

Environment Linked to Social Aggression, Study Finds (Update1)
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(Adds information on study in sixth paragraph.)

By Paul Basken

July 14 (Bloomberg) -- Socially offensive behavior such as ostracizing people and spreading rumors is rooted more in environmental reasons than genetics, according to researchers who studied twin children in Canada.

The study of 234 twins found genetics could explain only about 20 percent of their social aggression at age 6, according to the researchers at the University of Quebec at Montreal, Laval University and the University of Montreal.

"The rest is the result of environmental factors such as parental behavior or peer influence," the researchers wrote in the July/August issue of the journal *Child Development*.

The findings suggest parents should take greater care to deter physically aggressive behavior at an early age and avoid modeling socially aggressive acts themselves, said the study's lead researcher, Mara Brendgen of the University of Quebec.

"We need to teach our children that it's not acceptable to just exchange one type of aggression with the other," said Brendgen, an associate professor of psychology.

The 234 twins, all from the greater Montreal area, are part of a larger study in which they have been followed at regular intervals since their births between 1995 and 1998.

Brendgen based her findings on questionnaires given to kindergarten teachers and classmates, comparing the similarities among identical and fraternal twins in regard to teacher- and peer-rated physical and social aggressive behavior.

Social Aggression

In addition to finding physical aggression is more related to genetics than is social aggression, the study found that physical aggression in young children led directly to social aggression in the same children, Brendgen said.

"As they develop, they seem to adopt other aggressive strategies that carry less of a risk of punishment," she said.

"Aggressive children may eventually simply replace their aggressiveness, and may not necessarily unlearn to be aggressive, but just replace them with other strategies that are more difficult to detect."

Brendgen's findings reflect a trend among both children and the adults whose behavior they emulate, said Corinne Gregory, founder and president of the PoliteChild, a Woodinville, Washington-based company that offers classes in social skills to public and private schools.

"Behavior in general has gotten increasingly self-centered, increasingly selfish, increasingly coarse and crass," Gregory said. "And our children are picking it up in faster ways."

Explanations for the shift, beyond parental and societal behaviors, include the increased emphasis schools place on mitigating physical bullying and the increasing alternatives that technology provides, she said.

``You learn pretty quickly on that if you physically abuse somebody, it gets you into trouble real fast," Gregory said.

``It's very visible, it's very unavoidable, it's very overt --you hit somebody and you get into trouble.

``However, can you prove that I truly was running around and making slanderous comments about somebody when I do it anonymously through the Internet?"

--Editor: Todd, Elser

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