

Gender Differences in Aggression Among Pre-School Children and its Impact on Social Competencies

Nida Khan and Nimisha Kumar

Centre for Early Childhood Development & Research, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India

Corresponding author. N. Khan: Nids.syed@gmail.com

Abstract

Aggression has been a widely researched phenomenon. In contemporary times, it has become a topic of great concern in the field of behavioural research especially that related to children and adolescents. The concern is to be able to identify aggressive behaviour as early as possible while children are still young, since they are at risk for the development of a host of adjustment problems in the social arena in addition to them having a perpetuating influence during their adolescence and adulthood. The present study aimed to study gender differences in aggressive behaviour in pre-school aged children and its impact on the social competencies of these children. It was conducted on a sample of 50 children (29 boys and 21 girls) aged 3 to 6 years selected randomly from a pre-school in South Delhi. Initially children were rated by their class teacher on a checklist of aggressive behaviour. This rating was used to divide them into 3 groups - Group A (highly aggressive), Group B (average on aggression), Group C (low on aggression). The results indicated that boys were rated as physically aggressive and girls were found to be more relationally aggressive. Further children in these three groups were studied individually through an observation checklist for skills related to Social Competence (Popularity, Sharing, Managing a conflict and Ability to cooperate). The results obtained are discussed in the light of literature survey.

Keywords: Aggression, preschoolers, social competence

Introduction

Aggression during early childhood is not taken seriously and is often considered a part of growing up. Aggression can be understood in a variety of different ways. It can be conceptualized as a personality trait or as having origins within a difficult temperament. In other words aggression may be inherent to the individual. Another view of aggression identifies it as a symptom with or without intention or adaptive function. A wide spectrum of aggressive behavior is possible in the preschool age group.

The temper tantrum of the ‘terrible twos’ is generally a universally accepted notion. The aggression associated with these tantrums (kicking and throwing things), is therefore understood as a ‘normal’ behaviour and therefore better tolerated. The notion of specific developmental periods when an increase or decrease in aggression is expected is also supported (Reebye, 2005).

Clinicians and researchers agree that problematic expression of aggression is related to dis-inhibition and poor self-regulation. Several points need to be considered before identifying aggressive behavior as a disorder. The typical rough and tumble play of preschoolers forms a scaffolding to support pro-social assertive play. What distinguishes playful fighting from aggressive behavior is the lack of intent to hurt or frighten. During the preschool years, children tend to resort to instrumental and physical expression of aggression such as snatching toys and pushing a playmate. Hostile aggression that is exhibited as aggressive behavior directed to others, such as name-calling, criticizing and ridiculing, comes much later, at around 7 years of age (Coie and Dodge, 1998).

Aggressive children are at risk to developing social problems in future. Aggressive children manifest such characteristics as, disobedience, physical and verbal aggressiveness, quarrelsomeness, revengefulness and destructiveness. Children who exhibit aggressive behaviour also tend to have a multitude of other problems. Younger children are more likely to act aggressively toward someone or something that blocks their means to some goal.

There has been a great deal of focus on the gender differences in aggressive behaviour. According to research, beginning at about age 4 years, physical aggression has been found to be more common among males than females (Hood, 1996; Parke & Slaby, 1983), as a result studies on aggression have often included only boys (e.g., Bierman & Wargo, 1995; Cillessen *et al.*, 1992). This focus on physical forms of aggression and exclusion of girls from research has resulted in lesser knowledge about behaviours that may lead to girls’ social difficulties.

The experience of being perceived as an intentional being is a precursor to developing reflective capacity in relationships, and is pivotal in understanding feeling states, developing empathy and internalizing social codes, all essential features for socialization of aggressive impulses.(Reebye, 2005).

Review of Related Literature

In an observational study, gender differences in physical, verbal, and relational aggression, were studied among preschool children by Ostrov *et al.*, (2004). In their sample of 60 children, findings revealed that gender differences in subtypes of aggression may be apparent as early as 3 years of age. Girls were found to be more relatively aggressive as compared to boys and boys were reportedly found to be delivering more of physical aggression.

Crick and Grotpeter (1995) proposed that social goals may also explain the gender differences that arise in aggressive behaviour. They propose that boys' social goals are typically instrumentally oriented, and that they therefore tend to use physical forms of aggression that hinder the action of others. Girls, on the other hand, tend to have affiliative social goals, and they therefore tend to use relational aggression because it hinders the affiliative intimacy goals of others. These gender differences may lead to the use of the different types of aggressive behaviour.

Early peer relationships are thus highly relevant to social policy issues and should be an object of persistent attention, (Boivin, M 2005) Being held in positive regard by peers has been associated with future social competence and relatively fewer behavioral problems (Hymel, Rubin, Rowden, and LeMare, 1990). In the case of preschoolers, socially competent behaviors would be organized, as already noted, around the central developmental tasks of positive engagement and self-regulation during peer interaction. adaptation with peers and in the school environment, the ongoing social relations and interactions of children in their social group (Rubin and Ross, 1988)

It might come as a question that at this early age of 3-5 years how come these social competence be of any effect. But studies have shown the importance of social competence in the later years of their lives. The importance of these social competence out-comes should not be underestimated. Along with marking successful development and predicting later well-being, social competence is increasingly recognized as vital to school readiness (Carlton & Winsler, 1999). For example, socially competent kindergartners are more successful than their less competent counterparts in developing positive attitudes about and adjusting to school, and they get better grades and achieve more (Birch and Ladd, 1997; Ladd, 1990; Ladd, Birch, and Buhs, 1999; Ladd, Kochenderfer, and Coleman, 1996).

Aims and Objectives

The main aim was to study the gender differences in aggressive behaviour among pre-school children of age 3 to 6 years. The sub-objective was to study the effect of girls and boys aggressive behaviour on their social competence.

Methodology

The present study involved a mixed methods approach including both the qualitative and quantitative techniques. The former part of the research where the differences between the girls and boys in exhibiting their aggressive behaviour were studied, involved a quantitative approaches of data collection using a rating scale and the latter part of the research where the effect on their social competence was to be studied was done using qualitative methods such as observation and interview.

A preschool situated in Delhi was first identified by convenience sampling. A list of all the children in these sections was made and 50 children were randomly selected (31 boys, 19 girls) aged 3- 5 years from five sections of this school.

Measures

1. **Child Aggressive Behaviour Checklist:** This checklist was adapted from the standard checklist “Child Behaviour Checklist Aggression Subscale” & “Behaviour scale – Relational Aggression”. This checklist had 15 items of the three types of aggression i.e physical, verbal and relational aggression (10 items for physical and verbal and 5 relational). Each item was to be rated on a three point rating scale - always, sometimes, never. Each option was scored as 2, 1, 0 respectively. In the end the total scoring was done and child was given the total scoring by adding the scores.
2. **Aggressiveness Rating Scale** which was a 0-10 rating scale to be rated by the child’s teacher. The class Teacher was asked to mark the child in concern according to her experiences with the child.

0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7-----8-----9-----10
 Low aggression High aggression

3. **Evaluation of Popularity:** Each child was rank ordered by the number of friends they had in class.
4. **Ability to cooperate:** The researcher chose a play material which was a puzzle game in the shape of a fish on which numbers from zero to ten were written and the task was that the children had to arrange the numbers from 0 till 10 in order to make a fish shape. Through observation the researcher assessed the children’s ability to cooperate.
5. **Sharing:** A bowl of colours was kept among groups of 4 children each, so they would share the colours for the drawing given to them by the researcher. Then deliberately the researcher made a shortage of one particular colour to be utilised in the drawing to observe whether the children shared their colour with their peers or not.
6. **Managing a conflict:** There were four pictures of children involved in different anger arousing situations. Each boy and girl were asked what they would have done if they would be in the similar situation after showing the picture to every child. The responses were noted.

Fig.1: Summary of Social Competence Variables and methods of assessment

Variable	Activity used	Method
Sharing	Colouring activity	Observation
Managing a conflict	Responding to a Picture	Verbal responses noted
Ability to cooperate	Puzzle game	Observation
Popularity	Class Voting	Counting the votes

Results and Discussion

1. Gender Differences in Aggression

On the basis of the checklist conducted on the sample by teacher and the researcher it was revealed that the mean of the boys (6.3) on physical aggression was higher as compared to girls(4.5) , which shows that boys of age 3 – 5 years express their aggression physically and thus higher on physical aggression as compared to girls. There was very less difference in the mean of the relational aggression among boys and girls which showed that at the age of 3-5 years there did not exist a significant difference on the measure of relational aggression in the sample.

2. Gender Differences and Peer Relations

Among boys who were rated as low aggression had an average of 10 friends and boys who were rated as average aggression had an average of 5 friends then the boys who were rated high on aggression had 9 friends. This trend of popularity shows that low and high aggression boys had maximum number of friends in the class and majority of the children raised their hands in their favour.

A similar trend was seen among girls. Girls who were rated low and high on aggression were more popular in their class as compared to the girls rated average on aggression.

3. Aggression and Social Competence

Sharing: Among boys it was observed that children low on aggression were sharing their things with their peers but boys who were high and average on aggression were found to be low on sharing as they were observed using verbal aggression and declined giving their colours to their peers when asked.

Among girls, it was observed that girls who were rated low on aggression shared their things with their peers and also waited for them to return it back and girls who were rated average on aggression made annoying facial expression and didn't give the colour to the peers whereas girls who were rated high on aggression didn't share their things with their peers and verbally refused to share.

Ability to cooperate: It was revealed that boys and girls who were not aggressive and very low on aggression were involved in the activity and cooperated with

their peers in arranging the blocks, waited for their turn, but in contrast to it boys who were rated higher on aggression shouted and screamed on their peers. The aggressive girls made annoying facial expressions and complained to the researcher about their peers for not arranging the blocks correctly.

Managing a conflict: The responses showed that the boys who were rated high on aggression would hit the child back in any type of the conflict and the get into fighting and boys rated low on aggression responded that they will complain to their elders like teachers, parents and siblings whereas majority of girls who were rated average and high on aggression responded that they will complain to their elders like parents, teachers and elder siblings, moreover some proportion of girls who were rated high on aggression said that they will hit back to the peer if s/he does so. The girls who were rated low on aggression replied that they will complain to their elders or keep silent and not respond at all.

Conclusion

The results obtained were largely in confirmation of different researches reviewed by the researcher and some of them had a little deviance. The study found that girls and boys showed little difference on the measure of physical aggression and relational aggression. Showing that boys were physically aggressive and girls were relationally aggressive. But there was no significant difference on t- value calculated at the .05 level showing that boys and girls of age 3-5 years had were almost similar.

An interesting trend among boys and girls which was similar was found. It showed that boys and girls rated high on aggression had higher average number of friends. And boys and girls rated lower on aggression had less number of average friends. Showing children higher on aggressive behaviour were more popular among their peers and the trend was similar in both genders. The effect of aggressive behaviour on social competence like sharing, ability to control and , managing a conflict was also found to be almost similar in both the genders,

Boys higher on aggression were found to be less cooperative, low on sharing and had lesser ability to manage a conflict. Whereas boys lower on aggression were found to be sharing with their peers, could manage a conflict by getting involved in the activity and could also cooperate with their peers in a group activity.

In contrast to this, girls who were rated higher on aggression were found to opt for complaining to their parents and teachers and making faces when not getting an opportunity to cooperate or to share her things with her peers.

These findings showed that children rated and observed to be higher in aggressive behaviour were lower on their social competence, which could prove to be a hindrance in their development leading to serious behavioural problems in the long run. Interestingly children higher on aggressive behaviour were found to be more popular among their class mates and similarly those very low on aggressive behaviour were also popular in comparison to children average on aggression.

Implications of the Study

Although scholarly work on aggressive behaviour has been extensively done and gender differences in aggressive behaviour also has been researched but the effect of this aggressive behaviour on children's social competence at such an early age has been scarcely studied.

In most of the studies reviewed it has been found that girls show relational aggression and boys show physical aggression, which was found to be true in the present study as well but with the minor deviation that girls who were rated aggressive in the tool also showed physical aggression in the same intensity as boys did and were reported high on physical aggression.

Going by the present life style of the generation where parents are finding it hard to cope up with their children's aggressive tantrums and that too at such an early age. Parents avoid these tantrums and leave on the later years to get improved but if not intervened now, more severe forms of problems in their social competencies like *sharing, ability to cooperate and conflict management* might take place. Not only intervention but also prevention since early age can be done.

References

- Birch, S. H. and Ladd, G.W. 1997. The teacher-child relationship and children's early school adjustment. *Journal of School Psychology*, **35**: 61-79.
- Boivin M, Hymel S. 1997. Peer experiences and social self-perceptions: A sequential model. *Developmental Psychology*, **33**(1):135-145.
- Carlton, M.P. and Winsler, A. 1999. School readiness: The need for a paradigm shift. *School Psychology Review*, **28**: 338-352.
- Crick, N. 1996. The role of overt aggression, relational aggression and pro social behaviour in the prediction of children's future social adjustment, *Wiley Blackwell*, **67**(5):2317-2327.
- Coie, J.D., Dodge, K.A. 1998. *Aggression and antisocial behavior*. In: Damon W, Eisenberg N, editors. *Handbook of child psychology: Social, emotional, and personality development*. Wiley , New York. **3**:779-862.
- Hood, K. 1996. Intractable tangles of sex and gender in women's aggressive development: An optimistic view. In D. M. Stoff and R. B. Cairns (Eds.), *Aggression and violence: Genetic, neurobiological, and biosocial perspectives*, pp. 309-335.
- Hymel, S., Rubin, K.H., Rowden, L. and LeMare, L. 1990. Children's peer relationships: Longitudinal prediction of internalizing and externalizing problems from middle to late childhood. *Child Development*, **61**: 2004-2021.
- Reebye, P. 2005. *Aggression during early years – infancy and pre-school*. *Can Child Adols Psy Rev.*, **14**(1):16-20.
- Rubin, K.D. and Daniels-Byrness, T. 1983. *Concurrent and predictive correlates of sociometric status in kindergar-ten and grade 1 children*. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, **29**:337-352.
- Ostrov, J. M., and Keating, C. F. 2004. *Gender Differences in Preschool Aggression During Free Play and Structured Interactions: An Observational Study*. *Social Development*, **13**(2): 255-277.
- Ostrov, J. Woods, k. Jansen, E. Casas, J. and Crick, N. 2004. *Early childhood research quarterly* **19**:355-371.