

Editorial

How recent developments in the study of relational aggression and close relationships in early childhood advance the field

The study of relational aggression, including the developmental onset and course, has been rapidly expanding over the past 15 years. Recently scholars have been focusing on the early childhood period to understand the developmental onset, stability, and associated outcomes (see [Crick, Ostrov, Appleyard, Jansen, & Casas, 2004](#); [Ostrov & Crick, 2005](#)). This work has demonstrated that relational aggression is present during early childhood ([Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997](#); [McNeilly-Choque, Hart, Nelson, Robinson, & Olsen, 1996](#)) and is more sophisticated than previously thought ([Ostrov, Woods, Jansen, Casas, & Crick, 2004](#)). Researchers have explored the role of language processes ([Bonica, Yeshova, Arnold, Fisher, & Zeljo, 2003](#)), temperament ([Park et al., 2005](#); [Russell, Hart, Robinson, & Olsen, 2003](#)) peer status ([Nelson, Robinson, & Hart, 2005](#)) and other associated processes during early childhood. To date though, most of the research on relational aggression has been limited in two important ways.

The first limitation of past research is that most of this work has not explored the role of voluntary and involuntary close relationships. The literature on relational aggression in friendship contexts during early childhood is slowly increasing (e.g., [Burr, Ostrov, Jansen, Cullerton-Sen, & Crick, 2005](#); [Johnson & Foster, 2005](#)) but work exploring the role of closed-field or involuntary relationships at home (i.e., parents and siblings) during early childhood is lacking (cf. [Stauffer & Dehart, 2005](#)). Close interpersonal relationships are an important developmental context ([Hartup, 1996](#); [Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000](#)). Clearly peer relationships are an important relationship system for understanding the development and course of aggressive behavior across development ([Coie & Dodge, 1998](#)). However, an in-depth analysis of the way in which other relationship systems may affect the development and course of relational aggression is crucial. Given the importance of close interpersonal relationships, and in particular sibling and parent–child relationships for young children ([Dunn, 1993](#)), it is imperative that we incorporate other contexts and relationships in the study of relational aggression. The main goal of the current special issue was to explore the role of close relationships on relational aggression during early childhood.

The second main limitation in the current literature is a reliance on the perceptions of peers, teachers, and self-reports. Although these studies are incredibly important and have furthered our scientific knowledge, they may be biased by gender stereotypes (for discussion see [Ostrov, Crick, & Keating, 2005](#)). Therefore, relatively less biased forms of assessment including observational methods are needed. To date, only a few observational studies have been conducted during early childhood (e.g., [McNeilly-Choque et al., 1996](#); [Ostrov, in press](#); [Ostrov & Keating, 2004](#)). The second goal of the current issue was to widen our methodological approach to include multiple methods of assessment including various observational methods. Three of the five articles in this special issue use developmentally appropriate observational methods and the other two studies have a multi-method, multi-informant approach, which is important for advancing the field.

The first research paper by Werner, Senich, and Przepyszny explored the role of maternal influences on children's relational and physical aggression ($N=87$). The authors developed a new instrument comprised of hypothetical vignettes to gauge how mothers feel and what they would do in various situations. On average, mothers reported lower levels of negative affect and a smaller likelihood of intervening when they imagined their child was presented as engaged in relational aggression relative to physical aggression. In addition, the authors found that mothers who would intervene for relationally aggressive behaviors would do so with words or actions that indicated that the child had

violated a social or moral convention. More importantly, those mothers who proposed interventions that communicated the behavior was a *social rule violation* had children who were described by teachers as less relationally aggressive and more likely to share and help others in the classroom. We agree with the authors' position that future research that explores mother's actual intervention strategies when supervising live playgroups is needed. In addition, longitudinal designs would help to further tease apart the direction of effects and processes by which parental beliefs and practices impacts future relational aggression.

The second manuscript by Casas, Weigel, Crick, Ostrov, Woods, Jansen-Yeh, and Huddleston-Casas was conducted to further understanding of the role of early parent-child relationship features and children's relational and physical aggression with peers ($N=122$). In keeping with prior research with older children, the role of parenting styles, and specifically *parental psychological control*, were explored. In addition, this study explored the level of agreement between parents and teachers. A key contribution of this study was the development of a reliable parent-report measure of relational aggression for use during early childhood. There was documented correspondence between home and school for physical aggression but not for relational aggression. Since some types of relationally aggressive behaviors require a group, or at least 3 children (see Ostrov et al., 2004), it is possible that the peer context itself facilitates relational aggression. Clearly, future work is needed to explore the cross-context stability of these behaviors and the further validity of this new measure. More importantly, mothers and fathers' reports of authoritarian and permissive parenting were positively associated with children's relational aggression. Interestingly, these findings were complex and dependent upon the sex of the focal child and parent. In addition, children whose parents engaged in high levels of psychological control (e.g., love withdrawal) were more relationally and physically aggressive. More specifically, fathers' use of psychological control was predictive of girls' relational aggression, which is in keeping with past literature. The findings from this paper further underscore the importance of including information about the sex of all members of the relationship dyad or system in investigations of relational aggression (Pellegrini, 2001). These points are underscored in the commentary provided by Pellegrini and Roseth in this special issue.

The third paper by Stauffacher and DeHart explores two relationship contexts (i.e., friendships and sibling relationships) as children transition from early to middle childhood ($N=46$). In addition, this study used careful home-based semi-structured observations. The most revealing finding was that during early childhood focal children directed more relationally aggressive behavior toward their siblings than towards their friends. As the role of the peer relationship becomes more salient at the start of middle childhood (i.e., age 7) the findings suggest that the rate of relational aggression within sibling relationships drops and a simultaneous increase in relational aggression within friendships occurs. This study further points to the gender constellation of the sibling dyad, suggesting that some pairs are more at risk for continuing to use relationally aggressive behaviors. Although this study is one of a few that explores social behavior among peers in the home, future research should explore the rates of relational aggression toward friends within different peer contexts such as school, since many of the relationally aggressive behaviors (e.g., social exclusion, spreading rumors) by definition requires larger groups.

The fourth article by Ostrov, Crick, and Stauffacher also addressed sibling and peer relationships and relational aggression. Specifically, this study ($N=50$), which was part of an on-going longitudinal study, explored the association between older siblings' relational and physical aggression with peers and their younger siblings' aggressive behavior with peers. This study used an intensive naturalistic observation approach to capture the aggressive behavior of children at school. The authors found that older siblings' peer directed relational aggression was associated with their younger siblings' peer directed relational aggression. In addition, links with physical aggression were also documented. Older siblings were both more relationally and physically aggressive than their younger siblings. Finally, this study also illustrates the importance of documenting the sex of the recipient (i.e., victim) of aggression. This study found that relational aggression was more often directed to female than male peers and physical aggression was more often displayed toward male rather than female peers. Future research is needed to explicitly examine if the amount of relational aggression between the siblings in the home environment predicts the amount of peer directed relational aggression at school.

The final study by Crick, Ostrov, Burr, Cullerton-Sen, Jansen-Yeh, and Ralston was designed to test several questions concerning the development and significance of relational aggression between peers during early childhood. Specifically, this longitudinal and observational study of 91 preschoolers found moderate levels of stability across 18 months for both relational and physical aggression. This is the first evidence of such temporal stability during early childhood and it is even more revealing because the focal children were within different peer contexts, with different teachers, and new observers across the study. Further validity and reliability for the observational methods used in this

study was demonstrated, with over 29,000 min of observation collected across four time points. This study also documented important sex differences supporting the sex-linked hypothesis of aggression. That is, girls were more relationally aggressive than male peers and boys were more physically aggressive than female peers. More specifically, girls directed their relationally aggressive behavior more often to same-sex peers than to opposite-sex peers. Finally, this study is the first to indicate that early childhood relationally aggressive behaviors are associated with future peer rejection, an important indicator of social–psychological adjustment problems.

Collectively these five studies, conducted in four independent laboratories, highlight the role of studying relational aggression during early childhood. More importantly, these studies indicate the various relationship contexts within which relationally aggressive behaviors are displayed during the early child years. There is clear evidence that both voluntary (i.e., peer) and involuntary relationships (i.e., parent–child and siblings) serve as important factors in the development and course of relational aggression. A close interpersonal relationship focus provides the opportunity for witnessing the emergent properties of the relationship (Reis et al., 2000) and helps applied developmental psychologists understand various means of influence and potential points of intervention.

It is our goal that this special issue will serve as the impetus for further research on relational aggression and close relationships across development. Each paper, the expert commentary, and book review provide several avenues for future research. We hope that future applied scholars will continue to explore these questions, communicate these findings to families and key stakeholders, and work to translate this research into effective intervention and prevention initiatives.

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