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*Social Processes and Outcomes*

Relationships critical to healthy development

Challenging behavior in preschool classrooms:

Linking research to practice

Effects of quality care and mother's depression

Continuity of care

FPG Recent Publications

Friendship formation

NCEDL News

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# Challenging behavior



# in preschool classrooms

**Linking research to practice**



A SURVEY INVOLVING NEARLY 400 CHILDREN in preschools and child care centers indicates that 40% of preschoolers exhibit at least one antisocial behavior each day, 24% exhibit three or more per day and 10% exhibit six or more antisocial behaviors each day.

This new information comes at a time when preschool teachers report concerns about increasing rates of challenging behaviors in their classes.

“Some antisocial behavior can be expected in young children,” said Donna Bryant, a senior scientist at the Frank Porter Graham Center and an author of the study. “If 40% children exhibit one antisocial behavior a day, we can’t consider that ‘abnormal;’ if 10 to 25% children show high rates of aggressive behavior, we do need to be concerned.”

She pointed out, however, that it is also important to keep in mind that the majority of preschoolers were not reported to show any aggressive behaviors on a daily basis. >

### Putting it in context

These data help researchers, policy makers and others understand the extent of the problems resulting from antisocial behavior that many preschool teachers report are on the increase. The implications of these rates of antisocial behaviors are perhaps better understood in the context of a typical preschool classroom with 15-20 children, said Mike Willoughby, a doctoral student in psychology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and lead author of the study.

Data suggest that in an average-sized preschool classroom between six and eight children (about 40%) will exhibit at least one antisocial act each day. Furthermore, two of these children will likely exhibit six or more antisocial behaviors each day.

“From this perspective, we can better understand the pressures reported by early childhood educators and the need for additional training and resources to help teachers use effective and appropriate strategies to address these behaviors,” said Willoughby.

Because these estimates are based on a random sample of children and classrooms, the authors note that specific rates of daily antisocial behavior may be greater in programs that serve more high-risk children, such as intervention child care and Head Start centers, or in classrooms where teachers don’t have positive relationships with children or are not well trained in social and emotional development.

### Prevalence by behavior

The study found that arguing-disagreeing was the most frequent antisocial behavior, while pinching, biting and playing mean tricks were the least common.

Data suggest that boys exhibit higher rates on four of the twelve items than girls: hitting and kicking, pushing and shoving, calling names and playing mean tricks. Boys and girls did not differ on any of the remaining eight items.

## Types, frequency of antisocial behavior

Types	Frequency(% children rated)				
	Once per month or less	Once per week	3-4 times per week	Once per day	Many times per day
Hit or kick other kids	59	19	11	4	6
Push, shove, or grab other kids	53	17	11	10	10
Pinch or bite other kids	94	2	2	1	1
Argue or disagree with other kids	36	16	20	11	18
Threaten or “boss around” other kids	64	15	10	6	6
Call names or tease other kids	63	13	8	6	11
Do sneaky things when others are not looking	52	14	14	10	10
Take things when others are not looking	65	8	11	10	6
Play mean tricks	92	4	1	2	2
Tell kids not to play with someone who is not around to hear it	70	11	7	8	4
Tell lies about kids when they are not around	84	7	3	4	2
Say mean things about kids behind their back	82	11	4	3	1

### Overt, covert dimensions

Another purpose of the study was to investigate the structure of antisocial behavior in a normative sample of preschoolers. In studies involving older children, both overt (obvious) and covert (hidden) dimensions of antisocial behavior have been typically reported, but FPG investigators wondered whether this was true for preschoolers.

Janis Kupersmidt, professor of psychology at UNC-CH and another author of the study, said more research on subtypes of antisocial behavior is needed. “While some types of challenging behavior may be typical of normal development, others may not. These atypical behaviors may help to identify children who are at risk for negative long-term outcomes.” It remains to be seen whether covert behaviors as defined in this study are actually early manifestations of more serious forms of covert behavior that were the focus of previous studies, she said.

### Other findings

- Although overt antisocial behaviors were more common than covert behaviors, covert behaviors were not rare. For example, while 15% of children exhibited three or more overt behaviors each day, 10% of children exhibited three or more covert antisocial behaviors each day.
- Overt and covert antisocial behavior were about equivalent for males and females.



The majority of preschoolers were not reported to show any aggressive behaviors on a daily basis.

## Implications

The primary implication of this study is the strong need for training and education of early childhood teachers and their supervisors on strategies for helping children learn to get along well together, control their anger and solve problems without resorting to aggression, Bryant said. Many positive strategies are effective in reducing such behaviors and the ultimate goal, of course, is to prevent them, she said.

The study took place in child care and Head Start programs in four counties in the Triangle area of North Carolina. The investigators are now conducting an intervention study as part of the Head Start Mental Health Research Consortium funded by the federal Administration for Children, Youth and Families and the National Institutes of Mental Health. This consortium has been helping Head Start supervisors, teachers and parents learn effective ways of dealing with children's antisocial behaviors. Parents want to learn better ways of helping their children, too, said Kupersmidt, but reaching parents requires different approaches than working with classroom teachers.

Willoughby said that while the finding of both overt and covert subtypes of behavior in preschoolers is new, he cautiously interpreted the results because the study used only teacher reports. "Future studies of covert antisocial behavior in early childhood will likely benefit from using multiple measures that include both adult ratings and observation paradigms," he said.

## Implications for screening

The increasingly common finding that antisocial behavior among preschoolers is best viewed as multidimensional in nature has implications for early screening practices.

More research is needed to determine if preschoolers who exhibit developmentally inappropriate covert antisocial behavior are at increased risk for negative outcomes and if these apparently mild covert behaviors are precursors of more serious behaviors that are indicative of conduct disorder. **led**

## If you want to know more

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