



# The socializing effect of classroom aggression on the development of aggression and social rejection: A two-wave multilevel analysis

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## ABSTRACT

The current study examined the moderating effect of classroom aggression on the development of individual aggression and on the path from individual aggression to social rejection over time. The study included 1,284 elementary school children and consisted of two data waves 10 months apart. At both time points, teachers assessed the children's physical and relational aggression and their social rejection status. Multi-level analyses revealed that the classroom level of relational aggression moderated the link between individual relational aggression at T1 and T2 ( $b = -0.18$ , 95% CI  $[-0.32, -0.05]$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and the link between T1 relational aggression and T2 social rejection ( $b = -0.12$ , 95% CI  $[-0.23, -0.003]$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Being in a classroom where relational aggression was prevalent increased relational aggression among children with a low level of relational aggression at T1. Furthermore, a high individual level of relational aggression predicted greater social rejection in classrooms with a low level of relational aggression. Children were mainly influenced by their same-gender peers. Boys as a group had a greater influence than girls on their peers of either gender in the domain of relational aggression, whereas girls as a group had a greater influence in the domain of physical aggression. The contributions of analyzing cross-level interaction to understanding the developmental patterns of aggression and social rejection in middle childhood are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Classrooms differ substantially in the overall level of aggressive behavior (Kellam, Ling, Merisca, Brown, & Jalongo, 1998; Mercer, McMillen, & DeRosier, 2009), and these differences in classroom levels of aggressive behaviors have an influence on the individual development of children's aggressive behavior. Longitudinal studies have revealed that the level of classroom aggression is positively linked to individual aggression among elementary school children (Mercer et al., 2009; Thomas & Bierman, 2006; Thomas, Bierman, & Powers, 2011) and among adolescents (Müller, Hofmann, Fleischli, & Studer, 2016). These associations can be explained by different processes: Classrooms provide the opportunity for social learning, for instance by imitation, with peers serving as role models for aggressive behavior (Bandura, 1986). In addition, aggressive behavior is likely to be more accepted among peers in aggressive classrooms. Consequently, the social pressure to inhibit aggressive tendencies is lower in classrooms with a high level of aggression (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren,

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1990). Furthermore, according to the “deviancy training” model, the positive reinforcement of deviant behaviors in a highly aggressive classroom environment contributes to an increase in individual aggression (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011). Finally, aggressive individuals tend to affiliate with aggressive peers (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989), which may lead to a further increase of aggressive behavior (Synder, Horsch, & Childs, 1997). Differences in classroom levels of aggressive behavior may also influence the extent to which aggressive behavior contributes to the development of social rejection. Aggression is a well-established risk factor for being socially rejected by peers (e.g., Crick et al., 2006a; Schwartz, McFadyen-Ketchum, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1999). However, previous studies have indicated that a high level of classroom aggression attenuates the path from aggression to social rejection (e.g., Wright, Giammarino, & Parad, 1986).

The current study was designed to further examine the influence of classroom-level aggression on the individual development of aggression and social rejection in middle childhood. We adopted a prospective design that focused on the interactive effects of classroom-level and individual-level aggression at Time 1 (T1) as predictors of children's aggression and social rejection at Time 2 (T2), approximately 10 months later. In addition to considering the classroom as a whole, we were interested in the extent to which the gender composition of the classroom contributed to the strength of classroom-level effects. In particular, we investigated whether boys and girls would be more influenced by the collective level of aggression among their same-gender as compared to their opposite-gender peers and whether one gender group might be more influential than the other in affecting the aggressive behavior of individual classmates of either gender.

### *1.1. Classroom aggression as a moderator of the development of individual aggression*

Most previous studies of the impact of classroom-level aggression on the development of individual aggression focused on classroom-level main effects without considering differences in initial individual aggression. However, the processes that serve to explain classroom-level effects are likely to interact with the child's initial level of aggression, suggesting a differential susceptibility of children with initially low and high levels of aggression to the overall level of aggression they encounter in their classroom. Social learning theory suggests that in classrooms with a high collective level of aggression, children with initially low levels of aggression learn to become more aggressive through observing their more aggressive peers, whereas the initially more aggressive individuals in these classrooms are less affected because they have already acquired this behavioral repertoire. On the other hand, the affiliation of aggressive children with deviant peers may lead to a stronger effect of a highly aggressive classroom environment on children who score relatively high on aggression to begin with. These two explanations suggest differential predictions on whether children with initially low or high levels of aggressive behavior may be more affected by a high level of aggression in their classroom.

Interactive effects may also be expected in classrooms with a low overall level of aggression. In these classrooms, children with a low level of aggression are likely to stay at this low level, as suggested by social learning theory as well as the general tendency to affiliate with like-minded peers. For highly aggressive children, there are again competing predictions: They may reduce their aggressive behavior in order to avoid negative social consequences, such as peer rejection; alternatively, their high level of aggression may marginalize them in their nonaggressive peer group, driving them to selectively affiliate with more aggressive peers (Patterson et al., 1989). This, in turn, makes them less likely to be affected by positive group influences (Yarnell, Pasch, Brown, Perry, & Komro, 2014), thereby stabilizing their aggressive behavior.

Studies that examined the interplay of classroom-level and individual-level variables have found evidence for significant cross-level interactions. For example, Brendgen, Girard, Vitaro, Dionne, and Boivin (2013) found that the link between the genetic disposition for physical aggression and aggressive behavior in fourth grade was moderated by the acceptance of physical aggression in the classroom. A significant child-by-classroom interactive effect on aggression was also found in a 6-year longitudinal study by Kellam et al. (1998), who found that highly aggressive first-grade boys who were in classrooms with a higher level of aggression had higher odds of being severely aggressive in sixth grade compared to aggressive boys in less aggressive classrooms. By contrast, among boys with initially low levels of aggressive behavior, the risk of being aggressive in middle school was unrelated to the level of aggression in the classroom community. These results suggest that highly aggressive boys are particularly susceptible to influences of the classroom environment.

By contrast, Busching and Krahé (2015) conducted a longitudinal study with adolescents that suggested that individuals with low initial levels of physical aggression may be more affected by their classmates. In classrooms with a high collective approval of aggression, the aggression scores of initially non-aggressive students increased over time, whereas the aggression scores of highly aggressive individuals were unaffected by differences in classroom-level norms. This result is partly in line with the findings of Yarnell et al. (2014) that extremely violent children in eighth grade were not influenced by the level of violence among their peers, whereas less violent children showed an increase in violence when they were surrounded by peers who showed medium or high levels of violent behavior. However, no such differential association was found for younger children in lower grades. Despite somewhat inconsistent results, the above-mentioned studies suggest that classroom-level and individual-level variables are likely to interact in shaping children's aggressive behavior over time.

### *1.2. Classroom aggression as a moderator of the path from aggression to social rejection*

The importance of considering the interaction of classroom-level and individual-level variables is demonstrated in particular by studies that examined the link between aggression and social rejection or peer victimization. For example, Wright

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