



## Temperament, Forms of Aggression, and their Consequences

### Full Reference

Vitaro, F., Brendgen, M., & Tremblay, R. E. (2002). Reactively and proactively aggressive children: Antecedent and subsequent characteristics. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 43*, 495-505.

### Keywords

Adolescence, aggression, behaviour problems, delinquency, depression, temperament

### Main Questions

Do children who use different types of aggression (i.e., reactive, proactive, reactive & proactive, none) have different previously existing temperaments? Do children who use these different types of aggression differ in their delinquent behaviour and depressive symptoms during early adolescence?

### Background

Proactive aggression is goal-oriented; it requires neither provocation nor anger. On the other hand, reactive aggression stems from provocation and involves anger. A child may engage in one, both, or neither forms of aggression. It can be hard to tell the difference between these two types from a bystander viewpoint. Past researchers have shown differences between reactively and proactively aggressive children in areas such as popularity, interpretation of social interactions, and abilities to handle conflict. Reactively aggressive children are less skilled in these areas than proactively aggressive children. In fact, peers often accept proactively aggressive children, but often reject reactively aggressive children. Based on these differences, researchers have hypothesized that the causes of aggressive behaviour are different for children depending on their tendency to use one form of aggression over another form. For example, parents who use power and aggression to control their children may teach their children to use reactive aggression, whereas parents who reinforce the use of aggression and use it themselves to get what they want, may teach their children to use proactive aggression.

### Who Was Involved

Children, parents, and teachers who participated in this study came from a larger longitudinal study that was following children from age six through to adolescence. The researchers randomly selected the children involved in this study from French schools in Quebec. The participants were predominately white and French speaking. The majority of the children lived with both biological parents (80%) and came from middle-class families. Approximately half of the children were boys. For the current study, 4,659 mothers answered questions about their child's temperament when the child was six



years old. Then, teachers answered questions for 2,550 of those children regarding each child's use of proactive and reactive aggression when the child was 10, 11, and 12 years old. Finally, at 13 years of age 1,245 children answered questions about their involvement in delinquent acts (e.g., using a weapon, stealing, etc.) and their experience with depressive feelings.

### **What We Found**

Children who use different forms of aggression in later childhood differ in terms of their early temperaments. More specifically, reactively aggressive children were rated by their mothers as more reactive (including being reactive to stimuli such as light or pain) and more inattentive than proactively-only or non-aggressive children. This study supported the hypothesis that children characterized by reactive or proactive aggression differ on several dimensions of personal functioning and that the two types of aggression are distinct forms of aggression even though many aggressive children display both types. Children with reactive temperaments at a young age likely have low thresholds for frustration, punishment, and threat, and when exposed to harsh environments they may develop defensive patterns of aggression as a way to cope with such environments.

At age 13, the proactively aggressive children reported more overt delinquency than the reactively-aggressive children reported. The two groups reported the same levels of covert aggression. This suggests that proactively aggressive children are at a greater risk for engaging in overall delinquent behaviours. Proactively aggressive children may be more delinquent because of the way peers influence each other during early adolescence. Proactively aggressive children tend to have more friends than reactively aggressive children and those friends tend to engage in more proactive aggression. Conversely, at age 13, the reactively aggressive children reported more depressive feelings than did all the other children. Reactively aggressive children may have more depressive feelings because they tend to be more rejected, socially isolated, and victimized by both parents and peers compared to their proactively aggressive counterparts.

### **Implications**

It is important to distinguish between reactive and proactive aggression to improve the prediction of later adjustment problems. Understanding the differences between children who use these two types of aggression will also improve the understanding of differences in aggressive children's psycho-social functioning, their past history, and developmental pathways. These differences may play a role in clinical problems that some children have. For example, two common clinical childhood behavioural disorders are conduct disorder and oppositional defiant disorder. Interestingly, a diagnosis of conduct disorder involves many proactive elements (e.g., aggression to people and

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animals), whereas a diagnosis for oppositional defiant disorder almost exclusively involves reactive elements. Knowing the unique needs of children who engage in different types of aggression may help when intervening with them. It will be important to adjust prevention/intervention programs to the specific needs and difficulties of proactively and reactively aggressive children.