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## Harsh Parenting, Early Childhood Aggression, Linked to Victimization

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October 15, 2008 — Toddlers who display aggressive behavior, especially if their mother uses harsh parenting techniques and struggles financially, are at increased risk of being victimized, a new study suggests.

These findings provide solid evidence that patterns of victimization emerge as soon as children start to interact socially, said study author, Michel Boivin, PhD, from Laval University, in Quebec City, Quebec.

While the connection between childhood aggression and victimization has been well documented, "the new stuff here is the fact that we can assess the same type of process very early on," said Dr. Boivin. "This is happening not only in the schools but even earlier, and we can witness or document this phenomenon."

These results underline the importance of early intervention to teach young children and their parents alternatives to harsh and aggressive behavior, said Dr. Boivin.

The study is published in the October issue of the *Archives of General Psychiatry*.

### Three Trajectories of Victimization

Study participants were from the Quebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development, a sample of children born in Quebec between October 1997 and July 1998. Researchers assessed children at several stages between the ages of 4.5 months and 7.2 years.

Among other material, mothers provided information on parenting styles, physical aggression, and signs of hyperactivity. To assess level of victimization, they were asked how often their child had been made fun of, hit or pushed, or called names by other children in the previous 6 months.

To assess the degree of harsh parenting, mothers reported how often they were angry at, raised their voice at, shouted at, and spanked their child. At age 7.2 years, both teachers and children reported on victimization by classmates. The study included 1970 children.

The researchers uncovered 3 distinct categories or "trajectories" of victimization:

- Low/increasing (this was the majority, at 71%).
- Moderate/increasing (25%).
- High/chronic (4%).

Although more boys than girls made up the last 2 groups, there were no sex-specific effects in the patterns of prediction between physical aggression and victimization.

The study found that 3 risk variables — harsh parenting, low family income, and physical aggression — differentiated those children in the high/chronic group from those in the low/increasing group.

Low family income and physical aggression differentiated the moderate/increasing group from the low/increasing group. The high/chronic group differed from the moderate/increasing group in only 1 risk variable — harsh parenting.

Both early signs of hyperactivity and early internalizing symptoms were not associated with peer victimization during preschool.

### **Parents Can Reinforce Negative Behavior**

The relationship between harsh parenting and early childhood aggression can be a vicious cycle — harsh parenting may cause as well as be a result of a child's aggression.

"A parent may intervene [when a child behaves badly], but inappropriately; instead of calming the child, the parent might reinforce the negative behavior," Dr. Boivin said in an interview.

"This makes it more likely that the child will either develop or maintain his or her aggression over time, or he or she will learn that aggression can be a way to get what he or she wants."

Low income, which is often associated with single-parent households, can also have an impact, he said. "If you have 1 kid who is more difficult than another, and if you have the pressures of being alone, it's more difficult to properly discipline your child."

### **Need To Identify At-Risk Families**

Parents can and should take steps to reduce aggressive behaviors to minimize their child's risk of being victimized. "Parents should try to implement consistent behavior toward their child, and not be overly punitive," said Dr. Boivin.

He added that the study results reinforce the need to identify families at risk. "We know the risk factors, and there are some proven ways to intervene," he said. "It's been shown that if we build an alliance very early on, even before the child is born, with families at risk and give them support in terms of parenting skills, you can prevent, to some extent, these negative trajectories."

Such interventions are all the more important today, as more and more kids are enrolled in daycare and preschool at an early age, he added.

The developmental catch-22 for aggressive kids is that while they tend to eventually hang around with other aggressive kids and thereby become less victimized, their association with other aggressors puts them at increased risk for increased antisocial behaviors, said Dr. Boivin.

*No financial disclosure was reported.*

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