Aggression in the Kindergarten Classroom

A White Paper Prepared by
The Mayor's Commission for Children
Springfield, Missouri

The Mayor's Commission for Children was established less than a year ago. We all want our children to grow into successful adulthood—to be successful in their family lives, successful in their careers, successful as responsible citizens.

The Commission's charge is to help the community find ways to embrace children in their early years, and provide them what they need.

In an effort to learn something about how our children are doing, the Commission took a look at some aspects of their behavior in kindergarten. This white paper describes what the Commission found, and what they found is distressing.

Please read and think about what is in this report. Together we can and will renew our efforts to help our kids be successful.

--Tom Carlson, Mayor of Springfield

For release to the public on August 10, 2005

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Executive Summary

Early in 2005, the Mayor's Commission for Children conducted a study which explored aggression among kindergarten children in the Springfield and Republic public schools. The methods included 16 face-to-face interviews with veteran kindergarten teachers and principals, and paper-and-pencil surveys completed by 95% of the kindergarten teachers and principals. Key results of the study were that the frequency and intensity of aggressive behaviors among kindergarten children are reportedly on the rise; teachers spend a disproportionate amount of their time dealing with aggression; there are quite dramatic episodes of aggression in the kindergarten classroom; and teachers and administrators can easily cite factors that contribute to this aggression.

For a more thorough but brief set of findings, the reader is encouraged to turn to page 10 and read the "Conclusions" section. You will pick up a summary there, and we hope it will whet your appetite to spend a few minutes reading the entire document. Aggression in the kindergarten classroom is an issue which we think the whole community needs to understand.

How this white paper got started

Before the Mayor's Commission for Children (MCC) members were even sworn in, two members, professional educators, began discussing their observation that they were seeing increases in aggressive behavior, even violent behavior, among the youngest students in our schools. Other members of the Commission joined the conversation. Several had seen articles in the popular media suggesting similar conclusions.

We all know that there is a lot of violence in American life. Journalists bombard us with accounts each day. We know of school shootings in places like Columbine. We even know that the data show disturbing levels of aggression and violence among high school students in our own community. But to hear about dramatic instances of aggression in kindergarten and first grade was shocking. The two educators who began the discussion told of specific instances in their schools. The anecdotal evidence was too convincing, and too worrisome, to be ignored.

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In kindergarten we see how children come to school; what they are like before schools have had a chance to impact them; how families in the community are presenting their young for formal education. The Commission decided to find out what truth there is in the assertions that more and more aggressive behavior is appearing in the youngest school children, and then share our findings with the community. In our background work, we found that one of the unresolved issues is a single agreed-upon definition of aggression. **For the project, we defined aggression as, "Hostile or destructive behavior or action on the part of kindergarten students."**

How we gathered our information

First, we conducted a literature review and found very little scholarly research devoted to aggression in kindergarten-aged children. One interesting piece of research only recently available is a study published in May, 2005, by the Yale University Child Study Center. Having analyzed data from 40 states, researchers reported that pre-kindergarten children are being expelled from their classes for behavior problems at a higher rate than students in K-12 schools (www.edweek.org/links May 18, 2005 article.) Whatever is happening, it's not just happening here.

Having reviewed the available research, we set out to study aggression in our own region's kindergarten classrooms, and found a significant story to tell. Although this report may raise some alarms, it is important to note that the vast majority of kindergarten children are not aggressive. The information presented in these pages relates to a small proportion of children in kindergarten classrooms.

Two approaches were taken. First, with the help of Southwest Missouri State University's Center for Research and Service, two surveys were developed and distributed during March and April, 2005: one to all kindergarten teachers and the other to all elementary school principals in Springfield and Republic public schools. The surveys, which included both closed and open-ended questions, differed only to reflect the different responsibilities of teachers and administrators.

Of the 146 questionnaires distributed to kindergarten teachers and principals, 140 were returned with wholly completed or partially completed responses for an overall response rate of 95.9%. The response rates were similar for teachers and principals.

Second, structured interviews were conducted with a sample of educators who were considered key informants. Experienced kindergarten teachers and elementary principals from both districts were interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of kindergarten aggression. In Springfield, Associate Superintendent Dr. Peggy Riggs and Director of Student Support Services Dr. Karen Scott suggested individuals to be interviewed. Two teachers and two principals were selected for interviews from each of the Springfield school district's three zones. In Republic, one principal and three teachers, selected by Republic Early Childhood Center Principal Carol Lohkamp, were interviewed.

How the results are presented

The results of both the survey data and the interview data are reported below. The quantitative data from the survey appear in ordinary font. Where noted, the data that are reported are statistically significant, which means that according to accepted scientific standards we can conclude that the data reflect real reported increases, and not simply the results of pure chance.

The qualitative data from the survey (those open-ended questions to which respondents could give any kind of answer) and the results from the interviews are reported in indented italics. These data represent the responses of individual teachers and principals. Because they are not quantified, as are the results from the

closed-ended items of the survey, it may not be as safe to generalize from them. However, while they lack the statistical safeguards of the quantitative survey results, they do represent the views of experienced professionals, and provide insights which cannot be reached by quantitative instruments.

Trends in the Classroom

Kindergarten teachers and elementary principals, when surveyed, were asked whether they have observed a change in the overall **frequency** of aggressive behavior in the classroom. They answered as follows:

Significant decrease	1.7%
Moderate decrease	2.6%
No change	19.8%
Moderate increase	31.9%
Significant increase	44.0%

Note that three-quarters of these teachers and principals reported moderate to significant increases—to a statistically significant degree—in the frequency of aggressive behavior.

The teachers and principals were also asked whether they have observed a change in the overall **severity** of aggressive behavior in the classroom. Their responses:

Significant decrease	1.7%
Moderate decrease	5.2%
No change	27.0%
Moderate increase	30.4 %
Significant increase	35.7%

Again, the reported increases in severity, with almost two-thirds of teachers and principles reporting moderate or significant increases, were found to be statistically significant.

We asked if teachers and principals had noticed changes in specific aggressive behaviors of students in the classroom. Their answer was a powerful yes. They reported large increases in aggressive behavior by kindergarten students in the classroom. For each of the behaviors (biting, kicking, shoving, hitting, throwing objects, profanity, name calling), reported increases were found at statistically significant levels. See Figure 1.

Figure 1
Reported Changes in Aggressive Behavior

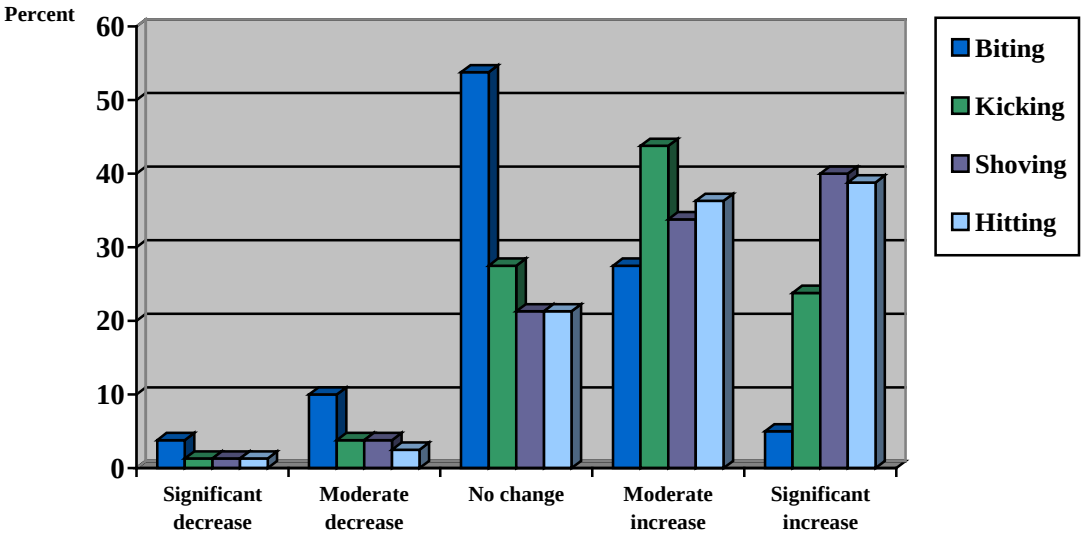
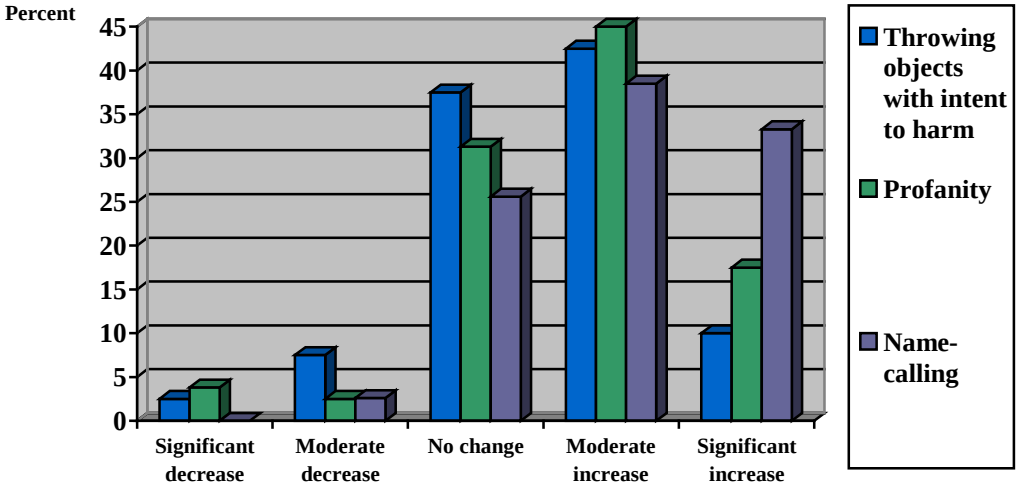


Figure 1 (con't)
Reported Changes in Aggressive Behavior

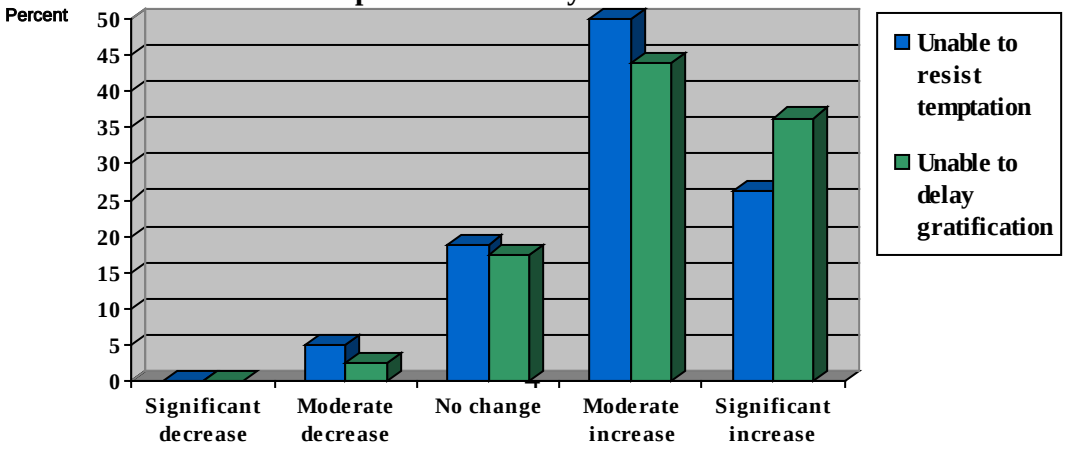


In the interviews, kindergarten teachers were asked what percentage of their current kindergarten students exhibit aggressive behavior. The average of their responses was that 26% of their current students exhibit aggressive behavior. Many said the number varies from year to year. For example, one teacher said 75% of her students exhibit aggressive behavior in her current school year, but that, "This is a terrible year. The worst I've had since coming to this school." Her experience can be contrasted with a survey respondent who wrote, "I have only experienced a mild amount of aggression. Nothing too concerning. The things I have seen are only typical of this age." Between these two extremes lies the majority – and the majority reported that aggression in kindergarten is on the rise.

Characteristics of aggressive children

It can be asserted that impulsiveness is an underlying factor associated with aggressive behavior, and that an inability to resist temptation and/or delay gratification contributes to impulsiveness. Teachers were asked whether they have noticed a change in students' capability to resist temptation and delay gratification. Their responses are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Reported Changes in Inability to Resist Temptation and Delay Gratification



Differences exhibited by aggressive kindergarteners

During interviews, respondents were asked several questions regarding the characteristics of aggressive children. We asked kindergarten teachers and elementary principals in what ways they see children who are repeatedly aggressive as being different from their peers.

Regarding the children themselves, kindergarten teachers and elementary principals reported a variety of characteristics, including a lack of social skills, coping skills and conflict management skills. They also reported limited vocabularies, greater need for attention, greater challenges academically, immaturity and inattentiveness, lower levels of frustration tolerance, difficulty accepting change, poor impulse control, and higher levels of anger.

A common theme expressed both during interviews and on open-ended survey questions was that aggressive children are angrier than their peers. One teacher wrote on her survey, "Children are full of anger." Another wrote, "I have taught Kindergarten for over 14 years and it is like night and day. The children seem to be angry and their parents are very disrespectful and talk rudely to their children and teachers."

Circumstances and surroundings that contribute to aggression

During interviews, kindergarten teachers and elementary principals reported certain circumstances and contexts in kindergarteners' lives which are likely to contribute to aggressive behavior.

At school:

Triggers of aggression during the school day reported in the interviews included students not understanding or liking the rules of school, fatigue, students not getting their way, immaturity, issues from home weighing upon them, and needs for attention going unmet. Two principals described aggression as often being a result of children fighting over limited resources. Several mentioned full time kindergarten, with bigger class sizes and not enough rest time for students. Additional triggers of aggression mentioned included transition times during the day, like changing class location, and unstructured time, like recess, when children's behavior is less prescribed.

Teachers and principals reported during interviews and through open-ended survey responses that at school many aggressive children face academic challenges. Several professionals lamented the fact that the academic expectations of kindergarteners have increased to a degree that triggers aggression, as children act out due to academic frustration. One teacher wrote on her survey, "In my ten plus years teaching Kindergarten, I have seen a marked increase in aggressive behavior and Kindergarten students generally not ready for a structured environment. On the other hand I have witnessed curriculum markedly increasing! This adds to student frustration and brings out aggressive behaviors." Another wrote, "We are pushing too much academically and causing frustration in some children which leads to aggression. If we expect so much academically from our students, we need children to begin school at an older age."

A theme repeated frequently during interviews and through open-ended survey responses was that aggressive children exhibit disrespect for authority. For example, one teacher wrote on her questionnaire, "I see an increase in aggressive behavior and contempt of authority. Children are in charge of parents, instead of the adults being in charge!" Another wrote, "Kindergarten students seem to have no respect for authority and are not used to consequences. They do not

realize that there are consequences for their behavior." Another wrote, "I've taught Kindergarten for 22 years. Children no longer have respect for authority. They're very angry because no one spends any time with them."

A related theme was concern that parents do not support the efforts of teachers and principals to manage students' aggressive behavior at school. One teacher wrote on her questionnaire, "When I call parents to report these aggressive behaviors, there isn't the support there should be. They blame the school or bus – it's never them. Some even say they tell their children to fight back. I tell them we are a 'no hands on' school and they still want to argue." Another wrote, "When I contact parents regarding aggressive acts, I receive little or no support. I have been told on numerous occasions that they (the parents) teach their children to 'defend' themselves - that it is okay to hit."

At home:

Interview respondents reported circumstances in the home lives of aggressive kindergarteners which, in their view, contribute to aggressive behavior in the classroom. They include lack of structure, abuse and aggression experienced at home, families who fight, families who are on the go too much, children who are tired, families who are too focused on children's social activities, parents who lack parenting skills, parents who don't discipline enough and won't follow through at home to support the teacher, inconsistent schedules, too little family time, parent fatigue, financial worries, parents with emotional problems, disrespect for authority modeled in the home, poverty, overly materialistic attitudes which take parents out of the home to work and leave children alone, children overindulged, and absence of family expectations to be responsible and to work. They also reported that some of the aggressive children had been drug babies.

A common theme voiced by our group of kindergarten teachers and elementary principals during interviews and through open ended survey responses was that aggressive kindergarten students tend to come from homes in which parents and other caregivers lack parenting skills. One teacher wrote on her survey, "Parents today are not at home or are trying to be only friends with their child and are not willing to set boundaries."

Interview and survey respondents expressed concern about the absence of structure and routine in aggressive kindergarteners' lives. One teacher wrote on her survey, "Kindergarteners seem to have less structure & routine in their lives. There are more children from broken families & many have no father figure as a role model. Many children in daycares exhibit loud & aggressive behaviors." Another wrote, "I have observed that most aggressive children come from environments that are very unstable and homes in which there is very little positive adult interaction with children. Most do not have any prior school experience such as preschool or Parents as Teachers, etc." Another wrote, "Many students come from unstable environments. This makes transition into a structured environment, with rules and routines, more difficult."

When asked during interviews what challenges they had experienced when working with parents or caregivers of aggressive kindergarten students, respondents most often reported a tendency by the parents of aggressive students to deny the aggressive behavior of their children, or diminish its importance.

In the neighborhood:

When asked during interviews what circumstances or surroundings in the neighborhoods of kindergarten children contribute to aggressive behavior, respondents reported several factors. These included lack of supervision, high mobility, drugs, poverty, lack of acceptance or tolerance of others, and less interaction with their peers as children are spending more time with media. One principal described children as sometimes learning "street smart" rules in their neighborhoods – rules that do not translate into success at school. Others expressed concerns including a lack of positive influences outside children's troubled homes, unsavory elements in

neighborhoods to which kindergarten children are exposed early, and the diminishment in our culture of a shared sense of responsibility for our entire community of children.

Within the broader culture:

During interviews, our sample of kindergarten teachers and elementary principals noted that within the broader culture, TV, video games and movies contribute to aggressive behavior by some kindergarteners. They also identified broad themes within our society, such as the admiration and acceptance of aggression, and the acceptance of disrespect for authority, as affecting rates of aggression. One teacher described a little kindergarten boy who, she said, exemplified society's acceptance of violence. She said, "Last year I had a little boy, who often wore Incredible Hulk t-shirts. He would corner kids in the bathroom and be verbally and physically aggressive."

Another teacher wrote on her survey, "The aggression level has risen for all grade levels, not just kindergarten. It is a reflection of society."

Social, emotional and cognitive skills

In trying to understand the characteristics of aggressive children, we asked our interview sample of kindergarten teachers and elementary principals what percentage of the aggressive kindergarteners they worked with had struggled with the development of social skills. Their average response was that 93% of their aggressive students had struggled with the development of social skills. As one teacher put it, "Social skills are THE big issue." Another teacher remarked, "Some kids I truly worry about. They're smart enough academically, but socially and emotionally, they struggle. Part of the problem is I'm teaching first grade, not kindergarten. Kindergarten was supposed to be about teaching social and emotional skills, but now they're asking us to teach so many academics."

During in-depth interviews we asked respondents to report roughly what percentage of the aggressive kindergarten students they had worked with had struggled with the development of emotional skills. An average of the responses of teachers and principals was 84% of their aggressive students had struggled with the development of emotional skills. One teacher remarked, "The aggressive kids tend to be on the edge of tears or anger. I think it comes from their home lives. The kids don't understand. They just know they feel bad – and they take it out on somebody else."

When asked what percentage of the aggressive kindergarten students they had worked with had struggled with the development of cognitive skills, our respondents reported that an average of 55% of their aggressive students had struggled with the development of cognitive skills. One teacher commented, "They're smart kids who can get in smart trouble. Aggressive kids are not dumb." Another said, "Aggressive kids can be really bright." A third remarked, "We have bright kids who are still aggressive."

One kindergarten teacher wrote on her survey, "Kinders are coming in with more emotional and social needs! We have to deal with these basics in order to reach our academic goals." Another wrote, "It seems as if the children have not had the opportunities to learn appropriate social skills and anger management prior to K." Another wrote, "I have noticed these students are also subject to frequent tantrums or melt downs. The tantrums can range from dropping to the floor yelling, crying, and kicking, to knocking things off tables, to running away."

Differences between boys and girls regarding aggression

More traditional gender stereotypes of aggression are exemplified by comments made by interview respondents, such as, "Girls tend to bicker and cry and tattle. Boys tend to be more physically

violent." and,"Boys are a lot more physical and girls use their mouths. We work on getting out of a victim mentality with kids, especially girls." But times are changing. When asked about differences between boys and girls regarding aggressive behavior, the majority of our teachers and principals agreed that more boys than girls are aggressive; however, they also reported an increase in aggressive behavior by girls. One teacher said, "It used to be exclusively boys. Now it's probably still more boys than girls, but there are many more girls now who are behaving aggressively." A principal reported, "Our number of aggressive girls is increasing. In general aggression rates are definitely going up. Passive aggression is also going up." Another principal reported, "It used to be boys were more aggressive, but not anymore. Yesterday a couple of girls instigated a fight on the playground. The girls and the boys were all fighting physically."

Management of aggressive children

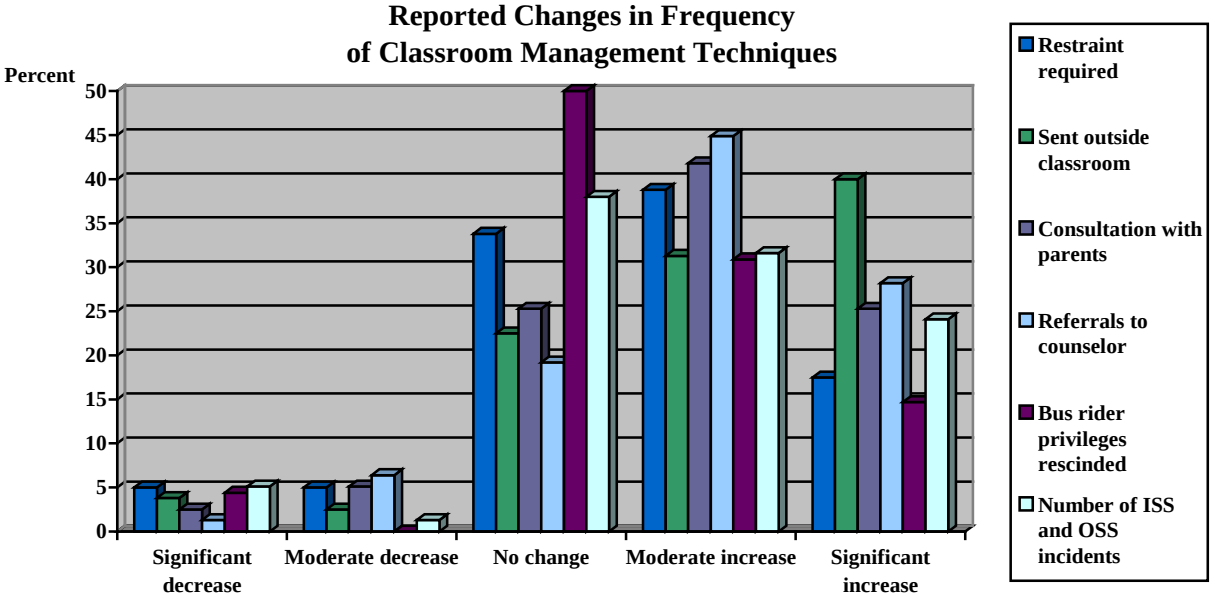
In-school strategies for dealing with aggression

Our surveyed teachers reported having an average of 21 children in their kindergarten classrooms. Their reported years of experience were: 21.2% of teachers reported 1-2 years of experience working with kindergarten children, 16.2% reported 3-5 years, and 62.6% reported 6 or more years.

With kindergarten students, the occasional temper tantrum is normal. However, aggressive behavior that extends beyond what is age appropriate and developmentally expected presents several challenges for teachers, principals and students.

When teachers who had worked with kindergarteners for three years or longer were asked on the survey about changes in the frequency with which various techniques were used to deal with classroom aggression, they responded as indicated in Figure 3. Reported increases were found to be at statistically significant levels.

Figure 3
Reported Changes in Frequency of Classroom Management Techniques



During interviews, our sample of kindergarten teachers and elementary principals reported a wide range of strategies used to manage aggressive kindergarten students - from time-outs, think sheets (working out, on paper, what happened and what they could have done differently) and peer discussion, to counselor and principal involvement, restraint, and even in-school (ISS) or out-of-school (OSS) suspension. Though rare, ISS and OSS are occasionally used with kindergarten

students. Reported examples of behavior by kindergarteners warranting ISS or OSS included assault, serious threats and inappropriate sexual conduct.

Considering out-of-school options

Teachers were asked on the survey if there are some aggressive kindergarten children whose behavior is unmanageable within the limits of the **classroom**. Of the 96 teachers who responded to this question, 72.9% reported "yes" and 27.1% responded "no." When asked of those who responded "yes" how many of these kindergarten children are encountered per year, teachers reported an average of one to two per year.

When interview participants were asked if there are some aggressive kindergarten children who are so problematic that there are currently no adequate interventions within their ***school building*** *to manage the behavior, the majority answered yes. One teacher said, "We have some kids who need a place to go to get their act together; a place to go to learn some coping strategies and then come back. These kids might not qualify for behavior disorder classrooms, but they still need something." A principal commented, "I have two kids right now who don't understand their inappropriate behavior. You talk with them and still don't know if they understand. One boy has terrible communication problems and gets so frustrated, which triggers aggression. If we had an immersive (full time) environment to help these kids get past that kind of thing it would help."*

The impact of aggression on the classroom

When surveyed, teachers reported that an average of 15% of their time is spent managing aggressive behavior in the classroom. Teachers also reported an average of two-and-one-half aggressive students per classroom. (The percentage of time teachers reported spending to manage aggressive behavior varied considerably, just as the number of kindergarten students per classroom who exhibit aggressive behavior varied widely.)

In response to an open-ended question, several survey respondents described the effects of aggressive student behavior in the classroom, and how it disrupts learning for the majority of non-aggressive children in a class. One teacher wrote, "Time spent dealing with aggressive children disrupts the flow of learning in the classroom. Therefore, all the children suffer." Another wrote, "Aggressive behavior is something that can spread within the class. Many children are on the fence and will easily pick up on aggression if they experience it."

Interview participants spoke emotionally about the impact of aggression in the kindergarten classroom. One long time teacher said, "It's very stressful. Very. You feel like you can't do your job. I feel bad for the other kids who are not getting what they need. It makes me feel like quitting." Another said, "A lot of my attention is given to them, which leaves less of my attention for the rest of the class." Another teacher commented, "That's where all my attention is going, not to my other 22 students. It makes it exhausting to teach." A teacher who had been teaching kindergarteners for many years lamented, "I spend so much time disciplining that I can't do with the kids all the wonderful things I know how to do with them. There is a huge trend for the worse in this area. Even just in my eight years at this school, I have seen a huge trend towards more aggressive behavior. I want to say it all boils down to income, but it's not that completely. Still, here at this school, our family's socio/economic levels have been dropping and our kids' aggression rates have been rising." One teacher simply said, "Learning stops while we put out fires."

Improving our approach

Both teachers and principals were asked on the survey, "How beneficial would training be to help you deal effectively with aggressive behavior in your kindergarten students? Of the 134 people who answered, responses were distributed as follows:

47.0% said it would be "very beneficial"
37.3% said it would be "somewhat beneficial"
14.2% said it would be "a little bit beneficial"
1.5% said it would be "not at all beneficial."

During interviews and in response to open-ended questions on the survey, kindergarten teachers and elementary principals suggested approaches that they think would be helpful when dealing with aggressive kindergarten children. They reported most often an interest in smaller kindergarten class sizes. Respondents who mentioned smaller classes listed the ideal number as being between 18 and 20 students. Several suggested those classes should have a full time aide.

The other most common improvement mentioned by teachers and principals was the support of a full time counselor and a full time principal in their building. One teacher said, "If we had a full time counselor and a full time principal in the building to be available it would help. Right now there are times when we have nowhere to take a kid who is a problem. I can't leave my class, so I can't work one on one with the child who is aggressive or out of control." A few respondents mentioned an interest in having either social workers or therapists in the building, or available, to help with problem children and also with their families.

Many suggested engaging in additional family intervention, such as parenting classes. One teacher wrote on her survey, "We need family intervention. The families[of aggressive children] don't know any better. They need help accessing social services." Another wrote, "I am concerned about lack of programs or training for parenting skills for young families." A teacher commented during her interview, "Parents often say they know their kids act that way, but they don't know what to do." A principal being interviewed expressed a strong desire to teach parenting skills to families, but was concerned at the low turn out for such events when he had organized them in the past.

Another improvement suggested by teachers and principals was the teaching of social and emotional skills classes for children - for example, anger management classes, or a basic social skills class. One teacher wrote on her survey, "Children need to be taught how to handle their anger." Another wrote, "Socialization should still be the most important skill learned and mastered in Kindergarten."

Other suggestions included providing additional teacher training focused specifically on how to manage aggressive students, consistently applying the rules and consequences within the school environment, easing up academically at kindergarten level to focus more on social and emotional skill development, and developing alternative locations for aggressive kindergarten students – either an alternative location within the building, or an out-of-school program of some kind.

Relationships with caring adults were suggested as a help when dealing with aggressive kindergarteners. As one principal said, "Relationships are key for these kids. Anything that makes relationships with caring adults available would be great. We need more options to build relationships, build school readiness skills, and teach parents. For some of these parents, school is the enemy. Kids come to school with that attitude. Then, we have to swim hard upstream to overcome that negative attitude." One teacher commented, "Many of our youngest students seem to have little connection with adults or peers."

Conclusions

Ours was not intended to be a major piece of academic research. Careful attention was paid to research method; however, this report is not a comprehensive analysis of aggression in kindergarten students. Instead, it reflects the observations of kindergarten teachers and elementary school principals in two Missouri communities, Springfield and Republic, in March and April 2005.

Through surveys and in-depth interviews, kindergarten teachers and elementary principals expressed considerable agreement that aggression in kindergarten students is increasing. They shared their observations about the characteristics of aggressive children and their families, the management of aggressive students within kindergarten classrooms, the impact of aggressive students on the general learning environment, and options for improving the situation.

Despite the demands of their regular duties, the vast majority of teachers and principals were eager to complete the survey and talk with the interviewer. Not once did we hear, "Why are you bothering us with this?" Instead we heard, "I'm so glad you are looking into this," or, "Someone is finally interested in something we really care about. Thanks."

Based upon what we learned from 101 kindergarten teachers and 39 elementary school principals in Springfield and Republic public schools, the following tentative conclusions are suggested:

! Aggressive behavior, not ordinary behavioral problems or temper tantrums which have found expression in classrooms since classrooms began, but behavior which is hostile and destructive, is reported by our respondents to be increasing in kindergarten students.

! Despite reported increases in aggressive behavior by kindergarten students, we are still dealing here with a small proportion of total students. The vast majority of kindergarten students are good citizens in the classroom.

! Because kindergarten students have been exposed to school settings for such a short time, it is reasonable to assume that their aggressive behavior is something they brought with them to the schools, and not the result of their experience in the schools.

! The increase in aggression involves both the frequency and the severity of students' behavior.

! The aggressive behavior of a few students in a classroom requires an inordinate amount of teachers' time, thus diminishing the overall instruction given to the majority of students.

! A small but increasing number of students display a level of aggression which cannot be effectively managed in the classroom.

! Aggressive behavior in kindergarten classrooms is found at approximately the same level in the smaller district (Republic) and the larger district (Springfield).

! Aggressive students tend to be those who have not developed adequate social, emotional, and cognitive skills.

! Aggressive students tend to come from backgrounds which are unstable and/or dysfunctional.

! Teachers and principals would like training in dealing with aggressive behavior in the classroom. They would also like smaller classes and full time principals and counselors in each building.

The Commission wishes to insert here a perspective which does not derive simply from this piece of research. It is the perspective which sees aggressive, even violent and anti-social behavior, as something which has its roots in the earliest experiences of children. Unless some kind of intervention occurs, early childhood aggression can grow into problematic behavior in the first grades of school. Over time it then ripens into the serious delinquency of too many high school students and the mental dysfunction and criminal behavior of adults.

What we see here in this glimpse into our kindergarten classrooms is an increasing number of small children on their way to becoming big problems. These are the children about whom Daniel Patrick Moynihan said, "Their futures are spoken for." If we wish to find our way out of the discontents of too much of modern life, the drugs, the crime, the poverty, and the broken lives, we must start by focusing our attention on the conditions of life for our youngest children.

Recommendations

Based upon what we learned from the teachers and principals, the Mayor's Commission for Children makes the following recommendations. They are not meant to be exhaustive. All members of the community, and its organizations, are urged to examine the information contained in this white paper and come up with ideas and recommendations of their own.

1. The problems of these children begin before they enter school. The community must focus on early childhood and find a way to increase resources directed to early childhood in order to prevent the behavior discussed in this white paper and thereby break the cycle of aggression. We must:

    - Create public awareness, through all available avenues, of the trend toward increasing aggressive behavior among the very young, and what that behavior reveals about our families and our community.
    - Expand publicly supported pre-school programs, improve their quality and increase the involvement of parents in these programs.
    - Provide quality and affordable child care for families with no other way to care for their young children.
    - Educate parents and professionals who work with children (in the schools, child care centers, the faith community, etc.) in the processes of cultivating the social and emotional skills of children and provide support for efforts to improve social and emotional skills.

2. The phenomenon of aggression among entering students must be studied further, to determine causes and design better treatment and prevention strategies.

3. A system of assessing readiness for school, including social and emotional readiness as well as intellectual readiness, should be developed in order to monitor the trend towards increasing aggression and to assess the value of prevention efforts aimed at reversing the trend. All public schools in the county should be invited to join this program. (Note: The Mayor's Commission for Children is accepting responsibility for implementation of this recommendation.)

4. More assistance, including increased funding from public and private sources, must be given to the public schools in order to address the problems of aggressive children in the schools, and to assist the families of these students.

5. The school systems should respond to the call of teachers and principals for specialized training for dealing with aggressive students.

6. Although the goal is to keep all kindergarten children in the classroom where they have a chance to interact with others who are role models, it appears that the aggressive behavior of a very small number of children is too severe to be dealt with in the regular classroom. Alternative programs and/or treatment should be considered for these students in order to allow them to return to the regular classroom.

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"In order to understand the tide of violent behavior in which America is now submerged, we must look…to the cradle of human formation in the first thirty-three months of life. Those months, including nine months of prenatal development and the first two years after birth (33 months), harbor the seeds of violence for a growing percentage of American children….

"The ghosts of children lost to rage and despair, overlooked or abused by a community unaware of their existence, do retaliate. These children - like all children - 'do unto others.' It may be easy and politically expedient to ignore them or close our eyes to the appalling circumstances of their lives while they are voiceless and powerless - little bodies tucked away where no one is looking. But those children - grown larger and angrier - are swelling the rising tide of violent young offenders in our communities. Rage filled adolescents only seem to come out of nowhere. They come, too often, from the nursery."

--*Ghosts from the Nursery*, by Robin Karr-Morse and Meredith S. Wiley, p. 9