

The study also dispelled another myth, that girls tend not to be physically aggressive. This myth may exist because public opinion is more likely to approve the use of direct aggression by boys than by girls. But even though boys use direct aggression more than girls, girls are directly aggressive, too.

### Implications

- We need to study direct and social aggression, but not because one is a male form and the other female. Both forms of aggression affect both genders, and boys and girls who engage in aggression are equally likely to experience maladjustment.
- To understand whether aggression causes poor adjustment, or vice versa, we need to do longitudinal studies. We must look at aggressive kids over time to see which condition—aggression or maladjustment—comes before the other.
- People who work with aggressive children can look for signs of delinquent behavior, attention problems, depression, or anxiety. Indirectly aggressive children are as much at risk for problems as directly aggressive children.

- Researchers can look at the source of perceptions of aggression. Do they arise in adult or children's minds?



This research brief summarizes the following report: Card, N. A., Stucky, B. D., Sawalani, G. M., & Little, T. D. (2008). Direct and indirect aggression during childhood and adolescence: A meta-analytic review of gender differences, intercorrelations, and relations to maladjustment. *Child Development, 79*, 1185-1229.

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## Aggression Among Teens: Dispelling Myths About Boys and Girls

*A new study dispels the popular belief that girls are more likely than boys to hurt other children through gossip, rumor, and social rejection. While boys do tend to hit, push, and call their peers names more than girls do, they are just as likely as girls to hurt other kids socially.*

### Background

Why study aggression in children and adolescents? Such behaviors are associated with maladjustment—that is, difficulties coping with problems and social relationships. For over 100 years, scientists have studied children who physically and verbally attack other kids, what we now call “direct” aggression. Since most people previously thought that physical attacks were typical of boys, researchers often left girls out of their studies. In addition, in the last 20 years, girls have been linked with social or “indirect” aggression—that is, they hurt other girls through talking badly about them and

keeping them out of their social group. Over time, a belief has grown that social aggression is a female form of aggression. But new evidence shows that boys hurt their peers socially, too.

### Direct and Social (“Indirect”) Aggression, and Related Problems

**DIRECT AGGRESSION**—when you hurt others by hitting, kicking, punching, or calling them names

*Related problems include:* rule-breaking, lack of attention, poor relations with peers, low prosocial behavior (e.g., helping, sharing, working together)

**SOCIAL AGGRESSION**—when you hurt others through gossip, rumors, and rejection from your social group

*Related problems include:* depression and anxiety

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## About the Study

A recent meta-analysis examined 148 studies that consisted of almost 74,000 children. The goal of the meta-analysis, which examined direct and social forms of aggression, was to understand three things:

- 1 Are direct and social aggression more common among boys or among girls, and how large are these gender differences?
- 2 To what extent are children who are directly aggressive also socially aggressive, and vice versa?
- 3 How much does aggressive behavior explain the likelihood that a child will suffer from problems such as depression or delinquency?

### How Does a Meta-analysis Work?

- First, it looks at how strongly two things, such as aggression and behavioral problems, are associated with each other.
- Next, it gives more weight to the big studies, those that include more kids. For example, a study of 100 kids might find a strong gender difference in aggressive behaviors. But another study of 10,000 kids might find a weaker difference. The larger study would be given more weight.
- Then, it finds the overall, average strength of findings across all of the studies.
- Finally, it explores why the findings of the studies might be inconsistent with each other.

## Finding 1

*Boys tend to engage in hitting and punching more than girls, but girls do physically hurt others to a moderate degree.* For example:

- Imagine a school with 100 boys and 100 girls, and 100 children are directly aggressive and 100 are not.
- Of these 100 aggressive children, about 65 would be boys and 35 would be girls.
- So even though direct aggression is nearly twice as common among boys than girls, there are still a lot of girls who use direct aggression.

*Boys and girls are equally likely to use social aggression.* For example:

- Imagine again a school with 100 boys and 100 girls, and 100 children are indirectly aggressive and 100 are not.
- Of these 100 indirectly aggressive children, about 51 would be girls and 49 would be boys.
- The amount of difference in social aggression between boys and girls is so small that it is not meaningful.

## Finding 2

*Physically and socially aggressive behaviors tend to be used together.* For example:

- Imagine again a school of 200 children and that 100 of them are directly aggressive and 100 are indirectly aggressive.
- Because there is overlap between the two forms, about 85 or 90 children use both direct and social aggression.

- But because the two forms are not perfectly overlapping, there is a large number—about 20 to 30—who use only one form or the other.
- So, although most aggressive children will use both types, some will only use one form or the other.

## Finding 3

*Both direct and social aggression are related to behavioral problems, but to different types.*

For example:

- There is a *strong* link between direct aggression and problems we can see in a child. That is, children who hit and punch tend to misbehave and act impulsively more so than children who gossip and hurt others socially.
- Directly aggressive children are also more likely to have poor relations with their peers than other children.
- There is a *moderate* link between social aggression and problems that are harder to see. That is, children who are indirectly aggressive are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety than other children.
- Children who use direct aggression show low prosocial behavior (e.g., helping, sharing, cooperating), while children who use social aggression show high rates of acting prosocially toward others.
- No matter which type of aggression they use, girls and boys experience poor adjustment in the same ways. This finding contradicts previous beliefs that boys who gossip and spread rumors and girls who hit and punch are especially likely to have poor adjustment.



## Misperceptions of Aggression in Girls

The myth that girls tend to be more socially aggressive than boys is strong among teachers, parents, and even some researchers. These adults may set social expectations for girls early in life that are hard to shake. Recent movies and books that depict girls as mean and hurtful maintain these stereotypes. According to the meta-analysis, teachers and parents were more likely to say that girls were more socially aggressive than boys. Meanwhile, peers and research observers were likely to view boys and girls as equally socially aggressive.

**“These findings challenge the popular belief that social aggression is a female form of aggression,” says Noel A. Card, assistant professor of Family Studies and Human Development at The University of Arizona and the study’s lead author.**