

Development of aggression

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Theories and empirical findings regarding the development of aggression have included advances in four key areas in the last two years. First, studies have increasingly adopted more nuanced operationalization of forms and functions of aggression. Second, mediators and moderators of links between risk factors and the development of aggression have been examined with more precision. Third, advances in neuroscience and studies of gene by environment interactions have led to greater understanding of genetic and neurobiological underpinnings of the development of aggression. Fourth, cross-cultural and international research has tested the generalizability of findings to more diverse samples and has examined culture as a potential moderator of links between risk factors and the development of aggression.

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of major theoretical developments and empirical findings in the last two years regarding the development of aggression in children and adolescents. The review is not exhaustive but rather focuses on select articles that illustrate advances related to understanding the development of aggression in four broad areas: forms and functions of aggression, risk factors for aggression, gene by environment interactions and neuroscience, and cultural and contextual influences on the development of aggression (see [Figure 1](#)). Together, these advances have shifted the field from documenting that relations between risk factors and the development of aggression exist to understanding *why* relations exist (mediators/mechanisms), for whom (moderators and in certain contexts), and for which kinds of aggression.

Aggression is highly stable over time, with the most aggressive children generally continuing to be the most aggressive adults in long-term longitudinal studies [1]. Recent research has extended the study of aggression into infancy and demonstrated that by six months, differences in infants' expressions of anger and use of force against others predict aggression later in childhood [2]. Despite rank order stability, overall levels of physical aggression peak around 20–22 months and then decline thereafter [3]. Advances in statistical methods for modeling longitudinal data, such as by taking into account changes in measures that are necessitated to ensure that aggression is measured in developmentally appropriate ways from childhood to adulthood, have demonstrated nonlinear change in the developmental progression of aggression [4**]. For example, aggression decreases from early childhood (prior to age 5) to preadolescence (ages 5–10), then increases somewhat during adolescence (ages 11–18), and then decreases again into adulthood (>age 18) [4**].

Forms and functions of aggression

Early research on the development of aggression focused primarily on physical and direct verbal aggression such as face-to-face insults, and the next generation of research introduced indirect, relational, and social aggression such as spreading rumors and excluding targeted individuals from peer groups [5–7]. Recent empirical studies increasingly have differentiated the development of different forms of aggression as well as aggression that serves different functions [8,9]. Forms of aggression refer to the manner in which aggression is enacted (physically, verbally, socially), whereas functions refer to *why* aggression is enacted (reactively in response to perceived provocation or proactively to obtain some desired outcome) [10].

Bullying is a specific manifestation of aggression that involves a power differential between the bully and the victim and is characterized by repeated aggression over time. In recent years, bullying has been studied as part of a constellation of roles within peer groups that include not only bullies and victims but also bystanders who defend the victim, reinforce the bully, or remain uninvolved [11]. For example, victims of the same bullies sometimes come to defend each other over time, but defenders who originally were not victims sometimes themselves become the targets of bullying after they defend others [12]. Recent research also has examined aggression toward specific target individuals as a function of both aggressors' and victims' social status within the broader peer group [13]. A relatively new form of aggression that has emerged with changes in technology is

Figure 1

Forms and Functions of Aggression	Risk Factors for Aggression	Gene by Environment Interactions and Neuroscience	Culture and Context
Forms: physical, verbal, indirect/relational/social	Microdynamics: experiences that strengthen aggression over time	Diathesis-stress and differential susceptibility models	Generalizability to diverse populations
Functions: reactive, proactive	Macrodynamics: social network dynamics through which aggressive individuals affiliate and increase one another's aggression over time	Brain structure and function	Culture-specific experiences that increase or decrease aggression
Bullying can take different forms but is characterized by power differentials and repeated aggression.	Mediators: emotional, social cognitive, and self-regulation mechanisms accounting for links between risk factors and aggression Moderators: change the direction or strength of association between a risk factor and aggression		Cultural norms as moderators of links between risk factors and aggression

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Conceptual map of advances in understanding the development of aggression in the last two years.

cyberbullying [14]. A meta-analysis found that being a perpetrator of cyberbullying was moderately strongly related to being a perpetrator of traditional forms of bullying; in addition, cyberbullying perpetration and victimization were associated with many of the same mental health and behavioral problems as traditional forms of bullying [14].

Risk factors for aggression

A new ecological framework was proposed to take into account microdynamics and macrodynamics that account for the development of aggression over time and that may be addressed in interventions to prevent the development of aggression [15]. Microdynamics involve experiences such as coercive exchanges between children and parents that serve to strengthen aggression over time. Macrodynamics involve social network dynamics in which individuals who are aggressive affiliate and escalate one another's aggression through social contagion mechanisms. Interventions to prevent aggression will be more successful if they target microdynamic and macrodynamic social processes in a developmentally sensitive way.

An extensive body of research has demonstrated that viewing violent television programs and playing violent video games are predictive of an increase in physically aggressive behavior over time; media researchers, pediatricians, and parents generally concur about these findings [16]. Recent research has demonstrated that viewing

relational aggression on television is related to subsequent relational aggression, but that initial levels of relational aggression do not predict more viewing of relationally aggressive television programs [17^{••}]. A meta-analysis of 37 independent studies demonstrated small to moderate effect sizes for the relation between exposure to media violence and the development of appraisals involving a bias to perceive others' behaviors as hostile in ambiguous social situations; this relation became stronger with age, which the author suggested may be because the effects of violent media exposure cumulate over time [18].

Studies increasingly document not just discrete risk factors for aggression but also mechanisms through which risk factors operate. Social information processing theory describes a series of social cognitive steps that increase or decrease the likelihood of aggressive behavior in real time [19]. Risk factors such as child abuse and peer rejection increase children's social information processing biases, and social information processing biases mediate links between these risk factors and the development of children's subsequent aggressive behavior [20,21]. In a recent international test of the theory that included children from nine countries (China, Colombia, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, Philippines, Sweden, Thailand, and the United States), in all nine countries, children who made hostile as opposed to benign attributions for others' behavior in hypothetical, provocative situations were more likely to

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