

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Adolescents' Aggressive and Prosocial Behaviors: Links With Social Information Processing, Negative Emotionality, Moral Affect, and Moral Cognition

Laible, D. J., Murphy, T. P., & Augustine, M. (2014). Adolescents' aggressive and prosocial behaviors: Links with social information processing, negative emotionality, moral affect, and moral cognition. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 175, 270-286. doi:10.1080/00221325/2014/885878

SUMMARY: This study examined the relationship between adolescents' prosocial and aggressive behaviors and moral affect and cognition (feelings of guilt, shame and empathy, and perspective taking), negative emotionality, and biases in thinking. Hostile attribution biases (inferring hostile intentions to ambiguous acts), emotionality, and aspects of conscience were related to adolescents' prosocial and aggressive behavior. However, the pattern was complex and varied depending upon the type of behaviors predicted.

KEY FINDINGS:

- When adolescents tended to attribute hostile intentions to the ambiguous behavior of others, they were more likely to engage in aggressive behaviors and less likely to engage in altruistic behaviors.
- Adolescents who were not able to regulate their negative emotions effectively tended to engage in bullying behavior.
- Adolescents who were more prone to experience negative emotions were less likely to help others when asked.
- The more prone adolescents were to experiencing guilt, empathy, and shame, and the more they engaged in moral reasoning and perspective-taking, the more likely they were to engage in altruistic behaviors and the less likely they were to engage in aggressive behaviors. These adolescents were also more likely to stand up for someone being bullied.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Engage in conversations with adolescents that challenge them to engage in moral reasoning and perspective-taking
- Assist adolescents in developing the ability to attribute individuals' behavior to a myriad of intentions rather than just hostile ones

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer classes for youth on how to intervene when observing bullying or other aggressive behavior in peers
- Partner with schools to identify students who are the victims of bullying or aggressive behavior and to collaborate in providing supportive resources

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend professional development for professionals who work with military-affiliated adolescents about how to foster the development of empathy, moral reasoning, and perspective-taking
- Support the development of programs that aim to decrease bullying among military-affiliated youth

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METHODS

- Students from two high schools in a mid-sized mid-Atlantic town were recruited via their schools.
- Students completed demographic questionnaires and measures of social information processing, negative emotionality, guilt and shame, empathic anger, empathy and perspective taking, prosocial moral reasoning, prosocial tendencies, aggression, and bullying.
- Data were analyzed to determine predictors of aggressive behavior.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 148 students (67% female).
- The participants' average age was 15.68 years old (SD = 1.16).
- Of the participants, 89% were White, 5% were Latino, 2% were Black, 1% were Asian American, and 2% were another race.

LIMITATIONS

- All measures were self-report. Adolescents may have responded in a way that they felt was more socially acceptable, which may influence results.
- The study was cross-sectional, so it is unclear whether emotional and cognitive processes cause the behaviors or engaging in certain behaviors causes shifts in cognitive and emotional processes.
- The study did not distinguish between multiple kinds of aggressive and prosocial behavior to determine if they are predicted in different ways.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Assess whether cognitive biases inhibit both perspective-taking and emotional responses toward victims of bullying and whether that results in more aggressive and less prosocial behavior
- Use peer and teacher reports of aggression, bullying, and prosocial behaviors to gather a broader perspective on these phenomena
- Investigate the efficacy of programs that aim to decrease aggression and bullying and increase altruistic behavior

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