



## Research Article

## Factors Affecting Aggression in South Korean Middle School Students

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## SUMMARY

**Purpose:** The study was undertaken to assess levels of aggression, and to determine factors affecting aggression among South Korean middle school students.**Methods:** A descriptive study was conducted using self-report questionnaires. The participants were 340 girls and boys from two middle schools and 302 questionnaires were used for the final data analysis. Aggression, academic stress, depression, self esteem, decision-making competency, and happiness were measured. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics including *t* tests, one-way analysis of variance, Pearson's correlation coefficients and multiple regressions.**Results:** Aggression had significant correlations with academic stress ( $r = .21, p < .001$ ), depression ( $r = .43, p < .001$ ), self esteem ( $r = -.25, p < .001$ ), decision-making competency ( $r = -.25, p < .001$ ), and happiness ( $r = -.21, p < .001$ ). Mean score for aggression was 2.49 out of 5. Significant explanatory variables for aggression were grade ( $t = 4.39, p < .001$ ), academic stress ( $t = 2.78, p = .006$ ), and depression ( $t = 5.03, p < .001$ ). The explanatory power of these factors was 26.9%, and this was statistically significant ( $F = 16.06, p < .001$ ).**Conclusion:** Findings indicate that depression, academic stress, and grade (second grade) influence aggression. To decrease aggressive behavior, it is necessary to provide systematic and political programs in schools and local communities that can ameliorate negative emotional factors like depression and academic stress. Additionally, development of positive factors such as self esteem, decision-making skills, and happiness in middle school students is important to reduce aggression.

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## Introduction

Aggression is a behavioral and emotional response made on purpose for the sake of destroying or damaging other persons or things (Kim & Kim, 2007). Currently, South Korean society suffers from violent and inhuman juvenile crimes, like collective bullying and school violence, which are due to aggression. This behavior in adolescence causes juvenile crimes, hinders healthy interpersonal relationships, and can develop into social maladjustment and criminal behavior in adulthood (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010; Espelage, Low, Polanin, & Brown, 2013; Hwang).

Thus, it is very important to provide social and academic measures to prevent or mitigate aggressive behaviors in South Korean youth.

Seven out of 10 cases of juvenile violence occurring between 2008 and 2010 were committed by middle school students, and 69% of school violence cases occurred in middle schools (Bae, Kim, Chung, Kang, & Park, 2010). Considering these data, more attention should be dedicated to studying aggression in middle school students who are in early adolescence. South Korean middle school students age 13–15 years old, spend most of their time in school and experience high levels of stress due to difficulties or conflicts with the educational system and peers; thus, these individuals tend to express aggression (Jin, Park, & Bae, 2011). They experience greater confusion and dissatisfaction with the process of ego-formation than individuals who are at any other childhood developmental stage. In particular, middle school students have a stronger tendency to express maximized levels of aggression that is stronger than other age groups and prevalence rates of aggressive behavior including physical, verbal and social bullying peaked

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during the first and second grades in middle school (Wang, Iannotti, & Luk, 2012). Recently, the terminology of *Jung-2-byeong* has been applied to the immature psychological status of the second graders in middle school who are conceited and overconfident, but poorly informed and immature (Korea Joongang Daily, 2013). Thus, an investigation of aggression intensities and the factors affecting aggression in South Korean middle school students would allow us to lay a foundation for preventing the development of violent disposition, and reducing its negative impacts on life style and mental health.

Previous studies have attempted to clarify various factors that influence juvenile aggression. However, additional concentrated investigation is necessary to reveal factors influencing aggression in Korean middle school students. This study specifically studies depression and academic stress as negative emotional aspects, and self esteem, decision-making competency, and happiness as positive emotional aspects of middle school students. Among the factors influencing juvenile aggression, depression has been identified as a representative cause (Jin et al., 2011). Adolescents have stronger desires for recognition, friendship, affection, independence, dependence, success, pride, and self-identity than any other age group, and feel deep frustration when these needs are not met (Kim & Chung, 2004). This frustration causes depression, influences expressions of aggression, and can cause them to give up everything (Kim & Lee, 2008). Academic stress serves as the starting point of every juvenile issue in South Korea and has also been associated with aggression. Issues related to education are taken very seriously by South Korean adolescents, and are common worries for every student (Kim). Stress associated with academic performance is a reason why adolescents adopt aggression as a protective mechanism, but it can trigger violent behavior against others. Low self esteem is another important variable that influences aggression (Wang et al., 2013). Adolescents with higher self esteem tend to show better interpersonal relationships and decreased aggressive tendencies (Webster & Kirkpatrick, 2006). On the other hand, adolescents with lower self esteem tend to have higher levels of aggression (Webster & Kirkpatrick). Along with academic performance and peer relations, the ability to make decisions can influence problematic behaviors associated with aggression such as drinking, smoking, and violence (Halpern-Felsher, 2009). Individuals with better decision-making skills and the ability to independently choose a flexible and effective course of action have lower levels of aggression (Reyna & Farley, 2006). Finally, low levels of perceived happiness are closely associated with depression that is expressed as aggression (Lee, Gil, Yoo, & Kim, 2012; Penton-Voak et al., 2013).

Most studies in South Korea investigating factors that influence juvenile aggression have been performed using adolescents with a broad range of ages, including middle and high school students 13–18 years old (Kim & Lee, 2008; Kwark & Kim, 2013; Nam & Han, 2007). Based on these previous studies, it has been difficult to identify concrete measures for measuring aggression in South Korean middle school students, as well as other factors associated with Korean culture and age-related characteristics. Therefore, an investigation of the levels of aggression, and the factors affecting aggression, that focuses only on South Korean middle school students, is very important for any policy and program developments that address aggression in this specific group.

In the present study, we attempted to assess the aggression levels, and determine how negative factors (academic stress and depression) and positive factors (self esteem, decision-making competency, and happiness) influence aggression among South Korean middle school students.

## Methods

### Study design

This was a descriptive study designed to identify factors that influence aggressive behavior in South Korean middle school students.

### Setting and samples

The participants in this study were students attending a boys' middle school or a girls' middle school in Seoul who agreed to participate in the investigation with an understanding of its purpose and intention. The two middle schools, located in the same urban neighborhood, were comparable in size (both had more than 1,000 students). Considering gender and grade characteristics as variables, convenience sampling was performed with students from randomly selected classes. The number of students from each school was the same so that data collection could be carried out for each grade in each school in similar proportion.

The number of students necessary for this study was identified with the G-power 3.1.2 (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009). Using this method, 146 students were minimally required for a medium effect size of 0.15, a significance level of .05, and a statistical power of 0.95 when the number of predictive factors was 6 for multiple regression. Thus, the target was 50 or more questionnaires for each grade at both schools, and in consideration of differences by gender and grade of students, a total of 350 copies of the questionnaire were distributed. Of the distributed questionnaires, 340 were collected. After excluding questionnaires that had not been completed, only 302 were included in the final analysis.

Gender of the participants had an approximately even distribution (52.6% boys and 47.4% girls). Additionally, 31.5% of the students were in the first grade, 34.4% were in the second grade, and 34.1% were in the third grade. When assessing the parents' educational level, 46.3% of the fathers and 46.3% of the mothers had graduated from university. Approximately half of the students (50.5%) reported that their family income level was middle class, and 74.8% engaged in some leisure activities outside their school life. In addition, 20.5% reported that they had felt suicidal in the past month.

### Ethical considerations

The study was conducted after receiving approval from the Hoseo University Institutional Review Board (IRB no. HOSEO-IRB 20130004). After providing information about the purpose of study and guaranteeing anonymity and credibility for voluntary participants, rewards for participation in the study were given and written informed consents were obtained from all participants and their parents who agreed to engage in the study.

After data collection, trained research assistants and school nurses provided general group mental health education for all participants. Participants were educated about the symptoms of depression and unmanageable stress, as well as stress coping and ventilation methods. Contact numbers of counseling centers for adolescents were provided. After data analysis, the authors reported to each school nurse on portion and level of participants' depression, aggression and academic stress.

### Measurements

#### Aggression

Aggression means an intention or a behavior to cause harm or an act intended to harm others (Buss & Perry, 1992). It was

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