aggressive behaviors, (b) the settings which instigate aggression, and (c) changes in aggression over age. Most theories of aggression deal with the behaviors of older children and involve some degree of intent. With very young children, the measurement of intent is extremely difficult, and consequently we have little theory on the development of aggression. Instead, we have rather disconnected studies which may eventually help us develop a theory.

In a study of preschool children, Brindley et al. (1973) found that boys directed aggression toward other boys and not girls, while girls' aggression was directed more equally toward boys and girls. Very little aggression was directed toward teachers by either boys or girls. Patterson et al. (1967) showed that the types of responses the victim made influenced the continuation of aggressive interchanges in preschool children. Patterson (1979) has documented that boy's positive and negative social responses to the aggressor maintain aggressive interchanges in homes. Olweus (1979) showed that individual differences in aggression manifested as early as 3 years of age were stable over long time periods. One could conclude, as did Olweus, that there are stable reaction tendencies or personality variables that determine the maintenance of aggression. On the other hand, it is also possible to look for determinants within the social system which help to maintain performance of aggressive behavior.

Blurton-Jones (1972) suggested that different forms of assertive acts have different meanings for the child. For instance, taking an object may be