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Alternative-Thinking Ability of Aggressive, Assertive, and Submissive Children[1]

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While Shure, Spivack, and their colleagues (e.g., Shure, Newman, & Silver, 1973; Shure, Spivack, & Jaeger, 1971) have explored in depth the relationship between interpersonal problem-solving skills and behavioral adjustment, differences in problem-solving thinking between assertive and unassertive (i.e., aggressive, submissive) children have yet to be assessed. The present study examined differences among aggressive, assertive, and submissive elementary-school children in terms of one critical component of problem-solving thinking—the ability to generate alternative solutions to interpersonal conflict situations.

It was hypothesized that, for highly aggressive and highly submissive youngsters, behaving assertively might not occur as a possibility. Bandura and Walters (1959) and McCord, McCord, and Howard (1961) have noted that parents of unassertive boys tend to restrict their children's freedom to act in a deviant manner, but are quite lax in promoting socially desirable behavior. It is possible, therefore, that while aggressive and submissive children know which behaviors are unacceptable, they have a poor conception of the approved responses expected of them. It was predicted that while highly assertive children would *consider* behaving in a relatively wide variety of manners (i.e., aggressively, assertively, *and* submissively), aggressive and submissive children would see their options as more "black and white" (i.e., would generate alternatives that were almost exclusively

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aggressive and submissive) and would not differ from each other in the composition of their respective cognitive repertoires.

Subjects were 88 male and 72 female middle-class, predominantly white, fifth- to seventh-grade children, drawn from one public and two parochial schools in a large New York city. The children were classified as highly aggressive, highly assertive, and highly submissive on the basis of their scores on the peer-report measure of interpersonal behavior described by Deluty (1979). The 15 boys and 15 girls with the highest peer-ratings of physical aggressiveness, of assertiveness, and of submissiveness (90 in all) were designated as "highly aggressive," "highly assertive," and "highly submissive," respectively.

To assess subjects' alternative-solution thinking, the 10 conflict situations of the abridged Children's Action Tendency Scale (Deluty, 1979) were presented to the children over two testing sessions. After reading each conflict situation aloud, a male experimenter (the author) gave the children 5 minutes to write "all the things you really *might* say or do if you found yourself in such a situation." Two psychologists, working independently, then designated each alternative as "aggressive," "assertive," or "submissive," using the definitions delineated by Deluty (1979). In case of disagreement between the raters, the experimenter made the final evaluation.[3]

Three-way analyses of variance (sex X school X habitual style of behavior) were conducted for these 90 subjects' total number of scorable responses; total number of aggressive alternatives, of assertive alternatives, and of submissive alternatives; and "Percentage of total responses—Aggressive" (PTR-AGG) scores, "Percentage of total responses—Assertive" (PTR-ASS) scores, and "Percentage of total responses—Submissive" (PTR-SUB) scores.

While subjects of differing habitual styles of behaving did not differ significantly in terms of the total *number* of alternatives they generated, there were significant differences in the *types* of alternatives they offered. A significant main effect for habitual style was found for both total number of aggressive responses, $F(2,72) = 6.62$, $p < .005$, and PTR-AGG scores, $F(2,72) = 8.19$, $p < .001$.[4] As predicted, aggressive children

[3]To assess interrater reliability, the raters' evaluations of 200 randomly selected response alternatives were compared. Of these 200 alternatives, 177 (88.5%) were rated identically by the two judges.

[4]In addition, a significant sex effect was found for PTR-AGG scores, $F(1,72) = 12.17$, $p < .001$, with boys having higher scores than girls. Significant main effects for sex were also found for PTR-ASS scores, $F(1,72) = 8.51$, $p < .005$, and for total number of assertive responses, $F(1,72) = 19.07$, $p < .001$, with boys scoring lower than girls on both measures.

produced significantly more aggressive responses and had significantly higher PTR-AGG scores than did assertive subjects ($p < .01$); contrary to prediction, however, their scores on these two measures were also significantly higher than those of submissive children ($p < .01$). An examination of the PTR-AGG scores by sex revealed that while approximately one-half of the aggressive boys' and of the submissive boys' cognitive repertoires consisted of aggressive alternatives, only about one-third of the assertive boys' repertoires were made up of aggressive responses. Thus, the hypothesis that aggressive and submissive children would differ from assertive children, but not from each other, in their alternative thinking was partially confirmed for boys in terms of the percentage of responses they generated that were aggressive.

A significant main effect for habitual style was also found for total number of assertive responses, $F(2,72) = 7.80$, $p < .001$, and a strong habitual style effect was obtained for PTR-ASS scores, $F(2,72) = 3.70$, $p < .03$. Assertive children had significantly higher ($p < .01$) PTR-ASS scores than did aggressive children, and considerably (though not significantly) higher scores than submissive subjects.

Lastly, a significant habitual style main effect was found for PTR-SUB scorers, $F(2,72) = 5.81$, $p < .005$, with submissive children having significantly higher PTR-SUB scores than aggressive subjects ($p < .01$). It is noteworthy that all types of children generated more assertive alternatives than submissive ones. While the quantity of submissive alternatives was relatively low, the desirability or acceptibility of these few submissive responses for submissive children was likely quite high.

In sum, as hypothesized, highly assertive children are capable of conceiving of a wide variety of response alternatives to interpersonal conflict situations. Contrary to prediction, however, highly aggressive and highly submissive children are also able to generate (cognitively) aggressive, assertive, and submissive responses; their cognitive repertoires are not as "black and white" as originally predicted. Although aggressive and submissive childen can conceive of assertive alternatives, the percentage and absolute frequency of such alternatives (particularly for aggressive youngsters) is deficient when compared to that of assertive children. The findings suggest that aggressive and submissive children might benefit from cognitively oriented assertiveness training (i.e., training that focuses on increasing *assertive* alternative-thinking ability).

Aggressive alternatives were found to dominate the cognitive repertoires of highly aggressive children, with more than one-half of the aggressive boys' reservoir of strategies consisting of aggressive solutions. Mischel (1973) has demonstrated that an individual's actions in a given situation are intimately related to his capacity to select behaviors from a potential range of response alternatives. In the case of the aggressive

boy, the alternatives he generates are likely to represent one or another form of aggression, thereby limiting the number of nonaggressive behaviors available to him.

While the composition of a child's cognitive repertoire doubtlessly plays an important role in determining actual behavior, clearly there are other determinants. For example, the cognitive repertoire of submissive girls was found to be dominated by assertive alternatives. It is possible that while submissive females can conceive of assertive solutions, they may regard them as aggressive and undesirable, and may choose not to exhibit such behavior. Future studies will explore the interactive influences upon actual behavior of both alternative-solution thinking and decision-making processes (including perceived social desirability and perceived likelihood of success of particular responses) for boys and girls across several ages.

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