Unfolding the mystery of aggression in children and adolescents

Erin Rapien
Whittier College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.utc.edu/mps

Part of the Psychology Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholar.utc.edu/mps/vol10/iss1/7

This articles is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals, Magazines, and Newsletters at UTC Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Psychological Studies by an authorized editor of UTC Scholar. For more information, please contact scholar@utc.edu.
Unfolding the Mystery of Aggression in Children and Adolescents

Since 1996 there have been 17 reported cases of violence in U.S. schools by children ranging in age from 11 to 18. These cases have prompted an increase in research on risk factors and correlates of aggression. A review of this new literature would serve to highlight common findings and explain discrepancies. In this literature review I will discuss family, peer, and community influences as factors in the development of aggression in children. Within each context are several influencing factors that contribute to the development of aggression. I will also discuss possible implications, interventions, and future research needs as well as limitations of this review.

Explaining Anger in Children and Adolescents

Since 1996 there have been 17 reported cases of violence in U.S. schools by children ranging in age from 11 to 18. These cases have occurred throughout all regions of the country from Jonesboro, Arkansas to Littleton, Colorado. These children, all boys, so far, either singly or in small groups of two to four used guns to kill peers. These school shootings have prompted an increase in research on risk factors and correlates of aggression. A variety of methodologies and measures have been used to better understand the causes and development of aggression in children. A review of this new literature would serve to highlight common findings and explain discrepancies.

In this literature review I will discuss family, peer, and community influences as factors in the development of aggression in children, and I will discuss possible future implications of the increase in aggression. While factors internal to the child may partly account for this behavior, I will limit this review only to external (i.e., environmental) influences. When focusing on family influences I will look particularly at the effects of positive versus negative attachments, parenting practices and styles, the effects of sibling relationships, and the effects of negative marital relationships on aggression. When focusing on peer influences I will discuss the theories of friendship development and peer approval and disapproval of aggressive behavior. In the final section I will focus on community effects and I will discuss how communities are defined, the effects of violent communities on children, and how parents can serve as a buffer to protect their children. My conclusion will focus on limitations of this literature review and implications of future increases of aggression.

Aggression Types

When studying aggression and aggression related issues, researchers differentiate between two basic types of aggression: relational and overt. The general definition of aggression is any action produced with the intent to hurt another (Hart, Nelson, Robinson, Olsen, MeNeilly-Choque, 1998). Where overt
and relational aggressions differ is in the type of behavior one enacts. Galen and Underwood (1997) emphasize that in order for an act to be deemed aggressive it must be intentional and perceived as aggressive by the victim.

**Overt Aggression**

Overt aggression is defined as direct, physical aggression against another (Richardson & Green, 1999). Hitting, kicking, and throwing objects at another are examples of overt aggression. Accidentally running into or pushing a person would not be defined as overtly aggressive behavior because in accidental cases there is no intent to harm another. Researchers usually measure this type of aggression using scales for the child, parents, teachers, and peers to complete and/or with live or videotaped interactions of the child in question. Scales for the child generally ask the child how frequently in the past month he/she has engaged in the following behaviors: yelling, screaming, threatening harm, cursing, throwing an object, hitting or attempting to hit, pushing, grabbing, shoving, or kicking another (Richardson & Green). Researchers also ask parents general questions about their child's behavior as well as questions regarding how often physical punishment is used in order to measure parents' aggressive interactions with their child (Garcia, Shaw, Winslow, & Yaggi, 2000; Hart et al., 1998).

Peer assessment of overtly aggressive children is usually measured with a nomination scale. Both Crick (1996) and Crick and Grotpeter (1995) have had children nominate the top three or five children who engaged in physically aggressive behavior, such as hitting or pushing. Teachers have been asked to rate aggression in children using questionnaires about the child's overall behavior and if certain aggressive behaviors would be imaginable from the child (Crick, 1996; Garcia, et al., 2000). Researchers have also used videotaped interactions in the home and in a laboratory setting to determine the extent of aggressive behavior in the child. Volling and Belsky (1992) watched children interact with siblings and measured how often they struggled over toys or provoked the other in some manner. Davis, Hops, Alpert, and Sheeber (1998) watched families discuss preapproved topics and coded disapproval, interruptions, disagreement, or disinterest with an aggressive or neutral affect as oppositional behavior. It is important to note that although these behaviors in themselves are not necessarily aggressive, they may be deemed as such in a hostile environment. A child purposely disagreeing with the parent for the sole purpose of angering that parent would be an example of an aggressive behavior.

**Relational Aggression**

Relational aggression is generally defined as the intention to harm one by sabotaging his/her social relations (Richardson & Green, 1999). According to Richardson and Green, this may include actions such as spreading rumors about another, arguing, ignoring the person, or gossiping behind his/her back. Friendship manipulation is a common aspect of relational aggression. Children will often tell another child he/she cannot be part of the friendship group and/or will actually exclude the child for not behaving in the desired way. An attack on self-esteem is the general goal with this type of aggression and can be accomplished with body language such as rolling the eyes, turning away, and disapproving facial expressions (Galen & Underwood, 1997).

Researchers measure relational aggression in the same way they measure overt aggression. The only significant difference is in the types of questions asked and the behaviors monitored. Questions have included how frequently in the past month the child has engaged in the following behavior with or towards another: “spread rumors”, “made up stories to get them in trouble”, “made negative comments about their appearance to someone else”, “took something that belonged to them”, “told others not to associate with them”, “gathered other friends to my side”, “destroyed or damaged something of theirs”, “told others about the matter”, “called them names behind their back”, and “gossiped behind their back” (Richardson & Green, p.430). Parents, teachers, and peers all used the same types of measurements but answered questions about these types of behaviors rather than overtly aggressive behavior.

**Gender Differences**

Researchers have found that boys are more overtly aggressive whereas girls use relational aggression. The Social Sanction Model suggests that where it is acceptable for
males to be aggressive, it is inappropriate in females (Richardson & Green, 2000). Males see aggression as a valuable tool to get what they want and women see aggression as a way to express themselves and reduce their stress (Richardson & Green, 2000). The consequences a child anticipates for his/her aggression plays a part in whether or not he/she acts in that manner. Generally, boys were found to have heightened self-esteem after an aggressive encounter whereas girls felt guilty and upset (Perry, Perry, & Weiss, 1989). Perry et al. (1989) also found that disapproval among parents and peers was greater for girls than boys. This may be due to the way children are socialized by their parents. Generally, aggression in females is wrong in most societies whereas male/female aggression is also wrong, but male/male aggression is acceptable (Perry et al., 1989).

Family Influences

Attachment Theory

Intimacy with another is a fundamental need of humans and parent/child relationships in the form of attachment parent/child relationships are the basis of secure children, negative attachments between parents and their children have a number of effects, including aggression in children (Cohn, 1990; MacKinnon-Lewis, Rabiner, & Stares, 1999; Rubin, Hastings, Chen, Stewart, & McNichol, 1998; Volling & Belsky, 1992). Mary Ainsworth defined four types of parenting styles that lead to either secure or insecure (anxious-avoidant, anxious-resistant) attachments: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglect/reject (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). For this literature review, authoritative parenting styles generally result in secure attachments and authoritarian, permissive, and neglecting/rejecting parenting styles result in insecure attachments.

Ainsworth (1978) defines parents that implement a democratic role with their children as authoritative. She asserts that these children have the most secure attachments with their parents. Authoritative parents allow their child a certain amount of input, but at the same time maintain authority and make the final decisions. In these relationships there is trust between the child and primary caregiver. These parents have control over their children, but also offer support. Authoritarian parents also have control over their children, but do not offer support. In contrast, permissive parents have no control and offer a great deal of support. The children of both authoritarian and permissive parents tend to have anxious-resistant relationships and insecure attachments with their parents where there is a sense of indifference. Neglecting/rejectful parents offer no support or control. These attachments are anxious-avoidant and insecure, characterized by a lack of interest in the child (Ainsworth 1978).

Attachment Effects on Aggression

Research shows that the parent/child attachment is fundamental in a child's social learning (MacKinnon-Lewis, et al. 1999). Bowlby's Internal Working Model theory suggests that those with secure attachments will have healthy working models and will feel more secure, positive, and trusting about other relationships whereas insecurely attached individuals will have less healthy working models (Bowlby, 1969). The social learning theory suggests that children use the experiences from their first attachments as a base on which to model other relationships, namely those with peers (MacKinnon-Lewis, et al. 1999). Dodge's (1986) "five-stage social-information-processing model" states that children have a "database" of past memories and experiences used to encode and interpret social cues (Rabiner, Keane, MacKinnon-Lewis, 1993). A correct interpretation of these cues is vital in order to learn socially correct behavior. Attachments are the base on which to give a child a working model to interpret these cues.

Several different researchers have found a strong correlation between insecure attachment and aggressive behavior in children (Cohn, 1990; DeMulder, Denham, Schmidt, & Mitchell, 2000; Hart et al., 1998; MacKinnon-Lewis, et al., 1999). Because children use attachments with the primary caregivers as a base from which to compare other relationships, children with insecure attachments may have externalizing problems as well as difficulties interacting with peers and teachers (DeMulder et al.) Children with insecure attachments have lived with inconsistent responses or no responses at all from parents since infancy (DeMulder et al.) When parents
neglect their children, this is internalized and carried to peer relationships where the child may anticipate rejection and consequently act shy and withdrawn or in hostile and aggressive ways (DeMulder et al.). Bowlby (1973) found that insecurely attached children developed “mistrust, insensitivity, anger, aggression, and lack of empathy in subsequent relationships” (DeMulder et al.) When the parents are inconsistent, children often react with “hesitant and impulsive behaviors” (Cohn, p.153) Specifically, MacKinnon-Lewis et al. (1999) found that negative interactions between boys and their mothers were correlated with negative beliefs about peers and reacted with aggressive behaviors. Insecurely attached boys were seen as less socially competent by teachers and peers than securely attached boys (Cohn). Being seen as an outcast and socially incompetent is strongly correlated with aggressive behavior (Cohn). DeMulder et al. found a positive relationship between insecure attachments with mothers and aggressive behavior with peers and teachers. All of this research supports the idea that insecure attachments put children at a higher risk for aggressive behavior (DeMulder et al.). Researchers have also found that in the development of aggression, a lack of positive parenting is as influential as the presence of negative parenting; it is not enough to avoid negative parenting styles, parents must actually engage in positive parenting styles with their children (Hart et al.). The combination of paternal unresponsiveness and maternal coercion plays a key role in both overt and relational aggression (Hart et al.).

Methodologies included self report scales, interviews, videotaped and live parent-child interactions, and sociometric ratings (Cohn, 1990; DeMulder, et al., Hart et al., 1998; MacKinnon-Lewis et al., 1999). It is important to note that though the methodology for all of this research varies, the results remain consistent in showing that parent/child attachments do have an effect on the development of aggression.

Parenting Practices and Styles
Parenting practices differ from parenting style and research indicates it is parenting style that is most important in aggression development (Hart et al., 1998). Hart et al. defined parenting style as the general tone of the parent-child relationship across a variety of interactions. Parenting practices on the other hand are specific strategies employed to achieve a specific result (e.g., a parent may take specific actions in order to have smart, socially competent, or athletic children). Darling and Steinberg (1993) theorized that parenting styles are essential to the general socialization of children whereas parenting practices are essential to the goals children work toward (Hart et al.). Parenting styles and practices are related in that the style creates an ever-present environment in which the parent and child interact, which in turn, determines the practices (Hart et al.). Though not discussed in the research, parenting style may have a higher order and thus sets the tone for specific parenting practices. Therefore, the tone of the relationship may determine the development and level of children’s aggression.

Parenting Styles

The quality of parenting style is important to research because it is within the parent relationship that children learn and implement social skills. Parents also provide emotional and cognitive support to their children (Rubin, et al., 1998). Empirical work shows that “parents of undercontrolled, aggressive children mirror their children’s behavior in their own parenting practices, using highly directive, intrusive, punitive, and rejecting techniques” (Rubin et al., p.1616). It is necessary to note that while Rubin et al. are speaking of general practices, these come as a result of parenting style. If the parenting style has a generally aversive and hostile tone, this is reflected in specific practices such as those noted by Rubin et al. Negative parenting styles, which include coercive and psychologically controlling styles, are linked to children’s aggressive behavior. Generally, authoritarian, permissive, and neglecting parenting styles are correlated with low academic achievement, poor social skills and work skills, and antisocial behavior, which are all linked to aggressive behavior (Dishion, 1990).

Responsive Parenting Styles

Responsive parenting styles tend to produce secure attachments (Ainsworth, 1978). This style includes “accepting, mutually contingent, nurturant, patient, playful, sensitive,
supportive, and warm” interactions with children (Hart et al., 1998). Responsive parents typically engage in play with their children and, as a result, have socially competent and less aggressive children (Hart et al., 1998). Specifically, Parken, Burks, Carson, Neville, and Boyum (1994) found that children were less aggressive and exhibited more prosocial skills when fathers engaged in physical play and mothers engaged in general play with their children. Because children learn positive social skills from responsive parenting styles, they bring these qualities to peer relationships instead of aggressive and aversive behaviors (Hart et al.). Rubin et al. (1998) found that warm and affectionate parenting styles were negatively correlated with aggressive behavior. 

Coercive Parenting Styles

Coercive parenting styles include compelling a child in a physical or verbal manner (Hart, et al., 1998). In Patterson’s model of Coercive Parenting Styles, parents reinforce their children’s aggressive and aversive behavior by inconsistently implementing punishment or implementing unfair punishments (Garcia et al., 2000). These interactions become patterns and train the child to use aversive or aggressive behaviors in order to gain control over an unpredictable and unpleasant family environment (Dishion, 1990). This negative style of parenting either does not provide the child with structure or overly imposes structure. Consequently, the child does not learn self-regulation skills and may be fearful of punishment, therefore causing the child to be wary of participation in family activities (Rubin et al., 1998). Children bring these skills, or lack thereof, and fears to peer relationships where they may be manifested in aggressive behavior.

Psychologically Controlling Style

Psychologically controlling parents “constrain, invalidate, or manipulate children’s psychological and emotional expression” (Hart et al., 1998). Hart et al. describes this parenting style as using love and guilt in order to control children. Specifically, they explain that these parents may hold back their love or tell their children they do not measure up to other children when the child does meet expectations. This impacts attachment, which has been shown to influence aggressive behavior, by showing the child that love and acceptance are not constant and consistent. Children of psychologically controlling parents must deal with “overcontrolled, internalized childhood disorders, such as anxiety and depression” and overt and relational aggression (Hart et al., 1998). Rubin et al. found that children with poor self-regulating skills and controlling mothers were more aggressive with peers. 

Parenting Practices

There are particular actions parents take that are specifically aimed to increase peer relationships for their children. Putallaz (1987) showed that, in a laboratory setting, mothers’ interactions with other mothers were related to children’s interactions with other peers (as cited in Dishion, 1990). This suggests that parents’ “social disposition, translates into parenting practices, and ends with the characteristics that determine the child’s success or failure with peers” (Dishion, 1990). Dishion discussed particular practices parents may employ, such as arranging playtime and groups, aiding with friendship making and conflicts, and modeling these types of relationships. Parents who are sociable translate this into parenting style, which affects specific parenting practices aimed at socializing their children.

Sibling Relationships

Sibling interactions are the first child-child relations one engages in. Vygotsky’s (1965) Zone of Proximal Development Theory states that “cognitive development is a process of internalizing the knowledge incorporated in social interactions with a more advanced partner” (p. 1487). Through sibling relationships the younger child, who is usually the less advanced partner, learns what is considered appropriate behavior in the peer context and carries this knowledge to other relationships. Though these relationships may take on similar qualities as parent-child relationships such as caring-giving, teaching and the development of attachment, the sibling relationship is different in that it is reciprocal in nature (Dunn, 1983).

It is typically in pretend play with siblings that a child begins to develop prosocial skills, such as sharing and teamwork and gains social understanding (Youngblade & Dunn, 1995; Garcia et al., 2000). Youngblade and Dunn (1995) found a positive correlation be-
between positive sibling relationships and more sophisticated pretend play. The older sibling often serves as a model for behavior and the younger sibling imitates the actions of the sibling. Both interacting with and watching the interactions between older siblings model this sophisticated pretend play. Children whose siblings modeled prosocial skills exhibited more of these skills when observed six months later than children whose siblings did not engage in these activities (Garcia et al., 2000). Several studies have reported that younger siblings feel “special pleasure and excitement” when the two children perform the same act at the same time (Dunn, 1983). Younger siblings learn communicative sequences from these situations and view their sibling as a peer and part of a reciprocal relationship (Dunn, 1983).

Just as siblings can model and influence prosocial skills, they can also model and influence aggressive behaviors. Patterson’s Theory of “Coercive Cycles” maintains that parents’ inconsistent or severe punishments reinforce children’s problem behaviors (Garcia et al., 2000). The child misbehaves and is severely punished or not punished at all and as a result the child becomes more aversive and the parents resort to more punishment. This is a cycle in that the child’s negative behavior causes a certain behavior from the parents which results in the child again acting negatively. This theory is also applicable to siblings. For example, if a boy hits his sister and she in turn leaves the room, the boy has learned to use aggressive behavior as a means for satisfaction and the girl has learned submissiveness to alleviate a problem (Garcia et al.). Patterson believed that children in coercive families may experience problem behavior and the youngest child may be the most coercive (Garcia et al.). Whereas all the children in a coercive family live in a stressful environment, the youngest child must deal with the additional stress of the older and coercive siblings, and in turn would become the most coercive (Garcia et al.).

Jealousy of one’s siblings is another factor that may increase childhood aggression. Studies have shown that sibling rivalry and aggressive behavior towards a sibling are correlated with maternal attention and behavior towards each child (Dunn, 1983). The oldest sibling grows accustomed to the parents’ full attention, which causes a great dilemma in this child’s life when a new sibling is born. Children whose parents made them part of the discussion of the new baby as a person for whom they could take responsibility, generally exhibited friendlier behavior more frequently 14 months after the baby’s birth (Dunn, 1983). Moreover, Dunn found that “mother’s responsiveness to her child’s needs was positively correlated with the frequency of prosocial behavior and the infrequency of antisocial behavior of the children toward each other” (p.805). When the first born is affectionate and caring towards the baby, “imitation, modeling, and sociocognitive skills” are developed (p.801). Conversely, Volling and Belsky (1992) found that children with secure attachments to the parents were affected more by preferential treatment to another sibling than insecurely attached children. Securely attached children may feel loss when other siblings receive more attention (Volling & Belsky). In insecurely attached children are not affected by this due to the inconsistency in attention they receive in the absence of the new inconsistency in these findings may be because parents who make the older child a part of the pregnancy and arrival of the new baby may not be the type of parents who would display preferential treatment to one child over another.

**Marital Conflict**

Although parents may believe marital conflict has no effect on children’s development, research shows it may lead to development of aggression (Davis, et al., 1998). This type of conflict in the home is positively related to both overt and relational aggression (Davis et al.). Marital conflict often drains the parents’ emotional resources, which may lead to poor parenting and consequently to aggressive behavior in children. Marital conflict has been related to unresponsive parenting, lack of consistent punishment, and insecure attachments with children (Dunn, Deater-Deckard, Pickering, Golding, & ALSPAC, 1999). Research discussed in this literature review supports that each of these components is linked with aggressive behavior (e.g., Davis et al.; Dunn et al.; Hart et al.). Marital conflict affects depression, antisocial behavior, behavior prob-
lems, and aggressive behavior in children (Davis et al.; Dunn et al.; Hart et al.).

**Patterson's Social Interaction Theory and Marital Conflict**

Stress and negative interaction patterns in the context of the family have been found to have an influence on children's aggression (Dishion, 1990). Pulling the child into marital arguments, either directly or indirectly, leaves the child more susceptible to psychological problems (Davis, et al., 1998). Patterson's Social Interaction Theory explains the effects of children becoming involved in marital problems. Generally, if a child is able to alleviate the fighting between his/her parents with whatever means possible, the child learns through negative reinforcement the way to deal with such problems (Davis et al.). "Serving as peacekeeper, (being) co-combative, withdrawing, or simply displaying sadness" are typical ways children react in order to end the conflict (Davis et al, 1998). Additionally, in coercive families, if an aggressive child uses a form of aggression to stop the aggression between his parents and is successful, the child learns that aggression is the key to solving these types of problems. The child may generalize this learning to all forms of conflict he must deal with in his life. Dishion (1990) found that "rejected boys were exposed to more coercive and pathogenic family experiences when compared to average children" (p.888). Other researchers have found that boys in homes with physically aggressive parents were more likely to use some type of more aggressive problem solving strategy at the onset of conflict than boys from lower conflict homes (Davis, et al.). Hart et al. found that coercive parents had children who were rated as more aggressive with peers by teachers. This may explain why these children are more rejected by peers; these aggressive problem solving skills, when carried to the peer group setting, are not acceptable (Dishion, 1990).

It should be noted that each research team adopted different methodologies to research the effects of marital conflict on aggression development. Methodologies included parent and/or child self-report scales on depression and marital relationship as well as videotaped interactions between the parents and children (Davis et al, 1998; Dunn et al., 1998; Hart et al., 1998). Though the studies were difficult to compare to one another, the end results of each do conclude that marital conflict has a negative effect on children and is influential in the development of aggression.

**Modeling Theory and Marital Conflict**

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory is known in psychology for explaining how children learn from their social environments. In this theory, one chooses to perform or not perform a behavior based on the rewards or punishments one has seen attached to the behavior. This "observational learning effect" is most evident when one models a behavior the observer has not learned and the observer exhibits this behavior in the same form. Bandura's famous "Bobo" doll experiment showed the effects of modeled aggression. In this study, children watched as research assistants physically and verbally assaulted plastic dolls. The children who saw this behavior demonstrated were much more likely to treat the dolls in a similarly aggressive manner and imitate idiosyncratic aggressive attacks than those children who did not witness the assault. Several researchers have replicated these experiments with the same results. It is important to note that the aggressors in these experiments not only served as models of this behavior, but also reduced the children's inhibition about acting in a way they had actually seen rather than had previously learned (Bandura, 1969).

The Modeling Theory proposes that children learn to act aggressively through imitating aggressive behavior modeled by their parents (Bandura, 1969). Witnessing aggressive behavior, whether physical or verbal, has a desensitizing effect on the child, thus lowering the child's level of inhibition for performing like behaviors (Davis et al., 1998). Research has found that cold and angry parenting is linked with angry and aggressive children, which supports this modeling theory (Hart et al., 1998). Applying the Social Learning Theory to Patterson's Theory of Coercion, coercive parents model this type of aggressive behavior to their children and in turn the children imitate what they see and may develop overt and/or relational aggression (Hart et al.). This
theory can be applied to sibling relationships and may show how aggressive behavior is perpetuated in the family context. Parents model behavior for their children and the children mirror what they see and reinforce this behavior among themselves.

Combined Effects of Parents and Siblings

The previous section of this literature review has shown the influence of both the parents and siblings as individual components in the development of aggression. Research shows that children with high levels of sibling conflict and parental rejection are at higher risk for aggressive behavior than those influenced by only one of these factors (Garcia et al., 2000). The additive risk model suggests that a single factor cannot be blamed for children's aggressive behavior and with both factors the risk for this behavior increases greatly (Garcia et al., 2000) Volling and Belsky (1992) found a significant relationship between mother-child and sibling conflict, which supports Patterson's theory on aggression. Dunn et al. (1999) found that hostile marital relationships were linked with poor mother-child relationships, which in turn, were linked with a less positive relationship from the older to younger sibling. It is important to note that where Garcia et al. (2000) and Volling and Belsky (1992) looked at the combined effects of parent and sibling relationships, Dunn et al. (1999) looked at the path from one relationship to the other as a theory of aggression development.

PEER INFLUENCES

Harry Stack Sullivan's (1953) Theory of Interpersonal Development suggests that the child develops in two separate social contexts depending on the developmental needs: the parent/child relationship and the peer relationship. He explains that infants need contact and tenderness, which is provided by the parents, though more specifically by the mother. As they grow they need adult interaction in their play, which again is provided by the parents. As one reaches middle childhood, at approximately 6-10 years old the need for intimacy shifts from the mother to the peers. Sullivan emphasizes that there is a need for peer interaction and peer acceptance that can only be met by peers. Within an intimate peer relationship, one’s personal worth is validated. When a child receives that acceptance he/she begins to develop fully as an individual and gains a positive sense of self. If the child is not accepted into the peer group, his/her needs are not fulfilled and he/she may develop a negative self image and feel rejected. Sullivan suggests that identity and self esteem are built from interpersonal relationships (Sullivan, 1953).

Theories of Friendship Development

In looking at the development of aggression in children the peer group is a natural setting to study. Research has shown that friends have similar habits in drug and alcohol abuse, delinquency, and aggressive and antisocial behavior (Poulin & Boivin, 2000). There are two different schools of thought regarding the peer influence on aggression: (a) aggressive children are drawn to one another because of their aggressive nature and (b) children form dyads and the more aggressive child influences the less aggressive child. Boivin and Vitaro (1995) found that boys maintained their aggressive nature when they were friends with other aggressive boys (as cited in Poulin & Boivin). This is contingent on the boys being a part of an aggressive peer group rather than an aggressive individual. Being in an aggressive peer group they were less likely to be victimized by other children.

Proactive versus Reactive Aggression

Previously in this literature review, overt and relational aggressions were discussed as two types of aggression. Within each of these divisions there is also the subdivision of proactive and reactive aggression. Poulin and Boivin (2000) define reactive aggression as a response to real or perceived provocation. Reactively aggressive children typically lack social skills and exhibit hostile behavior. Because of this they may be victimized by peers, feel angry, fight with others, have attention problems, and exhibit problem behavior in school (Poulin & Boivin). In contrast, proactive aggression is defined as non-provoked aggressive behavior with an intention to hurt another in some way and feel a sense of power. By its nature, proactive aggression is more hostile than reactive aggression. Children who are proactively aggressive “have been shown to attach a positive value to the use of aggressive behavior when dealing with conflict resolution
and peer group entry” (Poulin & Boivin, p. 233). Interestingly, these children typically show leadership ability and a sense of humor. Proactive aggression usually attracts peers whereas reactive aggression rejects peers (Poulin & Boivin). This may be because whereas reactively aggressive children lack social skills making it difficult to relate to any peers, proactively aggressive children can relate to other proactively aggressive peers and be quite social in such a circle. Although proactive aggression seems positive under the definition, there are negative consequences that will be explored further in this literature review.

**Mutual Selection, Similarities Model, and Dissociation Process**

The Mutual Selection Process suggests that children are drawn to one another because they have similar qualities (Poulin & Boivin, 2000). The Similarities Model and Mutual Selection are similar in that both propose that peers are attracted to one another because they have similar qualities (Bukowski, Sippola, & Newcomb, 2000; Poulin & Boivin). This suggests that aggressive children are drawn together because they have that quality in common. The difference is that mutual selection relies solely on similar characteristics, whereas the similarity model suggests that attraction is key in forming friendships based in similarity (Bukowski et al.; Poulin et Boivin). Children who have similar conceptions on school achievement and are both excelling may be attracted to one another and form a friendship based on this similarity and attraction. Often this attraction relies on the other peer being perceived as more independent and not associated with childhood. Children look at superficial qualities such as appearance and athleticism as markers of one being older, which is an attractive quality (Bukowski et al.). Aggressive behavior and delinquency are also attractive qualities because they signify adulthood and independence to many young children (Bukowski et al., 2000). In both models aggression may serve as a commonality between two children with the difference being the degree of similarity the children share.

Both Poulin and Boivin (2000) and Bukowski, et al. (2000) found that aggressive children were attracted to one another. Poulin and Boivin found that between-friend similarity was evident in proactively aggressive children, but not reactively aggressive children. Boys who were proactively aggressive had more proactively aggressive friends than other children supporting this theory of mutual selection. This was not supported for reactive aggression. Bukowski et al. (2000) found that children who were attracted to aggressive peers had higher aggression scores themselves than those who were attracted to less aggressive children. This argues that aggressive children are attracted to other aggressive children, also supporting Mutual Selection and Similarities Model.

Dishion and his colleagues (1994) coined the phrase “shopping” to describe how children befriend one another based on default because of peer rejection (Poulin & Boivin, 2000). There is a tendency for children to migrate towards others more like themselves because those are the easiest friendships to establish and maintain. For aggressive boys who react positively towards aggressive behavior (i.e. congratulating their friends, laughing), they may create hostile and aggressive environments as well as encourage one another to act aggressively. This idea supports both the mutual selection and mutual influence processes, which will be discussed in detail shortly.

Bukowski et al. (2000) found that children with high aggression scores were attracted to children with high popularity scores as rated by other peers. These aggressive children were attracted to the idea of being liked by the popular peers and being popular themselves. This suggests that even among aggressive children there is the desire for social acceptance. Surprisingly, the popular children were popular because the aggressive children liked them. Bukowski et al. suggest these peers are especially attractive to aggressive children because aggressive children cannot understand their peers in general, let alone those who are popular. Aggressive children are attracted to their popular peers because the popular peers have mastered a social status that is so foreign to them.

Following the same idea as the mutual selection process, but from the opposite direction is the Dissociation Process (Poulin &
Boivin, 2000). This process suggests that children's friendships break up when there is a lack of similarities. Poulin and Boivin found that boys' friendships broke up when there was a difference in proactive aggression, but not in reactive aggression. Beyond supporting that children are drawn to those with similar qualities, this evidence also supports the effects of type of aggression on friendship formation. It is easier to predict the dissolution of a proactively aggressive friendship than one that is reactively aggressive. This may be due to the nature of the type of aggression with reactively aggressive children being social outcasts and proactively aggressive children being popular in their group of friends.

Mutual Influence

The mutual influence process suggests that children change and adapt to each other over time to become more like their friends. Invariably these children would grow to hold the same values, beliefs, and behaviors. Poulin and Boivin (2000) found that boys became more similar in proactive aggression over time than when they first became friends. Because they did not find this same pattern for reactively aggressive children they suggest children form relationships because they were similar in proactive aggression. While this may suggest that ultimately it is the mutual selection process that accounts for similarity in proactive aggression, it is important to note this may be due to the type of aggression the child utilizes. This may be because of the hostile nature of reactive aggression, which makes forming, let alone maintaining friendships very difficult. Proactive aggression on the other hand is not unattractive to others, especially those who are also proactively aggressive and together these children may create a supportive environment for one another.

The two models discussed are contradictory in that Mutual Selection, Similarities Model, and Dissociation Process (Bukowski et al., 2000; Poulin & Boivin, 2000) propose that friendships form and break as a result of similarities or lack thereof whereas the Mutual Influence Theory (Poulin & Boivin) states that friends are different initially and influence one another over time. There is valid research to support each theory and it seems both of the theories are weighed equally.

Approval/Disapproval of Aggressive Children

It is necessary to look at peers' views of aggression in one another as a component of aggression because obtaining the acceptance of one's peers is so fundamental in social development (Sullivan, 1953). According to Bandura's Cognitive Social Learning Theory children learn through imitation and observation so that eventually the behavior is internalized (Bandura, 1969). Children must weigh their expectation of the outcome against the value of that outcome. A child behaves aggressively and expects a certain outcome as a result of such behavior and attaches a value to that outcome. Outcomes may be physical objects, peer respect, or positive self-esteem (Hall, Herzberger, & Skowronski, 1998).

Peer Consequences

Research by Pellegrini, Bartini, and Brooks (1999), Poulin and Boivin (2000), Ladd and Burgess (1999), and Perry, et al. (1989) shows that both proactively aggressive and reactively aggressive children experience disapproval and/or rejection from the general peer population for their aggressive natures. Reactively aggressive children are generally rejected by all peers whereas proactively aggressive children are rejected by most peers, but accepted by other proactively aggressive children. Flow this affects the child is where there are discrepancies in the research. Ladd and Burgess found that aggressive children have peer relationship difficulties that remain fairly stable over the development process. Research has shown that both aggressive and nonaggressive children expect peer rejection as a result of aggressive behavior, but whereas this is a concern for nonaggressive children, it is not for aggressive children (Hall, et al., 1998).

Perry et al. found that girls expected more peer disapproval for aggression than boys did, but when the study was replicated by other researchers significant results were not found (Perry et al., 1986 as cited in Perry et al., 1989). Perry et al. discussed confounding variables in the 1989 study as the reason for this inconsistency. Children were asked to rate whether or not their friends would approve of aggressive behavior against a same-sex peer. The researchers assumed that the children's
friends would be of the same sex, though this was not true in all cases. Because it was assumed that friends were same sex, the sex of the target child and the sex of the peer group were confounded making the results somewhat questionable.

Although research indicates that peers reject aggressive children, research also suggests the opposite. Boivin and Vitaro (1995) found that although the general population of peers rejects aggressive children, proactively aggressive boys were not rejected by one another (as cited in Poulin & Boivin, 2000). Instead of being rejected for their behavior, it may be encouraged due to the aggressive nature of the group. When proactively aggressive children are rejected by peers they migrate towards other proactively aggressive peers (Pellegrini et al., 1999). Beyond not being completely socially rejected, the leaders of the aggressive group are even considered popular among the aggressive peers. In order to be popular in this group, boys had to use their aggression effectively and justify their behavior (Pellegrini, et al.). Whereas proactively aggressive children can find and maintain friendship, reactively aggressive children do not form cliques with one another because of their social incompetence, which makes beginning and maintaining relationships nearly impossible.

Acceptance by one's peers is dependent on one's disposition (Arsenio & Lover, 2000; Arsenio, Cooperman, & Lover, 2000). Children's general emotions have been linked to their social competence. Affective disposition is the general nature of the child across most settings. Aggression-related emotions are the emotions one presents during aggressive contexts (e.g., anger and frustration). Baseline emotions are those displayed at all other times (Arsenio et al.). Arsenio and Lover (1995) found that aggression related emotions and baseline emotions were significantly linked with high levels of aggression as were higher levels of aggression-related happiness. Research suggests that those who are less socially competent display more negative affect and were less likely than peers to be part of angry conflicts (Arsenio et al.). Children's knowledge of and attitude during aggression were linked with peer acceptance. Less aggressive children were more liked by peers and had higher affective baseline scores than more aggressive children. This research supports that peer consequences are present for aggressive behavior, though this does not discuss how aggressive children react to these consequences.

**Community Influences**

A study conducted with Washington D.C. children found that over one third had witnessed a shooting, 11% had been victims of a shooting, 22% had been the victims of a mugging, 47% had received physical threats, and 37% had been chased by a gang (Wallen & Rubin, 1997). These are community violence issues that expose children to aggressive behavior, which, according to Social Learning Theory, is a factor in the development of aggression in children. Community violence is different from peer and family aggression in that although it is a part of the child's environment, it occurs outside of the home and between people the child does not know (Wallen & Rubin, 1997).

**Types of Neighborhoods**

Research has shown that the socioeconomic status (SES) of a community is the strongest predictor of community violence (Colder, Mott, Levy, & Flay, 2000). Kupersmidt, Grielser, DePosier, Patterson, and Davis (1995) found that "black children from low-income, single parent homes living in a low socioeconomic status neighborhood were significantly more aggressive than black children from low-income, single parent homes living in a middle-SES neighborhood" (as cited in Colder et al.) Colder et al. also report that children who perceive their neighborhoods as more dangerous as evidenced by crime rates, graffiti, and drug use had higher aggression rates than did children who did not perceive their neighborhoods in this manner. In these low SES communities there is a lack of social resources such as "policing agencies, government bureaucracies, social services, educators, health providers, viable neighborhood associations, and housing authorities" which contributes to the violence (Wallen & Rubin, p. 39). Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2000) report specifically on housing policies as a promotion of violence in cities. The majority of public housing, if not all of it, is located in low income areas, thus serving to separate low-SES people from the rest of the
population. These neighborhoods tend to have a predominately minority population that leads to a form of racial segregation.

In looking at violent communities, researchers tend to look at communities with similar characteristics. Colder et al. (2000) used African-American children from 10 inner city school and two suburban schools for their study. They looked specifically at socioeconomic status, amount of education, household income, and per capita income. Florsheim, Tolan, and Gorman-Smith (1998) used inner-city, African American and Latino families as a part of their study and looked at income level and parental status. The sample Schwartz and Proc studied also was predominately minority students with African American children being the largest percentage followed by Latino then European Americans. They chose their subjects from schools in neighborhoods with high economic disadvantage and high crime rates. The samples from each of these studies show that violent neighborhoods are defined as being predominately minority with adults having little to no education, and the income level at or barely above poverty. There is a lack of research on violent communities composed of European Americans with education and income levels well above the poverty cutoff. Violence in these communities exists though it may not be reported because it is not expressed in the same manner (e.g.: gang shootings, graffiti). It is interesting to note that the slew of school shootings in the past five years has all been at the hands of middle class white males.

**The Effects of Community Violence on Children**

Research has shown mainly negative effects of violence on children (Colder et al., 2000; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Schwartz & Proctor, 2000; Wallen & Rubin, 1997). Generally speaking, children who experience violence in their communities are at risk for disruption problems at school, development problems, social rejection, aggressive behavior, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Colder et al., 2000; Schwartz & Proctor, 2000; Wallen & Rubin, 1997). Colder et al. found that just the perception of living in a dangerous community was found to be associated with aggressive behavior. These children who perceived themselves as living in a dangerous community were found to have positive beliefs about aggression, which was linked to having higher aggression levels overall. Coie and Dodge (1996) suggest that perception of a dangerous neighborhood leads to “an information processing style characterized by hypervigilance to hostile cues and automatic attribution of hostile intent to others” (p. 96).

When the neighborhoods are actually defined as dangerous and children witness violence in their communities PTSD is a common occurrence; PTSD can manifest itself in “nightmares, emotional numbing, hypervigilance, sleep disturbances, and anxiety” (Wallen & Rubin, 1997). Other symptoms include “the need to reenact the trauma, estrangement or detachment from others, a restricted range of affect, the sense of fore-shortened future, and irritability or outbursts of anger” (p. 34). If not dealt with, children may be left with violent and aggressive tendencies. Schwartz and Proctor (2000) found that witnessing violence led children to view violence positively and as an appropriate way to solve problems. Colder et al. (2000) discussed research that also supports this statement. Guerra and Slaby (1990) found that when children’s positive beliefs about aggression were weakened so was their aggression (as cited in Colder, et al.). This suggests that exposure to views of aggression are what form ideas about aggression. Children who live in these violent communities may be at risk for internalization and externalization leading to aggressive behavior (Colder, et al.).

Barber (1999) found completely different evidence suggesting that violent communities do not necessarily lead to aggression in children. The Palestinian/Israeli conflict of 1987 (the Intifada) was unrelated to aggression in Palestinian children. This may be due to the norms and values placed on participating in the movement towards independence. Children felt their involvement had a purpose and there was a sense of honor in fighting.

Barber’s (1999) findings may differ from the other results presented because of the difference in sample. Colder et al. (2000), Schwartz & Proctor (2000), and Wallen and Rubin (2000) all looked at low income, minority children in low SES communities who were
witnesses to violence. Barber was also looking at impoverished communities but in a war-torn land. Instead of being witnesses to violence these children were actively involved. The perception of violence was also different with Barber’s sample seeing it as a means to an end whereas the other samples viewed community violence as a danger.

Aside from affecting only the children, perceived neighborhood danger also affects parents. A violent neighborhood has been linked with parental emotional distress causing limitations to child involvement (Colder et al., 2000). These parents may be irritable, anxious or depressed leaving them to either not monitor their children at all or resort to restrictive parenting (Colder et al.). Colder et al. found that restrictive discipline and parental monitoring were associated with aggression in children. Children of restrictive disciplinarians were found to have strong positive beliefs about aggression and act more aggressively. It is suggested that this is because this parenting style allows children to see aggression as a form of self-protection because the parents pass the fear of the neighborhood to their children. Unmonitored children were found to be more aggressive due to the fact that the parents were not watching the behaviors and therefore were not able to punish inappropriate, aggressive behavior.

Buffering Effects on Violence
Not all children exposed to community violence become aggressive, and violent. Research suggests this is due mainly to buffering by the parents (Wallen & Rubin, 2000). Physical closeness with the parents alone can help children cope with violence. Wallen and Rubin (2000) discussed the outcomes of children involved in the World War II bombings asfairing better because they were with their parents than children who were sent to safer countries. When children are protected from community violence not only are they protected from physical harm, they are protected from negative psychological developments. Wallen and Rubin emphasize open communication between parents and children as a way for parents to reassure their children and learn to understand their environment. Just by discussion children may be healed from specific traumatic events by giving them meaning and reason. Using the outside community as a catalyst for discussing the moral issues surrounding violent behavior can teach children that violence does not have a positive value. Just as parents can transmit fear to their children they can also transmit a feeling of positive coping (Wallen & Rubin). In this the child can sense the parent’s security and feel secure himself/herself.

Wallen and Rubin (2000) discussed the effects of working through PTSD. Working through the trauma of an experience also is important so a child does not become aggressive. The idea of working through the experience involves accepting the feelings and facts surrounding the event and coming to terms with the aftermath. One is through with the event when there is a sense of resolution and the feelings are no longer overwhelming. This is related to the parents because they are the ones the child typically works through the event with.

CONCLUSION
This literature review looked at children’s three main environments and influences as contexts in which aggression can develop. I found that in all three of these environments, family, peer, and community, certain conditions were correlated with the development of aggression. Page constraints limited a deeper exploration beyond that of a correlate and aggression. This literature review focused mainly on overt aggression in males. Relational aggression in females was not discussed in detail allowing the possibility of different findings. Another limitation in this literature review was that it only looked at the three direct environments children are involved in. It did not focus on components within the child such as temperament or intelligence, or how they interact with the environment, and it did not focus on school environments or culture influences.

This literature review was able to provide evidence of causes of aggression in children in the environments in which they spend most of their time and give possible answers as to why children are aggressive. Future research on this topic is necessary to determine implications of youth aggression as well as interventions. In the family context, a possible intervention may be parenting courses
to teach new parents the authoritative parenting styles, which would encourage secure attachments. In the peer context possible interventions may include play therapy with aggressive children in order to teach them appropriate behavior and improve social competence. At the community level several interventions are possible such as after school programs for children, community clean-up days to decrease the perception of a dangerous neighborhood, and social activities so community members can become friendly with one another. There is a tremendous need for interventions because as these aggressive children become adults, they begin to produce their own aggressive children and the cycle continues. The implication is that if the development of aggression in children is not understood and fought against through intervention programs, the number of aggressive people will continue to grow.

References


