

Childhood empathy important predictor of aggression

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Young children who are less empathetic than their peers are more likely to be aggressive when older. This is what Malou Noten concludes in her dissertation. Ph.D. defense on 25 November.

In a number of studies, Noten demonstrated that aggressive behavior can already be predicted in pre-schoolers by looking at how much [empathy](#) they show. Noten says, "From prior research, we know that low empathy is a risk factor for [aggression](#) in [school-age children](#), adolescents and adults. Little research had been done in young [children](#), however, and the studies that there were gave conflicting results."

Empathy and aggression are characteristics that children develop at a very young age, and Noten therefore expected them to be related to each other at an early age, too. "This relationship only became truly visible, however, when we also looked at other factors such as sex, impulse control and the extent of social attention to others."

Long-term study of mothers and children

Noten worked with a team of researchers in education and child studies. In the project A Good Start, they followed 276 mother-child pairs from pregnancy until the child was almost four years old. In that period there were six research moments, four of which Noten describes in her dissertation. These all looked at the behavior and physiological reaction of the children, by measuring their heart rate, for instance.

At the age of six months, the babies were emotionally challenged by getting their mothers to wait before responding to them or to disappear from sight. At the age of 20 to 30 months, empathy was measured using a pain simulation task: The researcher pretended to bump herself and simulated intense pain. The researchers also studied the children's impulse control. When the children were three and a half, the researchers looked at the extent to which they could empathize with the emotions of other children while watching a video of children showing emotions. At all the ages studied, the mothers completed questionnaires about the extent of aggressive behavior in the child.

Encourage empathy

Noten says, "Our studies show that a high level of aggression is related to low affective empathy: being unable to empathize with another person's emotions." These links were more common in boys than in girls. A lack of impulse control was also found to be a predictor of more aggression. Noten calls for early recognition of poor empathy development and to encourage this skill if necessary.

"It's also important to take more account of factors that influence the relationship between empathy and aggression, such as sex, [impulse control](#) and a child's social attention to others," says Noten.

Provided by Leiden University

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