

ELEMENTS OF RELATIONAL AGGRESSION IN PRE-SCHOOL GROUPS IN SLOVAK KINDERGARTENS

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The study presents an analysis of findings from a long-term research supported by the VEGA agency 1/0452/18. Identifications, analyses, inhibitions of latently aggressive children's actions in pre-school period.

Abstract: The study analyses specific situations from the environment of Slovak kindergartens, which demonstrate the covert nature of aggressors in pre-school age. The analyses of situation observations were supplemented by and compared with the outcomes of individual interviews with the observed children. Based on these data, sociometry matrixes were constructed, which also included the individual's sociometric index expressing their acceptance and/or rejection by the peer social group. Based on these analyses it was confirmed that in the beginning of the aggressive actions, aggressors combine direct and indirect aggression unless they gain capabilities to act with covert aggression. Aggressors (pre-schoolers) are primarily characterised by a lower level of secrecy in covertly aggressive behaviour.

Keywords: covertly aggressive behaviour, kindergarten, sociometry

1 "Ideal age" for covert and relational aggressive behaviour

The first study concerning covert aggression (Crick et al., 1998) questions if it is correct to be considering covert aggression at an early age. According to the research results, the existence/prevalence of covert aggression in children younger than 2.5 years was not fully confirmed. Crick et al. (2002) claimed that the occurrence of covert aggression in early childhood (with the extension to pre-school age) relates to lower level of mutual acceptance (negative preferences) and higher tendency of the social group to reject their peers, friends, basically, one of their own. Huesmann (1988 as cited in Lovaš, 2010) described the theory of scenarios as a model of processing information, which he used to clarify the development of habitual aggression in children. He stated that children at an early age create aggressive scenarios based on their own experience and learning by observing their surroundings resulting in "a network of cognitive scenarios of aggressive behaviour in specific situations. To activate a scenario a trigger is enough, followed by creating conditions that can evoke the situation" (Lovaš, pp. 37-38). Similarly, Ribeiro and Zachrisson (2019) observed that exposure to peer aggression or externalizing behaviour may increase individual physical aggression. The research results of Monks et al. (2005) suggest that pre-school age is the ideal period for performing covert aggression. Verlaan and Turmel (2010) confirmed that this form of aggressive behaviour in the described age is nothing unusual. It practically appears in every peer group and is initially considered common behaviour. The extent to which this form of behaviour is accepted by the social group depends on the limits of how bearable the harmful behaviour is. In the research of Yektatalab et al. (2015) relational aggression was manifested in 22% of pre-school children (to compare, verbal aggression was present in 33% and physical aggression in 31% of children).

Covert aggression in an early and pre-school age reflects wider psycho-social problems in early childhood. Krygsman and Vaillancourt (2019) found out that children who experience and engage in relational aggression in pre-school age are at risk of depressive symptoms too. Ostrov (2013) claims that peer rejection of a child relates to a variable scale of social and psychological problems following on children's early development in their immediate environment (family). Pre-school classrooms are diverse and in order to be inclusive for everyone, these factors need to be considered. Therefore, it is useful to understand covert aggression as a result of adverse conditions in the child development but also as a factor that can be regulated if it is observed and supported by appropriate strategies. The focus of this study is on observing the dynamics of small social groups with the purpose of deeper understanding of the phenomenon of covert aggression and its influence on inclusion or exclusion of children from their peer groups. Kováčová (2014) reported that within pre-school age, children with and without disability might be at risk. Children who differ from the peer group in their behaviour become potential victim. Research proves that children with pervasive developmental disorders (Kožík Lehotayová, 2017a), learning disability, or gifted individuals (Kožík Lehotayová, 2017b) are vulnerable too. Thus, for creating inclusive education environments, it is crucial to identify covertly aggressive behaviour in pre-school peer groups.

2 Having a friend is a need of pre-school aged children

From the age of three, it becomes important to children to have a friend, somebody who they can feel good with, somebody to play with, somebody who shares something with them. According establishing relationships essentially means activating communication pathways in the processes of mutual respect and understanding. Distance between friends is substituted by respect and destigmatisation of all participants. Comstock-Galagan (2008) claims that everyone needs friendship despite the fact that some do not realise the need to have a friend.

Social relationships are created between individuals and their social environment through mutual influence of complex interaction processes. Described interactions happen on three levels. Kollárik (2002) identifies the mechanism of deviations in human behaviour from social norms as happening in the level of: the process of socialisation of the individual; mutual influence between the individual and the social group and relationships between the individual and the society.

Behaviour of the individual is an expression of their personality and their relationship with the external environment. Tichá (2008) claims that understanding individuals' behaviour assumes respecting mutual interplay of the factors that influence it, which are the individuals, their family, school and society.

Kindergarten, as identified by Kováčová (2019), presents one of the first opportunities for developing friendships and relationships, which may have an impact beyond the school environment. Social interaction as part of friendships, acquaintances or short-term meetings is understood by Walden et al. (1999) not only as one of the indicators of a successful process of inclusion but also as its means. It applies in particular to pre-school age, where the capacity to social interaction with peers is an important stage of development, while the interaction represents the interpersonal context of social, speech and cognitive development. According to Dunn (1993) friendships are characterised by the fact that friends do not betray each other in the social group by jokes or gossip. This loyalty towards friends is strengthened by intimacy and closeness. An example is a published study about friendships, in which Maquire and Dunn (1997) point out the presence of covert aggression in children's actions, e.g. "I don't like X, you

neither?” Creating conflicts, gossiping without a real reason, or untruthful information suggest that children in pre-school age use covert aggression initially to strengthen their position, and later with the intention to isolate the “undesirable” friend on purpose. “*Friendships are a commodity*,” as Comstock-Galagan (2008, p. 4) wrote. Strong friendships overlook so called *labels and stigmas*.

Covert aggression is on one hand more visible, however, in the end it is the one that damages relationships and weakens child’s reputation. Putallaz and Gottman (1981, p. 167) confirmed that “*children start with gossiping and creating untruthful information at the age of three to four years old.*” For illustration, they mention a conversation of a couple of children who are talking rather loudly about a third child in the context of not being near them during the play: “*It will be best if he leaves us alone.*”

The connection between friendship and using covertly aggressive strategies was reflected in the research studies of multiple authors. The results comprise findings that friendships and popularity are primary aspects of social contacts in child development. Children in pre-school age consider them crucial for their own existence in the social group. The concept of friendship is expressed in a specific, intensive, affective dyadic relationship between two children, while the concept of popularity is defined by how the child is perceived by the whole group. These two concepts complement each other a for relationships of children at pre-school age they are significant and necessary in friendship building (more in Ostrov & Crick, 2005). Children who use covert strategies with an aggressive intent in their acts have at least one reciprocal friendly relationship, as stated by Rys and Bear (1997). Lee (2020) explored the roles children take in their relationships and confirmed that children in the roles of bullies were most dominant in terms of group dynamics. In popularity, they were behind children in neutral role who had the most positive relationships. However, only 10% of children kept the role of the bully long-term and their role changed due to a change of dominance rather than change in relationships. Moreover, relational aggression tends to be associated with social maladjustment (Ostrov et al., 2019). Gower (2014) provided evidence that physically aggressive behaviour in pre-schools predicted reduced peer acceptance. It was confirmed by Evans et al. (2019) that all types of aggressive behaviour, and especially physical and reactive aggression link with peer rejection. Ostrov et al. (2019) emphasised that relational aggression (not bullying) increased the risk of peer harassment or relational victimisation.

2.1 Covertly aggressive behaviour in the development of children at pre-school and primary school age

The aspect of latency is different in the development of children/pupils in pre-school and in primary school age (Table 1).

Table 1: Comparison of manifestations of covertly aggressive behaviour in selected age periods

Manifestations of covertly aggressive conduct	Developmental period	
	Pre-school age	Primary school age
Beginnings of covertly aggressive conduct	Conducted directly (primarily verbally)	Conducted discretely, by the means of another child
Aggressor’s behaviour	Aggressor does not feel the need to hide. Rigby (2001) states that a “lower” level of covertness is typical in latently aggressive behaviour for a child at a pre-school age.	Aggressor’s behaviour is more elaborated and hidden
Specification of aggressor’s attacks against the victim	Direct attacks (gossip, argumentation without a truthful basis)	Indirect attacks (threatening of reputation, intentional destructive information)

The aggressor’s behavior is characterized by direct and indirect attacks of the aggressor against the victim (Archer & Coyne, 2005).

If we compare the latency rate at primary school age, we can state that aggressors have appropriate competences to act in a covertly aggressive way and their strategies are usually well thought out. They can influence social group members while managing the whole process of covert aggression. Usually, children who began with aggression in pre-school age will elaborate their actions as they develop and continue with covert aggression if there are conditions created to do so (see Ostrov et al., 2004).

3 Analysis of findings from observations in kindergartens

Subsequently, we present situations in which aggressive behaviour with elements of latency can be observed in pre-school aggressors. Individual situations were part of observations in Slovak kindergartens during the months May 2018 to February 2019. Children were monitored in natural situations (during both free and directed play).

For the assessment of individual situations, we used observation and subsequently individual interviews with children who were participating. For the sake of objectivity, we conducted interviews on that day to minimise distortion of the results as such. We used the sociometric method (Janoušek, 1986) to ascertain relationships within a group, its structure and the position of individuals within it.

The limit of this method is the fact that it does not provide information on the causes of these relationships and the status of individuals in the group. Despite this limit, it was possible to compare the analyses of observations with the sociometric index values (AP, RP). These were numerical expressions of choices made, focusing mainly on monitoring the cohesion, expansion of the group, etc. Choices made by group members may be unidirectional if one person (or group) selects another without being selected by them; bidirectional if two persons select each other. A case of no selection is possible too when individuals did not select each other from either side.

Sociometric indexes provided information on the situation in the group, which is an important piece of information in assessing covert aggressive behaviour (compare with Kollárik, Solárová, 2004; Kollárik, 2002).

3.1 Situation K

Daniel (3 years) approached two boys from the back who played with building blocks. He arrived at the construction and kicked it. After kicking it he skipped away with a smile. After a while he returned to the boys (Kamil and Milan), who were repairing the demolished construction.

He wanted to demolish it again. One of the boys (Kamil) prevented him from demolishing the building again by stretching his hand out. Daniel stands, the boys sit and wait. Daniel frowns, tries to kick again, but Kamil’s hand still prevents him from kicking the building blocks. Daniel turns to go to another group of children (Matej, Uli, Sergei, Tony). Daniel sits down and joins a game with building blocks. After a very short time, he is pushed out of the group by one child (Matej) with a commentary: *You are bad, we will not play with you! Go away!*

Evaluation of Situation K from the perspective of the participants: During the individual interviews we explored the types of mutual relationships based on the situation that occurred. Individual children evaluated the play and also the mutual relations between each other. Each of them had the opportunity to comment on each child, but of course they did not have to use the choice.

Table 2: Sociometric matrix of situation K

Participants making choices	Participants	Participants being selected in play							Number of made choices		Sociometric index	
		Daniel	Kamil	Milan	Matej	Uli	Sergej	Tony	+	-	AP	RP
Daniel	0	+	+	+	+	+	+	6		0.16	0.83	
Kamil	-	0	(+)	+	-		+	3	2	0.66	0.16	
Milan	-	(+)	0	+			+	2	2	0.5	0	
Matej	-	+	(+)	0			(+)	3	1	1	0	
Uli	+	-		+	0	+	+	4	1	0.16	0.33	
Sergej	-			(+)			0	1	1	0.66	0	
Tony	-	(+)		+	-			0	2	2	0.5	0.16
								21	9			

Key (Table 2):

AP / acceptance of a person [AP = number of people who made a choice / (N-1)]

RP / rejection of a person [RP = number of people who reject a person / (N-1)]

When interpreting the rating, it is necessary to have the knowledge that a person, a member of the group, can obtain a rating from a minimum value of 0 to a maximum value of 1. The higher the AP value a person gained, the more accepted they are by the group. The higher the value in the DP index, the more a person is rejected by their social group.

The observation was carried out in the "Horses" class. It was a heterogeneous class in which children aged three to five years old were included. This grouping was a temporary solution, as the current kindergarten is undergoing reconstruction of the class due to the emergency situation that had to be addressed during the school year.

Based on the achieved sociometric index value in the context of individual acceptance of the person from the side of the group participants, it can be stated that Milan, Matej and Tony achieved a higher AP value, which shows that they are the most accepted by the group. Matej reached the highest AP (= 1), indicating that he is a favourite person in this particular social group.

In the case of a value achieved in the context of rejection of a person by individual participants in the group, it can be stated that Daniel achieved the highest AP value (= 0.83). Based on the specific values, it is clear that Daniel is accepted by the group, but at a very low level. The likelihood of being excluded from the group in group play is more than likely.

Most children rated the play as good, interesting until Daniel came. Children realize that Daniel is younger, but from their point of view ... *he can't do bad things just because he is small, ... no one is doing bad stuff to him, so he can't do bad things.* On the contrary, Daniel considered his own behaviour as play that did not harm anyone.

After 5 months: Daniel repeats his unsuccessful conduct (based on his experience from the "Horses" class) in another social group. There is Tobias in this group, who likes Daniel. Tobias is impressed by Daniel and admires him (... *he is as powerful as a dragon*). According to the observations of the teacher, Tobias wants Daniel to like him. He uses this fact in particular to strengthen his position during group games.

Table 3: Transcript of the interview of the aggressor with a mediator

Daniel	<i>Go there, see if they have room, that I am going to play. Daniel points to Tobias where to go to ask.</i>
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Tobias	He came to the children and asked them. Children are discussing with Tobias, then they nod. Tobias comes to Daniel. <i>Yes, we are going there.</i>
Daniel	Approaches the children and sits down on the carpet.
Jonáš	Jonáš leans down towards Daniels and says: <i>Borrow this car, this one you can, but until Peřko comes.</i>
Daniel	Daniel nods and tells Jonáš: <i>Peřko is a bad boy, he is naughty, also to me and Tobias.</i> He points at Tobias.
Tobias	Stays quiet, does not react.
Peřko	Peřko comes to children playing together. He wants to sit down with them, but Tobias stops him with stretching his hand and says: <i>Go away, you are bad, you were naughty to us!</i> Peřko tries to defend himself, but he is pushed out by Tobias.
Tobias	Tobias controls what Peřko is doing. Then he stands up and approaches Daniel. <i>We are playing. He is gone now.</i>
Daniel	Daniel lifts his head and gives thumbs up and says: <i>Great. Cool.</i>

Source: processed based on observation (February 2019)

Based on his previous experience, Daniel tried to strengthen his position. He used the unexpected loyalty of Tobias, whom he used as a mediator. On the basis of false information, he secured a spot during the game and at the same time used a replica that was addressed to him in another situation and in another group. Pre-school aggressors learn. They are aware that physical aggression is threatening because it requires force that children often do not have as potential aggressors. For this reason, they behave manipulatively towards the social group in their own favour.

Each individual is tied to the value and normative system of the social group to which they belong. Some social groups are characterized by a high level of tolerance of violent behaviour, which is considered desirable. If an individual belongs to such a social group, membership in it is important for them and they are comfortable with the group's rules, it can be assumed that they will also show violent manifestations of behaviour, or there is a tendency to strengthen such behaviours.

3.2 Situation M

In the "Butterfly" class, children commonly play chase. They also have rules that, if they break, they must stop chasing. Lukas (4 years) does not participate in the chase. He watches four chasing children (Filip, Tónko, Tamara and Lenka). He walks slowly around the classroom and picks objects from the shelves (he looks at the object, then either chooses it or returns it to the shelf). When he already has three items (two building blocks and a ball) he takes them behind a white shelf, which is part of the kitchen. He puts them all on the carpet. Meanwhile, he watches the chasing children. He takes one more item from the shelf (teddy bear). He hides behind the shelf and throws the first block. He accompanies each throw with a silent laughter covering his mouth with his hand. After throwing the block, he squats and waits behind the shelf. The block hit Filip, who in the heat of the chase, did not notice the thrown block. The second block flies in the direction of Tamara, who is also hit, and she makes a cry. She pauses and looks around. She sees no one and rubs the place where the cube hit her. Lukas laughs behind the shelf and waits. When he hears no sounds, he sticks out and looks into the faces of the angry children. The chasing children gradually find out that someone is throwing objects into them. They agree and divide into two groups. They advance from each side, thus circumventing Lukas. When Lukas does not hear any sounds, he sticks out from behind the shelf and looks into the children's faces. When confronted with him (Filip "interrogates" him), Lukas denies and defends himself: ... *It wasn't me, I wasn't throwing anything, not even a block, nothing ... Mrs. Teacher boys want to beat me ... Mrs. Teacher ... Tamara is angry and encourages the boys to do the "Courtroom" and decide "what we do with the villain."* Lukas defends himself, but Tamara shows

him the wound she got from the block. *Do you want me to throw something at you too? My big brother will come and throw a shelf in you! That one! You want that? He will throw it on you!* The chasing children are angry overall, because Tobias spoiled their chase.

Evaluation of Situation M from the perspective of the participants: During individual interviews with children we explored the types of mutual relationships based on the situations that occurred. Individual children evaluated the play and also the mutual relations between them. Each of them had the opportunity to comment on each child, but of course they did not have to use the choice.

When interpreting a rating, it is necessary to have the knowledge that a person, a member of the group, can obtain a rating from a minimum value of 0 to a maximum value of 1. The higher AP value a person obtains, the more accepted by the group they are. The higher RP index a person gains, the more they are rejected by the social group.

Table 4: Sociometric matrix of Situation M

Participants making choices	Participants	Participants being selected in play					Number of choices made		Sociometric index	
		Filip	Lukas	Tamara	Lenka	Tónko	+	-	AP	RP
	Filip	0	-	(+)	(+)	+	3	1	0.75	0.25
	Lukas	-	0	(-)	+	+	0	4	0	1
	Tamara	(+)	(-)	0	(+)	-	2	1	0.5	0.25
	Lenka	(+)	-	(+)	0		4	0	1	0
	Tónko	+	-		+	0	2	1	0.5	0.25
							11	7		

Key (Table 4):

AP / acceptance of a person [AP = number of people who made a choice / (N - 1)]

RP / rejection of a person [RP = number of people who reject a person / (N - 1)]

Based on the achieved value of the sociometric index in the context of acceptance of a person by individual participants of the group, it can be stated that Filip achieved the highest value of AP (= 1), which proves that he is the most accepted by the group. This also occurs during the interrogation of Lukas, when all children accepted his status. The value achieved indicates that Filip is a favourite person in this particular social group.

In the case of the value achieved in the context of the rejection of a person by the individual participants in the group, it can be stated that Lukas achieved the highest value (RP = 1). It is obvious that Lukas is accepted by the group at a very low level.

The overall behaviour of Lukas during "his own game" can be considered covertly aggressive. His intention to hurt other members of the group was thought through, which was also reflected in the observation of his activity during the chase other children were playing. Hiding behind the shelf itself can be characterised as an *element of latency in aggressive action*. It can be assumed that a certain "rate" of latency at this age is typical of this developmental period.

4 Conclusion

By analysing the results based on the tools used to monitor the issue, we came to the following conclusions. The use of sociometry (sociometric matrix and sociometric index) is a

suitable strategy in assessing individual relationships in the social group of pre-school children. It provides evidence of an effective strategy for assessing peer aggression. It is important especially due to several biases that can occur in teachers' observations of child peer aggression. Huising et al. (2019) recorded differences in teachers' and children's perceptions of victimisation. Whereas children said that boys and girls were equally victimised by both boys and girls, teachers thought same sex victimisation was more frequent. In a similar research, Lindsey and Berks (2019) discovered that if children manifest positive emotions teachers tend to regard them as less aggressive and more prosocial. Especially, boys who expressed anger were perceived as more aggressive.

Ersan (2020) confirms that expression of anger can indirectly predict physical aggression and relational aggression through emotional regulation, however, negative emotions do not have to turn into aggressive behaviour. Therefore, it is important to support the development of emotional regulation. Even though Ersan (ibid.) suggests that anger can lead to aggressive behaviour before children develop emotional regulation, however, in previous studies, Yektatalab et al. (2015) reported only 13% prevalence of impulsive anger in pre-school children. Supporting emotional regulation thus is not the only intervention strategy. Gower et al. (2014) recommend that educators encourage prosocial behaviour in pre-school children because according to their findings, aggressive behaviour predicts also future maladjustment. Social learning through positive modelling was confirmed to be helpful in reducing aggressive and disruptive behaviour of pre-schoolers (Rababah & Alrub, 2018).

It is necessary to point out that pre-school age is a specific developmental period and revealing covertly aggressive behaviour in front of the whole group is an unacceptable strategy of working with a social group. It is necessary to realize that this is an ethically delicate situation, which is perceived differently by children. In this context, Majzlanová (2004) recommends working with the story as a suitable technique.

In particular, working with a story in which elements of aggression are "hidden" through a fairy tale action and children are thus presented with a solution in a very acceptable way. To illustrate, in a specific fairy tale about the Brave Tin Soldier, Majzlanová (2017) points out the possibility of playing hypothetical scenarios that contain (possibly from the perspective of children themselves) conflict and its solution. The author (ibid.) develops the "traditional" possibilities of working with the story in that the adult also selects / creates scenes that are integrated into the story as new and at the same time familiar to the children.

Combining observations with individual interviews with children with the addition of sociometry is currently an option that is accessible not only to the child (regardless of the position that they have in the aggressive conduct), but also to the social group itself. In a given developmental period, it is advisable to use a story / fairy tale, which may not only have a diagnostic potential, but also an inhibitory application (Kováčová, 2014). To support inclusion, it is important to identify covert aggression and to help children create more functional social strategies. Covertly aggressive behaviour may on one hand present the cause of exclusion, however, on the other hand it may be a result of peer exclusion. Supporting prosocial behaviour in peer groups can therefore support inclusive preschool environments.

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Primary Paper Section: A

Secondary Paper Section: AM, AN