

What makes kids aggressive later in life?

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A University at Buffalo developmental psychologist has received a \$550,000 grant from the National Science Foundation to study possible pathways that might lead young children toward different types of aggressive behavior later in life.

Jamie Ostrov, the study's principal investigator and an expert in subtypes of aggression and victimization, has already begun research on the PEERS and Social Development Project.

The three-year study will follow more than 200 children ages 3- to 5-years-old, collecting data from observations, teacher reports and parent/child interviews at four different time points.

Ostrov has been doing similar work in his lab for more than a decade, but PEERS, which stands for Psychophysiology, Empathy, Emotional Regulation and Social Information Processing, is a groundbreaking effort that introduces a psychophysiology assessment into the research methods that could provide new insights into what propels children toward aggressive behaviors.

The University of Vermont (UVM) is collaborating with UB on the project, but all the data is being collected at UB.

Annie Murray-Close, an associate professor at UVM and the study's co-principal investigator, is an expert in [psychophysiology](#), a branch of psychology at the intersection of mind and body.

Psychophysiology seeks to understand the relationships between mental and physical processes, by measuring such things as heart rate and perspiration as an indicators of the nervous system functioning.

Collectively, the researchers are interested in how these early physiological and temperament profiles might be interacting with empathy, emotion regulation and [social information processing](#) to produce later aggression.

"This is the first time certainly in my lab, and to my knowledge in any other lab, where all of these components are pulled together and studied across time with children this young," says Ostrov. "Typically this work is done with children 8 years and older."

The research will focus on four kinds of [aggressive behavior](#) that begin with physical and relational forms of aggression.

"Physical aggression might include hitting, punching or forcibly taking something from someone else," says Ostrov. "Relational aggression covers such things as social exclusion, threatening to end a friendship - using the relationship as a way of harming someone else."

Those forms of aggression can be either proactive, designed to get something; or reactive, a type of retaliation.

Combining the what (physical and relational) with the why (proactive and reactive) yields four kinds of aggressive behaviors: proactive and reactive [physical aggression](#) and proactive and reactive [relational aggression](#).

"We are interested in the different factors that might lead to those four outcomes," says Ostrov.

For instance, some children may not experience empathy. They might have perspective-taking challenges that don't allow them to see themselves in a victim's position, according to Ostrov.

"Children on the proactive pathway may be fearless and lack empathy," says Ostrov. "It's possible they don't feel bad about their behavior or they may not understand how their behavior is leading to harm."

Emotional regulation, meantime, speaks more to the reactive pathway.

Ostrov says these kids are more impulsive and less likely to think about the consequences of their actions.

Social information processing involves a particular world view that may also be interacting with the initial profiles.

"If someone is bumped from behind they're likely to first gather information and determine if the action was accidental or intentional," says Ostrov. "But a child with hostile attribution bias doesn't gather that information. They retaliate, which can lead to retaliation by the other party, which confirms the thought process for the child."

"We are going to be able to observe how all these factors are interacting over time," he says.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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