

Move over mean girls -- boys can be socially aggressive, too

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Society holds that when it comes to aggression, boys hit and punch, while girls spread rumors, gossip, and intentionally exclude others, a type of aggression that's called indirect, relational, or social. Now a new analysis of almost 150 studies of aggression in children and adolescents has found that while it's true that boys are more likely to engage in physical aggression, girls and boys alike take part in social aggression.

"These conclusions challenge the popular misconception that indirect aggression is a female form of aggression," according to Noel A. Card, assistant professor of family studies and human development at the University of Arizona and the study's lead author.

The analysis of 148 studies, which comprised almost 74,000 children and adolescents and were carried out largely in schools, looked at both direct aggression, which is usually defined as physical, and indirect aggression, which includes covert behavior designed to damage another individual's social standing in his or her peer group. Conducted by Card and researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the University of Kansas, the analysis appears in the September/October 2008 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

The researchers suggest that the myth that girls are more likely to be indirectly or socially aggressive than boys has persisted among teachers, parents, and even other researchers because of social expectations that develop early in life and recent movies and books that portray girls as mean and socially aggressive toward one another.

Based on the analysis, the researchers suggest that children who carry out one form of aggression may be inclined to carry out the other form; this is seen more in boys than in girls. They also found ties between both forms of aggression and adjustment problems. Specifically, direct aggression is related to problems like delinquency and ADHD-type symptoms, poor relationships with peers, and low prosocial behavior such as helping and sharing. In contrast, indirect aggression is related to problems like depression and low self-esteem, as well as higher prosocial behavior—perhaps because a child must use prosocial skills to encourage peers to exclude or gossip about others.

Source: Society for Research in Child Development

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