



The Stability of Bullying Behaviour from Toddlerhood to Pre-adolescence

Full Reference

Côté, S. M., Vaillancourt, T., LeBlanc, J.C., Nagin, D.S., & Tremblay, R.E. (2006). The development of physical aggression from toddlerhood to pre-adolescence: A nation wide longitudinal study of Canadian children. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 34(1), 71-85.

Keywords

Developmental trajectories, physical aggression, toddlerhood, middle childhood, family risk factors.

Main Questions

We had five main questions: (1) What are the developmental patterns (trajectories) in the use of physical aggression between the ages of 2 years and 11 years? (2) Is there a group of children who display atypically high levels of physical aggression throughout that age period? (3) Is there a group of children who were not highly physically aggressive during toddlerhood who become physically aggressive when they entered school? (4) Does the difference between the number of boys and the number of girls who are physically aggressive increase with age? (5) What characteristics distinguish children who have a developmental pattern characterized by atypically high levels of physical aggression from those children who follow a typical pattern?

Background

It seems that different children follow different developmental patterns in their use of physical aggression. Most children become increasingly physically aggressive during the preschool years and then less physically aggressive from preschool to adolescence. However, there is also a group of children whose level of physical aggression is highly stable between kindergarten and 6th grade. These children appear to be at risk for social problems. To date we know little about the developmental pattern of physical aggression in toddlerhood among this second group. It could be that they are not particularly physically aggressive as toddlers, but the stress associated with beginning school leads them to become highly physically aggressive. Alternatively it could be that the high levels of physically aggressive behaviour displayed by this at risk group in kindergarten are the continuation of a highly aggressive behaviour pattern that began earlier. The sex difference in the use of physical aggression is also poorly understood in toddlerhood. Boys tend to be more physically aggressive than girls during elementary school, but it is not clear whether this difference emerges before, after, or during the preschool years.



One reason that the authors want to identify different developmental patterns in the use of physical aggression is that atypical groups may have specific risk factors. Physically aggressive boys have been shown to have family, socio demographic, and individual characteristics which differentiate them from boys whose use of physical aggression is typical.

Who was Involved

The data used in this study comes from a nationally representative probability sample. This means that each Canadian family with a child between birth and 9 years of age at the start of the study had an equal likelihood of being selected to participate. This is an excellent sample because, since the participants were chosen at random, the demographic make up of the sample likely closely resembles the demographics of the country. Most of the 10,658 children whose primary caregiver gave information about them for this study lived in two parent homes, had one or more sibling, had parents who had graduated from high school, and came from middle class homes.

What We Found

We found three distinct developmental patterns in the use of physical aggression: 52% of children used a moderate amount of physical aggression in preschool and declined in their use of aggression over time; 31% of children used physical aggression infrequently in preschool and virtually never used physical aggression by age 11 years; and 17% of children had high and stable levels of aggression throughout the study. Therefore it appears that there are three typical developmental patterns in the use of physical aggression (moderate-desister, low-level desister, high stable). In addition, there is a group of children who display atypically high levels of physical aggression between the ages 2 years and 11 years. We did not identify a group of children whose rates of aggression increased after toddlerhood. The difference in the number of boys and girls who are physically aggressive does not appear to increase with age. We found that boys were already significantly more likely to be aggressive in toddlerhood. Several characteristics distinguished children who followed the high stable physical aggression pattern from other children. These characteristics were being male, being from a low income family, having a mother with a low level of education, and being raised with hostile/ineffective parenting. This suggests that children who follow the high stable physical aggression pattern may come from family environments in which it is difficult to learn to inhibit the use of physical aggression and to acquire other problem solving strategies.



Implications

The results of this study indicate that between the ages of 2 years and 11 years, children are learning how to suppress the use of physical aggression rather than learning how to use it. This can be assumed since no group showed an increase in the use of physical aggression over time. The results of this study also showed that those children who are the most physically aggressive at a young age will likely remain highly aggressive, which is associated with social problems later on. Therefore it appears that the group most at risk for problems related to physical aggression can be identified in the preschool years. Preschool may then be an appropriate time to start intervention programs designed to prevent the use of physical aggression.

