

SHARE PROJECT

FAMILY STUDIES LAB

FALL 2008

Note From the Director

Dear SHARE Project Participants,

The SHARE staff would like to welcome you back to the new school year, and thank you for your continued participation in our project! We are looking forward to working with you in the coming months. As in past years, we would like to share some recent fascinating findings regarding children's social health and educational adjustment that we have gathered with your help.

In addition to updating you about the past year, we are looking toward the future. Believe it or not, middle school is rapidly approaching! For our SHARE Project 5th graders, this transition will occur next year. For our 4th graders, it will occur in two years. Transitions are important times that provide opportunities for growth, but also present challenges. Many parents, children, and educators wonder how students will adapt to middle school. Whereas some children thrive when they encounter new academic and social experiences, other children struggle to fit in socially or academically. In some past research, we have investigated how children face these challenges and what helps children to succeed during this critical transition. We thought it would be helpful to share this information with you.

In our research, we found that children who believe that they have little influence over their success in school or with other children are less academically and socially engaged in middle school. They are more likely to give up when faced with challenges, and become more depressed. In contrast, children who feel a sense of mastery (for example, they feel that if they try hard they will do well in school and will make friends) thrive during this transition. They are able to face the academic and social challenges with a positive attitude and to handle the stresses of middle school.

One encouraging piece of information from our previous study is that children's anticipation of middle school was worse than their actual experience. When children were in 5th grade, they were quite worried about middle school. However, we discovered that these worries actually diminished once they were in the 6th grade.

So it is helpful for parents and teachers to keep a positive attitude and not be overly worried about children's adjustment, while also providing the extra support that children need.

We hope that this information is helpful as you begin to think about middle school. We look forward to continuing this exciting journey with you!

Sincerely,



Karen Rudolph, Project Director and
The SHARE Project staff

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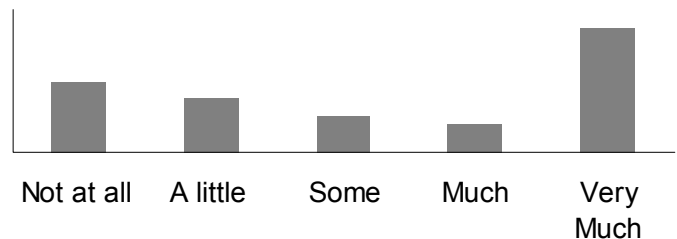
Why Do Kids
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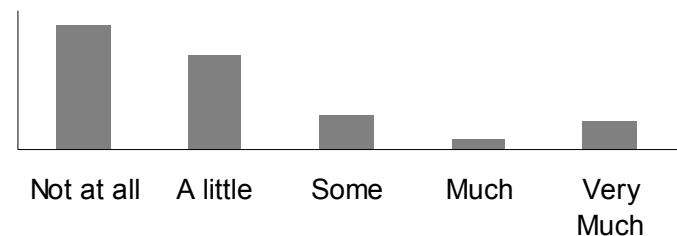
Empathy and
Aggression: How
Are Boys and Girls
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How You Can Help
Your Child Thrive
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How worried are you about going to middle school next year?



How worried are you about middle school this year?



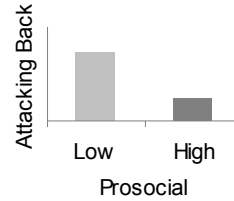
Why Do Kids Handle Problems with Peers Differently?

Kids respond to problems with other kids in many different ways. Some respond positively by getting help from a friend or teacher, cheering themselves up, or trying to work things out with other kids. Others have trouble dealing effectively with peer problems – they may avoid or ignore the situation, find themselves worrying about it nonstop, or choose to get even by being mean. Whereas some responses help to resolve problems with peers, others cause the problems to continue or even worsen. Because how children respond to these problems can influence their relationships over the long run, we are interested in why kids respond in different ways. In the SHARE Project, we looked at how kids’ thoughts and feelings in second grade predicted how they responded to problems with peers in third grade. We discovered several important characteristics that determined kids’ responses.

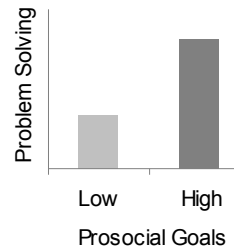
First, kids who value getting along with other kids and avoiding fights (those who have high prosocial goals) show more effective responses to peer problems. Second, kids who are aggressive or have depressed feelings show less effective responses to problems with peers. Finally, kids who have trouble controlling their impulses and are more reactive show less effective responses to problems with peers.

These patterns suggest that kids’ thoughts and feelings have lasting effects on how they respond to problems with their peers. Helping kids learn how to deal with negative feelings (e.g. sadness, anger, frustration) and how to control their impulses will help them respond to problems with peers in a more effective way that will hopefully protect them from such problems in the future.

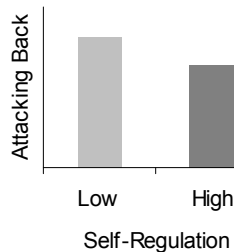
We hope to publish these findings in a child development journal soon. This will help us to live up to our name and “share” our results with other researchers and educators around the world. 😊



Children with high prosocial goals are less likely to retaliate aggressively in response to a peer problem



Children with high prosocial goals are more likely to take a problem-solving approach to peer difficulties



Children with low levels of self-regulation are more likely to attack a peer in response to a problem

Bullying and Perceptions Impact Academic Achievement

Bullying within the school environment is a concern for a number of reasons. Not only does it interfere with students’ development of supportive relationships, it also may influence their academic success. Some victims of bullying avoid or disengage from classroom activities. Others are at risk for developing emotional or behavioral problems, which in turn are detrimental to their ability to learn within the classroom setting. Results from the SHARE Project show that the more children are bullied, the lower their academic performance.

Bullying also may affect children’s beliefs about their ability to succeed in peer relationships and their views of their peers. When children are frequently bullied, they may begin to believe that they will never be able to make friends. They may also lose their trust in other children. These negative beliefs may then interfere with their school success. We asked children how they perceive themselves and their peers.

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For example, we asked them how much they believed that it was a waste of other kids' time to be friends with them, and how much they believed that other kids are "out to get you." Our results show that children who have negative beliefs show lower academic achievement.

It is important to recognize that children's peer relationships can affect their ability to learn in the school environment. A child who is worried about being harassed, displays emotional or behavior problems as a result of being bullied, or consistently views him or herself in a negative light will find it difficult to engage in classroom instruction and activities.



Encouraging self-confidence and a positive outlook on peer relationships may help a child to feel more comfortable participating in class activities. Of course, it is also important for classroom and school environments to facilitate learning by reducing bullying and helping children learn how to manage conflict in an effective and positive way.

Children with high levels of negative perceptions have lower academic achievement



Empathy and Aggression: How Are Boys and Girls Different?

The SHARE Project was interested in whether empathy helps to protect children from being aggressive toward their peers. **Empathy** is a person's capacity to understand another person's point of view. This can include the ability to sense others' emotions or "put yourself into another's shoes." We measured empathy in our 3rd graders by asking parents questions like whether their child is sensitive to how others are feeling and whether they seem upset when parents are in a bad mood. We asked teachers about two different types of aggression that children may show at school. **Overt Aggression** involves direct aggression, such as physical or verbal bullying. **Relational Aggression** involves manipulation of relationships, such as spreading rumors, excluding others, or threatening to end a friendship.



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Empathy
The capacity to recognize or understand another person's state of mind or emotions

Overt Aggression
Physical bullying and verbal taunting

Relational Aggression
Spreading rumors, saying mean things behind another person's back, excluding someone from a group

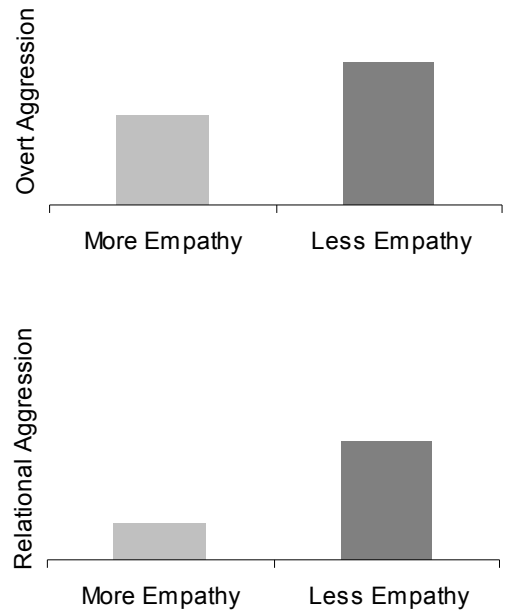
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Our results show that the more empathetic children are, the less aggressive they tend to be. This is true for both overt and relational aggression.

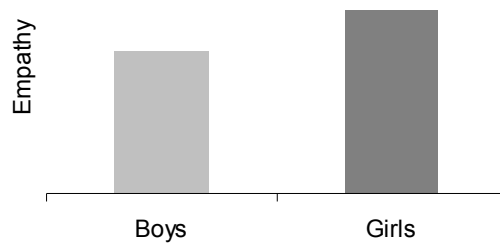
We also found that, on average, girls are more empathetic than boys. Girls engage in less overt aggression than boys; however, empathy does not protect them entirely because girls do engage in more relational aggression than boys.

Learning to be more aware of other people's perspectives may decrease the likelihood that children will engage in aggressive behaviors. Parents and teachers can talk to children about how their actions impact others and have them practice imagining how it feels to be bullied, teased, or the subject of a rumor. Also, adults may want to keep in mind that aggressive behaviors engaged in by boys and girls may look very different.

The more empathetic children are, the less aggressive they tend to be



Girls tend to be more empathetic than boys



How Can You Help Children Succeed in Middle School?

How can parents and educators help children thrive in middle school? Given the many challenges of middle school, it is important for children to feel effective in achieving their goals. Parents and teachers can help children to develop a sense of control by encouraging them to be independent and providing opportunities for decision-making, while also providing support. Suggesting that children try to solve problems on their own can convey the message that adults feel confident about children's abilities, and that it is OK to fail. Control over even small decisions can go a long way in making children feel like they have some input into what happens to them. Finally, recognizing problems early on can help prevent students from disengaging from school and experiencing failures that lead them to feel even less motivated.