

Antisocial conduct and decision making about aggressive behavior influence each other in teens

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A new study challenges the idea that antisocial behavior is relatively unchangeable during the teenage years. The study, published in the March/April 2008 issue of the journal *Child Development*, found that decision making and behavior among adolescents are related across time, and that efforts to help may be more effective if they address how adolescents make decisions about acting aggressively.

Conducted by researchers at Duke University, Indiana University, and Auburn University, the study was funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, and the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

The researchers studied 522 teenage boys and girls who lived in three different places in the United States from 7th through 12th grades. The teenagers and their parents completed questionnaires about the youths' aggressive and delinquent behaviors—such as fighting, lying, bullying, and stealing—in grades 7, 9-10, and 12.

When they were in grades 8 and 11, the adolescents were asked to imagine themselves as characters in hypothetical video scenarios that presented provocative situations, such as being challenged about picking up an abandoned backpack. At the end of each situation, the teenagers answered questions about responding aggressively to a person in each

scenario who had acted provocatively and caused harm (in the case of the backpack, one of the scenarios shows someone aggressively challenging the person who found the backpack).

The findings suggest that teenagers' antisocial conduct and judgments about aggressive behaviors influenced each other at early, middle, and late adolescence. These are among the first findings to support the idea that social decision making and behavior continue to influence each other in a reciprocal fashion over time.

“Our results are particularly notable because antisocial behavior has been demonstrated repeatedly in behavioral science studies to be highly stable (and presumably unchangeable) during adolescence,” according to Reid Griffith Fontaine, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Arizona (where he moved from Duke) and the study's lead author.

“The powerful relation between decision making and behavior in adolescence that was observed in this study suggests that interventions with antisocial adolescents may focus on changing adolescents' thinking and decision making about aggressive behavior in order to alter their antisocial styles of acting out. Furthermore, interventions may emphasize that adolescents consider non-aggressive ways of responding to provocative situations before deciding how to behave.”

Source: Society for Research in Child Development

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