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Judgments of Aggressive, Withdrawn and Prosocial Behavior: Perceived Control, Anger, Pity and Sympathy in Young Dutch Children

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In two studies, we examined first- and second-grade children's judgments of aggressive, withdrawn, and prosocial behavior by means of fictional scenarios. In study I, we compared judgments of fictional aggressive children with those of fictional withdrawn children. Aggressive children were perceived as more responsible for their behavior and elicited more feelings of anger, while withdrawn children were more likely to be chosen as a friend and elicited more feelings of pity. In study II, we compared judgments of fictional aggressive, withdrawn, and prosocial children with each other. Again aggressive children elicited the strongest feelings of anger, while withdrawn children elicited the strongest feelings of pity. These withdrawn children were perceived as more similar to the prosocial children. In an attempt to test the ecological validity of our sympathy measure, we asked children to rate their peers on a three-point liking scale and checked the scores of those judged to be aggressive by their teachers. These aggressive children were found to receive the lowest liking scores. The results are discussed. © 2002 Society for the Study of School Psychology. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd

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PERCEPTION OF AGGRESSIVE, WITHDRAWN AND PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR IN YOUNG CHILDREN

The importance of peer relationships to children's development is widely acknowledged (Harris, 1999; Hartup & van Lieshout, 1995). Children learn social skills and build their self-confidence in social situations through interacting with other children (Rubin & Ross, 1982). On the other hand, children with deviant behavior may encounter problems in their interac-

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tion with peers (Ladd & Burgess, 1999; Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993; Stormshak, Bierman, Bruschi, Dodge, & Coie, 1999), which can in turn lead to problems later on. This has been extensively researched and demonstrated in children with externalizing behavior, such as those with attention deficits, impulsive tendencies or aggressive behavior (Asher & Parker, 1989; Kupersmidt, Coie, & Dodge, 1990; Parker & Asher, 1987; Woodward & Fergusson, 1999). Researchers differ in their views on the risks of withdrawn behavior. Some believe that there are no indications for regarding this type of behavior as presenting a risk of problems later on (Asher, Markell, & Hymel, 1981; Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel, & Williams, 1990). Others find that there is indeed a risk: withdrawn children are more likely to develop a negative self-image or to suffer from feelings of inferiority, loneliness and depression (Hymel, Woody, & Bowker, 1993; Rubin, 1993; Rubin, LeMare, & Lollis, 1990). Part of the controversy is undoubtedly due to the fact that social withdrawal is quite common early on in development, and therefore cannot at this point be considered deviant. Yet, at an older age (from 10 years on) when fewer children demonstrate this kind of behavior, it becomes more salient (Younger, Schwarzmann, & Ledingham, 1985). Thus, while behavior of an externalizing nature is deviant from early on, withdrawal is not. Yet another explanation may be that the perception of deviancy is different from one type of deviancy to the next. Aggressive children are likely to have harmful effects on those in their vicinity, while withdrawn children do not pose such risks. Thus, it is likely that aggression is less accepted than withdrawal. This nonacceptance may lead to additional risks for development because the peer evaluation is different. Attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1992, 1995) is specifically concerned with perception by others and with the judgments they make.

According to Weiner (1993, 1995) people tend to judge the behavior of others on the basis of perceived responsibility. That is, people are held responsible (or not) for their behavior on the basis of whether or not they could have controlled the behavior. Thus, someone who fails to pass a test because of a lack of effort is held responsible for the result, but someone who fails to pass because of a headache during the test is not. Effort is controllable, while a headache is not. People's inferences about others give rise to affective reactions such as anger or sympathy (compassion). These affective reactions in turn determine how the persons judging will behave toward those judged: sympathy will lead to helping behavior and anger to rejection. Thus, the assumption is that people go through a sequence of attributions (about causal controllability), which leads to assigned responsibility, from there on to emotions and finally to behavior. Such sequences are consistent with prevalent emotion theories that view emotions as both responses to cognitive appraisal and as precursors to action (Frijda, 1986). Such an attributional framework that includes causal beliefs, emotions and

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