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# Research in Developmental Disabilities



## Aggressive interactions during free-play at preschool of children with and without developmental coordination disorder



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### ABSTRACT

This aim of this study was to investigate an unexpected finding from a larger study examining the play of preschool children with and without developmental coordination disorder (DCD). We found that children with DCD were more frequently involved in aggressive incidents during free-play than their peers. Children with ( $n = 32$ ) and without DCD ( $n = 31$ ) were videotaped during free-play at preschool and their play was assessed using the Play Observation Scale. A post hoc analysis was conducted using a specifically developed rating instrument to examine the aggressive incidents captured on video. Videos from 18 children with DCD and 8 typically developing children without DCD were found to contain aggressive incidents. Children with DCD were significantly more often involved as both aggressor ( $p = .016$ ) and victim ( $p = .008$ ) than children without DCD ( $p = .031$ ). This is the first study to identify victimization and aggression as being problematic for children with DCD as young as 4 years of age and needs replication. Given the negative consequences of involvement in aggression and victimization, play-based early intervention focusing on prevention needs to be developed and implemented.

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## 1. Introduction

The occasional use of aggressive behavior to hurt or harm another, to achieve goals or control resources (e.g. toys) is a normative feature of early childhood (Murray-Close & Ostrov, 2009; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2004; Ostrov, Ries, Stauffacher, Godleski, & Mullins, 2008). While some aggression in the preschool years is expected, the frequency of overtly aggressive behavior steadily declines over time with most children learning to adequately regulate their emotions and behavior by school entry (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2004; Tremblay et al., 2004; Williford, Whittaker, Vitiello, & Downer, 2013). Higher than expected levels of aggression at preschool, however, are of concern due to the immediate and long-term effects on the victim and the associated poor outcomes for the perpetrator (Tremblay et al., 2004). Longitudinal studies have shown that despite low levels of aggression being considered normative, relatively high levels of aggression during the preschool years tend to be stable and do not substantially decrease over time (Crick et al., 2006; Murray-Close & Ostrov, 2009; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2004; Tremblay et al., 2004). Furthermore,

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aggression and victimization are known to be linked, with one predicting the other (Ostrov, 2008; Tremblay et al., 2004; Vaillancourt, Miller, Fagbemi, Côté, & Tremblay, 2007). In a study examining the play behaviors of preschool children with and without developmental coordination disorder (DCD) in Germany, engagement in aggression was unexpectedly identified as being significantly different between the two groups of children with those with DCD engaging in aggressive incidents more frequently than their typically developing peers (Kennedy-Behr, Rodger, & Mickan, under review). Given the relationship between aggression and victimization (Hanish et al., 2004; Ostrov, 2010) and the poor outcomes associated with aggression in preschool (Côté, Vaillancourt, Barker, Nagin, & Tremblay, 2007; Tremblay et al., 2004; Vaillancourt et al., 2007; Vlachou, Andreou, Botsoglou, & Didaskalou, 2011), we aimed to further investigate this finding. This paper reports on the development of an expanded coding scheme and the post hoc analysis conducted to examine the occurrence and nature of aggression in this sample more closely.

### 1.1. Types of aggression

Aggression can be physical such as hitting, kicking, pushing or physically threatening or can be verbal which includes teasing, malicious gossiping, threatening, and excluding. Verbal aggression has also been referred to as indirect (Vaillancourt et al., 2007) or relational (Giesbrecht, Leadbeater, & MacDonald, 2011; Ostrov et al., 2008). Physical and verbal aggression can be further broken down into proactive and reactive aggression (Little, Henrich, Jones, & Hawley, 2003; Murray-Close & Ostrov, 2009; Ostrov & Crick, 2007; Pouw, Rieffe, Oosterveld, Huskens, & Stockmann, 2013), where proactive refers to unprovoked aggression, that is, aggressive behavior for no apparent reason, and reactive refers to an aggressive reaction to aggressive behavior, for example hitting back. Studies have shown that in early childhood, children tend to engage more frequently in physical aggression as opposed to verbal aggression (Murray-Close & Ostrov, 2009; Ostrov et al., 2008) with verbal aggression becoming more frequent in middle childhood as children's cognitive and language skills mature (Murray-Close & Ostrov, 2009; Vlachou et al., 2011).

### 1.2. Victimization and developmental disabilities

Children with developmental disabilities, including DCD, are known to have an increased risk of peer victimization at school (Campbell, Missiuna, & Vaillancourt, 2012; Dawkins, 1996; Lindsay & McPherson, 2012; Mishna, 2003; Redmond, 2011; Rose, Monda-Amaya, & Espelage, 2011; Sentenac et al., 2012; Swearer, Wang, Maag, Siebecker, & Frerichs, 2012; Twyman et al., 2010; Van Cleave & Davis, 2006), however, little is known about whether victimization is also experienced earlier, during the preschool years. It is thought that school-aged children with disabilities are more at risk for victimization as they are seen as different either in their appearance, speech or abilities (Bejerot, Edgar, & Humble, 2011; Bourke & Burgman, 2010; Swearer et al., 2012). As victimization has been associated with poor self-esteem (Delfabbro et al., 2006; Piek, Barrett, Allen, Jones, & Louise, 2005), depression (Sweeting, Young, West, & Der, 2006), and internalizing problems (Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010), this potentially further compounds the problems that children with disabilities already experience.

### 1.3. The current study

In a study examining the play skills of preschool children with and without DCD (Kennedy-Behr et al., under review), aggressive behaviors were observed infrequently, however, there was a significant difference between the two groups in the frequency of aggression. During free play at preschool, children with probable DCD (pDCD) engaged more frequently in aggression than their age- and gender-matched typically developing (TD) peers. They were also less often involved in group play than their TD peers and spent a greater percentage of time as observers rather than active participants in play. While the Play Observation Scale (POS) (Rubin, 2001), the measure used in the study, allows for capturing incidents of aggression, it does not differentiate between types of aggression or whether the child is the aggressor or victim. In order to examine the between group differences more closely, the aggression subscale of the POS was expanded with behavioral descriptors to distinguish between aggression and victimization. This study comprised part of a larger study focusing on the play skills and wellbeing of preschool children with and without DCD. The aim of this study was to explore and compare the incidents of aggression and victimization during free play at preschool of children with and without DCD.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Design

A quasi-experimental design with two independent groups, one with pDCD and a matched group of TD children was used. As there was no pediatrician involvement in the study and none of the children had a formal diagnosis of DCD (as was typically the case in Germany when data collection commenced), the term pDCD rather than DCD is used. This terminology is consistent with studies in Canada (Cairney et al., 2012) and the United Kingdom (Green et al., 2011).

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