

An aggressor is not necessarily a bully—and the distinction matters

July 5 2018, by Bert Gambini

Spotting a bully is more nuanced than it might seem, because there is a difference between general aggressive behavior and bullying. They are not the same thing, according to the findings of a new paper by a University at Buffalo psychologist who is among the country's leading authorities on aggression, bullying and peer victimization.

"It's important for us to realize this distinction, in part because every aggressive behavior we see is not bullying," says Jamie Ostrov, lead author of the forthcoming paper to be published in a special issue of the *Journal of Child and Family Studies*.

"Certainly [aggressive behaviors](#) are problematic in their own right and also deserve our attention, but recognizing the differences in the two behaviors means we can begin a discussion about whether we have to do something different with interventions related to general aggression."

Ostrov, who was a member of an expert panel at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Department of Education that worked to determine a uniform definition of bullying, will also present the findings from his latest research at the International Society for Research on Aggression world meeting in Paris, France, on July 11. <http://www.israsociety.com/world-meetings/upcoming/>

"We're certainly excited to share these results with our colleagues around the world," says Ostrov. "Our work with the CDC and the Department of Education has had a national focus. Now we can take this work and

present it globally."

Psychologists conceptualize bullying as a subtype of aggression.

Aggressive behaviors are meant to hurt or harm. Bullying is a repetitive behavior further characterized by a power imbalance between two parties, such as one child against a group or a bigger child against a smaller child, according to Ostrov, a professor in UB's psychology department.

The two studies detailed in Ostrov's paper come out of his work to develop that definition and empirically test whether general aggression is different from bullying [behavior](#).

"That's the fundamental question guiding this paper," he says. "The other component here is that we're focusing on early childhood. There have been researchers who examined similar questions in adolescence, but we wanted to see what happens in children between 3- and 5-years-old.

Bullying can be physical, involving hitting, kicking, pinching or taking things away from someone. There is also relational bullying or social exclusion, where kids might say, "You can't be my friend anymore" or "You can't come to my birthday party."

"Victimization is receiving; aggression is displaying; bullying adds the power imbalance and repetition," says Ostrov.

Using teacher reports for one study with 85 students and a second study that combined teacher reports and behavioral observations by a research staff on 105 students, Ostrov and his colleagues—Kimberly E. Kamper-DeMarco, a post doctoral associate at the UB Research Institute on Addictions; Sarah J. Blakely-McClure and Kristin J. Perry, both students in the UB clinical psychology Ph.D. program; and Lauren Mutignani, a

Ph.D. student at the University of Arkansas—found relational aggression was associated with increases in relational victimization in both studies.

The results suggest that relational [aggression](#), not [relational bullying](#), was associated with increases in victimization.

"We have to keep this distinction in mind—it matters," he says. "It's also validating our overall definition of bullying. There is something distinctive about bullying."

More information: Jamie M. Ostrov et al, Prospective Associations between Aggression/Bullying and Adjustment in Preschool: Is General Aggression Different from Bullying Behavior?, *Journal of Child and Family Studies* (2018). [DOI: 10.1007/s10826-018-1055-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-018-1055-y)

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