p-ISSN: 2184-2205 e-ISSN: 2184-3414 ISBN: 978-989-36839-1-0 © 2026
https://doi.org/10.36315/2026inpact068

FAMILY FUNCTIONING FACTORS DIFFERENTIALLY PREDICT DIRECT AND INDIRECT AGGRESSION IN ADOLESCENTS

Carmen Rodríguez-Naranjo[1], & Antonio Caño[2]
[1]Department or Personality, Assessment and Psychological Treatment, University of Málaga (Spain)
[2]Department of Basic Psychology, University of Málaga (Spain)

Abstract

Individual and contextual factors contribute to the development of aggressive behavior during adolescence. With regard to contextual factors, it has been widely demonstrated that child neglect, abuse, and maltreatment within the family have severe negative consequences for later adolescent behavior problems, such as delinquency, aggression, and substance use or abuse. Nowadays, there is growing interest in examining characteristics of family functioning during adolescence that contribute to aggression at this stage, since family dysfunction is consistently related to adolescent maladjustment. In this work, we used the McMaster Model of Family Functioning as a comprehensive and systematic framework that has proven useful for identifying relevant family variables that distinguish healthy from unhealthy families, in order to explain different adjustment problems in adolescence. We used this model to examine which specific features of the family could lead to either direct or indirect aggression in adolescents. The sample consisted of 722 Spanish secondary school students aged 12 to 18. They completed the Family Assessment Device (FAD), a self-report measure that assesses different dimensions of family functioning (problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, and behavioral control), and the subscales for direct and indirect aggression from the Children's Social Behavior Scale – Self-Report (CSBS-S). Regression analyses revealed that both problem solving and roles were predictive of both forms of aggression. In addition, communication was specifically predictive of direct aggression, while affective responsiveness and affective involvement were specific predictors of indirect aggression. In conclusion, the findings clarify the contribution of family functioning to the development of adolescent aggression, and reveal the differential role of communication and affection in preventing direct and indirect aggression, respectively. Knowledge of the risk factors leading to aggressive behavior may be useful for designing specific interventions aimed at preventing the onset of and reducing adolescent adjustment problems over the course of development.

Keywords: *Family functioning, direct and indirect aggression, adolescence*.

1. Introduction and objectives

Although research on the association between family functioning and aggression in children and adolescents has increased, most studies have examined aggression as a unitary construct. Against this background, several authors have emphasized the importance of distinguishing between direct and indirect forms of aggression to obtain a more fine-grained understanding of the family factors involved in adolescent aggression (Card et al., 2008; Lundh et al., 2014). The present study examined the extent to which a dysfunctional family environment is associated with adolescents' use of direct and indirect aggression toward peers, acknowledging that these forms share similarities but also display distinct characteristics. Specifically, we first examined whether each dimension of family functioning within the McMaster Model of Family Functioning (MMFF; Miller et al., 2000) predicted each form of adolescent aggression. Second, we assessed whether each MMFF dimension was predictive of the unique aspects of direct and indirect aggression by controlling for the overlap between both forms.

2. Method

Adolescents aged 12 to 18 (M = 14.79 years, SD = 1.74) were recruited from six secondary schools in the Málaga area, Spain, resulting in a total sample of 722 pupils (373 girls and 349 boys). Distribution by grade was as follows: 24.7% seventh graders, 14.7% eighth graders, 15.7% ninth graders, 16.1% tenth

graders, and 28.9% eleventh graders. Aggression was assessed with the Children's Social Behavior Scale Self-report (CSBS-S; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Family functioning was measured using the Family Assessment Device (FAD; Epstein et al., 1983), which assesses each individual family member's perception of their family functioning on the dimensions of the McMaster Model of Family Functioning (MMFF; Miller et al., 2000): problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, and behavior control.

3. Design and results

In our first set of regression analyses, results revealed that all family dimensions of the MMFF were predictive of both direct and indirect aggression. This led us to conduct a second series of analyses, controlling for the overlapping effects between the two forms of aggression, which revealed the existence of different constellations of family dimensions predictive of direct and indirect aggression. Specifically, problem solving, communication, and roles were found to be predictors of direct aggression (see Table 1), while problem solving, roles, affective responsiveness, and affective involvement were predictors of indirect aggression (see Table 2).

4. Discussion

As expected, data from our study revealed that there are several common dysfunctional characteristics of family functioning related to the use of both direct and indirect aggression in adolescents. In particular, the family's lack of ability to solve problems at a level that maintains effective functioning, and the inability to use roles as patterns of behavior through which each family member repeatedly fulfills certain functions, appear to predict adolescents' nondistinctive use of direct or indirect aggression. In addition, we found that particular characteristics of family functioning differentially relate to direct and indirect aggression. Specifically, dysfunctions in communication were predictive of direct aggression, while dysfunctions in affective responsiveness and affective involvement were predictive of indirect aggression. That is, the less clear and simple the communication among family members, the greater the likelihood that adolescents will develop verbal or physical direct forms of aggression, whereas more subtle indirect aggression is more likely to occur when the family's affective patterns are inadequate. These findings further specify the types of family interactions that influence aggressive relationships among adolescents, thus contributing to the prevention and treatment of aggression in adolescence.

Table 1. hierarchical regression analyses for each dimension of the family functioning predicting direct aggression.

Equation	Entry order	Predictor	*B*	*SE*	ß	*t*	R^2 change
1	1	Gender	-.92	.12	-.27	-7.50	R^2 =.07, *F* (1, 720) = 56.38***
	2	Indirect Aggression	.41	.03	.47	14.9	ΔR^2 =.22 , *F* (1, 719) = 222.61***
	3	General Functioning	.14	.08	.06	1.87	ΔR^2 =.00, *F* (1, 718) = 3.48, *ns*
2	1	Gender	-.92	.12	-.27	-7.50	R^2 =.07, *F* (1, 720) = 56.38***
	2	Indirect Aggression	.41	.03	.47	14.9	ΔR^2 =.22 , *F* (1, 719) = 222.61***
	3	Problem Solving	.23	.09	.08	2.51	ΔR^2 =.00, *F* (1, 718) = 6.31*
3	1	Gender	-.92	.12	-.27	-7.50	R^2 =.07, *F* (1, 720) = 56.38***
	2	Indirect Aggression	.41	.03	.47	14.9	ΔR^2 =.22 , *F* (1, 719) = 222.61***
	3	Communication	.32	.09	.11	3.45	ΔR^2 =.01, *F* (1, 718) = 11.91***
4	1	Gender	-.92	.12	-.27	-7.50	R^2 =.07, *F* (1, 720) = 56.38***
	2	Indirect Aggression	.41	.03	.47	14.9	ΔR^2 =.22 , *F* (1, 719) = 222.61***
	3	Roles	.37	.11	.11	3.46	ΔR^2 =.01, *F* (1, 718) = 11.96***
5	1	Gender	-.92	.12	-.27	-7.50	R^2 =.07, *F* (1, 720) = 56.38***
	2	Indirect Aggression	.41	.03	.47	14.9	ΔR^2 =.22 , *F* (1, 719) = 222.61***
	3	Affective Responsiveness	.13	.08	.05	1.71	ΔR^2 =.00, *F* (1, 718) = 2.93, *ns*
6	1	Gender	-.92	.12	-.27	-7.50	R^2 =.07, *F* (1, 720) = 56.38***
	2	Indirect Aggression	.41	.03	.47	14.9	ΔR^2 =.22 , *F* (1, 719) = 222.61***

	3	Affective Involvement	.04	.09	.01	.45	ΔR^2 =.00, F (1, 718) = .21, *ns*
7	1	Gender	-.92	.12	-.27	-7.50	R^2 =.07, F (1, 720) = 56.38***
	2	Indirect Aggression	.41	.03	.47	14.9	ΔR^2 =.22 , F (1, 719) = 222.61***
	3	Behavior Control	.16	.09	.05	1.71	ΔR^2 =.00, F (1, 718) = 2.92, *ns*

Note. *p < .05,*** $p \leq .001$, *ns* = non-significant

Table 2. hierarchical regression analyses for each dimension of the family functioning predicting indirect aggression.

Equation	Entry order	Predictor	*B*	*SE*	ß	*t*	R^2 change
1	1	Gender	-.44	.14	-.11	-3.03	R^2 =.01, F (1, 720) = 9.17*
	2	Direct Aggression	.57	.04	.50	14.92	ΔR^2 =.23 , F (1, 719) = 222.61***
	3	General Functioning	.27	.09	.10	3.10	ΔR^2 =.01, F (1, 718) = 9.59*
2	1	Gender	-.44	.14	-.11	-3.03	R^2 =.01, F (1, 720) = 9.17*
	2	Direct Aggression	.57	.04	.50	14.92	ΔR^2 =.23 , F (1, 719) = 222.61***
	3	Problem Solving	.29	.11	.09	2.72	ΔR^2 =.00, F (1, 718) = 7.38*
3	1	Gender	-.44	.14	-.11	-3.03	R^2 =.01, F (1, 720) = 9.17*
	2	Direct Aggression	.57	.04	.50	14.92	ΔR^2 =.23 , F (1, 719) = 222.61***
	3	Communication	.13	.11	.04	1.21	ΔR^2 =.00, F (1, 718) = 1.46, *ns*
4	1	Gender	-.44	.14	-.11	-3.03	R^2 =.01, F (1, 720) = 9.17*
	2	Direct Aggression	.57	.04	.50	14.92	ΔR^2 =.23 , F (1, 719) = 222.61***
	3	Roles	.28	.13	.07	2.18	ΔR^2 =.00, F (1, 718) = 4.76*
5	1	Gender	-.44	.14	-.11	-3.03	R^2 =.01, F (1, 720) = 9.17*
	2	Direct Aggression	.57	.04	.50	14.92	ΔR^2 =.23 , F (1, 719) = 222.61***
	3	Affective Responsiveness	.28	.09	.10	3.09	ΔR^2 =.01, F (1, 718) = 9.55*
6	1	Gender	-.44	.14	-.11	-3.03	R^2 =.01, F (1, 720) = 9.17*
	2	Direct Aggression	.57	.04	.50	14.92	ΔR^2 =.23 , F (1, 719) = 222.61***
	3	Affective Involvement	.27	.10	.09	2.64	ΔR^2 =.00, F (1, 718) = 6.96*
7	1	Gender	-.44	.14	-.11	-3.03	R^2 =.01, F (1, 720) = 9.17*
	2	Direct Aggression	.57	.04	.50	14.92	ΔR^2 =.23 , F (1, 719) = 222.61***
	3	Behavior Control	.11	.11	.03	1.01	ΔR^2 =.00, F (1, 718) = 1.01, *ns*

Note. *p < .05,*** $p \leq .001$, *ns* = non-significant

References

Card, N. A., Stucky, B. D., Sawalani, G. M., & Little, T. D. (2008). Direct and indirect aggression during childhood and adolescence: A meta-analytic review of gender differences, intercorrelations, and relations to maladjustment. *Child Development, 79*, 1185-1229.

Crick, N. R., & Grotpeter, J. K. (1995). Relational aggression, gender, and social-psychological adjustment. *Child Development, 66*, 710-722.

Epstein, N. B., Baldwin, L. M., & Bishop, D. S. (1983). The McMaster Family Assessment Device. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 9*, 171-180.

Lundh, L.-G., Daukantaitė, D., & Wångby-Lundh, M. (2014). Direct and indirect aggression and victimization in adolescents: Associations with the development of psychological difficulties. *BMC Psychol 2*, 43.

Miller, I. W., Ryan, C. E., Keitner, G. I., Bishop, D. S., & Epstein, N. B. (2000). The McMaster Approach to Families: Theory, assessment, treatment and research. *Journal of Family Therapy*, *22*(2), 168-189.