

## A TODDLER'S USE OF FORCE

**Study by Dale F. Hay, Jenny Castle, and Lisa Davies**

Two toddlers play side by side. One reaches over and grabs the other child's doll. A tug of war ensues. One child strikes out; the other cries. Such scenes are common when young children get together. Yet researchers are questioning whether this early use of force might point to problems with aggression later in life. Recently, a British team studied 66 children aged 18 to 30 months to learn how they used force (either by grabbing or hitting) against their peers.

A group of mothers of toddlers were asked to arrange a play date at home for their child and a friend around the same age. In two separate sessions, the children were observed and videotaped at play. The researchers also asked the mothers to rate their child's aggressiveness.

They then examined the tapes, looking for points where children used force, either by tugging or grabbing an object held by their



photo: Marie-Claude Saint-Laurent


friends or by hitting, kicking, or pushing. Slightly more than half of the children never lashed out at all. The ratings of aggression did not show significant differences between boys and girls. However, a gender difference was shown in the consideration of whether children ever used aggression: 65.6% of the boys were likely to hit at least once while

only 33.3% of the girls did so. If a girl did hit, she was more likely to do so again at the second session, which occurred six months later. This was not true for the boys.

The researchers also looked at the toddlers' ability to draw conclusions about a friend's intentions. Understanding what someone intends to do is a complex process, and research

has shown that misunderstanding or being suspicious of people's intent may lead older children to act aggressively. The British team found that toddlers in the study who quickly withdrew a toy when a friend pointed at or gestured towards it were more likely to eventually hit or kick the friend.

The study's findings showed that the tendency to hit, particularly in girls, tended to be stable - a child who lashed out in one session would likely do so again in the second session. However, as the study was conducted over a short period of time, the researchers could not determine whether children's early use of force might predict later problems with aggression. Only careful, long-term follow-up studies will determine how many of these toddlers learn to channel their aggression into socially acceptable behaviour. **L.W.**

Ref.: Hay DF, Castle J, Davies L, "Toddler's Use of Force against Familiar Peers: A Precursor of Serious Aggression?" *Child Development*, 2000;71(2);457-467. 

## IDENTIFYING BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS IN YOUNG CHILDREN

**Study by Kate Keenan and Lauren S. Wakschlag**

As children move into the preschool years (ages 2½ to 5½), cries of "No!" and "I'll do it myself!" are frequently heard. Children this age may be easily frustrated when faced with limits. They will cry, throw tantrums, and even lash out at a parent, caregiver, or friend. However, some preschoolers show even more extreme and difficult behaviours, often defying adults and deliberately hurting other people. Some may be so disruptive that they are banned from preschool.

Identifying and helping these children is a vital task. Current research suggests that, without help, these children

may go on to have serious problems with aggression. Indeed, researchers are finding that intervening at this time in life (rather than in middle childhood or adolescence) can be highly effective in helping children develop better coping skills.

In order to intervene, researchers need to identify those at risk. Unfortunately, when it comes to children under age 6, there are very few tools to help with this task. The *American Psychiatry Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-Fourth Edition (DSM-IV)* (the indispensable reference tool for those working in the field of mental health) offers methods of measuring serious behavioural

problems, but these methods are used only for children 6 years of age and older. Until recently, that is. A team of researchers in Chicago decided to try applying the DSM-IV criteria to younger children.

The researchers selected 79 children who had been referred to a special clinic in Chicago for behaviour problems. They then evaluated the children using a modified version of the DSM-IV criteria and discovered that over 70% met the DSM-IV definition for disruptive behaviour problems.

The researchers also evaluated the children using other measures of behaviour they had specifically designed for the preschool age group. Then they compared findings.

The DSM-IV criteria appeared to identify behaviour problems just as well as the other, more age-oriented, measures. It was therefore suggested that the DSM-IV might also be used with children under 6.

However, the researchers emphasized that these findings are preliminary. Further work is needed to improve and refine even better tools for evaluating preschoolers with behaviour problems so that they can receive timely and effective help. **L.W.**  
Ref.: Keenan K, Wakschlag LS, "More than the Terrible Twos: The Nature and Severity of Behavior Problems in Clinic-Referred Preschool Children" *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 2000; 28(1):33-46. 