Research-to-Results

Brief

Child **TRENDS**

...information for program practitioners on assessing peer conflict issues and outcome measures related to aggression.

ASSESSING PEER CONFLICT AND AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIORS: A GUIDE FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAM PRACTITIONERS

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BACKGROUND

Peer relations during middle childhood and adolescence are an important part of children's social and emotional development. Children and adolescents pick up essential social and communication skills from their peers as they move into late adolescence and early adulthood. Peer conflict is not necessarily a bad thing; disagreement and conflict are part of life, and children and adolescents need to develop skills to resolve disagreements.[1] However, peer conflict can cause significant emotional and physical harm and can lead to aggressive behaviors when youth lack the social skills necessary to cope with their frustrations. Therefore, it is important for programs to be able to identify peer conflict and aggressive behaviors, and to promote positive peer conflict resolution techniques for children and adolescents.

WHAT IS PEER CONFLICT?

Peer conflict refers to mutual disagreement or hostility between peers or peer groups.[2] It is characterized as conflict between people of equal or similar power (friends); it occurs occasionally; it is unplanned; and it does not involve violence or result in serious harm. Perpetrators of peer conflict do not seek power or attention. However, peer conflict can escalate into violence. Those involved in violence and aggression usually have comparable emotional reactions, demonstrate some remorse, and actively try to resolve the problem. [3,4]

WHAT FACTORS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH YOUTH WHO ENGAGE IN AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIORS?[5,6]

Individual factors such as problem solving skills, self-regulation skills, and language are associated with youth who engage in aggressive behaviors. Some children and youth lack the social skills necessary to avoid engaging in aggressive behaviors. They are more likely to exhibit deficits such as poor impulse control, low frustration tolerance, limited ability to generate alternative responses to stress, and limited insight into the feelings of themselves and others. This inability to correctly process social information can cause youth to misinterpret social cues and assume others have a hostile intent during conflicts. Since these youth have fewer skills than others to cope with their frustrations, they lose control more quickly and engage in aggressive behaviors during times of stress. In addition, family factors such as interaction, discipline, and communication patterns are associated with youth who engage in aggressive behaviors. School

factors, such as support and discipline approaches, also play a role.[7] Furthermore, youth may face serious stressors and lack adult support or role models for dealing with difficulties.

REASONS FOR PEER CONFLICT DIFFER BY AGE
- In elementary school-age children, the types of social environments that most often give rise to conflicts are related to the following circumstances: possession and use of objects; limited resources, such as toys and games; negative interactions with peers, such as aggression, jealousy, and exclusion from groups; and violation of rules.[8-12]
- In adolescents, additional social conditions that lead to peer conflicts become apparent, among them: jealousy of or exclusion from social groups; intrusive behavior, such as stealing and intimidation; stereotyping and the formation of cliques; jealousy based on envy of another person's possessions; and claims about opinions and beliefs.[13-16]

HOW DO PEER CONFLICT AND AGGRESSION DIFFER BY GENDER?
- Boys tend to engage in more conflicts related to status or dominance, such as arguing over who is better at specific sports, whereas girls tend to engage in more disputes related to relational issues, such as disclosing a secret or not being invited to a party.[2]
- Boys tend to engage in aggression by hurting others physically, whereas girls tend to display more relational aggression through social exclusion or spreading rumors.[17-20]
- Because girls engage in more relational than physical aggression, they are often better at hiding aggressive activities from adults who are observing and are thus less likely to be given consequences for this behavior.[21]

HOW WOULD I KNOW WHEN PEER CONFLICT HAS TURNED INTO AGGRESSION?[22]
Below are warning signs that a child or adolescent in your program may be experiencing aggressive behaviors as a result of conflict with peers:
- Has bruises, physical cuts, or other injuries;
- Seems afraid to go to school or to the program;
- Has trouble sleeping;
- Appears anxious, nervous, or distracted.

HOW CAN PEER CONFLICT AND AGGRESSION AFFECT PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT?
- The presence of aggressive behaviors serves as a risk factor for later psychological maladjustment in children and youth.[23-25]
- Research indicates that experiences with violence as a child can alter the structure and functioning of the brain, which can raise the later risk of stress-induced problems, including depression.[26-28] Furthermore, the risk of mental illness increases as the number of exposures to violence and other victimizations increase.[29]
- In a sample of Chinese adolescents, peer conflict was found to significantly contribute to adolescents' low self-esteem, and thus was a significant predictor of depression, and to intensify suicidal thoughts.[30]

WHAT CAN I DO IN MY PROGRAM TO REDUCE PEER CONFLICT AND AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIORS?[31]

- To prevent peer conflict and facilitate the development of peer support systems, create age-based programs that teach social skills.[32] For elementary school-age children, social skills include building friendships, being supportive, emotion regulation, and social problem solving skills. For older adolescents in middle school and high school, learning conflict resolution techniques and practicing respectful and positive interactions with others are important.[30]
- Define behavioral expectations and apply consequences for rule compliance and noncompliance. Clear identification of rules and other boundaries and consistent use of consequences can help minimize aggressive behaviors in your program.[5]
- Implement a peer mediation program in which a team of two peers helps those in conflict resolve their problem.
    - As part of a peer mediation program, teach peer mediators skills in listening and paraphrasing, as well as the protocol of a peer mediation session.
    - Observe the peer mediations and encourage participants to discuss their issues openly, and listen to both sides of the disagreement so that the cause of the conflict can be found.
    - Remember that peer mediation programs are only appropriate in resolving conflict between participants with equal power and, thus, are not suitable to combat bullying.

> *According to the National Survey of Children's Health, only 24 percent of parents report their child "always" tries to resolve conflicts with classmates, family, or friends. Another 23 percent of parents report that their child "usually" does. This leaves 53 percent who try to resolve conflicts only sometimes or never.*

ASSESSMENTS FOR PEER CONFLICT AND AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIORS

The following questions can help assess the prevalence of aggressive behaviors, peer conflict, and the use of nonviolent strategies to control conflict that may arise among children and adolescents in your program.[33]

The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS)[34]
These questions are designed to measure the prevalence of aggressive behaviors among high school aged youth.

1. During the past 30 days, on how many days did you not go to school because you felt you would be unsafe at school or on your way to or from school?

☐ 0 days ☐ 1 day ☐ 2 or 3 days ☐ 4 or 5 days ☐ 6 or more days

2. During the past 12 months, how many times were you in a physical fight?

☐ 0 times ☐ 1 time ☐ 2 or 3 times ☐ 4 or 5 times ☐ 6 or 7 times ☐ 8 or 9 times ☐ 10 or 11 times ☐ 12 or more times

3. During the past 12 months, how many times were you in a physical fight in which you were injured and had to be treated by a doctor or nurse?

☐ 0 times ☐ 1 time ☐ 2 or 3 times ☐ 4 or 5 times ☐ 6 or more times

4. During the past 12 months, how many times were you in a physical fight on school property?

☐ 0 times ☐ 1 time ☐ 2 or 3 times ☐ 4 or 5 times ☐ 6 or 7 times ☐ 8 or 9 times ☐ 10 or 11 times ☐ 12 or more times

2007 National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH)[35]
These questions are designed to measure the types of coping skills children and adolescents may use during times of stress.

How often were the following statements true for your child during the past month?

He/she…
1. Argues too much. ☐ Never ☐ Rarely ☐ Sometimes ☐ Usually ☐ Always
2. Is cruel or mean to others. ☐ Never ☐ Rarely ☐ Sometimes ☐ Usually ☐ Always
3. Gets along well with other children. ☐ Never ☐ Rarely ☐ Sometimes ☐ Usually ☐ Always
4. Is disobedient. ☐ Never ☐ Rarely ☐ Sometimes ☐ Usually ☐ Always
5. Is stubborn, sullen, or irritable. ☐ Never ☐ Rarely ☐ Sometimes ☐ Usually ☐ Always
6. Tries to understand other's feelings. ☐ Never ☐ Rarely ☐ Sometimes ☐ Usually ☐ Always
7. Tries to resolve conflicts with others. ☐ Never ☐ Rarely ☐ Sometimes ☐ Usually ☐ Always

The Aggression-Problem Behavior Frequency Scale (Shortened 12-item scale)[33]
This questionnaire is intended to measure the frequency of physical aggression, non-physical aggression, and relational aggression. The language may pose challenges to younger children and youth with reading problems.

- Physical Aggression

    o In the last 30 days, how many times have you…
    1. Thrown something at someone to hurt them? ☐ 0 ☐ 1-2 ☐ 3-5 ☐ 6-9 ☐ 10-19 ☐ 20+
    2. Been in a fight in which someone was hit? ☐ 0 ☐ 1-2 ☐ 3-5 ☐ 6-9 ☐ 10-19 ☐ 20+
    3. Shoved or pushed another kid? ☐ 0 ☐ 1-2 ☐ 3-5 ☐ 6-9 ☐ 10-19 ☐ 20+
    4. Hit or slapped another kid? ☐ 0 ☐ 1-2 ☐ 3-5 ☐ 6-9 ☐ 10-19 ☐ 20+

- Non-physical Aggression

    o In the last 30 days, how many times have you…
    1. Teased someone to make them angry? ☐ 0 ☐ 1-2 ☐ 3-5 ☐ 6-9 ☐ 10-19 ☐ 20+
    2. Insulted someone to their face? ☐ 0 ☐ 1-2 ☐ 3-5 ☐ 6-9 ☐ 10-19 ☐ 20+
    3. Given mean looks to another student? ☐ 0 ☐ 1-2 ☐ 3-5 ☐ 6-9 ☐ 10-19 ☐ 20+

4. Picked on someone? □ 0 □ 1-2 □ 3-5 □ 6-9 □ 10-19 □ 20+

- Relational Aggression

    o In the last 30 days, how many times have you…

    1. Told another kid you wouldn't like them □ 0 □ 1-2 □ 3-5 □ 6-9 □ 10-19 □ 20+
        unless they did what you wanted them to do?

    2. Spread a false rumor about someone? □ 0 □ 1-2 □ 3-5 □ 6-9 □ 10-19 □ 20+

    3. Left another kid out on purpose when it □ 0 □ 1-2 □ 3-5 □ 6-9 □ 10-19 □ 20+
        was time to do an activity?

    4. Didn't let another student be in your group □ 0 □ 1-2 □ 3-5 □ 6-9 □ 10-19 □ 20+
        anymore because you were mad at him or her?

Conflict Resolution Instrument [1]
This questionnaire was designed to measure the frequency at which adolescents utilize conflict
resolution strategies in order to deal with peer conflict. Resolution strategies include getting
angry and walking away, trying to work out a compromise, and apologizing.[36]

USEFUL RESOURCES FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON PEER CONFLICT AND AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIORS

- He Started It! TeachersFirst's Guide to Peer Mediation
  *For an in-depth discussion of the steps involved in peer mediation, a method of resolving
  conflict between peers, and information on what to tell parents, go to*
  http://www.teachersfirst.com/lessons/mediate/mediate1.cfm
- Association for Conflict Resolution
  *For a list of frequently asked questions about conflict resolution as a means of settling
  peer conflict, go to* www.acrnet.org/about/CR-FAQ.htm
- Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
  *For a fact sheet on conflict resolution education and peer mediation sponsored by the
  U.S. Department of Justice, go to* www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles/fs-9755.pdf
- National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center
  *For a list of articles on aggressive behaviors, including information on how to respond to
  a potentially violent participant, go to*
  http://www.safeyouth.org/scripts/topics/aggressive.asp

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