

Aggression

and young children

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Diane Louise Szarkowicz

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to all those who appear in the photographs.

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Registered for posting as a publication—

PP232100/00036

ISSN 1440-5148

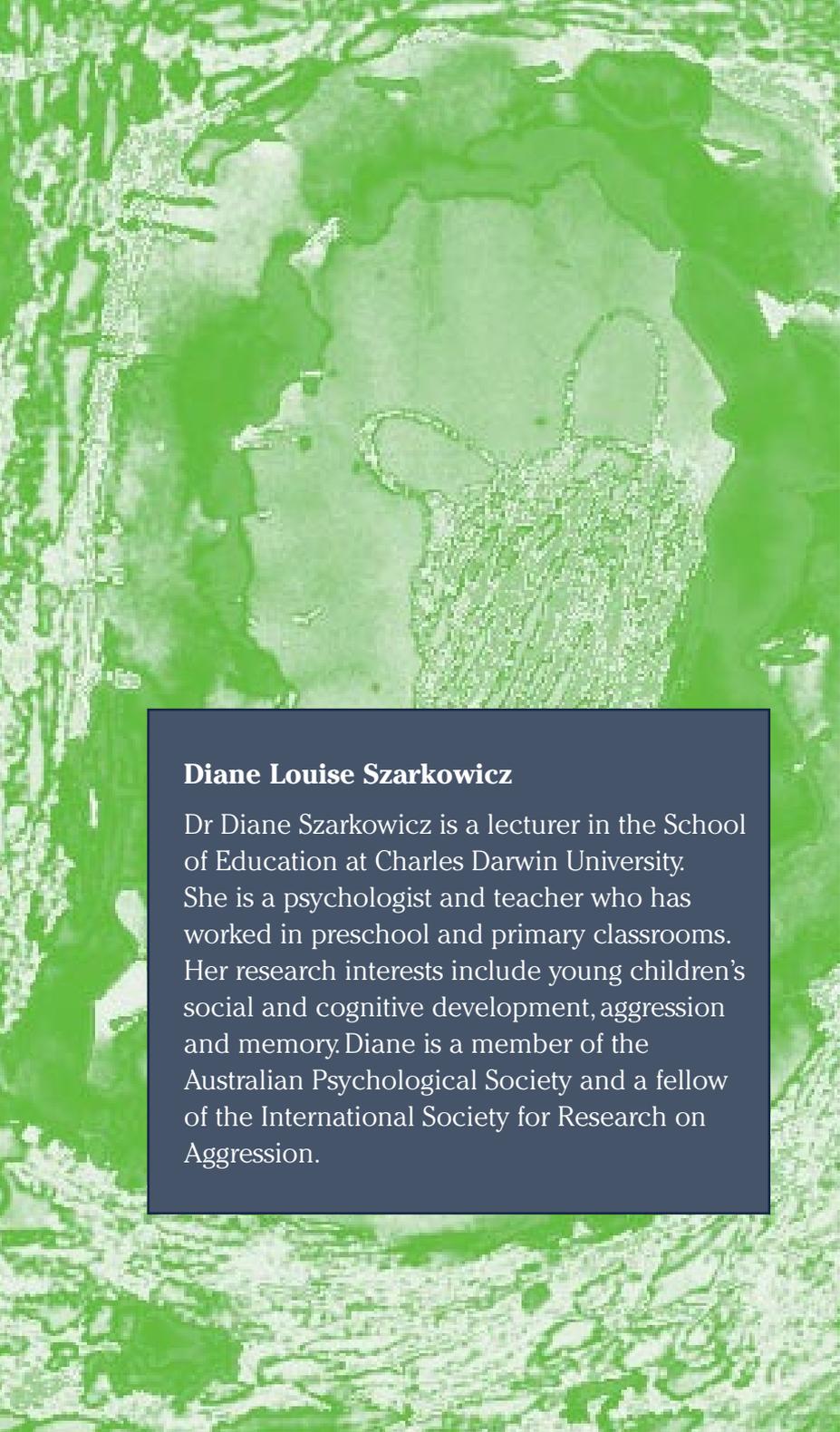
ISBN 1 875890 742

Printed by National Capital Printing, Canberra



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Introduction

Aggression is any behaviour that is attacking and offensive. Aggression can be physical like hitting, and verbal such as gossiping. Most of us experience some type of aggression every day. We see it in the media, when driving on the road, and in the playground or workplace. While many types of aggression are not accepted in our society, many children experience it from an early age. Unfortunately for some children, their experiences of aggression begin soon after birth because they live in an aggressive home. For others, their experiences might not start until they spend time with other children in a setting such as playgroup or school.

What is aggression?

Most adults think of fighting when they hear the word aggression. This type of aggression is called hostile aggression and is used when a person wants to hurt someone or something. Very serious cases of hostile aggression are often called violence. However, not all aggression is hostile. Sometimes we can be aggressive without meaning to hurt others. For example, some children will push others so they can be first in line. These children do not mean to hurt others; they just want to be first. We call this type of aggression instrumental aggression because it is used only when we want something, such as an object or attention, and do not intend to hurt others (Berkowitz, 1993). Instrumental and hostile aggression can also be called direct aggression because they directly hurt other people and objects.

Aggression can also be indirect. We see indirect aggression when people gossip, try to break up friendships and tease others (Crick, 1995). Indirect aggression is also called symbolic or relational aggression (Horowitz & Bordens, 1995). This type of aggression is often seen when young children use phrases such as, 'You can't play with us', or 'He has girls' germs'. Generally, girls use more indirect aggression than boys do, and boys more direct aggression than girls (see Tremblay, 2002).

Types of aggression

Direct aggression	Instrumental aggression Aggression used when we want something but don't mean to hurt others.
Direct aggression	Hostile aggression Physical aggression that is intended to hurt others.
Indirect aggression	Symbolic or relational aggression Verbal aggression that is intended to hurt people or their relationships with others.



Triggers of aggression

Lots of events, emotions and situations can trigger aggression. Sometimes children use direct aggression when they do not have the language to express their needs and wants. At other times children can be aggressive when they want to express their anger or hurt. For example, a child might break a toy when he/she is not allowed to play outside. Feelings of stress, depression, and fear can also lead to children being aggressive. For instance, some children who find it hard to learn in the classroom act 'tough' to take the attention away from their learning difficulties.

Where possible, we need to avoid 'labelling', or calling children aggressive. When children are labelled as aggressive they are more likely to behave aggressively. This can happen because we set different expectations for children we are told are aggressive. This does not always happen consciously; sometimes we do it without realising. For example, if we know that a child is aggressive we tend to watch them more carefully and respond to any potential sign of aggression quickly, often before any real aggression has been shown. This can frustrate and confuse young children, and, for some, the best way to show adults how they feel is through aggressive behaviour.

In this book research about the development, causes, and implications of aggression in young children is discussed. This book also lists some ways that adults can help children develop and use approaches other than aggression. The ideas presented may be of value to caregivers and educators of young children, as well as to parents.

Young children and development

Early development and the role of adults

During the early years of life children develop lots of new skills and abilities. Some they seem to pick up very quickly, while others they need time to develop. In late infancy they begin to see what makes them angry and frustrated, and sometimes they get aggressive with what makes them feel this way. Aggressive reactions are normal for young children because they do not naturally know that aggression isn't

“Young children watch adults and copy many of the things they do.”



acceptable. Often they don't know other ways of expressing themselves. Young children also have trouble seeing things from other people's points of view and do not immediately know that they can hurt others. The best way for children to learn appropriate behaviour is for adults to teach them.

Adults are very important role models for young children. Young children watch adults and copy many of the things they do. This watching and copying is part of the way children learn about appropriate behaviour. If adults do not show young children appropriate behaviour, children can miss out on important opportunities to learn alternatives to aggression. Harsh adult reactions to aggression, such as smacking, do not teach children appropriate behaviour. In fact, aggressive responses from adults can actually increase aggression in children (Brook, Zheng, Whitman & Brook, 2001). Positive approaches that praise and show appropriate behaviours are better than those that are verbally or physically harsh.

The long-term consequences of aggression

—The aggressive child

Aggression can cause many long-term problems for children. Many aggressive children are ignored by their peers, do not do as well academically, and are at a higher risk for juvenile delinquency (see Brook et al., 2001; Coie & Dodge, 1998). When aggressive children are ignored by their peers they generally spend more time with children who are similar to themselves. That is, children who are aggressive tend to spend their time with aggressive children. When aggressive children are with other aggressive children they have less chance to learn alternative behaviours to aggression.

Early aggression does not only predict later aggression but also other serious antisocial behaviours. What might start as teasing or annoying can grow into physical fighting and then into criminal behaviour such as assault or robbery (see Leff, Power, Manz, Costigan, & Nabors, 2001). If aggressive children are not given attention during their early years, their aggression can cause them to have long-term social problems. For example, research

tells us that aggressive eight-year-olds may have a higher chance of long-term unemployment when they are 30 years old (Kokko & Pulkkinen, 2000). However, many of these negative consequences can be avoided if children experience a nurturing, positive home environment.

—The receiver of the aggression

There can also be long-term problems for children who are subjected to aggressive behaviour. These children may have poor relationships with their peers, anxiety and academic problems (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). Most children are resilient to small experiences of aggression at an early age. However, ongoing experiences can hurt children's self-esteem and social development. For example, if the aggression makes a child feel anxious, the child might try to avoid situations where they experienced the aggression. When this happens, adults need to make sure that the child feels safe by taking away, physically and psychologically, any threat of aggression.

Indirect aggression can have very harmful effects on a child's self-esteem. Children who experience indirect aggression can feel very alone because the aggression regularly involves more than one child and is often not noticed by adults. Sometimes adults underestimate the way indirect aggression makes children feel, believing that 'name-calling' does not hurt children in the long term. Unfortunately for some children, the psychological damage of indirect aggression can be lifelong. It is important that adults try to prevent indirect aggression by teaching children about how words can hurt. It can also be helpful to teach children strategies for dealing with indirect aggression. For example, when Alex tells Marcus that he cannot play, Marcus needs to know that he has choices and can find other children to play with.



What leads to aggression?

Childhood or adolescence?

The early years are an important time in the development of aggression. Many of the aggressive behaviours seen in older children actually develop during the early childhood years. For example, long-term aggression appears to develop before six years of age (see Nagin & Tremblay, 1999), there is a good chance an aggressive five-year-old will become an aggressive 14-year-old (Bor, Najam, O'Callaghan, Williams & Anstey, 2001), and aggression during the early and middle childhood years can predict later juvenile delinquency (Farrington, 1991).

However, while the research tells us that aggression starts in the early years, there are still many people who believe that it develops in late childhood or adolescence (Tremblay, 2002). There are two reasons for many of us believing this, and both relate to our noticing aggression in older children more. The first reason is that older children are physically stronger than younger children and can cause bigger injuries. The second reason is that younger children generally use more instrumental aggression, such as pushing to be first in line, and older children use more hostile aggression. Usually this is because young children are still developing social skills such as turn-taking and sharing. Most episodes of instrumental aggression end quickly, but are a good opportunity for children to learn that they can hurt, and be hurt by, others.

Genetics

Most researchers agree that there are genetic and social reasons for aggression (eg. Berkowitz, 1993; Tremblay, 2002). While there is much evidence suggesting that aggression runs in families and doesn't change much over time (Coie & Dodge, 1998), not all children who have a family history of aggression will be aggressive. What seems to be as important as, if not more important than, genetics is the way adults interact with children (Kokko & Pulkkinen, 2000). If we bring children up in caring, nurturing environments they are less likely to be aggressive.

“Children do not only learn aggression by copying others.”



Learning aggression by watching others

Children can learn to be aggressive by watching others (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). For example, Hannah snatched a toy from another child because she saw Sam do this. In this type of learning Hannah is copying Sam's behaviour. Now imagine that Hannah and Sam were closely supervised by an adult. When either of them tried to snatch a toy from another child the adult supervisor would be able to stop them and show them different ways of behaving. Every time their aggressive behaviour was stopped and they were shown different ways of behaving, the more chances they would have to learn alternative behaviours to aggression.

Learning aggression by reinforcement

Children do not only learn aggression by copying others. They can also learn it by having their aggression encouraged or reinforced. Imagine that Juan is four years old and at preschool. Juan really likes trucks and always plays in the sandpit when the trucks are there. When another child tries to play with one of the trucks Juan pushes the child away. No adults have seen him do this yet. Every time Juan uses aggression, gets what he wants and is not shown that it is inappropriate, his aggressive behaviour will be encouraged. With repeated encouragement, the aggressive behaviour will become harder to change. However, if an adult stops Juan when he starts to push another child, lets him know that pushing is not appropriate behaviour and shows him different ways of expressing his wants, Juan's aggressive behaviour will be discouraged.

Aggression and physical development

It is a natural part of development for young children at some time to use physical aggression. Sometimes it is accidental when they do not know their physical capabilities, while at other times they mean it and want to hurt another person. Research tells us that we are the most physically aggressive when we are about two years old (Trembley et al., 1999). This is because at this age we explore the world by walking, pulling, pushing, throwing, and climbing. Two-year-olds don't have all of the thinking

and language skills they need, so they have to rely on their physical skills. It is only through interactions with peers and adults that they can develop their other skills. During these early years it is very important for children to understand that aggression is not acceptable. Children should learn that language, rather than aggression, is important when expressing their needs and emotions.

Thinking and aggression

Many children who are directly aggressive have trouble understanding social situations (see Dodge & Crick, 1990). These children cannot always tell if other children mean to be aggressive, and do not know how to react to non-aggressive behaviour such as accidents. When they do not know the difference, these children react aggressively to non-aggressive behaviour. Children who are more aggressive also tend to have trouble understanding other people's feelings and seeing things from different points of view (Capage & Watson, 2001). The ability to do this is important for understanding the consequences of our actions. Some children need to be taught these basic thinking skills as well as alternative behaviours to aggression.

As children become aware of the thoughts and feelings of others they begin to understand how to manipulate, lie, and trick (Dunn, 1994). Some children use these understandings to hurt others by teasing and tricking; for example, telling others who they can and cannot play with, teasing others about the clothes they wear, or saying they are not allowed to play with particular toys. These behaviours can hurt children and are often not noticed by adults. When adults see indirect aggression like this, they need to teach children that it is not appropriate behaviour.

Emotions and aggression

Unfortunately not all children grow up in nurturing environments. Domestic violence, family break-up, lack of supervision, inappropriate role models, and inconsistent or harsh parenting can leave children with feelings of anxiety, fear, loneliness or confusion. Young children do not automatically know how to express such feelings and sometimes show them through aggression. The best

way to help children who express their emotions through aggression is first to find out what is causing them to feel the way they do. Once the cause of these emotions is known, adults can make changes to help children feel more positive and secure. After changes have been made, children can be taught alternative ways of expressing their emotions.

The need for routines

Young children need routines and consistency. These help children to develop a sense of security and identity within their family. Sometimes routines get lost because of our hectic lives, making young children feel confused and frustrated. Just as fear and anxiety can trigger aggression, so can lack of security. Providing consistency in our routines and in the way we respond to children's behaviours helps them to understand what we expect, and can make them feel more secure in their home and school environments.

Aggression and the media

Many people are concerned about aggression in the media and computer games. Very young children do not understand the difference between real and pretend, especially on television, and sometimes copy the things they see. It is not until about four years of age that they begin to understand that things are not always as real as they seem to be (Flavell, 1986). Because of this, it helps to talk to children about the aggression they see on screen and to explain how some of it is not real.

We are still not sure how media violence impacts on young children. Some research shows that it makes children more aggressive while other studies show no changes (see Anderson & Dill, 2000). What we do know is that the immediate environment—family, neighbourhood, and school—has the greatest impact on young children. Since we all have some control over this environment, it is important that we concentrate on making it as non-aggressive as possible.





“ Talk to children from an early age about how aggression makes them feel. ”

Ideas that can help

Ways of responding

Children do not learn alternatives to aggression on their own. They need adults to teach them. Any response to aggression needs to be consistent and must focus on both the aggressive child and the recipient of the aggression.

When an adult sees a child being aggressive they should:

- first, stop the aggressive behaviour and tell the aggressive child that it is not acceptable;
- second, give attention to the recipient of the aggression and make sure this child is safe;
- next, introduce a strategy to help reduce the aggressive behaviour in the future.

There are many strategies that can be used to reduce aggression in children. The following ideas may be useful for anyone who spends time with children.

Helping children to avoid aggression

- Feelings such as anger, frustration, fear and loss can trigger aggression in young children because they do not automatically know other ways of expressing their emotions. As adults it is important for us to find out what is causing these emotions and make changes. We must always address the cause of aggression as well as the aggressive behaviour.
- Talk to children from an early age about how aggression makes them feel. This helps them to understand aggression and how it can make other people feel. Children can suggest how they should behave when being a good friend. These talks need to focus on the way words and actions can hurt people.
- Children need boundaries and rules for their behaviour. Adults need to talk to children about acceptable behaviour and develop a set of short, clear rules. When setting a rule for aggressive behaviour include direct and indirect aggression. For example, the rule may say, 'Use words and actions that don't hurt others.' Make sure that the rules you set are ones you will follow and model for children.

- Children need to think about how they will respond to aggressive children. Teach children from an early age to respond to aggression with statements such as 'Stop. I don't like that.' Also teach them the need to stop whatever they are doing when they hear another child say this to them.
- All children need to learn that there are alternative behaviours to aggression. The best alternatives are using appropriate language and being patient. Teaching these should begin as soon as children are able to use simple verbal responses such as 'no' and 'stop'.
- Sometimes it is helpful for children to role-play with an adult how they would respond to aggression. This lets children try out alternative strategies in a safe environment.
- Preschool-aged children are still developing their social and language skills. Sometimes they do not have the language to express what they want and feel. It is helpful to talk to children about the different words they can use to express feelings and choices. For example, 'I would like a turn please', or 'Please wait. I am not finished'. It is also useful to emphasise that some words hurt people and that those words are not appropriate to use.
- Irrespective of how old we are, learning takes time. For children, learning takes longer than it does for adults. Children do not learn from one example. It is important for adults to talk about and show alternative behaviours many times. Repetition is important in any learning.
- When we are learning we need to feel a sense of responsibility. Adults can help children feel this by emphasising the need for them to care for each other and be aware of other children's needs.
- Children learn from their peers. It is important to encourage the positive behaviours of children and use these as an example for others. Encouragements such as 'good' or 'excellent' do not highlight specific positive behaviours. Phrases such as 'Sharing your toy made Jasmine feel good', or 'Using your voice really helped Jacob know what you wanted', are more helpful. Such phrases help children learn about positive behaviours and their consequences.

- Sometimes children use aggression because they do not understand what others are saying to them. Adults can help by explaining what a child means if he or she is difficult to understand or is not able to clearly express his/her needs. Simple explanations help reduce children's frustration.
- By playing together children can learn appropriate behaviours from each other. Make sure there are plenty of opportunities for playing together throughout the day. Depending on the age of the children, adults may need to supervise play and help direct children's behaviours.
- Everybody who spends time with children needs to understand how children develop. Adults need to know what development occurs at each age, how to respond to children at different ages, and how to make a child's environment stimulating and developmentally appropriate. Those who work with children in care and educational settings generally have a good understanding of child development and can share this with parents and caregivers. Having knowledge about the behaviours children demonstrate and why such behaviours occur helps everyone develop appropriate plans and responses.
- It can be useful for parents and caregivers to find out what resources are available in their area such as parks, libraries, and playgroups. These resources are useful for creating a more stimulating learning environment for children and provide places for them to interact with others.

Responding to an aggressive act

- Any response to aggressive behaviour needs to be immediate. If a response is delayed, a young child will not know what behaviour is unacceptable.
- If a child is not in control of herself/himself after an aggressive act, an adult needs to calm the child before they can talk about the aggression. It helps to take the child to a quiet area and calm her/him, possibly by singing, reading, talking quietly, or even hugging. A calm child will be better able to concentrate. When responding to any aggression, always make sure that the recipient of the aggression and the perpetrator feel safe.

- Acts of aggression need to be viewed as opportunities for learning. How adults react to aggression influences what children learn. Adults need to stay calm when they see aggressive behaviour. All children want attention, and some do not worry if it is negative attention. A low-key response that focuses on the aggressive behaviour rather than on the child is important. For example, an adult could say, 'Hitting Emily hurt her. What words could you use to let Emily know it is your turn?'
- If a child has been aggressive an adult needs to talk about the aggression with the child and teach her/him alternative ways of reacting. The language you use will need to be adapted to suit the child's language. For example, a two-year-old may pinch another child because he wants the toy she is playing with. An adult could say, 'Stop. That hurts your friend.' The adult could then show the child how to wait and ask for the toy. If the child is older, the adult could say, 'When we play, we share our toys and wait for our turn. Pinching hurt your friend. If you wanted that toy what could you say so she knows you are ready to play with it?' If the child cannot think of an appropriate response, the adult could suggest some.

Adults are role models for children

It is the responsibility of all adults to create a safe environment for children. Adults can influence the amount of aggression that children experience. Remember that children watch the behaviour of adults and copy many of their actions, and children's early development is influenced by the types of interactions they have with adults. Try to avoid using aggression in your everyday activities. This includes indirect aggression such as gossiping and 'name-calling'. Children learn a large amount of their behaviour from the people in their immediate environment, so ensure that the behaviours they see in it are those you want children to use.



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Aggression and young children

Aggression and young children by Diane Szarkowicz, is a comprehensive look at the types, causes and implications of aggression in young children. It explores the ways aggressive behaviour develops, as well as the short- and long-term effects it can have on children, and those around them.

Diane Szarkowicz lists ways that adults can help children develop and use approaches other than aggression to create positive self-esteem in early childhood.

The ideas presented will be of value to care givers and educators of young children, as well as to parents.



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Volume.11 No.1 2004

EAN 1 625680 742

