
Symposium TA-2
Thursday, July 27, 2006



Ten years of cross-cultural research on reconciliation in children: Retrospect and prospect.

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In observational research on the aftermath of aggression reconciliation has been defined as post-conflict friendly reunions between former opponents that restore social relations disturbed by the conflict.

About ten years ago researchers in Europe and the USA first adapted a controlled observation method developed to measure reconciliation in nonhuman primates for use during naturalistic observations of peer aggression in children. The application of this controlled observation method to studying peer aggression in children broke new ground in three important ways. First, it enabled researchers to obtain a reliable measure of what happens after peer aggression, not only of what leads up to it or what happens during it. Second, it enabled researchers to measure the aftermath of peer aggression within the context of ongoing peer relations. And third, it provided researchers with a standard tool for comparative research on reconciliation among children of different cultures and special populations.

In this paper I review the comparative findings to date and discuss them within the context of a relational perspective on child development. Two kinds of relationships figure prominently in children's lives: "vertical" attachments to adults and "horizontal" relationships with peers. Conflict is inherent in these relationships, and managing conflict and aggression with familiar partners provides important socializing experiences. I will discuss how the controlled study of reconciliation and other integrative post-conflict processes can help us increase our understanding of the role that peer aggression and its aftermath plays in children's socialization and moral development. I will conclude by offering suggestions for future research and by presenting some ideas about how this developing area of research could be more fruitfully integrated into mainstream developmental science.

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