

Fearless children show less empathy, more aggression

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Preschool-aged children who demonstrate fearless behavior also reveal less empathy and more aggression towards their peers. This has been shown in a new study that was carried out at the University of Haifa's Faculty of Education. "The results of this study show that fearless behavior in children can be identified and is related to neurological and [genetic predisposition](#). This type of behavior has less correlation – at least in infancy – with standards of educational processes or parenting practice," says Dr. Inbal Kivenson-Baron, who carried out the study.

Under the supervision of Prof. Ofra Mayseless, the study set out to examine whether fearless behavior in children aged 3-4 is related to specific physiological and social-emotional characteristics and whether there is a relation to aspects of parenting, such as socioeconomic status, order of birth, parental well-being, child-rearing practices, and the like.

The study observed 80 children aged 3-4, along with their parents and preschool teachers. It reviewed reports given by parents and teachers, and made observations of the children at their preschool locations, at home and in the lab. The study monitored children's tendency to fearlessness and their social-emotional characteristics at the beginning

and end of one year, so as to determine the stability of this tendency.

First it was revealed that the heart rate in children who showed a high level of fearless behavior was slow to start. Next, the correlation between fearless behavior and social characteristics was evaluated, finding that the more fearless children revealed less empathy towards their peers and also had difficulty identifying facial expressions of fear, while they had no problem identifying other emotions such as anger, surprise, happiness or sadness. These children also demonstrated higher levels of general aggression – especially tending toward antisocial behavior such as taking advantage of friends, emotional shallowness and a lack of regret or guilt after doing something socially unacceptable.

An interesting finding in this study was that despite their antisocial tendency, the children who show more fearlessness are quite sociable. "These children connect with other children, they are friendly and smiley; but they find it difficult to identify distress in a friend, and show less interest in helping that friend. It seems that fearless behavior includes in it both positive and negative aspects," Dr. Kivenson-Baron explains.

"Since fearless behavior correlates with genetic and neurological characteristics, it is important to find the most effective ways – through education at the preschool and at home - to assist these [children](#) in developing the ability to recognize and value social prohibitions. As a society, we must discern the optimal stimulation that can be provided in the child's natural surroundings, in order to awaken those emotions that are necessary for the development of empathy toward another and for refraining from aggressive behavior," Dr. Kivenson-Baron concludes.

Provided by University of Haifa

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