



The role of teacher behavior in children's relational aggression development: A five-wave longitudinal study



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ABSTRACT

The present article examined the development of relational aggression in middle childhood and the effects of observed teacher behavior on this development. Relying on social learning theory, we expected that teacher praise would slow down the increase of relational aggression, whereas teacher reprimands would promote the increase of relational aggression. A sample of 570 children (49% boys, $M_{age} = 7$ years and 5 months, > 95% Belgian) was followed from second to fourth grade. Teacher praise and reprimands were observed at the beginning of second grade. Child relational aggression was assessed using teacher and peer reports, collected at five points in time: at the beginning and end of the second grade, at the beginning and end of the third grade, and at the end of the fourth grade. Multilevel modeling showed that relational aggression generally increased from second to fourth grade. Moreover, when teachers displayed more praise, students' relational aggression increased at a slower rate; when teachers displayed more reprimands, students' relational aggression increased at a faster rate. Overall, the results stress the importance of supporting teachers to reduce reprimands and increase praise when interacting with children.

1. Introduction

Over the past decades a lot of research has focused on aggression in the school context. Aggressive behavior has repeatedly been found to increase the risk for later behavioral, social, and academic maladjustment (Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006; Eisner & Malti, 2015). Aggression can take different forms. During middle childhood, relational aggression increases and, along with verbal aggression, gradually replaces direct physical aggression as the most common type (Michiels, Grietens, Onghena, & Kuppens, 2008; Murray-Close, Ostrov, & Crick, 2007; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). Relational aggression is defined as “harming others through purposeful manipulation or damage to their peer relationships” (Crick, 1996, p. 2317). According to Yoon, Barton, and Taiariol (2004) relational aggression in middle childhood and adolescence may become more salient because of developmental changes in interpersonal relationship quality and structure. For example, during middle childhood children's concerns about acceptance in the peer group rise sharply and one way to promulgate their social reputation is to use relational aggression (e.g., gossip) (Rubin, Bukowski, & Bowker, 2015; Rubin et al., 2006). Several studies have shown that relational aggression has harmful, long-term effects, not only for victims but also for initiators of these behaviors (Atherton, Tackett, Ferrer, & Robins, 2016; Crick, Ostrov, & Werner,

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2006; Michiels et al., 2008; Rys & Bear, 1997). Therefore it is paramount to understand the antecedents of relational aggression. This study focuses, more specifically, on the role of teachers' behavior in the development of relational aggression in middle childhood, which has remained largely unexplored.

Referring to bio-ecological models (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), proximal processes, that is bidirectional interactions between the child and its immediate environment, play a central role in child development. With regard to the antecedents of relational aggression in this micro-context, most research to date has focused on parent-child interactions (e.g., Michiels et al., 2008). Building on different theoretical frameworks, such as Bandura's (1973) social learning theory, researchers have found evidence that power-assertive discipline (i.e., using threats and aggression to discipline the child) increases the risk of children also using aggressive strategies to achieve desirable outcomes in their relationships with peers (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Hart, DeWolf, & Burts, 1992). In addition, lower parental responsiveness has been found to relate to higher relational aggression in children (Hart, Nelson, Robinson, Olsen, & McNeilly-Choque, 1998). A possible explanation is that children copy the unresponsive, insensitive, and cold behavior of their parents in their own peer relationships (Crick et al., 1999; Hart et al., 1998).

Similar to variables in the home context, variables in the school context are likely to shape the development of relational aggression as well. From a social learning theory perspective, teachers serve as role models for their students and teacher behavior is assumed to influence child social behavior through modeling positive or negative relational skills (e.g., Gest & Rodkin, 2011; Luckner & Pianta, 2011). Teachers who use a lot of reprimands (i.e., punitive corrections for non-compliant behavior) focus on the negative behavior of others and react with negative affect. Children may view such aggressive, angry, and/or irritated behaviors used by their role models as successful strategies for social interaction (Kuppens, Laurent, Heyvaert, & Onghena, 2013). When they are confronted with peers they may model these behaviors by using similar aggressive behaviors, including relational aggression. In contrast, teachers who use more praise (i.e., a positive reinforcement for appropriate behavior) may model focusing on positive characteristics of others and using positive relational skills.

Relatedly, theory and research on the concept of normative beliefs suggest that when children interact with or observe socializing agents, this influences their normative beliefs (e.g., Linder & Werner, 2012; Werner & Grant, 2009). Normative beliefs are a person's cognitions about the acceptability or unacceptability of certain behaviors, for example whether or not it is allowed to exclude someone when being angry at this person (Henry et al., 2000; Huesmann & Guerra, 1997). In a sample of third- to sixth-grade children, Werner and Grant (2009), for instance, found that mothers' normative beliefs about relational aggression were significantly linked to their children's normative beliefs regarding the appropriateness of relational aggression. Similarly, Linder and Werner (2012) found that watching television programs involving relational aggression raised third- to sixth-grade children's beliefs that this behavior is appropriate. In line with these findings, we contend that interacting with teachers who display praise versus reprimands towards their class, can affect the normative beliefs of their students regarding appropriate social behavior, which in turn can prompt children to behave accordingly (Henry et al., 2000). Several studies have indeed found associations between children's normative beliefs about relational aggression and their actual use of relational aggression. Werner and Hill (2010), for example, found that children who viewed relational aggression as acceptable, showed more relational aggressive behavior one year later.

Several studies have convincingly shown that positive teacher behaviors towards the class group (such as emotional support) positively relate to students' adaptive social behavior and negatively to problem behavior (e.g., Mashburn et al., 2008). Negative teacher behaviors towards the class, on the other hand, have shown to predict lower social competence among students (e.g., Brophy-Herb, Lee, Nievar, & Stollak, 2007). Research also showed that teacher praise and teacher reprimands have an effect on general aggression in elementary school (e.g., Gorman-Smith, & Metropolitan Area Child Study Research Group, 2003). However, the role of teachers in the development of relational aggression remains largely unexplored. Two notable exceptions are the studies by Luckner and Pianta (2011) and Leff et al. (2011). The first study examined associations between teacher behavior at the class level and children's relational aggression in a fifth grade sample of 894 children (50% boys). Multiple regression analyses showed that higher classroom organization was related to lower levels of relational aggression for children who had higher initial levels of relational aggression. A possible explanation is that teachers who effectively manage time and behavior in the classroom decrease the opportunities for negative peer interactions (Luckner & Pianta, 2011). In addition, a marginally significant negative association between classroom emotional support and children's relational aggression was found. To explain this association, the authors suggest that emotionally supportive teachers can model positive relational skills for students to use in their own peer interactions (Luckner & Pianta, 2011). The second study focused on developing a classroom climate observation assessment tool and preliminarily validating it in 18 third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade classrooms in a large urban public school district. The results showed that teacher responsiveness, indicated by the ratio of observed teacher praise to observed teacher reprimands, was negatively correlated with peer nominated classroom levels of relational aggression (Leff et al., 2011). Both studies were cross-sectional, leaving the question unanswered of whether teacher behavior impacts the development of children's relational aggression in the longer run. The present study aims at contributing to this research domain, by examining the longitudinal effects of teacher behavior at class level on the development of relational aggression, the most common form of aggression in middle childhood.

Examining the role of teacher behavior in the development of relational aggression, we differentiated between positive (i.e., praise) and negative (i.e., reprimands) teacher behavior, in line with current research. We made this distinction given that both are unique constructs and not merely opposites on one dimension (Hughes, Cavell, & Wilson, 2001). For example, it is important that teachers do not model bad behavior, but in addition they also need to model alternative, positive behavior (e.g., Gest & Rodkin, 2011). Research also showed that positive and negative dimensions of teacher behavior make independent contributions to several child outcomes. Hughes and colleagues (2001), for example, found that teacher support and conflict had unique effects on peer perceptions of children's competencies and peer acceptance of children in third and fourth grade. Also, recently, researchers have acknowledged the importance of examining single components of teacher behavior in addition to more broad measurements (e.g.,

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