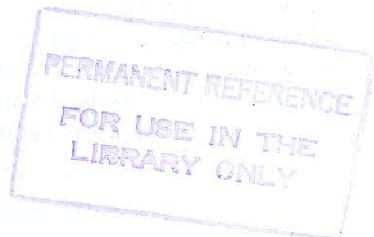


A Survey of Sri Lankan Preschool Teachers' Perceptions of Student Aggression

Abstract

Though aggressive behaviour in children has been a very popular topic of study, such studies conducted in Sri Lanka are almost non-existent. This paper attempts to explore the nature and prevalence of aggressive behaviours displayed by Sri Lankan preschool children as perceived by their preschool teachers (N = 275). Data was collected from 18 districts. The study offers suggestions and recommendations for future research as well as for preschool teacher training programs to minimize or prevent aggressive behaviours in this population.

Key Words: Aggression, Preschool children, Preschool teachers, Teacher perceptions.



Introduction and Definitions of Aggressive Behaviours in Young Children

Studies of aggressive behaviours in children, mainly conducted in Western settings, have described, analyzed and identified risk factors as well as prevention and intervention strategies for aggressive behaviours from early childhood through adulthood (Crick & Grotpeter; Crick and Dodge). However, only a few studies (Samarakkody *et al.*; Senaratna and Hussein) have been conducted so far to investigate the nature and prevalence of aggression or its correlates in the South Asian context are extremely rare. Hence the objective of the present study is to investigate the nature and prevalence of aggressive behaviours displayed by Sri Lankan preschool children as perceived by their preschool teachers.

Aggressive behaviour is defined in different ways. While some definitions (Crick & Grotpeter and Crick & Dodge) have examined direct observable features of aggression, others (Ostrov, Crick & Stauffacher and Kuppens *et al.*) have emphasized antecedents, consequences, context, age, etc. as well as outcomes of aggression when defining it. Definitions of aggression have also stressed the importance of intentionality, potential harm, arousal and aversion to the victim (Coyne, Archer, & Eslea). Therefore, aggression could be viewed as a phenomenon which involves forces that are internal to the child (gender, temperament, biological development, self-regulatory processes and social cognitive information processing), socialization forces that emerge with a child's social interactions and relationships (parenting styles, attachment relationships, and peer interactions), and external forces and structures of such violence in the family, media, community and the country.

Forms of Aggression

According to psychologists, aggression can be categorized into overt or relational aggression. Research has found that while boys display more overt forms of aggression and girls display more relational forms of aggression.¹ Research also differentiates between reactive and proactive aggression with reactive aggression described as a more hostile or impulsive form of aggression which is considered as directed at someone or something, and considered to be person-oriented rather than goal-oriented (Dodge, Coie & Lynam; Phillips & Lochman). Proactive aggression, which is at the opposite end of this continuum, is named proactive aggression and is considered to be goal-oriented, unemotional and evoked with little physiological arousal (Dodge *et al.*; Phillips & Lochman).

Research pertaining to aggressive behaviours of young children, as Dodge has shown, also differentiates between defensive and instrumental aggression. He identifies defensive aggression as a form of hostile and assertive response to a perceived threat or intentional frustration. However, he differentiates defensive aggression from instrumental aggression, the primary goal of which is not to harm the victim but where harmful behaviour is projected to gain an independent reward/valued resource and which may be changed by the appropriate manipulation of reward and punishment.

¹Siegler, Deloache & Eisenbeg (2003); McEvoy *et al.* (2003); Crick, Casas & Ku (1999); Crick & Grotpeter (1995); Crick, Casas and Mosher (1997); Ostrov *et al.* (2004).

Nature of Aggression in Preschool Children

Research on aggression reveals that though aggressive behaviours are common phenomena in the preschool class (Goldstein *et al.*), aggressive children are not isolated but are members of networks of similarly aggressive peers (Pepler & Craig and Farver). Furthermore, they also show that children indulge in different types of aggressive behaviours: direct physical, verbal, and direct-relational aggression, indirect-verbal, and indirect-relational aggression (Tapper & Boulton).

Goldstein *et al.*, have reported that aggressive behaviours are common phenomena in the preschool class. On average, the researchers found 32.5 acts of aggression during the 10 minutes segment observed for each classroom (i.e., average 3.25 acts of aggression per minute per class or approximately once every 6 minutes per child). They also report that boys were somewhat more aggressive than girls, performing 21 acts of aggression per segment per class compared to the girls. They categorized preschool children's reactions to aggression into several categories: Positive, Aggressive with reinforcement, Assertive, Non aggressive/Non-assertive with reinforcement, Non aggressive/Nonassertive without reinforcement, Ignoring with reinforcement, and Ignoring without reinforcement. Goldstein *et al.* also found that a child was more likely to aggress if another child had just performed an act of aggression than if no aggression had occurred. Therefore, they suggest that vicarious reinforcement of aggression occurs in a natural setting even when there are no specific instructions for the child to focus on the model's behaviour as in a lab or on a video. They also report that aggression did not occur at random intervals; rather, that frequent acts of aggression occurred in clumps generating periods of relative chaos in the classroom with imitation occurring within seconds of the observation of aggressive behaviours.

Developmental Aspects of Aggression

Investigating the developmental aspect of aggressive behaviours serves two important purposes. First, we need to investigate aggression in young children because such studies provide essential information regarding their behaviours. Second, early detection of aggressive behavioural patterns helps us in the prevention and treatment of childhood adjustment problems (Crick *et al.* a).

During the second half of the first year, infants develop the cognitive capacity to identify sources of anger and frustration and the motor skills to lash out at the identified sources. The most common form of aggression among infants is instrumental aggression, aimed at obtaining an object, privilege, and space with no deliberate intent to harm another person (Berk; ACT). Another developmental aspect of aggression is that during the early years children instigate brief aggressive episodes more frequently in comparison to older children who show less frequent but continued episodes of aggression (Fagot & Hagan; Ostrov & Crick). In their research, Fagot and Hagan codified aggressive episodes of toddlers into three categories. The first category was hit, pinch or kick; the second category was to take or grab objects; the third, verbal assaults. They had an additional category for receiving aggression. Although the authors report that aggressive behaviours comprise a very small percentage of the total behaviours in young children, children who behave aggressively at a high frequency are labelled as aggressive by others.

Rubin *et al.*, point to aggression as an enduring behavioural pattern which remains consistent from early childhood to, in some cases, adulthood.

Rubin *et al.*, observed 104 toddlers interacting with a same sex peer and their mothers. They found that children who were aggressive as toddlers inclined to be aggressive even in their preschool years. Similar findings were reported in a study conducted by Keenan and Shaw in a laboratory assessment conducted with 89 toddlers. Longitudinal research has also revealed that childhood aggression (Keenan & Shaw; Rubin *et al.*) and exposure to violence during childhood (Perry; Widom; Staub) are the best known social predictors of future maladjustment (Farmer & Xie).

When Bor *et al.*, summarized the results from the Mater University Study of Pregnancy, a longitudinal study of over 5000 mothers and their children, the study showed that aggression at five was a stronger predictor of delinquency than gender (being male), poverty, family structure and maternal education. It increased a child's risk of delinquency by a factor of 4.48. One in six aggressive, compared with one in 33 non-aggressive, children were delinquent by the time they were 14. However, the majority of aggressive preschoolers may not become aggressive adolescents. Studies show that many children with early high levels of conduct problems desist by adolescence and only a small percentage identified as being at risk go on to have major problems (Moffitt *et al.*; Nagin, Farrington, & Moffitt; Nagin & Tremblay; Patterson and Yoerger).

Teacher Perceptions & Aggressive Behaviours of Preschool Children

A contemporary line of research has explored teachers' and parental perceptions underlying their observed reactions to different types of aggression in children, with studies by Nicolaides *et al.*, carried out in this area revealing that adults hold different sets of cognitions about different types of aggression displayed by children. However, very little is known about teachers' perceptions of aggressive behaviours of preschool children. Hence, the present study could be described as a precursor to further studies on how perceptions of aggression affect teachers' responses to students. Moreover, considering the absence of any such studies on the current topic in Sri Lanka, it could also be described as one that paves the way for more in-depth studies in the future in the Sri Lankan context.

Methodology

A survey questionnaire solicited responses from 275 preschool teachers from 18 (out of 25) districts in Sri Lanka. The preschool teachers were requested to list five aggressive behaviours that they observed in their students. Before requesting preschool teachers to list their perceived aggressive behaviours of the children, a sample aggressive behaviour which frequently occurs in preschool was provided in order to clarify what was expected of them. Moreover, in order to obtain quantified, unbiased data, three experts with different expertise in developmental psychology (an educational psychologist who trains preschool teachers, a clinical psychologist who works with children, and an early childhood educationist) were requested to rate the perceived aggressive behaviours, reported by the preschool teachers in the survey questionnaire, using a 4-point rating scale, with 0 being not effective at all and the value of 3 being high. The scores provided by each expert was averaged (referred as an expert score herein). A single expert score was computed per perceived aggressive behaviour.

Responses provided by the preschool teachers for perceived aggressive behaviours were coded and re-coded in several ways to obtain the

prevalence, nature, intensity (low to high) and types of aggressive behaviour (relational, physical, verbal, and emotional) observed in the classroom using the expert score and literature.

Results & Discussion

Prevalence and nature of aggressive behaviours in children as perceived by preschool teachers

The aggressive behaviours listed by the teachers in a sample of 100 questionnaires were first categorized. Using those categories as a guideline, the responses to the remaining 175 questionnaires was tallied, rank ordered and computed with the help of experts and peer debrief-persons. This data outlined 6 main categories. Table 01 depicts the frequencies and percentages (absolute numbers indicated within parentheses) ranked from most frequently occurring to least frequently occurring within each category.

Table 1: Preschool Teachers' Perceptions on Prevalence of Aggressive Behaviours in Preschool Children

Frequency of Instances	Behaviours
81 and above	1. Fighting /quarrelling - use of hand/ objects/ group (n = 164) 2. Behaviours that hurt and harass other children such as pulling hair, poking with a pencil, rubbing food waste on faces, colliding purposely, destroying things belonging to other children (n = 156) 3. Hitting and fighting with other children –verbal + physical (n = 147) 4. Grabbing toys/ paint/ food belonging to other children (n = 117) 5. Pinching (n = 91)
61 to 80	1. Pushing (n = 70)
41 to 60	1. Throwing things - water/ sand/ stones/ toys (n = 60) 2. Refusing to share teacher attention or objects with other children (n = 46)
21 to 40	1. Taking or hiding things belonging to other children (n = 39) 2. Biting or chewing other children (n = 37) 3. Aggressive verbal acts such as name-calling, scolding using bad words, speaking in an irritating manner (n = 34) 4. Being competitive (n = 26)
11 to 20	1. Spitting (n = 20) 2. Indulging in behaviours that disrupt activities and order in the class such as shouting inside the class/ running out/ standing on the desk, etc. (n = 15) 3. Spoil or break art projects belonging to other children (n = 12) 4. Crying (n = 11)

1 to 10	1. Getting angry with other children (n = 10) 2. Kicking (n = 09) 3. Fighting on account of ethnicity (n = 09) 4. Complaining to the teacher about the wrong doings of other children (n = 06) 5. Aggressive gestures such as frowning at others or making faces (n = 05) 6. Self-injurious behaviours (n = 05) 7. Preference for being on their own (n = 05) 8. Hitting children who hit their friends/asking or making the class bully or hit other children (n = 03) 9. Rigidly sticking to one's opinion (n = 03) 10. Stealing things belonging to others (n = 01) 11. Killing insects (n = 01)
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The most frequently listed aggressive behaviours by the preschool teachers were physically aggressive acts such as throwing things at other children, biting, pinching, spitting, and grabbing toys from others. Acts of verbal aggression (name-calling, scolding etc.) were reported more moderately. Though low in prevalence, certain practices listed in the category 'less than 10 times' provided insight into other forms of aggressive behaviours of preschool children in Sri Lanka, such as killing insects and self-injurious behaviours, that are not normally discussed.

It could be said that the aggressive behaviours listed by the preschool teachers were similar to the ones listed in other research studies (Fagot & Hagan; Ostrov *et al.*). They included episodes of physical aggression as well as those of relational aggression (Ostrov *et al.*). The listed aggressive acts of the preschool children also included intentional harm to others. In addition, studies by Pepler *et al.* and Farver have revealed that aggressive children are members of networks of similarly aggressive peers.

The analysis also revealed that the preschool teachers listed episodes of both reactive and proactive aggression. However, relatively more of these were reactive aggressive episodes, considered to be directed at someone or something (Dodge *et al.*). They also tended to be more person-oriented than goal-oriented (Phillips & Lochman). Therefore, it could be said that undoubtedly future intervention programs should address both these sub-types of aggression as research conveys that interventions are differentially successful for these two sub-types of aggressive behaviours in children (Phillips *et al.*). Perhaps more attention should be paid to interventions for reactive aggressive episodes as preschool teachers in the sample have listed a significant number of instances of reactive aggressive behaviours, in comparison to proactive episodes such as grabbing toys and paint or taking/ hiding things belonging to other children.

Some of the aggressive behaviours listed by preschool teachers in Table 01 are also listed in the diagnostic statistical manual (DSM IV) under the category of conduct problems (Kendall & Hammen). While some behaviours are described more frequently such as bullying, intimidating and threatening others (n = 156), initiating physical fights, and being cruel to people (children), others are not as highly prevalent (for e.g., killing insects n = 01, self-injurious behaviours n = 05).

On the contrary, the perceived aggressive behaviours of the preschool child could only be a fraction of what actually takes place in the preschool class among children. Preschool teachers may have failed to note extreme aggressive acts as these may not be occurring frequently in the presence of the teachers. Such behaviours are more likely to take place during recess or outside the preschool class when the teacher is not paying attention to the children. Therefore, future studies need to look into aggressive behaviours in Sri Lankan children occurring during different activities.

Since studies (White *et al.*) reveal that childhood behavioural problems are the best predictor of later antisocial outcomes and that precursors or risk factors of adult and adolescent conduct problems have their roots in early childhood (Wilson & Hernstein), this paper also stresses the importance of exploring this issue in depth within the Sri Lankan context. Moreover, studies carried out in Sri Lanka (Samarakkody *et al.*) on externalizing behaviours of preschool children convey that its prevalence is high. However, the results showed that teachers rated "talking out of turn" and "non-attentiveness" as the first and second most severe and frequent classroom behaviours, respectively. Based on this, it could be argued that preschool teachers need to be provided training to identify aggressive behaviours, as early identification would lead to appropriate prevention/intervention for young children with prominent aggressive behavioural patterns.

It should also be noted that though limited in number, some of the behaviours perceived to be aggressive by the preschool teachers such as crying, preference for isolation, being competitive, and rigidly sticking to his/her opinion could not be categorized under any of the forms of aggressive behaviours described above. However, these categories were mainly based on the studies carried out in the western context. Hence, it could be assumed that the results showed that the modus of perception for aggressive behaviours could also be influenced by the cultural context. When Langfeld explored teacher perception of problem behaviour between Germany and South Korea, the results showed that while German teachers did not find non-conformist behaviour to be problematic, Korean teachers did. Similarly, when Ho and Leung investigated disruptive classroom behaviour perceived by primary school teachers in Hong Kong, they too found that the teachers rated "talking out of turn" and "non-attentiveness" to be the number one and two most severe and frequent classroom behaviours, respectively. Therefore, though few in number, these behaviours urge researchers to further investigate the cultural perceptions of aggressive behaviours or what is considered to be problem behaviours by the teachers and preschool teachers in the Sri Lankan context as they need to be considered when developing programs to train teachers.

Table 2: Types of Aggressive Behaviours of Preschool Children

	Physical	Verbal	Emotional	N.R
Frequency	980	67	69	259
Percentages	71.3%	4.9%	5%	18.8%

N = 1375

The analysis of the expert panel revealed that aggressive behaviours, as perceived by preschool teachers, could be divided into three main categories: physical, verbal and emotional. Instances of physical acts of aggression

were, for example, taking things belonging to others, and pinching and biting other children. Verbal acts of aggression were using bad words, mocking, making fun of other children and scolding other children. Emotional expressions included crying, not changing one's negative attitudes, and refusing to be in close proximity with some children. The most frequently listed aggressive behaviours were physical aggressive acts while verbal and emotional aggressive acts were hardly listed by the preschool teachers. These findings are also in line with the research which state that preschool children do not possess the cognitive-emotional maturity to display complex aggressive acts (Bonica *et al.*).

Table 02 also shows that preschool teachers have listed a large number of physical aggressive acts (71.3%) in comparison to verbal aggressive acts (4.9%). Why teachers have mentioned more instances of physical than relational aggression could be due to two reasons. First, it may be surmised that occurrences of relational aggression were less frequent in the preschool setting because preschool children do not possess the social, emotional and cognitive skills to display these (Fagot & Hagan; Bonica *et al.*). Another reason may be that preschool teacher perceptions or their mental schemas of aggressive behaviours mainly comprise physical forms of aggressive acts of preschool children, and therefore that they may tend to label and perceive physical or overt aggressive acts as 'aggression' than verbal aggressive acts. However, the information clearly warrants further investigation as an effective early violence prevention program would definitely benefit from such research evidence.

Although there is some evidence that older children use relational aggression to a greater degree than younger children (Ostrov, Crick, & Stauffacher), existing research has not fully examined age differences in preschool children's use of relational aggression. These results may be due to differences in cognitive abilities and increasing social and emotional competence. For example, Crick and Rose contend that relational aggression may intensify as children grow older due to a growing sophistication in their cognitive abilities and an increasing understanding of complex social networks. Although the variables of age and relational aggression are not entirely understood, there is evidence to suggest that in contrast to physical aggression, which tend to decrease with age (Crick & Rose, the use of relational aggression increases with the age of the child.

However, research shows that preschool children can and do display instances of relational aggression. In the present study, though low in frequency, preschool teachers have also listed among aggressive behaviours relational aggressive behaviours such as name calling, scolding, using bad words ($n = 34$), and aggressive gestures such as frowning or making faces ($n = 05$), which are in line with previous research findings (Ostrov *et al.*; Crick *et al.*a; Crick; Crick *et al.*b; Crick *et al.*c).

Table 3: Intensity of Aggressive Behaviours of Preschool Children

	01 Not Severe	02	03	04	05 Extremely Severe	N.R
Frequency	130	422	330	232	02	259
Percentages	9.5%	30.7%	24%	16.9%	.2%	18.8%

N = 1375

Based on the literature and expert ratings, the severity of the aggressive behaviours of the preschool children were placed on a five point rating scale, one being 'not severe' and five being 'extremely severe'. The behaviours that yielded a score of one from the experts were crying when the teacher pays attention to another child or keeping objects to self, while those that yielded a score of five were killing insects and self-injurious behaviours.

Table 03 indicates the most prevalent aggressive behaviours, which received a score of two, with the next in order being those that yielded a score of three and four. The Table shows that aggressive behaviours which received a score of 5 were hardly perceived to be carried out by the children (.2%), along with the ones which were labelled as the 'not severe behaviours' (9.5%). However, in the backdrop of previous research studies which convey that adolescent and adult aggressive behaviours begins early in life, the present study stresses the importance of exploring preschool teacher perception of even those aggressive behaviours that are categorized as 'not severe'.

A major limitation of this study was that it relied on self-reporting by the teachers. Though an individual is in a unique position to report on internal views, especially regarding practices, beliefs, attitudes and needs, during self-reports there are questions about the validity and reliability of teacher perceptions as teachers may over identify the behaviours of the children (McEvoy *et al.*). Therefore, future studies conducted with similar objectives should use other methodologies such as direct observation.

Nevertheless, the strength of the present study lies in its method of data collection. The survey data was obtained using a sample of 275 preschool teachers from 18 districts in Sri Lanka. As a result, the data gathered provides a very detailed view of the nature, prevalence and types of aggressive behaviours displayed by preschool children in Sri Lanka as perceived by their preschool teachers. Considering the dearth of studies carried out on the subject in the Sri Lankan context, the present study provides valuable initial findings for future researchers for purposes of comparison and contrast.

The analysis also revealed that some of the behaviours as perceived by the teachers could not be categorized under the western definitions of aggression (Crick *et al* b; Ostrov, Crick & Stauffacher; Kuppens *et al.*). Therefore, this study urges future researchers to explore cultural perceptions of aggression as well as cultural perceptions of the precursors of aggression in young children.

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