

# A Changing Profile of Aggression in Schools: Its Impact and Implications for School Personnel

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**ABSTRACT:** This article reports the results of a national survey of school principals and assistant principals regarding the frequency and trends of student aggression over the past two decades. The authors describe reactive and proactive subtypes of youth aggression, present the findings of a study that examined current (and changing) trends in reactive and proactive youth aggression and their impact on the educational process, and identify approaches to student aggression for school personnel that are appropriate to the reactive and proactive subtypes and responsive to their current trends.

**Key words:** aggression, proactive, reactive, violence, youth

In the 1990s public education faced the reality that there exists a population of students who exhibit extreme forms of aggression. The decade was marked indelibly by tragic school shootings in Littleton, Colorado; Conyers, Georgia; Fort Gibson, Oklahoma; Lake Worth, Florida; and elsewhere (Maeroff, 2000). Although the notoriety of recent incidents has certainly stemmed from their lethality, it has also stemmed from their deliberate, malicious, and appetitive characteristics—characteristics that seem to reflect a distinct and potentially alarming change in the type of aggression associated with school-age children and adolescents. Research suggests that there are two distinct kinds or “subtypes” of aggression—reactive aggression and proactive aggression (Brown, Atkins, Osborne, & Milnamow, 1996; Dodge & Coie, 1987).

Reactive aggression is characterized as a “hot-blooded,” automatic, defensive response to an immediate and often misperceived threat (Dodge, Lochman, Harnish, Bates, & Petit, 1997). Youths exhibiting reactive aggression are hypothesized to be lacking in close relationships with significant adults such as parents—relationships they must have to learn how to effectively attend to, understand, and take into account others’ intentions (Dodge, 1991). Their internalized anger and frustration from past rejections frequently result in excessively emotional and forceful responses to even minor immediate stressors. Teachers and caretakers often refer to these students as having “a short fuse” because they have a low tolerance for frustration, are easily threatened, and

tend to respond impulsively to any source of stress or fear. Because of their frightening overreactions, reactive aggressors are often disliked by their peers. School personnel and parents find them frustrating and unpleasant to be with because of the unpredictability of their tantrums and outbursts (Sterba & Davis, 1999).

Unlike reactive aggression, proactive aggression does not characteristically occur as an emotion-laden, defensive response to immediate threat. Instead, it is described as highly organized, "cold-blooded," and premeditated rather than automatic (Dodge et al., 1997). For proactive aggressors, aggression has, over time, become an internalized and primary means of achieving for themselves the needed assurances of personal security, competence, and control that caregivers have denied them (Brown & Parsons, 1998; Hunt, 1993). Instead of responding aggressively to conflict with others (reactive aggression), proactive aggressors initiate aggressive acts (Sterba & Davis, 1999). Their aggressive behavior is used as a tool for personal gain that is applied strategically, methodically, often subtly, and with increasing intensity until the desired goal is achieved. Peers and caregivers often view the proactive aggressor as a bully. Despite that view, other students may pledge loyalty to a proactive aggressor rather than become a victim of his or her aggression. Due to its predatory, remorseless, and internalized nature, proactive aggression is often considered the more serious of the two subtypes. It has been suggested that proactive aggression may be an outgrowth of unchecked conditions for reactive aggression over time, and, thus, may be more prevalent in older children (Hunt, 1993).

The collected data on incidence of school violence makes no distinction between the subtypes of violent behaviors. However, reactive and proactive aggression require unique prevention and intervention methods (Brown & Parsons, 1998). The identification of the subtype, as well as changing patterns of aggressive behavior, is necessary for the development of different modes of intervention and may prevent the continued application of a single standard or response to all episodes. Furthermore, the relationship between youth aggress-

sion type and intervention design has direct implications for the preparation and practice of those responsible for developing and implementing violence prevention and intervention protocol. In the school setting, that responsibility is shared among virtually all administrative, instructional, and professional support personnel (Peterson & Skiba, 2000).

The consistent interaction between students and school over a period of years places school personnel in a good position to identify and intervene early in the development of aggressive behavior (Van Acker & Talbott, 1999). Interactions with students' families and involvement in the local community often afford them additional insight into the environmental antecedents of aggression that occurs in school (Hayes, 1997; Lambie & Rokutani, 2002). Because of the number and seriousness of crises involving physical violence, school administrators across the country have been urged to expand and intensify violence prevention, risk assessment, crisis planning, and intervention activities (Callahan, 2000; Francisco & Fasko, 1999; Paisley & Borders, 1995). To respond effectively, school personnel in all capacities must be informed and appropriately trained in prevention and intervention methods that are consistent with existing conditions (Holcomb-McCoy, 1998).

In this article we (a) introduce school personnel to the reactive and proactive subtypes of youth aggression, (b) present the findings of a study that examined current (and changing) trends in reactive and proactive youth aggression and their impact on the educational process, and (c) identify approaches to student aggression for school personnel that are appropriate to the reactive and proactive subtypes and responsive to their current trends.

## Method

### *Participants*

The identified participant sample included 750 school principals and assistant principals in elementary, middle, and high schools (approximately 250 from each setting). Participants were selected randomly from membership lists provided by the national associations for elementary and secondary school princi-

pals. Among school personnel, we chose principals and assistant principals as those likely to have the most extensive experience in responding to student aggression and thus most likely to be aware of any changes in the nature of that aggression over time.

### *Procedure*

We mailed a 4-page survey to each of the 750 individuals in the sample.

The survey addressed five topic areas: (a) demographic information, (b) the relative frequencies of reactive and proactive youth aggression that respondents encountered early in their careers, (c) the relative frequencies of reactive and proactive youth aggression they were encountering by participants currently, (d) trends observed in the occurrence of reactive and proactive youth aggression from the beginning of participant's careers to the present, and (e) participant's levels and sources of education and training in reactive and proactive aggression. Demographic information included the participant's name (optional), sex, age, race/ethnicity, state of residence, primary work setting, and primary work role.

To determine the general scope of their experience with youth aggression, we asked the participants to indicate whether they had encountered "less than 10" or "10 or more" total incidents of youth aggression during each of 2 time periods: (a) their first year in professional work with aggressive youth, and (b) their most recent year in professional work with aggressive youth. They were then asked to estimate the percentages of aggressive incidents encountered during each of those time periods that were of the reactive and proactive subtypes respectively. Although various authors have described the reactive and proactive subtypes of aggression in different ways, some common defining variables are evident in the literature (Brown, Atkins, Osborne, & Milnamow, 1996; Dodge & Coie, 1987; Hunt, 1993; Levi & Orlans, 1998). For the purposes of this study, we distinguished the two subtypes on the basis of four such variables: the levels of impulsivity, immediate threat, remorse, and emotionality that were associated with each observed episode of youth aggression. The operational definitions of these four variables are shown in

Table 1. To further assess the relevance of the variables in distinguishing between the reactive and proactive aggression subtypes, we asked the participants to weight the usefulness of each variable on a scale of 1 = *not useful*; 2 = *useful*; or 3 = *essential* to the task of identifying how much of each type of aggression they had observed during the 2 time periods under review.

The survey also sought to determine whether reported changes in the incidence of reactive and proactive aggression occurring between the participants' early and more recent professional experiences were isolated and specific to their individual situations or whether the changes reflected general trends over time in the profile of youth aggression. In a series of short checklist questions, participants were asked to identify general trends in the occurrence of reactive and proactive aggression related to their relative frequencies and to gender, age, and race. Opportunity was given in each question for the respondents to identify any additional trends that were not included in the checklists provided.

A final section assessed the participants' levels of familiarity with the concepts of reactive and proactive aggression prior to their introduction in the survey. Those who were knowledgeable about the concepts at the time of the survey were also asked to indicate the source and extent of their knowledge. All those who reported trends in aggression over time were asked to participate in a follow-up telephone interview with the researchers. This interview assessed the impact of identified trends in reactive and proactive youth aggression on their professional practice and solicited their recommendations for particular research, education, training and changes in professional practice needed to address the current trends.

## Results and Discussion

### Sample Characteristics

From the original 750 surveys mailed, the final sample included 349 (47%) that were returned fully completed. The 190 men and 159 women in the final sample were almost equally distributed among elementary, middle, and high-school settings and had an average of 18 years of

**TABLE 1. Distinguishing Characteristics of Reactive and Proactive Physical Aggression**

Reactive aggression	Proactive aggression
Aggression was impulsive, not pre-planned.	Aggression was preplanned, calculated.
Aggression was employed to relieve the aggressor's frustration, anxiety, or fear.	Aggression was employed as a tool for the aggressor's personal gain.
Aggressor was remorseful for the aggressive behavior at its conclusion.	Aggressor showed no remorse for the aggressive behavior at its conclusion.
Aggressive behavior was emotionally driven (frenzied, chaotic).	Aggressive behavior was intellectually driven (planful, methodical).

experience in their professional roles. They represented 39 states plus the District of Columbia. Data on race/ethnicity were incomplete; however from the data that we received, it appears that under-represented racial/ethnic groups comprised no more than 38% of the sample.

Previous studies recommended that telephone contact be made with a sampling of nonparticipants to verify sample representativeness. Because participants' telephone numbers were not available from the referral sources, such contact was not possible in this study; however, demographic data in the surveys returned by 19 of 27 individuals who declined to participate in the study suggested that their characteristics were similar to those of the participants. For example, the mean age of those individuals was 45.2 years, their mean years of experience with aggressive youth was 17.1 years ( $SD = 7.9$ ), and the numbers of males and females were 11 (57.8%) and 9 (42.2%), respectively.

### Frequencies of Reactive and Proactive Aggression

In contrast to national statistics showing a drop in general rates of criminal and violent behavior by children and adolescents over the past decade (National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, 1999; Butts, 2000), the participants in this study reported a significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 348) = 7.36, p = .001$ , increase in the numbers of aggressive incidents since the beginning of their professional careers. Whereas only 29% reported having encountered 10 or more incidents of youth aggression during their first full

year in youth work, 66% reported 10 or more incidents in their most recent full year, which, for the majority (93%), was the year 2000. The reported increases were consistent across settings and not attributable to a particular age group or grade. The strong significance of this finding suggests that student aggression continues to be a prominent problem in many schools.

Although only about one fifth of all youth aggression respondents encountered in 1982 was reported as proactive in nature, reports for 2000 indicate that almost a third of such incidents are now proactive. Mean frequencies of reactive and proactive aggression observed during participants' first and most recent full years as professional school personnel ( $M = 18$  years) are presented in Table 2. It can be seen that a significant increase in proactive aggression was reported in each of the elementary,  $t(122) = 8.43, p = .001$ , middle,  $t(109) = 6.06, p = .001$ , and high school,  $t(118) = 7.25, p = .001$  settings. The most substantial increase in proactive aggression was observed at the elementary level where its incidence nearly tripled, reaching levels comparable to those reported by middle and high school groups. At first this finding seems to contradict the literature suggesting that proactive aggression, as a probable outgrowth of unchecked conditions for reactive aggression over time, is likely to be more prevalent in older children (Hunt, 1993). In fact, it may indicate that children are simply encountering conditions predisposing reactive aggression at younger ages (a finding of this study) and in turn, become more prone to develop and exhib-

**TABLE 2. Percentages of Proactive Aggression Reported During Respondents' First and Most Recent Years of Professional Work With Aggressive Youth**

Subject group	First year			Most recent year		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Elementary school administrators	122	7.9	4.2	122	21.6*	11.0
Middle school administrators	109	14.9	7.6	108	22.7*	10.2
High school administrators	118	15.0	8.6	118	28.9*	14.0

\**p* ≤ .001.

it characteristics of internalized proactive aggression at comparably younger ages. Regardless of its cause, the finding suggests that no schools should consider themselves immune to the potential impact of increasing proactive aggression.

#### *Trends Over Time in Reactive and Proactive Aggression*

Survey questions sought to determine whether reported differences in the type of aggression encountered early and then later in the participants' careers were isolated differences related to the 2 specific time periods or reflective of gradually changing trends over time. Responses to those questions are summarized in Table 3. A clear majority (56–64%) of respondents from each of the elementary, middle, and high school settings reported that there has been a trend over time toward increased incidence of proactive aggression. A concurrent trend toward increasing incidence of reactive aggression was reported by a majority (63.5%) at the elementary level but not at either the middle or high school levels. Trends in reactive and proactive aggression related to age were also identified.

A majority (51–71%) of the participants in each of the three settings reported a trend over time toward more frequent incidence of proactive aggression among increasingly younger students. That trend was particularly evident among those working in the elementary and middle school settings. A majority of the participants from the elementary (54%) and middle school (51%) settings also reported a trend toward increasing reactive

aggression among younger students, though not as strong a trend as that reported for proactive aggression.

In response to questions regarding a relationship between aggression type and aggressor gender or racial/cultural identity, the vast majority of the participants reported that there were no general trends. Among those who reported trends, there was no consensus as to the direction of trends identified.

Reflecting gradual but persistent changes over nearly 2 decades, the reported trends in student aggression seem likely to continue in the future if their antecedent and supporting conditions are not addressed. Because the trends have not been isolated within any unique or special population of youth, all schools should be prepared to deal with them. The current trends toward earlier onset and increasing frequency of reactive aggression among elementary aged children are suspected to be contributing to similar trends in proactive aggression at all age and grade levels. The increase in proactive aggression reported in this study appears to be having a profound and detrimental effect on leaders in K–12 education.

#### *Impact of Changing Trends*

In follow-up telephone interviews, we asked the participants to describe the impact (if any) of reported trends in youth aggression on the nature of their work, their effectiveness in their professional role, their satisfaction with their work, their view of the educational process, and their professional relationship with students. Aside from obvious concerns about

aggression-related deaths, injuries, and property damage, some clear themes emerged from the responses in each of these categories. In all three settings, the school administrators unanimously reported that student discipline had become a major function of their professional role—a function they neither aspired to nor had sufficiently prepared for during their training. As concerns for school safety have increasingly come to dominate their attention, other areas requiring their attention have apparently begun to suffer. Among those areas have been their creative and visionary functions as educational leaders—functions viewed as critical to the future refinement and advancement of the educational process. This problem was reflected in the following lament by one high school principal who said: "I've always considered having creative vision to the future as central to my role as principal of this school. Unfortunately, I seldom have the time anymore to look beyond our day-to-day crises." With less time to invest in the educational endeavors they were trained for, many participants described themselves as being less effective and satisfied in their jobs than they had been in the past.

The depth and quality of mentoring relationships between school personnel and their students also appear to have been threatened by the current trend toward more serious aggression. In the wake of recurring and seemingly unprovoked incidents of serious student violence, participants reported that they have become more vigilant and generally less trustful of students' intentions. Increases in fear and mistrust have resulted in a generalized depersonalization of educator-student relationships as may be illustrated in popular zero-tolerance philosophies, with their uniform (rather than individualized) policies for handling threatening student behaviors. Proponents of zero-tolerance contend that today's real concerns for school safety must preclude extending the benefit of doubt to students associated with dangerous incidents (Essex, 2000). To that end, one participant's comment reflected a common view: "An exacting standard for safety must be made clear and enforced across the board. The cost of inaction in questionable situations has

just become too great.” Though zero-tolerance policies are intended to reduce the risk of student aggression, it has been suggested that they may actually increase the risk by frequently segregating (through mandatory suspension/expulsion) at-risk students from the only positive adult mentors and opportunities for prosocial skill development that they have (Goldstein & Glick, 1987; Nelson, 1997; Van Acker & Talbot, 1999).

When asked about the cause of current trends toward more serious youth aggression, the majority of participants in this study included lack of supervision at home in their response. At the same time, community critics of education’s response to student aggression claim that schools unjustly use zero-tolerance policies to defer responsibility for troubled students to their families rather than provide them with needed counseling and mentoring (Essex, 2000). Apparently, another impact of the trend toward serious youth aggression is an increased potential for divisiveness between schools and families—divisiveness at a time when family-school collaboration may be needed more than ever to address the crisis appropriately (McAdams & Foster, 1999).

#### *Levels of Education/Training in Reactive and Proactive Aggression*

A majority (64%) of the participants in this study were familiar with reactive and proactive aggression prior to the description provided in the research questionnaire. Among that majority, familiarity

with the subtypes was attributed to a continuum of formal to informal methods of introduction. The formal end of the continuum included 21% who reported that the topics had been presented as a standard part of their graduate education curriculum and another 26% who reported that they had been introduced to the topics through specialized in-service training programs and conference presentations. The less formal end included 26% who reported that their first exposure to the topics occurred through voluntary personal reading and the remaining 27% who credited hands-on experience as their only source of knowledge. Members of this last group typically reported being familiar with the observable behavioral differences between reactive and proactive aggression but unfamiliar with the specific terms.

The reported exclusion of reactive and proactive aggression from the majority of preservice educational curricula was not surprising, because with an average of 18 years on the job, most of the participants in this study would have completed their formal education before the two subtypes were identified in 1987. What was surprising (and disturbing), however, was that only a quarter of the participants had received any subsequent introduction to the topics through formal in-service training channels. Despite over a decade of substantial growth in the body of knowledge about the nature of youth aggression, and especially about the significance of its reactive and proactive

subtypes, it appears that current leaders in education (and, presumably, their staffs) have generally been left to their own devices to acquire that knowledge.

### **Implications for School Personnel**

Educators and professional staff at all grade levels can expect to encounter incidents of both reactive and proactive student aggression. Failure to recognize and address the differences between the two subtypes can lead to inappropriate approaches and consequent dangers of increased and more severe aggression in schools (Brown & Parsons, 1998; Sterba & Davis, 1999). Reactive and proactive aggression appear to have reliable distinguishing criteria; however, it seems that even among the most experienced school personnel, few have had formal instruction in methods of applying those criteria to identify and differentially address youth aggression on the basis of its subtype. Educational curricula and preservice and in-service training programs for school personnel must be revised to provide this instruction. Added instructional emphasis on recognizing and responding to proactive aggression may be warranted due to its dramatic increase in frequency, especially at the elementary level where an increasing trend has been most evident.

Several conceptual models for addressing youth aggression on the basis of its reactive and proactive subtype are found in the literature from child welfare and psychology (Brown & Parsons, 1998; Dodge, 1991; Sterba & Davis, 1999). Broadly, the models share a common theme of circumventing or neutralizing the conditions that predispose and maintain each subtype of aggressive behavior. More specifically, they all seek to reduce aggression by (a) eliminating the real or perceived environmental threats that fuel the defensive behavior of the reactive aggressor or (b) devaluing the intrinsic reward that the proactive aggressor receives from his or her aggressive behavior. Drawing from the specific tenets of these models, we present an integrative framework for addressing reactive and proactive aggression in this section. Within the framework, we identify approach strategies

**TABLE 3. Reported Trends Over Time in Reactive Aggression (RA) and Proactive Aggression (PA)**

Trends	% reporting trend, by setting		
	Elementary (n = 122)	Middle (n = 109)	High (n = 118)
Related to frequency			
Toward increasing RA frequency	63.5	45.3	44.6
Toward increasing PA frequency	58.8	56.7	64.7
Related to age			
Toward increasing RA among younger youth	54.7	51.8	39.2
Toward increasing PA among younger youth	71.1	67.9	51.4

*Note.* A simple majority of responses ( $\geq 50\%$ ) constituted a trend.

unique to each subtype that can assist school personnel in the design and implementation of subtype-specific approaches to school violence prevention and intervention. Also we discuss an apparent need for increased family involvement in approaches to both subtypes. It is important to note that violence reduction initiatives will vary within different school systems and among individual school programs. Determination of the appropriate means and personnel to implement the strategies in the proposed framework will depend upon the specific nature of the initiative as well as the training and professional qualifications of the personnel in a given setting.

### *Addressing Reactive Aggression*

As a defensive response to real and perceived provocation, the impulsive, explosive, unplanned characteristics of reactive aggression provide explicit direction for intervention that includes relationship building, stimulus control training, cognitive restructuring, self-control training, and social skill training. As noted above, these activities target the antecedents of the aggression—antecedents related to both the aggressive individual and the school environment.

*Relationship building.* The establishment of a strong trusting relationship with reactive aggressors may be the most critical factor in helping them overcome the damage from past rejections that underlies their defensive behavior. Through exposure to consistent and caring adults who can provide operational models of caring, reciprocity, cooperation, and communication of feelings, it is anticipated that reactive aggressors, who characteristically seek adult involvement, will accept and ultimately internalize the modeled attributes. Schools can foster relationship building by maximizing opportunities in their programs for sustained, positive interaction between school personnel and their students. School personnel in all capacities will facilitate relationship building when they actively promote and model positive relationships in their direct interactions with students throughout the school day. Carefully supervised athletics and special interest clubs, tutoring and mentoring programs, and coun-

seling and guidance groups are examples of activities that can foster positive and trusting relationships between students and responsible adults outside the classroom. Through active involvement of parents and community members in their programs, schools can extend their positive role in healthy student relationship building well beyond the immediate physical setting.

*Stimulus control instruction.* Through the provision of stimulus-control instruction, school personnel can help reactive aggressors learn to recognize and distance themselves from real but avoidable environmental threats (stimuli) that could elicit an aggressive response if encountered. Teaching students at-risk for reactive aggression about the normal stressors in the school environment can reduce the threatening element of surprise that could result in a violent defensive reaction. Helping them to identify the specific conditions that are most likely to trigger their aggression and to devise strategies for avoiding or, in some cases, modifying those conditions can likewise reduce the level of threat. Classroom, guidance, and extracurricular activities are all forums for stimulus-control instruction activities to be integrated into a school's violence prevention program.

*Cognitive restructuring.* One process involved in reactive aggression is distorted thinking, that is, inaccurately perceiving cues from others or misreading their intent (Sterba & Davis, 1999). School personnel can help reactive aggressors to distinguish real threats from those that are misperceived or distorted through the application of cognitive restructuring interventions. Professional support personnel in particular (school counselors, psychologists, social workers, etc.) often have formal training in an array of cognitive restructuring interventions such as thought-stopping, reframing, and desensitization that can help the students understand the distortions, relieve anxiety, and change their thinking so that they can assess situations more accurately and positively. Because these interventions focus on changing general thought patterns as well as situation-specific ones, they also hold special value for preventing future aggression.

*Self-control instruction.* To prevent reactive aggression responses, at-risk students must learn to calm themselves and think more rationally in threatening situations. Proactive (precrisis) instruction in self-control strategies has proved especially useful in promoting self-controlled behavior (Sterba & Davis, 1999). By having students identify and practice self-control techniques in advance of crises, school personnel can help them learn to calm themselves down before erupting in aggressive and violent ways. Self-time out, relaxation exercises, and positive redirection are a few cognitive and behavioral techniques that can help students to learn better self-control and reduce their dependence on aggression as a response to stress or fear. With leadership from trained personnel, such techniques can be adapted effectively to virtually every classroom, support activity, and extracurricular activity in a school.

*Social skills instruction.* Having little practice in sustained positive relationships, reactive aggressors tend to lack effective relational skills. When they feel threatened, physical aggression may compensate for their inability to verbally process and negotiate a resolution to the problem. Schools can reduce reactive students' need to respond aggressively by integrating opportunities for instruction, coaching, modeling, and rehearsal of effective social skills into their programs whenever possible. Anger management, conflict resolution, problem solving, appropriate self-expression, and responsible decision-making are all skills in which reactive aggressors are characteristically deficient (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). When given the opportunity to practice prosocial skills prior to difficult situations, they are more likely to choose them over aggressive responses than if they encounter the difficulties cold and unprepared.

### *Addressing Proactive Aggression*

Proactive aggression is a response learned over time that is not typically motivated by immediate threats and fears. Rather it appears to be motivated by the intrinsic benefits of power and control that it affords to the aggressor. Consequently, prevention and intervention mea-

asures aimed at reducing the benefits of proactive aggression, relative to the benefits of alternative, prosocial, behaviors, may be more effective than targeting its internalized, nonspecific antecedents (Brown & Parsons, 1998). Although proactive aggressors need adult support and guidance as much as reactive aggressors, their internalized distrust of adults tends to make them less responsive to the relationship-building aspects of counseling intervention alone. Behavioral reinforcements and consequences, social skills and problem-solving instruction, and moral education have to be useful toward reducing the utility and thus the occurrence of proactive aggression, especially when applied in the context of a caring adult relationship.

*Positive reinforcement.* Proactive aggressors use playful threats and acts of aggression as tools to obtain attention and other wants. Aggression and the negative attention it evokes may be the primary means by which some fulfill their basic need for recognition from others. School personnel can act to reduce proactive aggressors' dependence on aggression for personal recognition through a conscious effort to recognize and thus reinforce the prosocial things they do. Through consistent acknowledgment and appropriate praise by teachers and other significant adult figures for their prosocial activities at school, proactive aggressors can begin to see the attention-getting rewards and benefits of positive behaviors. Over time, they may even begin to choose some of those behaviors over aggression as a path to the personal recognition and respect they need.

*Logical consequences.* As a goal-oriented, appetitive behavior, proactive aggression is less likely to occur when its negative ramifications or "costs" outweigh its benefits to the aggressor. Teachers must collaborate with administrators and professional support personnel to raise the costs of proactive aggressive behaviors by assigning and enforcing negative consequences to students who engage in them. Following through with assigned consequences is particularly important for proactive aggressors who, out of need for personal control, will invariably (and often convincingly) argue for reduced consequences—and thus reduced cost—for their

unacceptable behavior whenever they are permitted to do so. The nature of the consequences should relate to the age and ability of the student, the severity of the problem, and the specific context in which the aggression occurred. Sterba and Davis (1999) suggest that work assignments linked logically to reparations for damage done by aggression are particularly effective when administered as negative consequences. For example, a student who damaged property might be required to repair the damage during a scheduled break time or favorite activity. The logical consequence increases the cost of aggressive behavior for proactive aggressors by requiring them to sacrifice time and effort on the assigned task that could otherwise be spent doing something more enjoyable to them. In addition, they require the aggressive students to gain a better understanding of the impact of their aggressive acts on others.

*Social problem solving instruction.* Proactive aggressors characteristically deal with all social challenges in a similarly narrow manner—by attempting to control them. Unlike reactive aggressors, their means for achieving personal control can be diverse and creative; however, tend to generate few alternatives to control as solutions to difficult or threatening social encounters. Social problem-solving instruction is recommended as an effective way for school personnel to help students prone to proactive aggression to learn to generate an expanded range of alternatives to aggression for dealing with the myriad social situations they encounter at school. Teaching the students to identify multiple solutions to a given problem and to examine the pros and cons of each can help them to discover that solutions involving aggression are not always the most "cost-effective." A combination of adult coaching, modeling, feedback, and encouragement provided as students explore and rehearse alternative responses to hypothetical problem situations appears to effectively broaden their repertoire of nonaggressive responses to real-life crises (Walker, Kolvin, & Ramsey, 1995).

*Moral education.* Proactive aggressors tend to employ low levels of moral reasoning in their responses to social dilem-

mas (Goldstein & Glick, 1987). That is, they tend to show little or no concern for the needs and welfare of others when choosing their premeditated and often cold-blooded courses of aggressive action. Moral education intervention refers to the application of specific conditions in a learning or counseling environment that can promote development of learners' levels of moral reasoning and, thus, increase their intrinsic consideration of others in their actions. The conditions include: (a) opportunities for active student involvement in supervised "other-centered" (helping) activities, (b) regular opportunities for supervised student discussion and reflection around the meaning of those activities, and (c) an ongoing balance of challenge and support to students in replacing self-centered motivations with other-centered ones (Sprinthall & Mosher, 1978). Research indicates that these conditions are conducive to application in a wide range of teaching/learning environments (Sprinthall, 1994). By applying the conditions whenever possible in the classroom and promoting their application in other aspects of the educational program in their schools, school personnel may be able to assist students at risk for proactive aggression to realize the benefit in helping others rather than hurting them.

*Social skills instruction.* Unlike reactive aggressors, who tend to be deficient in social skills, proactive aggressors have often developed considerable skills in certain social interactions that support self-serving objectives. Proactive aggressors can be masterful at arguing their way free from accountability for aggressive acts and blaming their acts on others. They are often able to resist social influence by exploiting any weaknesses or inconsistencies in social control (rule) systems (Walker et al., 1995). In short, proactive aggressors tend to be proficient in skills needed to achieve and maintain control of social situations. Where they are often deficient, however, is in their understanding of the nature and importance of social rules, that is, understanding that it is unacceptable to pursue their own needs at others' expense. School personnel can address this deficiency by using (and counseling others to use) a combined application of

proactive social skill instruction and positive reinforcement (Sterba & Davis, 1999). Social skills instruction provided during noncrisis “teachable” times will help to increase the proactive aggressor’s minimal repertoire of socially acceptable responses to others. As noted previously, recognition and reward of the student’s choice of a newly acquired prosocial responses over coercion and aggression will reinforce that positive choice and increase its likelihood in future interactions.

#### *Family Involvement*

The dramatic increase in proactive aggression reported among elementary-aged children suggests a growing shortage of parental involvement in young children’s lives that no amount of clinical intervention may ever be able fully to replace. Bowlby (1973) suggested that rejection produces the most violent, angry, and dysfunctional responses in children. To emotionally “malnourished” children, there may be no greater fear than further affectional deprivation (Tully & Brendtro, 1998). The most effective interventions for these children’s aggression may be those that include their families and enhance the amount and quality of parental (or other significant adult) presence in their lives. With adequate parental support and protection, children of all ages may feel less compelled to single-handedly defend themselves against real and perceived threats through acts of reactive aggression. Likewise, when parents are willing and able to offer children consistent assurance that they are safe and worthwhile, children are less likely to internalize aggression as a proactive means of acquiring those assurances on their own. The purpose and nature of specific child and youth service programs will determine the degree to which families can feasibly be involved in their service delivery. However, those programs that are able to maximize family involvement appear best equipped to address the current trends in youth aggression. In view of those trends, all children’s services, and especially those seeking to reduce youth violence, should explore, and where possible expand, possibilities for collaborating with the families of the children and youth that they serve.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Limitations of this study include the reliance on self-report data and the retrospective analysis and assessment of aggressive incidents. Recent serious incidents of school violence and the current “zero-tolerance” attitude toward the legal processing of violent youthful offenders could have impaired objectivity in the subjective assessments by members of the respondent group. Because the study relied on a mail survey, self-selection bias also poses a threat to the reliability of the findings. More research is needed to verify the relative frequencies and apparent trends in reactive and proactive aggression that we identified. Such research could address subjectivity concerns by including data collected from written reports of aggressive incidents made at the time of the incidents rather than in retrospect, and by using standardized instruments (as developed) rather than self-report to distinguish between the reactive and proactive subtypes. Corroborating findings from similar studies across a broad range of youth services settings would likewise address concerns about the influence of selection bias.

Implementation of the actions recommended above may not effectively control for assessment biases that are intrinsic to the current social and economic contexts in which both reactive and proactive aggressions occur. For example, social isolation, socioeconomic disadvantage, and deprived neighborhoods are adverse factors that have been related to aggression in children (Dumas & Gibson, 1990; Mincy, 1990; Prinz & Miller, 1991). Forced to fend for themselves for long periods without parental protection and support, children from impoverished, chaotic families may, out of necessity, develop verbally and physically aggressive skills to manage and survive their dangerous environment. Attribution of this aggression to pathology could misrepresent behavior that holds clear relevance within its particular context. Gender and culture and the power asymmetries predicated on them can likewise influence the way that violence is understood and identified.

Behavior that is incongruent with traditional sex role stereotypes may be labeled as aggressive for girls, when comparable behavior in boys is tolerated or even encouraged. Similarly, healthy psychological resistance to a discriminatory and demeaning society may erroneously be interpreted (by a dominant culture) as malevolence when young women and men of minority status confront oppressive circumstances (Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000). Accuracy of assessment and the long-term success of approaches to reactive and proactive aggression will depend in part on the degree to which they take into account the contextual factors that have spawned and sustained the aggression.

### **Summary**

The nature of youth aggression in schools appears to have changed during the past 2 decades to include a significantly greater proportion of serious, proactive aggression, and an increasing occurrence of aggression generally among younger children. Effective interventions are needed to check these trends and their negative implications for public education. Tasked with increasing responsibilities for responding to school violence, professional school personnel in all capacities need to have the knowledge and skills to respond ethically to the crisis. Recommended responses emphasize the need to differentially identify and address youth aggression on the basis of its reactive or proactive subtype. Effective, subtype-specific methods for prevention and intervention have been identified in current literature and practice. Greater emphasis must be given to these methods in education, professional development, and practice of school personnel to ensure that their endeavors to address student violence reflect a realistic awareness of its current trends. Continued research to address the limitations of this study and to further confirm and clarify its findings is warranted. Nonetheless, the collective observations and recommendations of the seasoned school administrators in this study provide useful direction for all school personnel struggling, often without direction, to understand and respond effectively to the current problem of student aggression in schools.

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