

Playground politics—what drives rejection amongst children?

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A child's behaviour is often scrutinized when they are rejected by their peers. A new study reveals that it's not what a child does that leads to rejection, but how other children feel about that behaviour.

Children learn how to make friends and interact with others in the first few years of school. Unfortunately, [rejection](#) is part of daily life in a classroom and we can all remember the bitter feeling of being left out by classmates. Some children suffer widespread rejection at school and this can have a long-term effect.

In an effort to reduce negative relationships, research has traditionally focused on the [behaviour](#) of the disliked [child](#), asking, 'What did they do to warrant rejection?' Blaming rejection on a child's behaviour, however, does not explain why an aggressive child might sometimes be a popular classmate. In addition, the bad behaviour of a rejected child may not actually be the cause, but rather the consequence, of being rejected.

New research, published in the open-access journal *Frontiers in Psychology*, approaches this subject in a different way. It asked the children doing the rejecting, the 'rejecters', for the reasons they disliked certain children. The study revealed the act of rejection is complex – the behaviour of the rejected child is only partly, or not at all, to blame.

"We find that the rejected child's behaviour does not lead directly or inevitably to rejection", says Francisco Juan García Bacete, a Professor in the Department of Developmental, Educational and Social Psychology and Methodology, at the Jaume I University, Spain. "Instead, what actually leads to rejection are the rejecters' interpretations of the child's behaviour, and whether they think it will have a negative impact on themselves or their social group."

Professor Garcia Bacete and his co-authors interviewed hundreds of 5- to 7-year olds and asked them to describe who, in their class, they liked least and why. The researchers were left with a long list of reasons, such as "I don't like playing football", "He's boring", "He's new", and "She cheats", to sort through to find common themes. To do this, they used a method called 'Grounded Theory'.

"Grounded Theory starts from the reasons provided by the children and, by constantly comparing them, categories emerge that explain differences between the motives for rejection", describes Professor Garcia Bacete. "So rather than forcing the data to be grouped under preconceived headings, we let the data speak for itself."

He continues, "Most of the reasons could be grouped under what the rejected child does, says or tries, such as aggression, dominance, problematic social and school behaviours, and disturbance of wellbeing. However, we also noticed that these reasons came with context – specifically, which classmates or groups were involved in the rejection and the frequency it happened."

It became clear they had discovered that rejection does not appear to be the direct result of the behaviour of the disliked child, but whether the rejecters saw this behaviour as harmful to the needs of themselves or their friends.

The Grounded Theory method also revealed two new categories of reasons that do not usually appear in traditional rejection studies - preference and unfamiliarity. Professor Garcia Bacete explains, "Preference highlights the power of particular likes and dislikes in that it strengthens personal identities. Sometimes it manifests in a negative context, for example, when prejudices are shared, which reinforces the feeling of belonging to a group." He continues, "Reasons governed by unfamiliarity highlight our tendency towards choosing and doing what has already been preferred and done, or the fear and mistrust to what is unknown or unfamiliar."

The authors hope this study will provide a solid framework for developing programs to tackle rejection. "This research highlights the importance of teaching children how to be aware of and tackle negative reputations, stereotypes and prejudices, as well as understanding the

consequences of their behaviour on themselves and others. Positive relationships should be encouraged – you should respect others, not just your friends." concludes Professor García Bacete.

Further research hopes to delve deeper and examine if there are particular reasons that lead to persistent rejection. Additionally, research should focus on the relationship between the rejecter and rejected child, examining how other [children](#) may influence the reasons for rejecting a peer.

This research is part of a broader collection of articles that collates research on [students at risk for school failure](#).

More information: Francisco J. García Bacete et al. Understanding Rejection between First-and-Second-Grade Elementary Students through Reasons Expressed by Rejecters, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00462](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00462)

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