

### **The Impact of High School Teacher Behaviors on Student Aggression**

There has been a great deal of research conducted on the topic of teacher behavior. However, within this broad category, this particular research sought out specific information on how teacher behavior affects student aggression. In doing so, the researcher did not set out to blame teachers for student aggression; the goal was to discover how teachers can modify behavior and react in ways that will help create positive and peaceful classroom environments – and prevent student aggressive behaviors that can result in violence.

In a study on student aggression and teacher behavior, teachers reported that they see the following behaviors in fellow teachers: bullying, derogatory comments, gossip, disrespect of authority, harassment, predetermined expectations of others, discord between individuals and groups, and angry outbursts. Not only did teachers witness these actions among their peers, but, when asked to label these behaviors, they identified them as either violence or precursors to violence. Interestingly, these are some of the very behaviors schools are trying to eradicate from the student population, yet, eradication efforts will find only limited success if teachers are modeling inappropriate behaviors. As one respondent said, “Teachers model expectations – if they show aggression, they will get aggression” [1,240].

The literature documents similar findings to those of the Spaulding and Burleson study discussed above. Hymen and Perone determined that at least 50-60 percent of all students experience maltreatment by an educator at least once in their school careers. Furthermore, research has found that a school may unwittingly contribute to student aggression through inappropriate classroom placement, irrelevant instruction, inconsistent management, overcrowded classrooms, rigid behavioral demands, or insensitivity to student diversity [1,241]. Conversely, findings show that elements which may curb aggression include a positive school climate, identification of and response to early violence warning signs, relevant coursework which is neither too simple or too complex, clear classroom rules and expectations, and the avoidance of power struggles.

Other research has explored more specific teacher behaviors and results. For instance, Mullins, Chard, Hartman, Bowlby, Rich, and Burke (1995) studied teachers’ responses to children who were depressed. They discovered that there was an increase in a teacher’s self-reported level of personal rejection and a decrease in the level of personal attraction to children who were depressed. Furthermore, the same decrease in personal attraction and increase in personal rejection were found for boys aged six through eleven who showed an increase in social problems or delinquency.

Finally, Mullins (1995), et al., reported that teachers' negative responses to these troubled students were likely to grow stronger over time.

Van Acker, Grant, and Henry drew several conclusions from their research on school violence. First, they found a connection between school climate and violence resulting in the knowledge that schools can adversely affect student behavior. Secondly, they posit that teachers may displace their own feelings of anger and aggression onto students. And, thirdly, they discovered that the lack of positive teacher feedback for appropriate student behavior were likely to create inappropriate behavior in students. They describe this phenomenon in the following manner:

The lack of predictable feedback following desired behavior appears to suggest a situation in which the school may well provide a context for the exacerbation of undesired social behavior on the part of students most at risk for demonstrating aggressive and violent behavior.

Krugman echoed this idea of students behaving according to what is expected of them. They wrote that students adapt quickly to whatever label a teacher gives them in order to fit in the classroom environment.

Teacher behavior is an important target for preventive intervention because many aspects of the classroom environment have been linked empirically with student aggression. Among these are teacher instructional and behavior management techniques [3,82]. There is evidence that student-teacher interaction and punitive practices in schools may contribute to increased levels of aggressive behavior [3,86]. For example, VanAcker, Grant, and Henry (1996) found that highly aggressive children experienced "different classrooms" than other children. These investigators found that student-teacher interactions and classroom contingencies differed significantly based upon student risk for aggression. Teachers in the study did not attend positively to the desired social behavior of any of their students, and students at risk for aggression who performed well academically were less likely than were other students to receive praise. Teacher interventions have focused on improving teacher instructional skills and classroom management, as represented by factors such as negative interactions with students, differential treatment of students, autocratic styles of leadership, a high reliance on suppressionary discipline, negative physical behaviors, and unrealistic social and academic demands. In particular, there is evidence that increasing teachers' use of contingent praise can positively affect high-risk children (Ferguson & Houghton, 1992; Walker, 1996).

Several studies have demonstrated the efficacy of teacher interventions with high-risk children and youth. Hawkins and colleagues in the Seattle Social Development Project [4,470] found that teacher training emphasizing proactive classroom management, interactive teaching, and cooperative learning was related to lower levels of violent delinquency, sexual behavior, and cheating, and higher levels of school bonding and academic achievement. Specifically, teachers

assigned to an intervention condition received a 5-day training course stressing consistent rules and expectations, contingent praise for positive achievement and behavior, monitoring student progress, and individual attention and small group instruction. Teachers were observed using the Interactive Teaching Map (Kerr, Kent, & Lam, 1985). Implementation of these practices was positively related to classroom opportunities for students, reinforcement, and school bonding and achievement. Although mean differences suggested positive intervention effects on teaching strategies taught in the intervention, these differences were not substantial enough to be statistically significant. Webster-Stratton and colleagues [1,240] offered four full-day teacher training workshops to Head Start teachers over a 6-month period. The sessions targeted effective classroom management strategies for misbehavior, promoting social skills, improving relationships with difficult students, and approaches to collaboration with parents. In evaluating the teacher training, the investigators created a composite teacher negative behavior score consisting of observations of teacher criticism of students from the MOOSES (Tapp, Wehby, & Ellis, 1995), a classroom atmosphere measure from the FAST-Track program (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1999), and a coder impression inventory modeled after a measure used with parents. Teachers in all teacher training conditions exhibited lower levels of negative behaviors toward students. Interestingly, teachers of students in the child-training-only condition also exhibited lower levels of negative behaviors (Webster-Stratton et al., 2001). Effects on teacher behaviors observed in the Seattle Social Development Project were suggestive, but not significant, and the designs of the Webster-Stratton et al. (2001,2002) studies do not permit evaluating the effects of the teacher intervention in isolation from other conditions. The Webster-Stratton et al. (2001) study randomly assigned families to one of six conditions, combining components of the Incredible Years program. There was no condition in which teacher training was offered without either parent training or child training included. In the Webster-Stratton et al. (2002) study, Head Start centers were randomly assigned to either an intervention condition including parent, child, and teacher interventions, or an observation-only control condition. Teachers in the intervention condition exhibited higher levels of behaviors stressed by the intervention. Like the Seattle Social Development Project and the Webster-Stratton et al. (2001,2002) studies, the Metropolitan Area Child Study (MACS; Metropolitan Area Child Study Research Group, 2002) has demonstrated the efficacy of interventions including teacher training and consultation on student behavior and achievement. The MACS study tested the efficacy of a general classroom enhancement intervention, a small group social-skills training intervention, and a targeted family intervention, arranged in levels with increasingly intense interventions, on aggression and academic achievement. Sixteen schools were randomly assigned to one of four intervention conditions: (1) an observation-only control condition, (2) a classroom enhancement condition (Level A), (3) classroom enhancement plus small group social-skills training (Level B),

and (4) classroom enhancement, small group social-skills training, and family intervention (Level C). Results showed that the full (Level C) condition was effective in reducing aggression among younger children at high risk for aggression. Younger high-risk children in the three conditions receiving the general classroom enhancement intervention showed positive effects on academic achievement compared to controls. The effects on aggression in the MACS study were limited to children receiving treatment in earlier grades and occurred in a community with greater resources. Further analysis of the MACS sample suggested that teacher contingent reprimand of aggressive behavior, combined with classmates' normative pressure to reduce aggression, was associated with reductions in classroom levels of aggression (Henry et al., 2000).

This investigation produced evidence that teacher feedback generally, and teacher feedback to the most aggressive students in particular, was associated with change in aggression. The results also suggested that the teacher intervention of the MACS changed both teacher feedback and class structure variables, generally and with the most aggressive students. These changes were in directions consistent with lowering levels of aggression. Although teacher behavioral praise has been shown to affect aggressive behavior of students, and the intervention stressed contingent praise for positive social behavior as a tool for behavioral management, little behavioral praise was found in this investigation, either in the control or intervention conditions. Overall, behavioral praise was observed only about 1/20th as often as behavioral reprimand, or once in every 20 observation sessions, whereas behavioral reprimand was observed an average of once each observation session. There was a slight indication of an increase in behavioral praise with more aggressive students when the Level A intervention was considered in the absence of other levels of intervention. Previous research has suggested that aggressive students receive excessively punitive treatment from their teachers [3, 88]. However, the results of this investigation suggest that more aggressive students actually receive less contingent reinforcement for their academic performance and behavior than do less aggressive students. Teachers in the control condition in this study tended to give less feedback overall as student aggression increased. The slopes between aggression and teacher academic praise, academic correction, and behavioral reprimand were all negative among controls, and significantly different from those observed among teachers in the intervention condition. The intervention appears to have been successful in equalizing the amount of contingent reinforcement received by students at all levels of aggression. All indicators suggested that teachers receiving the intervention increased the amount of individual attention given to more aggressive students over pretest levels. Teachers assigned to receive the intervention were also observed structuring class time differently than controls. Classes conducted by teachers in the intervention condition consisted of less time spent in large group lectures and substantially more class time devoted to individual seat work. These effects were stronger among more aggressive students,

indicating, perhaps, that intervention teachers with more aggressive classes tended to change the ways they structured their classes. Overall, this study is consistent with the findings of Webster-Stratton et al. (2001,2002) and the Seattle Social Development Project (Abbott et al., 1998; Hawkins et al., 1999; Lonczak et al., 2002). The effect sizes of the significant effects in this study averaged .46 in the full sample and .62 in the reduced sample. These are comparable with effect sizes reported by Webster-Stratton et al. (2002), which ranged from .46 to .63 for effects on teacher negative behavior. Taken together, evidence from these studies suggests that teacher interventions may be effective because they change the contingent reinforcement experienced by aggressive children in their classrooms.

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