Reactive and Proactive Aggression in Childhood: Relations to Peer Status and Social Context Dimensions

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Although there has been an accumulation of evidence to suggest a link between peer-directed aggression and social rejection, little attention has been given to the relations between specific subtypes of aggressive behavior and social rejection. The purpose of this investigation was to examine the relations between two subtypes of aggressive behavior (reactive and proactive aggression) and children's classroom peer status. The reciprocity of each of these subtypes of aggressive behavior and the social contexts in which these behaviors occur were also examined. Assessments of each of these forms of aggression among 70 boys (ages 5 and 6) were conducted using direct observations and teacher ratings. In general, directing reactive aggressive behavior toward peers was associated with social rejection, while utilization of instrumental aggression was positively related to peer status. The findings also indicated that directing proactive forms of aggression toward peers was related to being the target of proactive aggression. Finally, among older boys, both subtypes of aggression were more likely to occur during rough play than during any other type of play activity.

There is an accumulation of evidence to suggest a link between peer-directed aggression and social rejection (Coie & Kupersmidt, 1983; Dodge, 1983; Dodge, Coie, & Brakke, 1982). In fact, a high rate of aggressive behavior is the reason most often cited by children for social rejection of a peer (Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982). There are, however, several unresolved issues.
regarding this relation. In particular, there is a need to delineate the relation between social rejection and specific subtypes of aggressive behavior. Until recently, most investigators studying the correlates of social status did not distinguish among various categories of aggressive behavior. Perhaps the low rates of occurrence of aggressive behavior hindered subtyping and led researchers to combine various forms of aggression into one global category. As a consequence, the generalization is often made (without substantiation) that all types of aggression are equally associated with social rejection. It is possible that some forms of aggressive behavior may be more strongly related to social rejection than other forms.

Recently, Dodge and Coie (1987) identified two general subtypes of aggressive behavior—reactive aggression and proactive aggression. Reactive aggression, which has theoretical roots in the frustration-aggression model (Berkowitz, 1963; Dollard, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939), is a defensive reaction to a perceived threatening stimulus and is accompanied by some visible form of anger (e.g., angry facial gestures or verbalizations). This form of aggression is similar to Hartup’s (1974) category of “hostile” aggression. Proactive aggression, on the other hand, is unprovoked aversive means of influencing or coercing another person and is more goal-directed than reactive aggression. In addition, proactive aggression may take one of two forms—instrumental or bullying. Instrumental aggression is “object-oriented” and is aimed at the retrieval of an object, territory, or privilege (Hartup, 1974). Bullying, on the other hand, is more “person-directed,” with the aim of intimidating or dominating a peer in some manner. The theoretical roots of the proactive subtypes of aggression can be found in social learning theory (Bandura, 1973), which postulates that aggression is an acquired instrumental behavior that is controlled by reinforcements.

As Dodge and Coie (1987) point out, even though reactive and proactive aggression are discussed in the adult literature, there have been relatively few attempts to distinguish between forms of aggression among children. Toward this end, Dodge and Coie (1987) undertook a series of studies in order to examine the construct validities of reactive aggression and the bullying form of proactive aggression in children. By use of the multitrait-multimethod approach of Campbell and Fiske (1959), internal, convergent, and discriminant validities were examined with two measures of reactive and proactive aggression—teacher ratings and behavioral observations of children's social interactions in small play groups. The internal validities of each type of aggression were supported by the reliabilities, internal consistencies, and short-term stabilities of various measures. In support of the convergent validities, the teacher-rated measure of reactive aggression was positively related to the proactive aggression. Finally, the pattern of correlations and partial correlations between teacher ratings and direct observations