

## EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE OF AGGRESSIVENESS AND VIOLENCE AT EARLY STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

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**Abstract.** Aggressive and violent behaviors are at the forefront of the causes of adolescent mortality worldwide. This is a problem of great magnitude that, although it does not necessarily result in death, has a significant impact on health, social, educational, and legal systems. In this work, after reviewing different conceptions of aggressiveness and violence, theoretical and empirical knowledge is integrated into the educational approach of aggressive and violent behavior in adolescence. Specifically, from an initiated line of research, a differentiation between premeditated and impulsive aggressiveness is established, with the plural objective of better understanding these polymorphous behaviors, neutralizing as much as possible the risk factors, establishing the appropriate pedagogical measures once they are detected and promoting personal development and coexistence.

**Keywords:** aggressiveness, human development, education, prevention, violence

### Introduction

Aggression is a complex phenomenon that can be analyzed through multiple research and theoretical lenses, making it a subject of interest in various disciplines such as psychology, sociology, biology, anthropology, philosophy, and political science. The diverse approaches to aggression stem from its intricate nature and its varied forms of expression, ranging from physical and verbal aggression to more subtle forms such as relational or symbolic aggression. A comprehensive discussion of these approaches is provided in *Psychology of Aggression [Psychologia agresji]* by Farnicka, Liberska, and Niewiedział (2016). The literature identifies several theoretical frameworks for understanding aggression, including biological (Davidson,

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Putnam, & Larson, 2000), psychological, sociological (Coser, 1956), anthropological (Mead, 1935; Chagnon, 1983), philosophical and ethical (Singer, 1981), and political and global perspectives (Morgenthau, 1948; Huntington, 1996). These diverse perspectives highlight the multifaceted nature of aggression and demonstrate how interdisciplinary research offers a more holistic understanding of the mechanisms that underlie aggressive behavior.

In the field of psychology, different theoretical paradigms explain the mechanisms and functions of aggression. For instance, evolutionary theories, such as those proposed by Edward O. Wilson (1975) in *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, suggest that aggression may serve as a survival strategy. Robert Sapolsky (1997) and Adrian Raine (1993) have drawn attention to the hormonal and neurobiological underpinnings of aggression. The psychodynamic perspective, rooted in Sigmund Freud's (1920) theory, views aggression as an expression of innate drives, particularly the „death drive“ (Thanatos), which counters the „life drive“ (Eros). Melanie Klein (1932) expanded on these concepts, focusing on mechanisms such as projection and identification, through which children learn to manage aggressive impulses. From a cognitive perspective, aggression is seen as a product of information processing and the interpretation of events. Attribution theory (Heider, 1958) and Albert Bandura's (1977) social learning theory emphasize how aggression is learned through observation and the reinforcement of aggressive thought patterns. Research by Dodge and Coie (1987) indicates that children predisposed to aggression are more likely to interpret neutral actions as hostile. The phenomenological approach, influenced by Carl Rogers (1951) and Abraham Maslow (1968), conceptualizes aggression as a response to perceived threats to self-worth and the process of self-actualization.

This paper aims to formulate guidelines useful for practitioners involved in education, which are to prevent the acquisition of aggressive behaviors in students, especially in the early stages of development, before puberty. Therefore, the main task of this paper is to provide insights that can be used in the pedagogical environment to prevent aggressive behaviors at an early stage. The starting point is to prepare the ground for early intervention in aggressive behaviors, therefore the focus is on the terms „aggression“, „aggressiveness“ and „violence“ from a wider spectrum of related concepts and processes. Below is presented their understanding adopted in this paper and their significance for creating a programmatic framework of the educational process focused on the prevention of aggressive behaviors.

## Basic Concepts and Approaches

What is worth mentioning is that in the context of pedagogical challenges, the complexity of the concept of aggressiveness complicates the development of a universally accepted definition (Ramírez & Andreu, 2006). On one hand, there are numerous definitions of aggression and related concepts, such as violence, which encompass a broad range of behaviors that are often poorly defined. On the other hand, the

analytical field of aggression has been enriched by contributions from various disciplines, including psychology, law, pedagogy, medicine, ethnology, and sociology. However, this cross-disciplinary expansion has also led to conceptual ambiguity. As Andreu and Peña (2016) note, aggressiveness is not the result of a single cause but a multidimensional process involving a complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral factors. Liu (2004) highlights that aggression, like any behavior, has biological underpinnings, including neurobiological, genetic, hormonal, perinatal, traumatic, nutritional, and neurochemical factors. However, Liu clarifies that biological factors alone do not account for the development of aggression. The individual's social environment, including learning experiences, plays a crucial role in regulating neurobiological processes and behavior, helping to explain individual differences in aggression levels.

The verb ,assault', as Corominas (1987) recalls, is taken from the Latin term *aggrēdi* ,to set about (someone)', ,to attack,' derived from *gradē* ,to walk.' Of the same family are the words ,aggression,' the act of attacking someone, and ,aggressiveness,' the tendency or disposition to attack.

In the sense of inclination to attack, aggressiveness can be observed at any stage of life. However, in adolescence, a critical period of development in which significant biopsychosocial changes occur, it can increase and take a hazardous course because of the damage and pain it generates (Muarifah et al., 2022).

Traditionally, discussions about the origin of aggression have been established between the advocates of geneticist theses, e.g., Lorenz (2002), and those who argue, such as Bandura (1978), that it is the result of social learning. What is currently worth noting from a scientific point of view is that all complex behavioral acts require a close interrelationship between genotype and environment (Markel', 2018). Alonso Fernandez (1994) states that self-affirmative aggressiveness has an instinctive origin, while malign human aggressiveness has a sociocultural origin. We can add that human beings have the potential to show markedly destructive aggressive behavior, as well as exhibit a behavior committed to collaboration, understanding, and coexistence. This is a topical issue in the pedagogical field. Educational intervention in the face of a series of factors favoring aggressiveness is one of the greatest challenges, especially in the adolescent population (Kaveh et al., 2022).

In understanding behavior and its socio-educational orientation, it is essential to bear in mind the reciprocal interaction between personal traits and environmental factors (person-environment interaction). In this regard, appropriate family, school, and social pedagogical action, which raises and strengthens personal maturity through emotional and behavioral control, is essential to prevent and neutralize conflictive situations that can otherwise lead to aberrant and long-lasting behavior.

It is noteworthy that aggressive behavior, the learning of which can begin in childhood, tends to reach its highest level during the high school years (Poling et al., 2019), conditioned by a set of interwoven social/environmental, communicational and relational, school, family and personal factors (multicausality) (Martínez-Otero, 2018).

## Premeditated and impulsive aggressiveness

According to our line of research currently underway, thanks to colleagues from several countries (Brazil, Mexico, Paraguay, Poland), we approach aggressiveness in adolescents comprehensively according to the traditional differentiation between premeditated and impulsive aggressiveness, which suggest not only different behaviors and motivations but also different neurobiological structures involved.

Operationally, a useful instrument for the assessment of aggression is the CAPI-A questionnaire (Andreu, 2010), which records premeditated and impulsive aggression in adolescents aged 12 to 17 years, both in general and clinical populations. The results obtained through the CAPI-A can also serve as a basis for the design of prevention and intervention.

In the psychological field, several studies have dealt with the conceptual distinction between premeditated (instrumental or proactive) and impulsive (reactive) aggression.

*Impulsive aggression* is defined as a spontaneous, aggressive response to a perceived provocation. The subject may lose control of his behavior, driven by anger, hostility, or fear, and explode in the face of a real or imagined threat that prompts him to defend himself. Perpetrators often express regret after the aggression (Barratt et al., 1999).

In many cases of impulsive aggression, especially those associated with anger, the acute threat response system (amygdala, hypothalamus, and periaqueductal gray matter) is neurobiologically implicated (Blair, 2015). A more significant hostile attribution bias is also suggested in impulsive than premeditated aggression, which could increase the likelihood of aggressive behavior in stressful or provocative situations. The results of the study by Quan et al. (2022) seem to confirm that: trait anger correlates positively with reactive aggression; hostile attribution bias mediates between trait anger and reactive aggression; anger rumination (continually thinking about anger and how to retaliate) mediates between trait anger and reactive aggression; and hostile attribution bias and anger reflection are serial mediators between trait anger and reactive aggression.

*Premeditated aggression* is defined as a planned aggressive act that is neither spontaneous nor related to a state of agitation (Stanford et al., 2003). It is also known as instrumental or proactive, goal-directed aggression. It is not associated with frustration or response to an immediate threat (Siever, 2008). Premeditated aggression has been related to poor parental control in childhood, lack of affection, psychopathic personality, and low physiological arousal (Cima & Raine, 2009). It is conscious and deliberate and constitutes a strategy that the aggressor implements to manage a conflict or obtain a benefit, such as power, status, money, satisfaction, etc. (Andreu, 2010).

The study conducted by Gauthier et al. (2009) on adolescents revealed the relative independence between the two forms of aggression and provided information on

their personological nature. Specifically, impulsive aggression was associated with high neuroticism, and premeditated aggression was associated with low agreeableness and high extraversion. Adolescents with impulsive aggressiveness had a pattern of personality characteristics considered socially distant and emotionally unstable. In contrast, adolescents with premeditated aggression presented a pattern of egocentric and socially competent characteristics but without concern for others.

Despite the relative phenomenological and neurobiological independence of premeditated and impulsive aggression, the two are correlated (Poulin & Boivin, 2000) and can be combined with some frequency. This has been confirmed in a sample of adolescents by Andreu, Peña, and Ramírez (2009), which does not prevent some adolescents from showing predominant aggressiveness, justifying the study presented here.

We face a disturbing phenomenon in any aggressiveness since all modalities are harmful. A better understanding of aggressiveness in adolescence is a necessary step towards its prevention.

### **Aggression in adolescence – sources and causes**

Aggression in adolescence hinders interpersonal relationships. An analysis of the scientific literature reveals that aggression in adolescence is a significant public health problem that is increasingly being addressed with the most significant interest, despite the fact that there are not enough studies to prevent it, nor are the necessary alternative social orientations promoted in this age group (Pekince & Erci, 2021). Given the above data, the question arises as to what education, perhaps very rationalistic and overwhelmed by the dizzying social and technological changes taking place, can do to be effective in its commitment towards personal development and coexistence in a stage of life in which there is no shortage of conflicts and emotional overload. When these problems and dysregulations are not prevented or channeled, the risk of triggering aggressiveness is much greater (Rothenberg et al., 2019).

Aggressive behavior is of concern in adolescence and can be increased and aggravated by the consumption of alcohol and other drugs. Modern research confirms the existence of a strong link between the use of psychoactive substances for non-medical purposes, alcohol intoxication, and violent behavior among adolescents (Benedetti et al., 2022). Alonso Fernández (2002) points out that drug-generated violence is distributed into two main types, which can be combined: chemical, which generates a disinhibiting effect (e.g., ethyl alcohol and cannabis), and subcultural when the drug-induced activity links the subject to a criminal network (e.g., gangs, mafias) that generally exerts territorial control. About the specific association of drugs and alcohol with violent behavior, it should, therefore, be noted that both the environment and psychoactive substances can encourage violent behavior. As mentioned above, the causes of aggression and violence can vary greatly.

From a biopsychosocial perspective, the determinants of adolescent aggression include relevant biological, psychological, and social factors, which together explain the aggressive manifestations (Fauzi et al., 2023).

When aggression is severe, it is preferred to speak of violent behavior (from *vis*, strength; Corominas, 1987). In this regard, Allen and Anderson (2017) argue that aggressive and violent behaviors are best distinguished if they are placed on a continuum of severity, with relatively minor acts of aggression (e.g., shoving) at the lower end of the spectrum and violence (e.g., homicide) at the higher end or end of the spectrum. In a way, these authors add that all acts of violence are instances of aggression, but not all acts of aggression are considered instances of violence.

According to WHO (2023), interpersonal violence is one of the leading causes of death among adolescents and young people worldwide, although the data vary substantially by world region. For example, violence accounts for almost one-third of all adolescent male deaths in low- and middle-income countries in the Region of the Americas. It is appropriate to offer some more data provided by WHO:

1. Violence during adolescence increases the risks of injuries, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, mental health problems, poor school performance and school dropout, early pregnancies, reproductive health problems, and communicable and non-communicable diseases.
2. In addition to deaths, youth violence results in injury, disability, and long-term health consequences that include mental health problems and increased risk behaviors. It is also associated with higher school dropout rates and negative impacts on cognitive development and social behavior.
3. 37% of the total number of annual homicides worldwide, more than 176,000 homicides, occur among young people between the ages of 15 and 29.
4. Homicide is the third most frequent cause of death among 15-29-year-olds, with a large majority of victims and perpetrators being male.
5. For every young person killed, many others are injured.
6. When not lethal, youth violence has a profound, often lifelong, physical, psychological, and social impact on the individual.
7. Sexual violence also affects a significant proportion of young people. For example, 1 in 8 young people report having been sexually abused.
8. Physical fighting and bullying are also widespread. A study conducted in 40 developing countries revealed that, on average, 42% of boys and 37% of girls suffered from it.
9. Youth violence increases costs in health services, social protection, and justice, and decreases productivity and property values.

The magnitude of the problem is such that it needs to be prevented through a multilevel, multisectoral, and multidisciplinary strategy. In this paper, we propose an educational approach. To this perspective, we will dedicate the final reflections. However, first, we return to the conceptual field to analyze, clarify, and, subsequently, provide some guidance to help prevent aggressive adolescent behavior.



## Conclusions: An Educational Approach to Aggression

In general, we emphasize the need to establish pedagogical foundations conditioning active involvement of minors in preventing aggressive behavior and eliminating its negative consequences for the sense of well-being and simultaneous coordination of activities from the family, school and social environments - so that the activities of all environments participating in the education of children and adolescents are harmonized, unified.

After reviewing various aspects of aggressive behavior in adolescence, we highlight the importance of a comprehensive educational approach that is humanistic, multidimensional, and systemic. In this approach, the interconnection between different actors and environments plays a pivotal role.

While the manifestations of aggression vary depending on age and circumstances, early educational intervention throughout development is crucial. The general strategy should be supported by personalized psychological measures in a warm and safe relational environment. In this environment, both parents and teachers must actively participate and possess appropriate pedagogical competencies, which can prevent the emergence or consolidation of aggressive tendencies.

Research indicates that early aggressive behavioral problems increase the risk of antisocial behavior in later stages of life (Ettedal & Ladd, 2015). Children and their environments who can benefit from early interventions involving the family and school (teachers and peers), especially when signs such as irritability, oppositional-defiant behavior, and various forms of aggression appear, gain the opportunity to free themselves in later development from the negative effects of early experiences of being a victim or perpetrator of aggression.

Aggressive behavior, which can significantly impact health, social, educational, and legal systems, often manifests through risky and antisocial actions such as criminal behavior, substance abuse, fighting, and harassment. The causal factors include family dysfunction, socioeconomic hardship, childhood trauma, neuropsychological deficits, and the negative influence of technologies and mass media due to exposure to violent content, as well as peer pressure. These factors interact in complex ways.

Continuous and intense adverse situations during childhood, often linked to risk contexts and dysfunctional child-parent relationships, tend to increase aggressive behaviors. Conversely, positive family and school environments characterized by affectionate interpersonal relationships, cohesion, a positive and guiding disciplinary style, shared values, engaging activities, and open communication can help prevent the development of aggressive behaviors.

In conclusion, the serious concerns and disruptions caused by aggression in school, family, and social settings cannot be alleviated without implementing preventive educational strategies. These strategies must be multidimensional and systemic, integrated into the broader pedagogical framework designed to promote personal development and social coexistence.

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