

The road to popularity can be paved with unpleasantness

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Popularity is important to children and adolescents. Some think it is more important to be popular than to have friends, because popularity is a marker of prestige, dominance and social status. Some children become popular through prosocial means. Other popular children, paradoxically, are disruptive and aggressive.

A [longitudinal study](#) by researchers at Florida Atlantic University tested the novel hypothesis that aggressive and disruptive [children](#) engage in frequent conflicts with classmates to strengthen their position in the group and enhance their [popularity](#).

Results of the study, published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*, revealed that higher initial levels of peer-reported aggression and disruptiveness were associated with increases in peer-reported popularity over the course of a semester, particularly for children who reported frequent disagreements with peers.

Because aggression usually arises within the context of a [conflict](#), it follows that conflicts with aggressive children carry an implicit threat of harm. To avert aggression, classmates are apt to submit, which provides visible evidence of dominance and promotes short-term gains in popularity.

"Although we think it unlikely that contentiousness alone is a foundation for popularity, it may signal to peers a willingness to deploy discord to achieve ends," said Brett Laursen, Ph.D., senior author and a professor of psychology in FAU's Charles E. Schmidt College of Science.

"Because conflict contains the potential for escalation, it amplifies dangers that can arise when aggressive and disruptive children are crossed. Aggressive children who are frequently in conflict need not always resort to coercion; the mere prospect of unpleasant behavior may persuade others to submit."

Study participants included a diverse sample of Florida children ages 8 to 12, attending a [primary school](#) whose population mirrored that of public school students in the state in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

"A similar process appears to work for disruptive children, although less

pronounced. Submission in response to a disagreement with a disruptive child avoids irritating classmates who are aware of the risks of antagonizing someone who is willing to unsettle the group to get their way," said Laursen.

The researchers emphasize that by itself, conflict is not a means to peer status. However, they say that it can be an effective tool that amplifies conspicuous attributes that undergird some forms of popularity.

"We do not claim that conflicts used in this manner are a healthy avenue to well-being. The consequences of conflict depend on the context, the aims and the ways in which it is managed," said Laursen. "We do claim, however, that disagreement can be an efficient social strategy that leverages the implicit threat of coercion into dominance, bolstering popularity through reminders rather than actual displays of aggression and disruption."

More information: Michael Yoho et al, Conflict moderates the longitudinal association between aggression with classmates and popularity: Leveraging disagreements into peer status, *Personality and Individual Differences* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2022.111538](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2022.111538)

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