

Kids expecting aggression from others become aggressive themselves

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Credit: Robert Kraft/public domain

Hypervigilance to hostility in others triggers aggressive behavior in children, says a new Duke University-led study. The four-year longitudinal study involving 1,299 children and their parents finds the pattern holds true in 12 different cultural groups from nine countries across the globe.

This pattern is more common in some [cultures](#) than others, which helps explain why some cultures have more [aggressive behavior](#) problems in [children](#) than other cultures, according to the study.

The findings, published online Monday in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, hold implications for dealing not only with the problem of aggressive behavior in individuals, but also for better understanding of large-scale, long-standing cross-group conflicts such as the Arab-Israeli clash and racial strife in the United States.

"Our study identifies a major psychological process that leads a child to commit violence," said Kenneth A. Dodge, director of the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University and the study's lead author.

"When a child infers that he or she is being threatened by someone else and makes an attribution that the other person is acting with hostile intent, then that child is likely to react with aggression. This study shows that this pattern is universal in every one of the 12 cultural groups studied worldwide."

"Our research also indicates that cultures differ in their tendencies to socialize children to become defensive this way, and those differences account for why some cultures have children who act more aggressively than other cultures," Dodge said. "It points toward the need to change how we socialize our children, to become more benign and more forgiving and less defensive. It will make our children less aggressive and our society more peaceful."

Participants in the study were from Jinan, China; Medellin, Colombia; Naples, Italy; Rome, Italy; Zarqa, Jordan; the Luo tribe of Kisumu, Kenya; Manilla, the Philippines; Trollhattan/Vanersborg, Sweden; Chiang Mai, Thailand; and Durham, N.C., in the United States (which included African-American, European-American and Hispanic

communities). Children were 8 years old at the start of the study.

The researchers measured children's levels of aggressive behavior by collecting observations from the children and their mothers. Children also were asked to respond to hypothetical vignettes that might involve someone acting hostilely toward them—someone bumping them from behind and causing them to step into a puddle of water, for example.

Based on their answers, researchers rated whether the children interpreted ambiguous acts as hostile or non-hostile and whether they would escalate a conflict into aggression. Some children in each culture displayed a regular pattern called "hostile attributional bias."

The result in every one of the 12 cultures was that when children believed an act was the result of hostile intent, they were more likely to react aggressively. In fact, on average, they were five times more likely to do so than children who accepted the act as non-hostile. Children who had acquired a hostile attributional bias were more likely than other children to grow in the rate and severity of their aggressive behavior across the four years of the study.

Most importantly, the cultures that had the highest rates of hostile attributional bias, such as Zarqa, Jordan, and Naples, Italy, also had the highest rates of child aggressive behavior problems. Cultures that had the lowest rates of hostile attributional bias, such as Trollhättan, Sweden, and Jinan, China, also had the lowest rates of child aggressive behavior problems.

The findings suggest that a key way to prevent aggressive behavior both within and across cultures may be to socialize children to think differently about their interactions with others.

"The findings point toward a new wrinkle to the Golden Rule," Dodge

said. "Not only should we teach our children to do unto others as we would have them do unto ourselves, but also to think about others as we would have them think about us.

"By teaching our children to give others the benefit of the doubt, we will help them grow up to be less aggressive, less anxious and more competent."

More information: "Hostile Attributional Bias and Aggressive Behavior in Global Context," Kenneth A. Dodge, Duke University, et al. *PNAS*, July 13, 2015; [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1418572112](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1418572112)

Provided by Duke University

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