

Study: Children may be aware of popularity by 3rd grade

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(Phys.org)—Children's social goals at the beginning of a school year may predict whether they'll be more popular – or less popular – by the end of that academic year, a new study conducted at the University of Illinois suggests.

As young as third grade, [children](#) are attuned to issues of popularity, social preference and social vulnerability and strategize to enhance or demonstrate their social status using prosocial or aggressive behaviors, or both, the research indicated. This model of [social competence](#) was previously thought to apply to [adolescents](#) but researchers were less certain of its pertinence to younger children.

The study found that third and fourth graders, just like adolescents, may have one of three social orientations or motivators – social development, demonstrating popularity/high social status or avoiding exposure of low social status – that influence their behavior and, ultimately, their placement in their schools' social milieus.

At the beginning of the [school year](#), the 980 children in the study were assessed to determine their social goals. Were they intent on making new friends? Focused on showing peers how popular they were? Or were they concerned most with avoiding criticism and perceptions of social undesirability?

Using peer nominations from the children, the researchers determined which children were most or least popular and which children were most

or least preferred as [playmates](#) in each classroom.

Teachers evaluated their students' levels of aggression and prosocial behaviors, such as whether they were argumentative and frequently fought with others or were friendly, helpful and kind to [classmates](#).

Children intent on demonstrating their social status increased their popularity over the course of the [academic year](#), the researchers found. Children with this social orientation also were more aggressive and engaged in fewer prosocial behaviors than their classmates, according to their teachers.

"We found that the goals kids had were quite predictive of their behavior and their social status," said Philip Rodkin, a professor in the College of Education at Illinois and one of the study's co-authors. "Kids who really want to become more popular will become a little bit more popular, but they are more likely to do that through aggression – physical, relational, social and/or verbal aggression – so that was a little disconcerting, but not really surprising.

"Some researchers have wondered whether the popularity of aggression is a uniquely adolescent phenomenon, and this paper helps to say 'no, it's not.' "

Although the children who were intent on demonstrating their popularity were perceived as more popular by their classmates at the end of the year, they also lost favor among their peers, who preferred them less when the school year ended.

Even though it may seem counterintuitive, children can be popular – have high status, influence and prestige – but not be well liked or preferred by their peers, said Rodkin, whose research focuses on the development of aggressive behavior, bullying and children's social

networks.

"In a way, the distinction between popularity and likeability is the difference between power and affection," Rodkin said. "Power and affection are fundamental to interpersonal relationships in any society, now and in times past. Children pick up on the meaning and importance of power and affection as they travel through the world and they see how people relate to one another, within their families and in the social ecology of schools."

Children with a social development orientation increased their popularity too, but their classmates preferred them more by the end of the year. According to their teachers, these children were not aggressive and demonstrated more prosocial behaviors than their classmates.

Children focused on avoiding social gaffes and perceptions of low social status, whom teachers perceived as neither prosocial nor aggressive, fared the worst: They became less popular with their peers by the end of the school year.

The findings suggest that children may use a variety of strategies – relationship building as well as aggression and other behaviors – in their pursuit of social status.

And children who actively seek to make themselves more popular may succeed to some degree, but they probably already have some social skills to help orchestrate it, Rodkin said.

Many studies, including the current study, have found a troubling association between [aggression](#) and popularity.

However, the current study provides some insights into children's social motivators that could aid in developing more effective bullying-

intervention programs, Rodkin said.

"For kids who perceive bullying as a way to gain social status and be more popular, part of the answer may be motivational, in terms of determining what these kids believe and what they value," Rodkin said.

"Maybe you have to get at how they can achieve what they want, and how you can help structure a classroom and school environment in which kids can achieve status or be popular for other kinds of reasons – or not value popularity (at all)."

The study, "Social Goals, Social Behavior and [Social Status](#) in Middle Childhood," is available online in advance of publication in the journal *Developmental Psychology*.

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