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Proactive and Reactive Functions of Aggression Subtypes during Early Childhood

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Two studies explored functions (i.e., proactive and reactive) and forms (i.e., physical and relational) of aggression during early childhood with observational methods. These studies were designed to test the utility of this classification scheme.

Study 1: A total of 67 children (42 girls) from a Midwestern city participated in a longitudinal study with 4 times across 18 months. This sample was 37.11 months (SD = 6.27) old at time 1. Each of the 4 aggression subtypes (e.g., proactive physical aggression) was stable (e.g., r 's from .23 to .52, p 's < .01). The inter-correlations between proactive and reactive subtypes were low. Teachers and observers agreed (i.e., r 's from .22 to .43, p 's < .01). Teacher (α 's > .70) and observational (ICC's and K > .70) measures were reliable. Boys were more physically aggressive and girls were more relationally aggressive regardless of the function. Aggression subtypes predicted unique developmental outcomes.

Study 2: A total of 63 (33 girls) children (M = 44.65 months old; SD = 13.39) from a Western NY city participated. Proactive and reactive subtypes were uncorrelated. Proactive physical and proactive relational were associated, r = .25, p < .05, but not for reactive aggression. Teachers and observers agreed (r 's = .26 to .34, p 's < .01). Each measure was reliable. Physical aggression was more frequent than relational, $F(1, 61) = 8.94$, p < .01. Proactive was more common than reactive $F(1, 61) = 6.97$, p < .001. A form x function x gender interaction, $F(1, 26) = 6.50$, p < .01, indicated boys were more proactive physically aggressive (M = 1.67; SD = .28) than reactive (M = .44; SD = .13). Similar to study 1, aggression subtypes predicted salient developmental outcomes. For example, a hierarchical regression model indicated reactive relational aggression (β = .24) predictive teacher reported hyperactivity-impulsivity above and beyond reactive physical aggression, $\Delta F(1, 52) = 4.09$, p < .05.

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