

# Rethinking Aggressive behavior in Adolescents: an exploration of the relationship between social Intelligence and empathy

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## Abstract:

This literature review rethinks aggressive behavior in adolescents and focuses on its analysis through the lens of social intelligence and empathy. Aggressive behavior is essential in adolescence because this period is a critical stage for developing emotional cognition and social skills. This article attempts to explain and analyze how social intelligence and empathy influence aggressive behavior in adolescents. Social intelligence is a crucial factor influencing an individual's performance in social situations. Empathy is the ability to understand and care about the feelings of others, and empathy is associated with more positive conflict resolution skills. Studies have found a positive correlation between high social intelligence and lower aggressive behavior. Highly empathetic adolescents were more likely to use positive conflict resolution methods, thus reducing the likelihood of aggressive behavior. Finally, the essay makes recommendations for future research, including further exploration of the influence of other factors on aggressive behavior. These studies contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexity of adolescent aggressive behavior and provide a theoretical basis for research interventions.

**Keywords:** adolescents, aggressive behavior, aggression, social intelligence. Empathy, emotional awareness

## Introduction:

Adolescence has a profound impact not only on individual development but also on social patterns. During this critical period, adolescents face changes in expressing and dealing with their emotions. This change plays a significant role in the overall interpersonal relationships. When analyzed from a traditional perspective, explanations of adolescent aggressive behavior have mainly emphasized the role of the environment and external stimuli in shaping behavior. These theories explain adolescent aggressive behavior to a large extent. However, these theories ignore deeper emotional and psychological factors in analyzing adolescent aggression. Social intelligence and empathy are closely related to the social skills of an individual's emotional cognition. Social intelligence encompasses various skills, such as affective cognition, conflict resolution, and emotional mediation. This ability significantly impacts the processing of social information and the performance of social behavior. Empathy encompasses emotional empathy and understanding, which expresses understanding and concern for the feelings of others. Aggression as a social behavior must be related to social intelligence and empathy. Without generating exploration and research on aggressive behaviors, reducing or even eliminating aggressive behaviors in society at source is difficult. This is not conducive to social harmony. Therefore, understanding and responding to adolescent

aggressive behavior is a complex research area requiring more in-depth thinking and exploration. This study analyzes the relationship between adolescent aggressive behavior, social intelligence, and empathy to reveal the patterns among the three. This paper explores the role of social intelligence and empathy in preventing and explaining adolescent aggressive behavior. By analyzing the existing research and theories, it is argued that social intelligence and empathy are essential in understanding and intervening in adolescent aggressive behavior.

## Background

Adolescence marks a critical process in an individual's physical and mental development. During this process, adolescents face the task of self-awareness, identity exploration, and coping effectively with emotional and social interactions. Aggressive behaviors include verbal abuse, physical violence, and social rejection. Psychologists often use a dichotomy to divide aggressive behavior into hostile and instrumental aggression. Hostile aggression is an 'intense' impulsive behavior motivated by the desire to harm others. Instrumental aggression is a cold, premeditated behavior (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). Aggression is often defined as a behavior that aims to hurt someone physically and psychologically. Allen, Anderson, and Bushman proposed the 'General Aggression Model' (GAM), a comprehensive, integrated framework for understanding aggression (Allen et al., 2017). This model explains and predicts an individual's

aggressive behaviors, including verbal insults, physical violence, and hostility. The GAM considers social, cognitive, personality, developmental, and biological factors' role in aggression (Allen et al., 2017). In other words, GAM considers aggressive behavior as the result of the interaction of multiple factors, including an individual's cognitive, emotional, physiological, and environmental factors.

The defining characteristic of aggressive behavior is the intention to cause harm to another person, but the form of aggressive behavior can be direct or indirect (Eltink et al., 2018). Direct aggressive behavior is defined as explicit, direct behavior mainly directed toward the target task. The main manifestations of direct aggressive behavior are verbal or physical aggression and threats of harm (Wyckoff & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Direct aggressive behavior is characterized by the fact that the intentions and actions of the attacker are apparent and very easy to detect. Indirect aggression refers to using roundabout means to harm another person, explicitly referring to behaviors that harm another person's social status and self-esteem (Fatima, 2021). The aggressor takes a more subtle or inconspicuous approach to harming others. Indeed, indirect aggressive behavior involves social manipulation, in which the aggressor tries to hurt the other person and influence the social structure psychologically without confrontation with the victim (Fatima, 2021). Indirect aggressive behavior mainly manifests in rumor spreading, ostracism, social exclusion, suggestive behavior, etc. Indirect aggressive behavior usually does not involve direct physical contact or explicit threats. The main characteristic of indirect aggressive behavior is that the attacker usually tries to hide his or her intentions to make the behavior less obvious. However, the person can cause harm to the victim. Aggressive behavior is not only potentially harmful to an individual's physical and mental health. However, it can also harm their family, peers, and even the community to some degree. Aggressive behavior often leads to problems on multiple levels, such as conflict, alienation, emotional harm, and educational barriers. This further underscores the urgency of in-depth research on adolescent aggressive behavior.

Researchers have consistently found that males use direct aggression more than females, but the gender difference in indirect aggression is ambiguous (Wyckoff & Kirkpatrick, 2016). In other words, there is a difference in aggression by gender, but this difference is not consistent in indirect aggression. Bjorkqvist et al. investigated gender differences in aggression in schoolchildren of different age groups through their study. The main finding was that girls in the older age groups were more likely to use indirect aggression, while boys were more likely to use direct

aggression (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992). One of the reasons for gender differences in direct aggression may be because the risk of physical injury may accompany direct aggression. Sex may differ in aggressive behavior due to evolutionary mechanisms and socio-cultural influences (Campbell, 1999). That is, females may be more focused on their own survival and infant care.

On the other hand, males are more likely than females to benefit from the performance of direct aggression, which helps males improve their status in society (Campbell, 1999). This is related to social status and culture. Cultural factors can reinforce or diminish this gender difference, resulting in female aggression being viewed differently. Therefore, direct aggression is a high-cost, low-reward strategy for females.

### **Definition and Research on Social Intelligence**

As psychological research on Intelligence has advanced, traditional conceptions of Intelligence have been criticized. The main reason for this is that, theoretically and practically, traditional conceptions of Intelligence are limited to cognitive abilities. In other words, the traditional conception of Intelligence focuses on predicting an individual's academic performance rather than on predicting an individual's interpersonal relationships or career achievements, for example. Social Intelligence can be described as an individual's ability to use appropriate cognitive and behavioral skills in social situations to achieve their desired goals (Ford & Tisak, 1983). Social Intelligence is a person's ability to engage in social interactions, including the ability to gain insight into the emotions and intentions of others, to adapt to different social situations, communicate effectively, and establish and maintain interpersonal relationships. Social Intelligence is critical in successfully guiding individuals to connect with others in social situations. Social Intelligence plays a crucial role in adolescent development and profoundly impacts the interpersonal relationships and psychological well-being of others.

Silvera et al. study devised a more simplified instrument for measuring social intelligence. Silvera et al. asked three questions about the definition and measurement of social intelligence. That is, does social intelligence exist? ; There are differences in the way different researchers define social. ; The multidimensional nature of social intelligence, including the perception of others' internal states and emotions, processing skills, social rules, and knowledge of social life (Silvera et al., 2001). There are multiple components, such as insight and sensitivity in complex social situations, using social skills to manipulate

others, perspective on others' perspectives, and social adaptation. Silvera et al. believe there are challenges in defining and measuring social intelligence, mainly the question of whether social intelligence exists or not, the different ways of defining it, and its multidimensionality. Through questionnaires, it has been shown that social intelligence is mainly based on cognitive skills such as understanding others and judging their behavior or emotions.

In contrast, behavioral skills such as getting along with others are considered less important in social intelligence (Silvera et al., 2001). Silvera et al. Designed the Troms Social Intelligence Scale, a self-reported measure of social intelligence. The factor dimensions reveal a three-factor structure behind social intelligence: social information processing (SP), social skill (SS), and social awareness (SA) (Silvera et al., 2001). Social information processing is the ability to encode and interpret social cues (Crick & Dodge, 1994). Social Information processing involves cognitive activities encompassing interpreting social cues and generating appropriate behavioral responses (Li et al., 2013). Social Awareness measures affective-cognitive understanding, which includes an individual's ability to perceive, understand, and anticipate the emotions and reactions of others (Silvera et al., 2001). As a part of behavior, social skill encompasses an individual's ability to produce and engage in social behaviors in a particular context (Beauchamp & Anderson, 2010). Silvera et al. define Social Intelligence as a complex structure whereby Social Information processing and Social Awareness are two cognitive components. Moreover, social skills are a behavioral component (Kim & Barry, 2023).

In addition, Crick and Dodge reformulated the Human Performance and Social Exchange Model to explore the relationship between children's social information processing and social adjustment. Research has shown strong evidence to support the relationship between an individual's processing style and children's social adjustment. It includes several processing methods, such as hostile attributions, accuracy detecting intentional cues, response patterns, and outcome comments (Crick & Dodge, 1994). ; these may lead to changes in social status or be influenced by peer status (Crick & Dodge, 1994). These studies provide a more comprehensive perspective that helps us understand the complexity and multidimensionality of social intelligence and the importance of social intelligence to interpersonal relationships and mental health. Social intelligence is a thinking ability and includes behavioral skills and affective and cognitive understanding. These factors influence an individual's performance and adaptation to social situations.

### **Social intelligence and aggressive behavior**

There is an association between social intelligence and adolescent aggressive behavior. Adolescents with higher Social Intelligence are more likely to deal with emotions and conflicts effectively and avoid using aggressive behavior to solve problems. Individuals with higher social intelligence may be able to manipulate others through well-developed Social Skills to achieve their goal strategies (Kim & Barry, 2023). Goal strategies are mainly expressed in striving for higher social status or reducing the likelihood of being attacked. In other words, adolescents with higher social intelligence are better able to understand the emotions and intentions of others. They can also express their needs and opinions more effectively, thus reducing aggression to a large extent. Kim and Barry (2023) state that if people with high social intelligence do not consider others or social rules, the social skills they develop may be used to pursue self-centered goals. This motivation may cause harm to others and violate shared social norms. However, Kaukiainen et al. (1999) stated that social intelligence is related to indirect aggression, i.e., the more an individual uses indirect aggression, the higher the individual's level of social intelligence. Indirect aggression usually requires a certain level of social skills and situational sensitivity. The main reason for this is that it involves, to some extent, creating conflict with others in a way that is not direct aggression. Loflin and Barry (2016) state that high levels of social intelligence are associated with relatively high levels of relational aggression. Relational aggression is when an individual attempts to harm others by manipulating social relationships or destroying friendships and relationships between others (Loflin & Barry, 2016). It is one of the hidden or indirect harms.

Individuals with higher social intelligence can interpret and understand social cues, so they may be particularly aware of or able to predict the thoughts and behaviors of others based on these cues (Kim & Barry, 2023). This means that it may be beneficial for solving pro-social problems in social situations or for antisocial manipulation (Kim & Barry, 2023). Individuals high in social intelligence are generally better at understanding the emotions and behaviors of others and, therefore, may be more inclined to solve problems pro-socially rather than engage in aggressive behaviors. This reflects the positive role that social intelligence plays in promoting socialization and respect for others. Therefore, social intelligence is negatively associated with aggressive behavior in adolescents. This means adolescents with higher social intelligence tend to show a lower tendency

towards aggressive behavior. In further analysis, the positive correlation between social intelligence and indirect aggression was judged regarding direct and indirect aggression. In this case, individuals using indirect aggression must place the intention to harm others in a favorable position (Kaukiainen, 1999). This implies an essential role between social skills and situational sensitivity in reducing direct conflict and adopting more complex social strategies. Social intelligence encompasses a range of cognitive abilities and social skills, including emotional awareness, conflict resolution skills, and the ability to adapt to different social situations. These skills help adolescents manage conflict and emotions better, reducing the likelihood of aggressive behavior.

### Definition and research on empathy

Empathy is an important concept that covers both cognitive and emotional dimensions. In the dictionary, empathy is defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. To gain empathy, a person first notices that another person is experiencing a particular emotion, which requires paying attention to the individual's response to emotional signs (Fletcher & Bird, 2020). The behavior is correctly interpreted after noticing another person's emotional behavior (Fletcher & Bird, 2020). In other words, can the individual determine whether laughter is pleasant or sarcastic? Or when another person is crying, is the cry happy or sad? In noticing and interpreting another person's emotional signals correctly, it is possible to feel what another person is feeling and create affinity, empathy, or mirroring (Fletcher & Bird, 2020). Empathy is primarily concerned with understanding the emotions and feelings of others and responding to them in response to their emotions. Empathy is a multidimensional structure (Boele et al., 2019). Current perspectives emphasize that empathy consists of cognition and emotion, i.e., the ability to recognize and understand the feelings of others and also to empathize with them (Kaukiainen et al., 1999). The dimension of cognitive empathy emphasizes the individual's ability to recognize and understand the emotions and feelings of others, for example, through mentalization processes such as transpersonal thinking (Davis, 1983). It includes the ability to recognize the emotional states of others and understand what they may be feeling and their emotional needs. Emotional empathy focuses on an individual's empathy and response to the emotions of others (Boele et al., 2019). This includes empathy for others' emotional relationships, i.e., sympathy or willingness to offer support or help. Feshbach (1982) categorized empathy into three main components: the ability to differentiate

and label the emotional states of others vs. the ability to assume the perspectives and roles of other pairs and emotional competence and responsiveness. Highly developed empathy is associated with positive social and psychological outcomes, particularly during adolescence. Individuals with high empathy typically show greater emotional awareness and are better able to recognize and understand the emotions of others.

### Empathy and aggressive behavior

Empathy plays a crucial role in preventing and reducing aggressive behavior in adolescents. Adolescents with high levels of empathy are likelier to demonstrate cooperation, sharing, and positive social interactions. They are more likely to understand others' perspectives or behaviors and resolve conflicts peacefully rather than resorting to aggressive behavior to resolve conflict. These positive behaviors help to create a more harmonious social environment. At the same time, tensions and hostility among adolescents are somewhat reduced. Empathy may inhibit aggressive and antisocial behaviors (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). Jolliffe and Farrington (2004) demonstrated a positive correlation between antisocial behaviors and low levels of empathy through their study. Kaukiainen et al. stated that empathy mitigates aggressive behavior to some extent.

Furthermore, high levels of empathic responses enhance pro-social behavior to some extent (Gini et al., 2007). In other words, higher levels of empathy are associated with greater emotional awareness and conflict-resolution skills. Higher empathy can, to some extent, reduce aggressive behavior. Therefore, empathy is negatively correlated with aggressive behavior in adolescents. This means that adolescents with higher levels of empathy are, to some extent, less likely to display aggressive behavior and that empathy encompasses the ability to care for and understand the feelings of others. Empathy helps to build relationships with others, thus reducing the occurrence of aggressive behavior.

In addition, there is an effect of some degree of interaction between social intelligence and empathy. Individuals exhibited the lowest aggressive behavior when they had high social intelligence and high empathy. This indicates that social intelligence and empathy play a synergistic role. These two competencies have a positive impact on reducing aggressive behavior.

### Discussion

Social intelligence is critical in fostering positive social interactions and reducing aggressive behavior. Adolescents can use social intelligence to understand social situations

better, interpret the behavior and emotions of others, and adapt to different social rules (Loflin & Barry, 2016). This enables them to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, and build healthy relationships. Increased social intelligence may lead to greater emotional awareness, i.e., a keener sense and understanding of others' emotions, which can reduce the chances of aggressive behavior. In addition, social intelligence may enhance the ability to resolve conflicts positively, thereby reducing conflict escalation. Therefore, developing and improving social intelligence may be an essential way to reduce aggressive behavior.

Second, empathy, as the ability to care for and understand the feelings of others, also has a potential impact on adolescents' aggressive behavior. Empathy usually induces individuals to moderate their aggressive behavior. The main reason is that a high degree of empathy is essential for a person's ability to emotionally predict the adverse outcomes of their behavior towards another individual (Hoffman, 2001). Highly empathetic individuals are more likely to be aware of the emotional state of others, which can motivate them to be more cautious with others and reduce the occurrence of aggressive behavior. Empathy is a talent for being concerned about others and understanding their emotions, which has been cited as one reason for building high-quality relationships with parents and peers (Boele et al., 2019). In addition, empathy is also associated with positive conflict resolution skills, meaning that adolescents high in empathy are more likely to resolve disputes through cooperation and compromise rather than through aggressive means. This further reduces the risk of aggressive behavior. Thus, empathy development may help to reduce aggressive behavior in adolescents.

Moreover, social intelligence and empathy may interact to reduce aggressive behavior by enhancing emotional awareness and positive conflict resolution. Social intelligence and empathy are not entirely independent domains; they overlap somehow (Kaukiainen, 1999). Individuals with high social intelligence are more likely to correctly identify and interpret the emotions of others, which is related to the affective cognitive component of empathy. The cognitive component of empathy can be considered an aspect of social intelligence (Kaukiainen, 1999). In other words, it takes people with some social intelligence to empathize and understand others. The emotional component is a factor that distinguishes empathy from social intelligence (Kaukiainen, 1999). Social intelligence is applied in the absence of any emotions. At the same time, empathy's main feature is sensitivity to others' feelings. Thus, social intelligence and empathy can work synergistically to help adolescents better understand and cope with the emotions of others

and reduce misunderstandings and conflicts. At the same time, they are more likely to use positive conflict resolution strategies and solve problems peacefully rather than resort to aggressive behavior.

### Future Research Directions

This ESSAY focuses on providing insights into the effects of social intelligence and empathy on aggressive behavior in adolescents. However, many factors still deserve to be studied in the future. Considering the influence of other factors, the study can further consider other factors that may influence adolescent aggressive behavior, such as the family environment (single-parent versus two-parent families), the influence of the online environment (whether or not one plays online games regularly or watches movies with violent characteristics), and a variety of socio-environmental factors such as social support. This helps to explain the diversity and complexity of aggressive behavior more fully. Cross-cultural comparisons, i.e., exploring whether there are differences in the effects of social intelligence and empathy on aggressive behavior across cultures. As well as conducting a long-term follow-up study helps to find out the changing trends of social intelligence and empathy during adolescents' growth. It also helps to analyze the study of aggressive behavior in adulthood. In conclusion, future studies can further reveal the role of social intelligence and empathy in adolescent aggressive behavior and how interventions can improve adolescents' social interactions and behaviors. These studies can provide positive insights into discussing preventing and reducing aggressive behavior.

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