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# A Positive View of Peer Acceptance in Aggressive Youth Risk for Future Peer Acceptance

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This study examines the relations between aggressive children's perceived levels of peer acceptance at Time 1 and actual levels of social preference and aggression 30 months later. Participants were 49 children nominated for one of two interventions by teachers for their aggressive behaviors in second or third grade at Time 1. This study used longitudinal data to determine whether a positive view of perceived peer acceptance is a risk factor for continued aggression and social rejection for aggressive children. Social preference scores were derived from sociometric assessment procedures at Time 1 and Time 2. Peer and teacher ratings of aggression were also obtained at Time 1 and Time 2. After controlling for baseline (Time 1) levels of aggression, perceived peer acceptance at Time 1 did not predict aggression at Time 2. However, children who reported higher levels of perceived peer acceptance at Time 1 received lower actual social preference scores at Time 2, after controlling for Time 1 levels of social preference. Implications of these findings for future research and for intervening with aggressive children are discussed. © 2001 Society for the Study of School Psychology. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd

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An expanding body of empirical research documents that aggressive children tend to hold overly optimistic views of their competence and social relatedness compared with more objective indicators (Boivin & Begin, 1989; Hymel, Bowker, & Woody, 1993; Hymel, Rubin, Rowden, & LeMare, 1990). Among peer-rejected children, those who are also aggressive tend to report levels of peer acceptance similar to that of average-status children

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(Patterson, Kupersmidt, and Griesler, 1990; Zakriski & Coie, 1996). Consistent with the view that aggression is associated with a self-enhancing bias, Fagot (1996) reported that 6-year-old children who were observed to engage in higher levels of negative peer interactions rated themselves as more accepted by peers.

In an earlier study (Hughes et al., 1997), we found that aggressive children's ratings of competence and acceptance in Grades 2 and 3 were comparable to or greater than those of nonaggressive children, despite being rated as more deviant by teachers, parents, and peers, and as less accepted and more rejected by peers. Compared with nonaggressive children, aggressive children were also more likely to report undifferentiated (i.e., statistically overlapping) and idealized (i.e., perfect) ratings of self and others, where idealization was defined as the tendency to obtain perfect scores. Furthermore, within the aggressive sample, the tendency to report idealized and inflated views of self and others was associated with higher levels of aggression, irrespective of children's peer-rejection status. The present longitudinal study expanded on this earlier work, and determined whether the positiveness of aggressive children's appraisals of their peer acceptance predicted subsequent levels of aggression and peer acceptance.

A number of explanations have been posited for a self-enhancing bias among aggressive children. Hymel et al. (1993) suggested that aggressive children's optimistic self-views result from a lack of negative feedback from peers who fear retaliation if they respond negatively. However, findings from an experimental study by Zakriski and Coie (1996) challenge this explanation. Zakriski and Coie (1996) manipulated rejection feedback directed at the subject and at another child by confederate peers. Aggressive-rejected boys accurately perceived negative feedback directed at another child but tended to overlook this same feedback directed at them. In light of findings that aggressive children receive more aversive treatment from peers (Hughes et al., 1997; Pellegrini, 1998), it seems clear that underreporting of rejection does not result from a lack of negative responses from peers. Rather, aggressive-rejected children demonstrate a hyposensitivity to negative feedback (Zakriski & Coie, 1996).

Because aggressive children are more likely to have experienced the type of harsh and insensitive parenting that is associated with insecure attachments (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992; Speltz, Greenberg, and DeKlyen, 1990), their idealized self-views may result from selectively filtering negative information, a process referred to as defensive exclusion (Bowlby, 1980). According to attachment theory, children who experience continuing insensitive and unresponsive caregiving learn to mask negative emotions that, in normal circumstances, would elicit corrective parental responses (Cassidy, 1988; Cassidy & Kobak, 1988). Empirical support for this premise comes from studies demonstrating that children who experienced maltreatment (Buchsbaum, Toth, Clyman, Cicchetti, & Emde, 1992) and

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