



## Self-control, social support, and aggression among adolescents in divorced and two-parent families

Liat Hamama <sup>a,\*</sup>, Anat Ronen-Shenhav <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Bob Shapell School of Social Work, Tel Aviv University, Israel

<sup>b</sup> Education Department, Tel Aviv University, Israel

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined aggression in Israeli adolescents from divorced and two-parent families to explore self-control and social support as resources for reducing aggression, and to investigate whether the stress of divorce increases adolescents' aggression. Israeli adolescents from 127 divorced families and 308 two-parent families, completed self-report questionnaires. Major findings were: (1) Parental divorce did not correlate with increases in physical or verbal aggressive acts, but did correlate with significant increases in angry feelings and hostile thoughts (2) Higher levels of self-control and social support were found to mitigate possible adverse effects of parental divorce on adolescents' aggression. Outcomes imply that intervention designed to reduce aggression in adolescents should focus on the acquisition of self-control and the provision of social support.

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### 1. Introduction

Aggression among children and youth is a serious social problem that has sharply escalated in Israel in recent years (Benbenishty, Astor, Zeira, & Vinokur, 2002; Khoury-Kassabri, Benbenishty, Astor, & Zeira, 2004; Warman & Cohen, 2000). Aggression is usually described as an outcome of the links between hostile thoughts, angry emotions, and aggressive behaviors (Buss, 1961). Stress and distress are among the most frequent reasons the literature proposes as affecting aggression (Krahe, 2001; Pepler & Rubin, 1991; Tremblay & Nagin, 2005). The present study focused on the incidence of aggression among adolescent children of divorced parents, compared with that of adolescents in two-parent families. It aimed to learn whether divorce as a stressful event results in increased aggression.

### 2. Effect of divorce on children

Divorce causes stress and changes the family's homeostasis. It undermines the family framework that is meant to provide the child with security, permanence, and protection, as well as physical needs. It introduces major disruptions into the child's lifestyle and forges uncertainty surrounding daily life, confusion, anger, anxiety, and a sense of precariousness (Mahoney, Krumrei, & Warner, 2009). As such, it is a difficult and crisis-fraught episode in the family

lifecycle that impacts both the divorcing couple and their children (Barnea & Eldar, 2003; Wood, Repetti, & Roesch, 2004).

During this time, children endure a crisis at the emotional, cognitive, social, and behavioral levels. Regarding the behavioral aspect, children of divorced parents have been found to experience social difficulties, declines in academic achievements, a tendency to abuse drugs, juvenile delinquency, and a tendency toward aggressive behavior (Aro, Huurre, & Junkkari, 2006). Children in these families exhibit greater behavioral problems compared with children whose parents are still married (Amato, 2001). While divorce generally seems to result in changes and stress increases within the family, during the adolescent period divorce is particularly stress-provoking. Adolescence is a period characterized by frequent changes in all realms of life (Broidy et al., 2003; Ronen, 2008). Divorce at that time can specifically influence the adolescent's self-image and self-concept, amplifying behavioral disorders.

In a bid to trace the causes of the development of behavioral problems among children of divorced parents, some researchers have implicated divorce itself as the culprit (Amato, 2001; Grych & Fincham, 1992; Holroyd & Sheppard, 1997; Maxwell & Maxwell, 2003). Others have pointed to various aspects of the child's personality (such as variations in coping styles and empathy) within their family and environment – before, during, and after the divorce (Gjerde, Block, & Block, 1986; Kaczynski, Laurenceau, Lindahl, & Malik, 2006). Some researchers have also pointed to possible positive outcomes, such as when divorce results in “protective” factors like forging a more stable positive bond with at least one parent, which reduces the child's behavioral problems (Barnea & Eldar, 2003; Kaczynski et al., 2006; Kline, Johnston, & Tschann, 1991; Lee, 2002). This calls for an exploration of aggressive

\* Corresponding author at: Bob Shapell School of Social Work, Tel-Aviv University, 69978, Israel. Tel./fax: +972 3 9305551.

E-mail address: [hamama@post.tau.ac.il](mailto:hamama@post.tau.ac.il) (L. Hamama).

behavior along with possible environmental and personal resources, which were all the focus of the present study comparing adolescents from divorced and non-divorced families.

### 3. Aggression

Studies show that nearly 40% of all Israeli students in elementary and secondary schools encounter incidences of taunting, harassment, or bullying at their schools (Benbenishty et al., 2002; Khoury-Kassabir et al., 2004). Part of the sharp rise in the incidence of aggression during adolescence in particular may be attributable to the many changes that occur during this period, which is notoriously turbulent and fraught with pressures of all sorts that force the adolescent to contend with developmental and personality changes in all aspects of their lives (Ronen, 2008).

The term “aggression” is a wide-ranging one, given many definitions that reflect a broad spectrum of explanations for its occurrence. The present study was grounded in Buss and Perry's (1992) theory that links thinking, feelings, and behaviors together, examining them collectively as a person's inclinations rather than actual behavior. According to this theory, aggression is a phenomenon made up of three components (Buss, 1961): (a) behaviors (aggressive acts), which include physical aggression (inflicting injury on someone else with the intention of causing pain) and verbal aggression (manifested as direct or indirect rejection or intimidation that serves as a substitute for, or prelude to, assault); (b) cognitions (hostile thoughts), which are a negative and fixed view of situations in one's environment, and a perception that the world is a menacing and unfair place where nobody can be trusted because everybody acts out of selfish motives; and (c) emotions (angry feelings), which comprise affective responses to frustration, provocation or, occasionally, anxiety, typically coupled with physiological arousal. Anger heightens sensitivity to frustrating situations or obstacles, triggers combative thoughts, and may intensify or incite action against the perceived source of threat (Cicchetti, Ackerman, & Izard, 1995). Although hostility is a cognitive response whereas anger is an emotional one, the two are similar in that both foster negative thoughts of an accusatory nature or thoughts about inflicting harm. Furthermore, anger and aggressive behavior are comparatively short in duration, whereas hostility is persistent and may continue long after the feelings of anger have subsided (Buss, 1961). The present study examined these three components of aggression among adolescents, to study the links between hostile thoughts, angry emotions, and aggressive behaviors in general, and the role of anger in mediating the link between hostility and aggressive behavior in particular.

In light of the rising incidence of aggression among adolescents, researchers are especially interested in learning how coping resources can be effective in reducing this behavior. The present study focused on two such coping resources: social support as an environmental resource and self-control as a personal resource.

### 4. Social support

Social support refers to the network of all the people with whom an individual has personal, social, and family relationships (Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990). According to Cohen and Wills (1985), social support falls into four principal categories – informative, instrumental, emotional, and social. Informative support helps by providing information, advice, and guidance, and helping the individual to understand and cope with difficult events. Instrumental support takes the form of material aid, alleviating pressure by providing a direct response to instrumental needs. Emotional support refers to interactions in which the individual is appreciated, accepted, and valued. Its chief manifestation is in one's feeling that one is significant, appreciated, and loved, and that others are available to turn to for help in times of distress, without fear of being valued any less for doing so. Companionship support

denotes the relationships that one maintains with those nearest and dearest, which furnish a sense of security and belonging. These help reduce one's sense of pressure by improving mood or diverting attention from worrying about one's situation (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Among adolescents – the focus of the present study – the peer group has enormous significance. Without the peer group, adolescents experience loneliness and a sense that they lack belonging to and acceptance by society (Cotterel, 1994). These, in turn, contribute to a sense of frustration and feelings of rejection that are implicated in the emergence of aggressive behavior (Cillessen, van Ijzendoorn, van Lieshout, & Hartup, 1992; Novaco, 1979; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001). Bandura (2001) also highlighted the social network of children or adolescents as one of the main factors predicting whether they will become aggressive or not: children with a good social network, who keep positive company, will generally develop a tendency toward sociable rather than antisocial behavior. Social support, therefore, is an important environmental resource for adolescents.

### 5. Self-control

Another resource available to the individual is at the personal level: the personality resource of self-control. Self-control is a goal-oriented behavior that helps the individual cope with various life situations that disturb mental equilibrium – such as negative feelings, disturbing thoughts, and pain – or that require a change in habits or the adoption of new coping mechanisms (Ronen, 1997). It pertains to the individual's efforts to change responses to external events, as opposed to trying to change external reality (Rosenbaum, 1993). Anyone lacking this resource finds it difficult to cope with the stressful situations that are part and parcel of daily life.

According to Rosenbaum (1993, 2000), self-control behaviors do not arise of their own accord, or out of habit, but require a conscious thought process in three stages. First, people sense a change in their customary ways of thinking or behavior that is hindering their continued activity as planned – and they respond reflexively and emotionally. Next, they make a cognitive appraisal of the significance of the disturbance: If they judge it to jeopardize the achievement of their goal, they decide on an alternative course of action – that they think they are capable of undertaking – which will enable them to achieve the desired goal despite the hindrance. The final stage involves deploying suitable responses to resolve the problem – including behavioral and cognitive skills – with a view to managing, controlling, reducing, tolerating, or changing the external, environmental causes of the pressure (Rosenbaum, 1993, 2000).

Implementing self-control gives one a sense of security, well-being, and independence in directing one's life. People who implement self-control behaviors and skills believe in themselves and act upon their aims. This approach gives people hope, a sense of responsibility, and a sense of power because they perceive themselves as their own agents of change (Ronen, 1997, 2003). Researchers showed lower levels of aggression among both adults and children who possessed self-control skills (Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989; Ronen, 1997; Rosenbaum, 1998). In contrast, low self-control has been linked to behavioral problems and violence among children and youth (Ayduk et al., 2000; Bandura, 2001). In a recent study by Ronen and Rosenbaum (2010), the incidence of violence among youth decreased after they acquired self-control skills.

#### 5.1. The present study design and hypotheses

The present study included two parts. First, we examined aggression in adolescents and environmental and personal coping resources that may ameliorate it, and then we compared adolescents with divorced parents to those from two-parent families. To obtain a sufficiently large sample of children of divorced parents in central Israel, we conducted this study in large integrative schools that include residential

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