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## From research: hidden aggressive behaviours of children at pre-school age

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### Pre-school children and latent aggression in their social groups

Considering pre-school age hidden (latent) aggression, it is appropriate to give its characteristics. The description of the characteristic is significant in terms of the analysis of the situation within the text above.

The first study of latent aggression<sup>1</sup> considers the fact relating to the age (in the early sense – toddler and preschooler age) if it is correct to write about hidden-concealed aggression. According to their research findings, the existence of definite hidden aggression in a child age younger than 2.5 years has not been clearly confirmed. Crick et al argued that the emergence of hidden aggression in early childhood is associated with a reduced level of mutual acceptance (negative preferences) and an increased tendency on the part of the peer group to reject a friends, or just one of them. Lovaš described scenario theory as an information processing model that explains the development of habitual aggression among children. He claimed that the child creates aggressive scenarios at an

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<sup>1</sup> N.R. Crick, J. Casas, D.A. Nelson, *Toward a more comprehensive understanding of peer maltreatment: Studies of relational victimization*, „Current Directions in Psychological Science“, 2002 (b), 11, p. 98–101.

early age that is based on personal experience and observation of ambience<sup>2</sup>. The result is a network of cognitive scenarios of aggressive behaviours in specific situations. Activation of the scenario, is conditioned by creating the conditions that consequently can cause the situation<sup>3</sup> is enough to provide the children basic information, for example: we will not play with him/her/them, we will not invite him/her/them for somebody celebration, or somebody will not sit with us at the table, etc.

The aggressor does not need to be hidden. According to Kováčová<sup>4</sup> a “lower” degree of concealment is typical for this age. At the ages 3–5, hidden aggression begins with prototype examples: “You cannot come to my birthday party...”, “You can not play with us...”. This type of behaviour is obvious at beginning, the victim is not only informed, but the victim is even present during the conversation. Aggressor’s does not mind victim’s participation, usually it’s a matter of personal development of the child. Later, the aggressor formulates his strategies through an mediator. In young school age, latent aggressive behaviour becomes more discrete in terms of the form of aggression and used aggressor behaviours. The aggressor’s behaviour is more elaborate and concealed. Ostrov et al.<sup>5</sup> claimed that the identity of the doer is always known, because the child in pre-school age is immediately dealing with the situation “*here and now*”. Children are struggling to reach their goal of “*Being in the spotlight, being favourite*”. They make their intention by gossiping, joking against a member of the group (this is not behaviour based on conscious calculation). Pellegrini and Roseth<sup>6</sup> argues this fact by saying that the younger aggressor (in terms of early and pre-school age) does not have the experience of acting anonymously, but gradually acquires competence in this procedure – to act aggressively. Typical are the direct and indirect aggressor’s attacks against the victim. When comparing the latency rate at younger school age, we can say that the aggressor has a reasonable ability to act hidden, and his strategies are usually well thought out. It can influence peer-group members while managing the entire process of hidden aggression. If conditions are created, usually a child who started with aggression in pre-school age develops into concealed aggression person<sup>7</sup>. The hidden aggressive behaviours of early and pre-school age children are connect-

<sup>2</sup> L. Lovaš, *Agresia a násilie: psychológia ľudskej agresie a jej podoby v domácom prostredí, v škole, v práci, vo väzniciach a v športe*, Bratislava 2010, p. 67.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 37–38.

<sup>4</sup> B. Kováčová, *Latentná agresia v škole*, Bratislava 2014, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> J.M. Ostrov, N.R. Crick, *How recent developments in the study of relational aggression and close relationships in early childhood advance the field*, „Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology“ 2006; 27(3), p. 189–192.

<sup>6</sup> A. Pellegrini, C. Roseth, *Relational Aggression And Relationships in Preschoolers: A Discussion Of Methods, Gender Differences, And Function*, „Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology“ 2006, 27(3), p. 269–276.

<sup>7</sup> J.M.Ostrov, N.R.Crick, op. cit., p. 189–192.

ed with problems in childhood. Kováčová<sup>8</sup> argues that peer-group rejection of the child is linked to a variable range of social and psychological issues.

Although there are relatively extensive research about bullying in the school environment and a lot of theoretically oriented scientific, professional and popular articles, the basis of this text is about a specific and low-elaborated form of bullying. There are hidden aggressive actions that occur within the group against the individual or several individuals at the same time. From the experts' point of view, the mentioned form of bullying has different terminology. The experts agree that despite the different terminology, that mentioned form of aggressive action harms the group's social relationships related to one or more individuals, and is an object of mediation processes.

The language of persons who acts aggressively can be described in their verbal and nonverbal communication as expressive. Direct or hidden behaviours are clearly expressive (for example anger as a verbal response, anger as a physical reaction). Expressivity in the aggressive action is for the aggressors important<sup>9</sup>. It is evident to see an angry, frustrated, or hostile aggressor – if older (and more developed), he or she is more able to control expressive behaviours, which are "eye-visible and easily detectable" within communication.

Mainly, the kindergarten is one of the first opportunity, as Kováčová wrote, to develop friendships and relationships that can be out of school<sup>10</sup>. This loyalty to a friend enhances their intimacy and closeness. An example is a published friendship study where Maquire and Dunn<sup>11</sup> point to the presence of hidden latency in children's behaviours. I do not like X, do you? Creating conflicts, defamation without real reason, or false information suggests that pre-school children use hidden aggression initially to empower an own position, later deliberately intending to isolate an "unwanted" friend. Friendship is a commodity, as Comstock-Galagan wrote, which transcends so called label and stigmas. Dealing with a child /pupil friendships, it is also a matter of gender<sup>12</sup>.

The hidden aggression is more visible, but ultimately, it is one that damages relationships and weakens the child's reputation. Goffman confirmed that already 3–4-year old year children begin "with the defamation, making false information". The author described the dialogue of two children who talk relatively loudly about the third one that they want to go away from them because they are angry with him<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> B. Kováčová, *Latentná agresia v škole*, Bratislava 2014, p. 59.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> B. Kováčová, *Inkluzívny proces v materských školách. Začlenenie dieťaťa s odlišnosťami do prostredia inkluzívnej materskej školy*, Bratislava 2010, p. 65.

<sup>11</sup> M.C. Maguire, J. Dunn, *Friendships in early childhood, and social understanding*, „International Journal of Behavioral Development“, 1997, 21(4), p. 669–686.

<sup>12</sup> B. Kováčová, *Latentná...*, p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> E. Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, New York 1986, p. 67.

Several authors reflected friendship and presence of hidden latent strategies in their research studies. As a result of examining relationships in peer groups was a fact that friendship and popularity have been found to be primary aspects of social contact in child development. A child of pre-school age considers them crucial for their own existence in the given society. The concept of friendship expresses a specific, intense, affective dyadic relationship between two children, while the concept of popularity expresses the child's perception of the whole group. These two concepts complement each other and are important and necessary for a child's preschool age relationship. The child who uses hidden strategies with aggressive intent in his actions has at least one reciprocal amicable friendship relationship<sup>14</sup>.

### Specific situations of latent aggression

Based on pre-school victims' testimonies, latent aggressive behaviour is typical by the specific statements in described situations (see Tab. 1), in which an important role is played by so-called message (important warning for the victim). The basis of the described meta-communication is to inform the (potential) victim about prohibition to participate in a particular situation and to inform the victim that his/her presence is unwanted. The prohibition itself, as it is mentioned above, is given by another person (sympathetic to the aggressor), and the way the "ban" message is carried out in a variety of forms – from verbal information to threatening (those ways of communication can also be observed in groups of pre-school children).

Tab. 1. Specific situations of latent aggression

<b>Description of the situation</b>	<b>The message for the victim</b>	<b>Generated significant statement</b> (the children's testimony was shortened but it expresses its meaning )
<i>Common collective game</i>	<i>No one will play with you!</i>	So I stood there looking at them. And they played and played. They smiled and whooped, and I just stood there.
<i>Choosing a friend</i>	<i>Nobody is interested in you.</i>	When was a choice, they always ignored me, and the worst thing was that my friends started to do it, too.
<i>Birthday party</i>	<i>If you come in, anyway you will be alone.</i>	I stood behind the door, I heard them to laugh, but they did not open me the door
<i>Excursion</i>	<i>You will sit alone in the bus.</i>	And I sat as they told me. Everyone looked at me when they thought I could not see them
<i>At the swimming pool</i>	<i>You obstruct, you have to be careful.</i>	Everyone poked me, "Sorry, you obstruct!"

<sup>14</sup> More in: J. Casas, N. Crick, E. Jansen, J. Ostrov, K. Woods, *An observational study of delivered and received aggression, gender, and social-psychological adjustment in preschool: This White Crayon Doesn't Work*, „Early Childhood Research Quarterly“ 2004, 19(2), p. 355–371; J.K. Grotper, N.R. Crick, *Children's treatment by peers: Victims of relational and overt aggression*, „Development and Psychopathology“ 1996, 8, p. 367–380.

Acceptance or non-acceptance of the pupil by the group is within the competence of the aggressor whose communication with the group has specific features (see Table 2). They describe latently aggressive action and some internal group rules are required and they should be accepted automatically, without rational justification.

Tab. 2: The most common aggressor's statements against the peer-group

Significant statement	Comment
<i>He will not play with us, we all know why ...</i>	The aggressor does not expect that somebody gives reason why. It is a fact that must be accepted without any critical analyses.
<i>If he's a friend, he'll do what I say, because otherwise we cannot rely on him.</i>	The aggressor creates own rules for choosing a friend in a group - either he/she will accept those rules or he/she will be excluded from the group.
<i>If you play with him/her, you are not my friends</i>	The aggressor gives conditions and prioritises social relationships in the group with verbal manipulation, he repeats his/her conditions before each activity, to consolidate his/her position.
<i>He/she shall be not invited to celebrate my (or your) birthday...</i>	The aggressor decides about the presence of specific members of the group. If a child, who has birthday, refuses to obey the aggressor's rules he/she will become a victim of hidden bullying.
<i>Well, and now you have to say about him/her that ...</i>	The aggressor manipulates the group members to spread false information about the victim.
<i>Sh! Silent, come closer to me, I will tell you something about him/her!</i>	The aggressor uses silent speech (whispering), "gossiping behind his/her back" to attract and persuade the group about his/her "truth". Often, this ritual took place by chance near the victim – he/she can see it.

### Premises of kindergarten for possible manifestations of latent aggression

Kindergarten and its premises, it is an area where takes place hidden bullying and also the hidden (latent) elements which come from aggressor's behaviours, but also from the individual participants of the group, even from the entire group against the victim.

The aggressor is an important element in hidden bullying<sup>15</sup>. He/she acts with the latent aggression indirectly, with the help of individuals, and groups. The aggressor directly manipulates the members of the group, encourages them to verbally disseminate negative backbiting that are presented by the aggressor as true, and indicative ones. Aggressor's goal is to obtain group consent, and sup-

<sup>15</sup> B. Kováčová, *Latentná...*, p. 34.

port in hidden bullying against a particular, predetermined person and to coordinate and direct the group, not to have only "assistants" but also "silent" approval of the whole group, class. Namely, aggressor's strong communication power (which is gradually enhanced by success) is considered as a pillar in the development of manipulative latently oriented strategies. The aggressor tries to differentiate himself from the other members of the social group with his dominant manners. Aggressor's actions are manipulative and his needs are closely linked to the social processes of approval and recognition within the group<sup>16</sup>, Grotperter and Crick claimed, that aggressors with hidden aggression are in social and emotional disorder and feel a higher degree of social loneliness, they have depressive states and negative perception of their personalities. They are usually individuals with inappropriate family education or different negative communicative patterns<sup>17</sup>.

The victim in the process of hidden aggression observes in his/her space gradual changes in social relations (lack of opportunities to participate in games, school trips, parties, stays in nature, etc.). At the beginning, situations are observable as sporadic, later they are infiltrated into all social contacts. A stigmatized pupil/child involuntarily loses friends, as well as social relationships with the group. Victim's perception of the problems arises and gradually become more and more serious. It includes: internalization (anxiety, depressed states), externalization (aggressive to destructive behaviour), and adaptation problems with a higher degree of persistence, also in later and different social communities (more in: Shahaecian, A., Razmjoee<sup>18</sup>). The victim feels lonely and, in extreme cases, his/her action is self-defeating. Friends of the victims, who are not the direct "members" of hidden bullying feel desperation, helplessness, and partly as a victim, are worried that after a time (which they can not identify) they may also become "target" of aggressions. There can be any stimulus, for example if they refuse to act aggressively, or they avoid being active within a group of aggressors). They usually do not talk about group behaviour, rather are in position of silent witnesses with a minimal verbal activity.

### **Research findings with emphasis on hidden aggression in children's drawings**

25 pre-school children from two kindergartens were involved in the research. After analysing each verbal expression, we selected those in which the

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<sup>16</sup> J.K. Grotperter, N.R. Crick, *Children's...*, p. 367–380.

<sup>17</sup> J.M. Ostrov, N.R. Crick, *How recent developments...*, p. 189–192.

<sup>18</sup> A. Shahaecian, M. Razmjoee, C. Wang, S. Elliott, C. Hughes, *Understanding relational aggression during early childhood: An examination of the association with language and other social and cognitive skills*, „Early Childhood Research Quarterly“, 2017, 40, 204–214.

child confirmed the repetition with an illustrative example. During searching aggressive behaviours, it is necessary to evaluate the cognitive, behavioural, and emotional characteristics of the individual group members (note: we will focus on assessing behavioural characteristics). The collection of this characteristics is also problematic in the pre-school age groups, because the researcher must firstly identify aggressive action and then work with the individual, the individuals, and the situation which happened.

Individual situations are presented in the form of brief descriptive situations and with a child's verbal testimony supplemented by the aggressor/victim child's assessment.

#### a) Repeated refusal to lend a toy or another object for playing

Rejecting a toy with justification that you are not my friend is a fairly common manifestation occurring in child collectives (wording: I will not lend you it, you are not my friend!). If this type of behaviour is repetitive and intensifies against the selected victim, the situation can be correctly identified as latently aggressive.

##### *Situation A (Tab. 3)*

*Here's an example of a boy (John, 5 years old). The boy has repeatedly expressed his desires about friendship. "I'm not their friend, they don't want me. That's wrong. This one (pointing finger to another boy) is a friend and that one is not. Why? „He also shows his position in the class as part of an expressive representation of his position, e.g. in the drawing he is on the edge of the drawing ... " when everyone is playing, I am looking; when toys are borrowed, I have to wait for rest or last one."*

Tab. 3: Assessment of the identified situation A through the hidden aggression index

Rating scale	index
Group bullying (S-i: 105p)	84
Aggressive behaviours (S-i: 38p)	12
Reactive aggression (S-i: 22p)	3

##### Analysed comment:

In a group rating, John gained a high score ( $i = 84p$ ) in points, indicating that he is in a very serious situation whose identification was also confirmed by the questionnaire. The score in the index of aggressive behaviours ( $i = 14p$ ) suggests that John can be considered a victim. The index in the reactive reaction item suggests that John cannot defend himself, i.e. it is likely that he will leave the team because he is unable to defend himself (parents were advised to enrol a minor to a primary school outside the catchment area of the kindergarten).

### b) Repeated harm by another person

Friendship is a very important premise for every pre-school child. It is something necessary for a child to be successful in a social life. The concept of popularity and the concept of friendship mentioned above also provides negative opportunities for a child looking for power after being an aggressor.

*Situation B (Tab. 4)*

*Andrejka (5,5 years) went through a situation that is typical for latent aggression in pre-school age. There is a verbal description of the situation, which is always repeated before coming from a walk in the changing room. Andrejka's friend (in the position of "visible" aggressor) pulls her hair and the other friend is looking at it. The child's testimony implies that these two friends are doing it, "but they are not always the same (in this act, note). A child who uses hidden strategies with an aggressive intention in his actions uses a mediator usually a friend, who is in friendly relationship.*

Tab. 4: Assessment of the identified situation B through the hidden aggression index

Rating scale	index
Group bullying (S-i: 105p)	81
Aggressive behaviours (S-i: 38p)	18
Reactive aggression (S-i: 22p)	12

Analysed comment:

In the group evaluation, Andrejka received a high score ( $i = 78p$ ) from the group's point of view, which suggests that she is in a serious situation whose identification by a kindergarten teacher (to be warned by Andrejka's parent) was also confirmed by the questionnaire. Andrejka's score is identical to the score in clinical assessment that is valid for the female persons. Andrejka can be considered as a victim of hidden aggressive action. The index in the reactive aggression item ( $i = 12$ ) suggests that considering the situation, it is necessary to provide for Andrejka time for possible responses to the situation.

### c) Repeated rejection of the child by another child

Even the appearance plays an important role among pre-school children. I don't want him to be here, but don't tell it him! We will not play with him because he will block us, and ... we will not play well. And we want to play well, don't we? There are isolated figures with children's comments even in their art products.

*Situation C (Tab. 5):*

*Julius (7 y.) „I am sad, because nobody plays with me. I want a friend, but I don't have one. That's why I start to fight and wrestle (...) because no one likes me.”*



Tab. 5: Assessment of the identified situation C through the hidden aggression index

Rating scale	index
Group bullying (S-i: 105p)	56
Aggressive behaviours (S-i: 38p)	33
Reactive aggression (S-i: 22p)	20

#### Analysed comment:

Julius gained a rating scale in the bullying index of the points that indicate that he was accepted by the group but he was not bullied. Described situations have image of hidden bullying by the group, but this was not confirmed by the rating. It is clear that even a value index in the item of aggressive behaviour suggests that Julius is not the victim. He can defend himself (S-i, r = 20). We have actually assessed the situation that manipulation was done by Julius.

Research has confirmed that selection of victim for hidden aggression is done by an aggressor and a peer-group. According to Crick and Nelson<sup>19</sup>, it has been confirmed that the child – the victim – is being bullied without a real reason (a victim has no knowledge about the reason of bullying, note). The closest friends begins to be in opposition, later they are aggressive. A child as a victim feels social and psychological anxiety, avoids social contact, is lonely, and deliberately isolates himself (e.g., the child repeats the its requirement not to attend kindergarten and has a need to stay at home, in a family where she or he feels safe), has difficulty in self-control, needs help from an adult to create social contacts and so on. Conversely, a pre-school aggressor uses his/her position to consolidate power.

## Conclusions

Hidden aggression of early and early age and preschool age children is linked to early childhood problems. Peer-group rejection is associated with a variable range of social and psychological problems related to child development, where the early problem is the early age and development of mutual social ties. Prevention/preventive measures, or strategies in kindergarten against hidden aggression exist. From the teacher's point of view it is necessary to notice labelling of victim by individual or by the group in time. It is sufficient to be attentive in the activities, correctly identify the non-verbal statements of the child / child during the activities in the kindergarten.

The aggressor in pre-school age is very specific in terms of actions and age. He or she manages commands and prohibitions through mediators and remains

<sup>19</sup> N.R. Crick, D.A. Nelson, *Relational and physical victimization within friendships: No body told me there'd be friends like these*, ,, Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology", 2002, 30, p. 599–607.

hidden before the victim. In the children's group where a victim is absent, the aggressor performs directly, especially with regard to the type of instructions: And we will not play with him! Don't ask him to join us! He is not my or your friend! Aggressor's directness to communicate with the group and secrecy in communicating with the victim is also due to the fact that at the beginning of aggressor's activities, he/she is not socially mature to handle indirect manipulation with the group. If an aggressor in the early stages of his/her activity finds favourable conditions, he/she is able to learn indirect manipulation with the group and isolate the chosen child through false arguments, it means without reason.

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### Summary

The hidden aggression of children at early and preschool age is linked to early childhood problems. Peer-group rejection is associated with a broad range of social and psychological problems related to child development such as difficulties in development of mutual social ties. The study analyses the utterances and responses of pre-school children connected with hidden aggressive behaviour they met in an inclusive kindergarten classes. The results of the research show that beginning of aggressive behaviour is observed in the early childhood groups (latent form of aggression), and later it metamorphoses into direct verbal or physical aggression.

## Ukryte zachowania agresywne dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym: raport z badań

### Streszczenie

Ukryte zachowania agresywne dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym należą do problemów wczesnego dzieciństwa. Odrzucenie przez grupę rówieśniczą jest kojarzone z szerokim zakresem problemów społecznych i psychologicznych powiązanych z rozwojem dziecka, w tym z nawiązywaniem wzajemnych relacji społecznych. Artykuł analizuje wypowiedzi dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym związane z ukrytymi zachowaniami agresywnymi. Wyniki badań pokazują, że początek zachowań agresywnych występuje we wczesnym dzieciństwie (uśpiona forma agresji), a później przeistaczają się w bezpośrednią agresję werbalną lub fizyczną.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zachowanie agresywne, dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym, przedszkole.