

A LINE ON LIFE

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Observing Aggression *

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Many people believe that children are more aggressive than they used to be. If this is so, social psychologist Albert Bandura has found at least one reason why – **social learning** – the children copy the behavior modeled by others around them, and that imitation is influenced by reward and punishment.

In 1961, Bandura did research, which has become a classic study. Children saw a model behave aggressively toward a "*bobo doll*" – a large, plastic inflatable punching doll. The model kicked and punched the doll while screaming, "*Sock him in the nose.*" After observing the behavior, each child was taken into a room with toys. To frustrate the child, the experimenter came in again after several minutes.

The experimenter told each child that s/he could no longer play with the toys, because the toys were being reserved for another child. Each child was taken to another room, where there were other toys and a bobo doll. The aggressive responses toward the bobo doll were recorded for a specified period.

In Bandura's later experiments, there were many variations. After batting the bobo doll around, the model received a reward, punishment or neither. The model was live, filmed or cartooned. With all conditions, the child's aggressive responses were noted afterward.

As you might expect, if the model was rewarded for aggression, the child imitated the behavior more than when the model was punished. Any modeling of aggression produced more imitation than either a non-aggressive model or no model at all. Without aggressive modeling, children averaged 1-2 aggressive responses during the period. During the same time, children averaged 12 aggressive responses with a cartoon model, 16 with a filmed model and 22 from observing a live model.

Beside the attack methods demonstrated by the models, children attacked the bobo doll in different ways. Apparently the model inspires aggression that is not restricted to merely the methods depicted. This may be related to **disinhibition**. Children already know how to kick or hit. If children have been punished for such behavior, they learn to curb that behavior – to *inhibit* it. Seeing a model being punished for aggression supports this inhibition. However, if the model is rewarded, disinhibition occurs – the inhibitions are reduced and aggressive behaviors of all kinds are more likely to occur – especially if the child is frustrated.

Imitation of modeled aggressive behavior does not only occur in the United States. In 1985, Bandura's experimental conditions were recreated with children in Lebanon. The Lebanese children confirmed the trends previously found by Bandura in the United States.

"Do as I say, not as I do"
is not an effective tactic.

Most parents tell their children not to fight. However, along with these bans, children see others engage in aggressive behaviors – and often these aggressive behaviors are rewarded. The media is a prime factor in rewarding aggressive behavior, but the modeling does not stop there. Parents, other relatives and friends also model aggressive behavior. Remember that live aggressive models are more influential than filmed ones.

Sometimes even punishing aggressive behavior can model it. Have you ever spanked your child for being aggressive toward another child? If you use aggressive punishment to discipline aggression, you are not demonstrating that aggressive behavior is undesirable. The child simply learns that the person with the most power gets to do the aggressing. This can lead to "***bullying***" – aggressing only against those who are weaker.

It is more effective to use "***time out***" **periods** – short periods of time alone, so the child can think about what has happened – or **restriction of privileges** – not allowing the child access to toys or events that were the source of an aggressive dispute.

Just as aggression is learned from aggressive models, children also pick up socially desirable behavior from prosocial models. Rather than just telling your children to be good, parents can be more effective by modeling positive behaviors. That is what is meant when we say, "***Set a good example.***"

* Adapted from Irwin A. Horowitz and Kenneth S. Bordens, *Social Psychology*, Mayfield Publishing, 1995, pages 514-515.