Behavior of Conduct Disordered Children in Interaction with Each Other and with Normal Peers

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ABSTRACT: This study investigated the behavior of children with conduct disorder or oppositional defiant disorder (CD/ODD) in interaction with each other and with normal control (NC) children in a semi-standardized setting over a period of 25 minutes. This short time turned out to be sufficient to demonstrate the behavioral manifestations of CD/ODD in children's interactions with peers. In addition, the role of the interactional partner on antisocial behavior of CD/ODD children became apparent.

KEY WORDS: Conduct Disorder; Antisocial Behavior; Aggressive Behavior; Peer Relations; Ethology.

Conduct disorder (CD) has been studied thoroughly with regard to its symptomatology,1 developmental course,2 and both child and family characteristics.3,4 However, there have been relatively few direct behavioral observation studies of CD children. These have focused mainly on parent-child interactions,5 teacher-child interactions,6 and on-task behavior in the classroom,7 but little attention has been paid to CD children's interactions with their peers.8

This is regrettable because many symptoms of CD and of the related disorder Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD)9 occur not only in interactions with adults but also in interactions with peers; such symptoms include destroying each other's property and deliberately

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doing things that annoy others.\textsuperscript{10} Patterson\textsuperscript{11} found that these and other "aversive" behaviors occur at a high rate (mean of .82 per minute) at home in child-parent and child-sibling interactions of 9 to 10 year old antisocial children referred for treatment. In this study we investigated whether it is possible to identify the behavioral manifestation of CD and ODD in peer-peer interactions over a short period of time. Kazdin\textsuperscript{12} draws a distinction between low-frequency, high-intensity antisocial behaviors (e.g., fighting, destroying) and high-frequency, low-intensity antisocial behaviors (e.g., demanding, denigrating). The CD and ODD children investigated in our study were expected to show over a short period of time their high-frequency, low-intensity antisocial behaviors rather than their low-frequency, high-intensity antisocial behaviors.

Behavior can be studied both in natural settings (at home, in the classroom) and in standardized settings (at the clinic, in the laboratory). Although independent observations in vivo may be the richest source of information, they are time consuming, expensive and inconvenient. Also, in such observations one investigates not only the behavioral manifestation of the child's own disorder but also the effect of situational variables that affect his or her behavior.\textsuperscript{13} By contrast, in standardized settings these context factors are kept to a minimum. In this study, we used a semi-standardized procedure in which we investigated both the behavioral manifestations of CD/ODD and the effect of the interactional partner on CD/ODD children's behavior.

The samples involved in the study were an inpatient psychiatric group of 10 year old CD/ODD children (CD) and a normal control group (NC) from a regular school. First, behavioral differences between dyads of CD children (CD-CD) and dyads of NC children (NC-NC) were studied while children were playing a competitive game for ten minutes. It was hypothesized that CD children would show both more active antisocial behavior, i.e., antisocial initiatives, and more reactive antisocial behavior, i.e., antisocial behavior in response to behavior of the partner, than do NC children. Secondly, triads were formed: either one NC child joined two CD children (CD-CD-NC) or one CD child joined two NC children (NC-NC-CD); children played a cooperative game for 15 minutes. We expected that CD children would show both more active and more reactive antisocial behavior in their interactions with other CD children than in their interactions with NC children; it has been demonstrated before that children behave more aggressively towards an aggressive peer than towards a