

Current Directions in the Study of Relational Aggression During Early Childhood

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The study of relational aggression during early childhood has steadily been gaining interest by scholars, educators and professionals during the last few years (see Crick, Ostrov, Appleyard, Jansen, & Casas, 2004). As a field we have begun to recognize the importance of studying multiple subtypes of aggression and victimization across development, but in particular among young children (e.g., Bonica, Yeshova, Arnold, Fisher, & Zeljo, 2003; Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997; Goldstein, Tisak, & Boxer, 2002; Hart, Nelson, Robinson, Olsen, & McNeilly-Choque, 1998; Hawley, 2003; Ostrov & Keating, 2004; Ostrov, Woods, Jansen, Casas & Crick, 2004; Russell, Hart, Robinson, & Olsen 2003; Sebanc, 2003). Investigating relational aggression in early childhood presents a number of conceptual and methodological challenges (for review see, Crick et al., 2004). The studies in this special issue present several developmentally appropriate methods and innovative approaches for

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dealing with these challenges and contribute significantly to our conceptual understanding of the development of relational aggression during early childhood.

Despite a number of recent advances in the study of relational aggression during early childhood, there are many unanswered questions. Some of the myriad of questions that remain include: What is the role of early peer status in the display of relational aggression? What is the function of relational aggression in the formation and stability of peer relationships and other close relationships (e.g., friendships and sibling relationships)? How does the parent-child relationship and more specifically parental behaviors impact young children's development of relational aggression? What are the developmental processes and social-cognitive capacities (e.g., language, temperament) associated with relational aggression among young children? Is relational aggression stable during early childhood? How are adjustment problems associated concurrently and prospectively with relational aggression during this same time period? What is the unique association between early emotion and relational aggression? Finally, what is the association between relational and physical aggression and is there evidence of differential predictions and discriminant validity for these behaviors among young children? The studies in this special issue addressed many of these fundamental questions using large diverse samples and innovative methodological designs. In addition, collectively the papers raise many additional empirical questions for future developmental research.

In the first study, the association between relational aggression and peer status during early childhood was assessed with a relatively large sample (Nelson, Robinson, & Hart, 2005). A major finding indicated that controversial status girls (i.e., high on both positive and negative sociometric peer nominations) were more relationally aggressive than their average status peers. However, controversial status girls were not above average for physical aggression. This study highlighted the successful use of peer and teacher reports for making distinctions between subtypes of social behavior (i.e., relational from physical aggression) during early childhood.

In addition to knowing about important peer status links, researchers are increasingly recognizing the importance of studying close relationships (e.g., friend, sibling relationships) in the display of relational aggression during early childhood. The second, third, and fourth studies all addressed this issue. Johnson and Foster (2005) used peer sociometric nominations of friendship and teacher reports to explore the role of friendship status and relational aggression among kindergarteners. These authors determined that relational aggression was negatively associated with peer acceptance, number of mutual friends and friendship stability over the course of 2 months, even when controlling for the role of physical aggression. This study further demonstrated that peer and teacher reports provide unique information about relational aggression for young children. Findings indicated that physical aggression did not contribute unique variance in the prediction of friendship variables when relational aggression was controlled, indicating that relational aggression may uniquely predict friendship status during kindergarten.

The third study (Burr, Ostrov, Jansen, Cullerton-Sen, & Crick, 2005) further tested the associations between relational aggression and close peer relationships in a preschool sample. Specifically, a short-term longitudinal study (i.e., across an academic year) was conducted using peer sociometric ratings to determine reciprocal friendships and extensive free play

naturalistic observations of relational aggression were obtained in preschool. This study revealed that preschool children who were more relationally aggressive than their peers, as determined by observational methods, had more mutual friends but only during the second time period (i.e., the end of the school year). When comparing the second and third studies, it is important to highlight that these investigations relied upon different designs (e.g., duration of the study), samples (i.e., preschool versus kindergarten) and methodologies for assessing both relational aggression and friendship status. Clearly, future research is needed to resolve the differences in obtained findings, particularly those that employ longitudinal time intervals (e.g., from preschool to kindergarten and beyond).

The fourth study (Stauffacher & DeHart, 2005) is the first known study to investigate the role of sibling interactions during early childhood in home settings with observational methods. Findings from this investigation showed that relational aggression was used much more often with siblings than with friends and that age and gender of the sibling were important factors. In particular, this study suggested that having an older relationally aggressive sister may serve as a risk factor for young children displaying and potentially receiving these behaviors. Collectively, these three studies demonstrate the need to continue to study voluntary (i.e., friendships) and involuntary (i.e., sibling) close relationships during early childhood and specifically more attention is needed to understand both the content and quality of these dyadic relationships over time.

The concurrent relations between indices of language capacity and aggression subtypes were explored in the fifth study (Estrem, 2005) using advanced statistical modeling techniques. In this sample of three and four-year-olds, both teacher reported relational and physical aggression scores increased as language scores decreased. When physical aggression was controlled, a stronger association between expressive language skills and relational aggression was found for girls relative to boys. Receptive language skill was associated with physical aggression more than relational aggression, especially for boys. In the context of past findings (e.g., Bonica et al., 2003), further research is needed to replicate these gender differences and discriminant associations with types of language and subtypes of aggression.

The sixth study (Park, Essex, Zahn-Waxler, Armstrong, Klein, & Goldsmith, 2005) consists of a longitudinal, multi-informant, multiple method investigation from birth into middle childhood on 207 children. This is the first known study to demonstrate moderate stability for relational and physical aggression across the early childhood period into middle childhood. Given the level of co-occurrence between relational and physical aggression in the sample, the authors introduced a novel methodological procedure for determining the severity (i.e., combined impact of both physical and relational aggression) and directionality (i.e., relative preponderance of relational versus physical aggression) of the aggression scores. Results revealed that girls showed a greater preponderance of relational aggression and boys demonstrated a greater preponderance of physical aggression. In addition, girls who had temperamental features consistent with disinhibition and who were exposed to paternal depression were at greater risk for displaying relational aggression. These findings demonstrate the need to continue to study the unique effects of relational aggression relative to physical aggression and the potential etiological role of temperament as well as early parent-child interactions.

A longitudinal investigation that included children with early disruptive behavior at clinical and subclinical levels during preschool who were assessed at age seven and again in early adolescence is the final study in this special issue (Zahn-Waxler, Park, Essex, Slattery, & Cole, 2005). Innovative methods were introduced in which children's narratives and emotions during hypothetical conflict and distress situations were used to predict future relational and physical aggression. The authors revealed that, for girls, early hostile themes predicted greater relational and physical aggression in adolescence, and early prosocial themes and perceptions of parental support predicted relatively low levels of relational aggression during adolescence. Findings further demonstrated the unique developmental pathways for boys and girls. This study highlighted the role that narratives and early emotions may play in the development of aggression subtypes.

Collectively, studies included in this special issue provide evidence that relational aggression is a salient construct during early childhood. Specifically, more research is needed to further delineate the unique developmental role of relational aggression in the lives of young boys and girls. We encourage child development and early education scholars to not only continue to study the development of relational aggression but also to specifically conduct research that advances our efforts to intervene during this period. The studies in the current issue speak to the need for the development of empirically based intervention and prevention efforts for young children. These studies offer some potential tools for assessing the integrity of various prevention and intervention efforts and provide some possible initial points of intervention. We are encouraged by the number of independent and innovative research programs in the field that specifically address relational aggression during early childhood and we call for and certainly welcome further study on behalf of the young child.

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