This study examined whether the effect of social group norms on 7- and 10-year-old children's aggression can be moderated or extinguished by contrary school norms. Children (n=384) participated in a simulation in which they were assigned membership in a social group for a drawing competition against an outgroup. Participants learnt that their group had a norm of inclusion, exclusion, or exclusion-plus-relational aggression, toward non-group members, and that the school either had a norm of inclusion, or no such norm. Findings indicated that group norms influenced the participants' direct and indirect aggressive intentions, but that the school norm moderated the group norm effect, with the school's norm effect tending to be greater for indirect vs. direct aggression, males vs. females, and younger vs. older participants. Discussion focused on how school norms can be developed, endorsed, and presented so that they have their most lasting effect on children. Aggr. Behav. 36:195–204, 2010.

Research on children's aggression and bullying, during middle childhood and early adolescence, has revealed that such episodes frequently involve the presence of peers rather than simply an individual protagonist [Atlas and Pepler, 1998; Salmivalli et al., 1996]. Whereas much of this research has focused on direct, overt, or physical aggression (e.g., hitting, pushing, taking things, verbal abuse), other research has examined aggression that is more indirect, much of it focusing on relationships as the mechanism for the delivery of harm [Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2005]. This type of aversive event includes behavior, such as exclusion, manipulation, gossip, and deception.

Although it might be assumed that the presence of others simply reflects curiosity and/or excitement, several researchers have proposed that young children's participation in aggression and bullying episodes might be influenced by their involvement in particular social groups [e.g., DeRosier et al., 1994]. This issue has received surprisingly little research attention, despite the increasing recognition that inclusion and belonging are critically important to people, even young children [Nesdale, 2007]. Indeed, it has been argued that individuals probably have an inborn fundamental need to belong that motivates them to establish friendships and to become members of social groups [Baumeister and Leary, 1995].

Consistent with this approach, several recent studies have explored the impact of group norms (i.e., the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors considered appropriate to be displayed by the members of a particular group) on children's intentions to engage in direct and indirect forms of aggressive behavior [e.g., Boiven et al., 1995; Henry, 2001; Henry et al., 2000; Nesdale et al., in press; Salmivalli and Voeten, 2004; Stormshak et al., 1999; Wright et al., 1986]. This study sought to extend this research by shedding light on the situation in which the norms of the child's social group conflicted with those of the community. In particular, the research examined whether social group norms that endorse exclusion...
are extinguished or, at least, moderated by community norms that oppose such behavior.

**Children and Social Groups**

Research has shown that, certainly by school age, children seek to be members of social groups and that they reveal a tendency to like and to see themselves as similar to ingroup compared with outgroup members [Bigler, 1995; Bigler et al., 1997; Nesdale and Flesser, 2001; Nesdale et al., 2005a,b,c], and that their acceptance by a social group contributes to their sense of self-worth [Verkuyten, 2001, 2007]. In addition, children have a strong bias toward their ingroup when they are required to make choices, indicate preferences, or allocate rewards between the ingroup and an outgroup, and they display ingroup positivity vs. outgroup negativity in their trait attributions [see, Aboud, 1988; Nesdale, 2001, for reviews].

Whereas the preceding findings indicate that peer group membership is exceedingly important to children, they also suggest that the peer group has the potential to exert considerable influence on group members. A primary mechanism through which this is likely to be achieved is to be found in the norms of the group—the expectations shared by group members concerning the appropriate attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to be displayed by group members. Consistent with this, Nesdale et al. [2005a,b,c] reported that children were more positive toward outgroup members, when the group’s norms endorsed inclusion vs. rejection, whereas Nesdale et al. [2005a,b,c] found that a group norm of exclusion negated individual children’s tendencies toward empathy for the members of ethnic minority outgroups. In addition, research has shown that, from 5 years onward, children show less liking for ingroup members who do not conform to group norms [Abrams et al., 2003, 2004].

**Group Norms and Aggression**

Consistent with the foregoing, some research has also examined the impact of group norms on children’s aversive behaviors, such as aggression and bullying. This research has revealed that classroom norms (i.e., those held by most or all members of a class) influence children’s aggressive attitudes and behavior [e.g., Henry, 2001; Henry et al., 2000; Salmivalli and Voeten, 2004; Stormshak et al., 1999]. Other studies have also reported that aggressive behavior was viewed more positively by other group members when aggression was normative vs. non-normative [Boiven et al., 1995; Wright et al., 1986].

However, few attempts have been made to examine the impact of peer group, rather than classroom, norms on group members’ aggressive and bullying behavior. In one such study, Ojala and Nesdale [2004] found that preadolescent ingroup members considered bullying to be much more acceptable when it was consistent with group norms, and when it was directed at an outgroup member who represented a threat to the ingroup. In addition, research has shown that participants’ bullying intentions were greater when the ingroup had a norm of outgroup dislike vs. outgroup liking [Nesdale et al., 2008].

Given that children form friendships with those who are similar to them in terms of characteristics, such as age, gender, and ethnicity, as well as in behaviors and activities [Cairns et al., 1989; Rubin et al., 1998], it is not surprising that other research has reported that similarities in behaviors, such as aggression, also occur from an early age [Cairns et al., 1989; Kupersmidt et al., 1995]. Consistent with this, Duffy and Nesdale [2009] found that the naturalistic groups of children in middle childhood that displayed most aggression, and bullying had group norms that endorsed this behavior, whereas groups that did not display such behavior did not have norms that endorsed the behavior.

The preceding findings indicate that group norms typically exert a powerful influence on the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of group members, even when they are young children in the middle childhood years. Moreover, the findings indicate that children’s social group norms can even enhance their preparedness to engage in direct and/or indirect aggression toward other children. Although disturbing, this conclusion is perhaps unsurprising given the critical importance that children seem to place on being accepted by, and belonging to, a social group [Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Nesdale, 2007].

Viewed together, such findings serve to emphasize the difficulties faced by community and school authorities, in attempting to moderate or extinguish children’s aggression and bullying. In short, if children’s social groups have norms that directly or indirectly endorse aggressive and bullying behavior, the findings suggest that many children will follow this prescription.

One response to the incidence of children’s aggression and bullying by school authorities has been the specification of rules or norms concerning appropriate attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to be displayed by children toward each other, as well as toward the teachers and school administrators. However, little research has actually assessed the impact of school norms...
norms or rules that proscribe such behavior. In short, do children attend to such prescriptions and does it influence their subsequent behavior. Furthermore, if an injunction by the school not to engage in a particular behavior (e.g., aggression, bullying, intergroup prejudice) conflicts with a norm endorsed by the child’s social group, to which does the child respond—the group norm or the school norm? The likely outcome is not clearcut, with at least three alternatives being possible. First, the group norm could take precedence over the school norm in influencing the level of the child’s aggression. Consistent with this is the research revealing the strong effect exerted by social groups on the behavior of members via their group norms. Moreover, because children are apparently very oriented toward being accepted by, and belonging to, social groups, it is plausible that they would be considerably influenced by their group norms, to the detriment of the school norm.

However, a second alternative is that the school norm could effectively extinguish the group norm and hence reduce the aggression that would otherwise occur. Consistent with this possibility is evidence that, from school age onwards, children show a growing understanding of, and tendency to engage in, self-presentational behavior that puts them in the best possible light, especially when they are being observed by adults [e.g., Aloise-Young, 1993; Banerjee, 2002; Banerjee and Yuill, 1999; Bennett and Yeeles, 1990]. Furthermore, children have an increasing awareness that negative attitudes and behaviors, such as intergroup prejudice, aggression, and bullying, are considered to be unacceptable and inappropriate by teachers and parents [e.g., Brown and Bigler, 2004; Greenwald and Banaji, 1995; Killen et al., 2001; Rutland, 1999; Rutland et al., 2005; Theimer et al., 2001]. Consistent with this, Rutland and colleagues reported a decrease in children’s negative outgroup attitudes when they were under adult surveillance [Rutland, 1999; Rutland et al., 2005].

Finally, in agreement with both the preceding possibilities, a third alternative is that the participants might be somewhat conflicted in wanting to conform to both their group’s and the school’s norms. That is, when the demands of their social group and the school conflict, children might try to conform to both the group and social norms, at least to some extent.

Present Study

This study was designed to examine the relative influence on young children’s aggression of the norms of their social group vs. the norms of the school. To address this issue, the study utilized a simulation methodology rather than the survey [Boulton, 1997] and observational [Atlas and Pepler, 1998] methods that have typically been utilized in research on such topics. This simulation paradigm has been used in a number of studies on the development of children’s ethnic prejudice [e.g., Nesdale et al., 2005a,b,c], as well as on children’s aggression [Nesdale et al., 2009] and bullying [Duffy and Nesdale, 2010; Nesdale et al., 2008].

The essence of this paradigm is that participants are randomly assigned membership in a peer group and are asked to role-play participating against another group in a purported intergroup competition. Although their peer group, and their membership in it, has only a brief existence, participants’ reactions (i.e., attitudes, beliefs, behavior intentions) can be examined in relation to the ingroup as well as the outgroup. In particular, these reactions can be examined under varying conditions of ingroup membership (e.g., group norms, group membership position) as well as intergroup relations (e.g., outgroup threat), and other situational contexts. Moreover, the fact that the paradigm allows for the manipulation of variables relating to the ingroup, the outgroup, and the context, enables causal inferences to be drawn, an advantage that is not afforded to correlational designs. Most important, however, the findings revealed in these minimal group studies are remarkably similar to research findings obtained in studies where children have been randomly assigned to groups in a naturalistic setting, and the effects of the group assignments have been observed over a period of weeks [e.g., Bigler, 1995; Bigler et al., 1997; Sherif et al., 1961]. This similarity confirms the external validity of findings relating to children’s ingroup membership and its effects that are revealed using the minimal group paradigm.

Using the group simulation paradigm, participants in this study were randomly assigned to one of three social group norm conditions (i.e., inclusion norm, exclusion norm, exclusion-plus-relational-aggression norm). In addition, in a fully crossed design, each participant was randomly assigned to one of two school norm conditions. However, bearing in mind the ethical implications, the children learnt either that the school had a norm of inclusion or they received no information concerning the school’s norm. Thus, whereas group and school norm coincided for some children (i.e., inclusion group norm and inclusion school norm), it conflicted for others (i.e., exclusion group and inclusion norm).
school norm; exclusion-plus-relational-bullying group and inclusion school norm). Finally, to control for order effects, the timing of delivery of the school norm message vs. the group norm message was manipulated, so that half the children received the group norm information first, whereas the remaining children received it second.

Three other features of this study are worth noting. First, the study focused on the impact of group and school norms on children’s aggressive intentions, rather than their actual aggressive behavior. This emphasis reflected the fact that a central issue addressed in the study was the potential causal effect of group and school norms on children’s aggression, and that it would have been extremely difficult as well as ethically irresponsible to allow children to engage in real acts of aggression in an experimental study. Accordingly, the study measured the children’s intentions to engage in aggression via their responses to a series of vignettes.

Second, the study measured both the participants’ direct and indirect aggressive intentions. Direct (or overt or physical) aggression includes acts, such as hitting, pushing, taking things, and verbal abuse. In contrast, indirect aggression tends to focus on relationships as the mechanism for the delivery of harm [Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2005] and includes aversive acts, such as deception, exclusion, manipulation, and gossip. The vignettes used in this study included measures of the participants’ intentions to engage in instances of both direct and indirect aggression.

Third, the study included 7 and 10-year-old boys and girls because of the currently mixed pattern of findings concerning, on the one hand, the incidence of direct compared with indirect aggression and bullying as children increase in age and, on the other hand, the incidence of these forms of aggression and bullying by boys vs. girls. Thus, some studies have reported that more direct than indirect aggression and bullying is displayed by children at a younger age [e.g., Bjorkqvist et al., 1992], whereas other studies have yielded no such difference [Crick et al., 1997; Ostrov and Crick, 2007]. Similarly, some studies have reported that girls display more indirect vs. direct aggression and bullying, whereas boys do the reverse [Crick et al., 1997; Ostrov and Crick, 2007], although other studies have not found this effect [e.g., Atlas and Pepler, 1998; Galen and Underwood, 1997; Little et al., 2003; Salmivalli and Kaukiainen, 2004]. Including 7 and 10-year-old boys and girls as participants in this study allowed for a reexamination of these issues.

In sum, this study examined the effects of social group and school norms, and the order of their presentation, on 7- and 10-year-old male and female children’s direct and indirect aggressive intentions. Participants were assigned to a group that had a norm of inclusion, exclusion, or exclusion-plus-relational aggression, and were informed that the school had a norm of inclusion or were given no information about a school norm. Participants subsequently responded to a series of vignettes designed to assess their direct and indirect aggressive intentions toward members of an outgroup.

METHOD

Participants

The sample comprised 384 Anglo-Australian children (173 males and 213 females), with the younger age group (196 children; 92 males and 106 females) from grades 1–3 (M = 7.85, SD = 0.83) and the older age group (188 children; 81 males and 107 females) from grades 4–6 (M = 10.85, SD = 1.07). The children attended four primary schools serving the same lower-middle class community. Children only participated in the study with parental approval and the child’s own assent.

Design

The experiment utilized a 2 (participant age: 7 vs. 10) × 2 (participant gender) × 3 (group norm: inclusion vs. exclusion vs. exclusion-plus-relational aggression) × 2 (school norm: inclusion vs. no information) × 2 (timing of norm presentation: group norm first vs. group norm second) × 2 (aggression type: direct vs. indirect) mixed factorial design, with the last factor measured within subjects. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the between subject conditions, with the number of males and females in each condition approximately equal.

Materials

Group photos. A set of head-and-shoulder color photos of Anglo-Australian children was used to present the members of the ingroup and outgroup to the participants. Within age, gender, and ethnicity, the photos were randomly drawn from a pool of photos that has been developed and pretested by the authors, as detailed in earlier reports [Nesdale et al., 2005a,b,c]. Photos selected were matched for expression (not smiling) and attractiveness (moderate). Each photo was 150 mm × 110 mm and pasted onto a 200 mm × 200 mm white cardboard square. A board was used to display the photos to the children in the study. In the first photo set, there
were two centered photos with one empty slot (where the participant’s photo was to be added), whereas the second photo set consisted of three photos.

**Group norm manipulation.** Group norms were manipulated by having the children listen to a prerecorded message spoken by a child of the same age and gender as the child being tested. There were three different messages recorded for each age and gender combination, one of inclusion, one of exclusion, and one of exclusion-plus-relational aggression.

**Response booklet.** A response booklet was prepared for each participant. The front page contained brief instructions and some practice questions. Responses to all questions were given on 5-point scales. The response options on unipolar scales ranged from 1 (*a small amount of the attribute*) to 5 (*a large amount of the attribute*). The response options on bipolar scales ranged from 1 (*a negative response*) to 3 (*a neutral response*) to 5 (*a positive response*). Each point on each scale was labeled appropriately. The response booklet contained filler items as well as the measures of aggressive intentions.

**Aggressive intentions.** After the variables were manipulated, each participant’s aggressive intentions were measured on a scale devised by the authors [Duffy and Nesdale, 2010]. Participants responded to five vignettes, each outlining a situation involving the participant on the day of the drawing competition. The purpose of the vignettes was to provide a situation in which the participants’ direct and indirect aggression intentions could be measured, if they happened to have these intentions. For example, one vignette described the following situation:

> After finishing your drawing, it’s time for lunch. But first, both teams need to pack up all the pencils they’ve used. The other team leaves one of its members to finish this job while the rest go to get lunch. The person from the other team is almost finished packing up when they knock the pencil case off the table and pencils spill out everywhere.

Each vignette was accompanied by four responses. One of the responses was consistent with the earlier characterization of direct aggression (e.g., name-calling, taking things from another, hitting, pushing or teasing another); another response was consistent with the earlier characterization of indirect aggression (e.g., ignoring, gossiping about, deceiving, rejecting or excluding another). Thus, after the foregoing vignette, the direct aggression response specified *Tell your group some nasty gossip about that person*. All items were scored on a 5-point unipolar scale ranging from 1 (*Very unlikely*) to 5 (*Very likely*). The other two responses were filler items that were not designated as aggression actions, instead describing mildly prosocial acts.

The participant responded to each of the five vignettes in turn, each of which had a different set of four responses, but each of which included a direct aggression response, an indirect aggression response, and two filler items, each of which related to the content of the particular vignette. The researcher pointed to the photo of an outgroup member in relation to each of the vignettes, the designated outgroup member being systematically varied in order to control for the possible effects of particular faces. In this study, participants’ scores on Direct and Indirect Aggression were the sum of their responses to the relevant measure on each of the five vignettes. Thus, each participant received two summed scores, one for Direct Aggression and one for Indirect Aggression. Each score could range from 5 to 25.

The designation of the particular response items as instances of direct vs. indirect aggression was based on an earlier study, in which a factor analysis of the items revealed two factors, Direct Aggression and Indirect Aggression, accounting for 65% of the total [Duffy and Nesdale, in press]. Each of the subscales displayed good internal consistency, with Cronbach’s α coefficients for the Direct Aggression and Indirect Aggression scales being .83 and .73, respectively. The aggressive intentions scale has been used successfully in earlier research and has revealed predictable findings in samples of children in middle childhood [e.g., Duffy and Nesdale, 2010; Nesdale et al., in press, 2008].

**Procedure**

All students in grades 1–6 from the participating schools were asked by their teachers to do a drawing of themselves on a 145 mm × 210 mm piece of paper. The children were told that during next week some visitors would look at their drawings, if their parents had given permission for them to participate. One to two weeks later, each participant was called out of his/her class and tested in a distraction-free environment. The child was asked to pretend that s/he was going to participate in an intergroup drawing competition that would involve children from other schools in the area. Accordingly, they were asked to pretend that all the children’s drawings had been judged by an artist and that the children were being put into groups of similar drawing ability. They
were then asked if it was okay to have their instant photo taken, and all participants agreed.

The children were then asked to pretend that their drawing had been viewed by judges who had assigned them to a team of equally well-performed drawers. They were then shown photos of two other children of the same age, sex, and ethnicity (photo set 1) and were told that this was their team. They were asked to put their photo in the empty slot between the photos of their team members and to have a good look at their team because they would later be asked some questions about them. In order to enhance ingroup identification, the participants were then told that their team members had asked them to pick their team’s color, which the researcher then wrote next to their team’s photos.

The participants were then shown photos of the same age, sex, and ethnicity children in the other team (photo set 2), and were told of the color that they had chosen for their team. Depending on the participant’s randomly assigned condition, the experimenter then subjected each participant to the appropriate manipulations of group norm and school norm. To carry out the school norm manipulation, participants in the school norm condition were told that your principal and teacher wanted me to remind you that this school wants all the children to like kids in other groups and to be friendly toward them. Conversely, in the no school norm condition, no mention of how the school wanted them to behave was made.

To carry out the group norm manipulation, each participant was told that his/her group had recorded a “secret message” for him/her to hear. Thus, the researcher told each participant before and after the message, this is for your ears only, I am not allowed to know what the message is, you must keep your team’s secret message to yourself. The participant was asked to put on head phones in order to listen to the secret (prerecorded group norm) message, delivered by one of your team members. In each group norm condition, the participant first heard several same age and sex voices welcome him/her to the team. In the inclusion group norm condition, the participant then heard a “team member” explain that if the participant wanted to be a part of the team, they must like and include all the members of all other teams. In contrast, in the exclusion group norm condition, the participant heard a “team member” explain that if the participant wanted to be a part of the team, they must not like or be friendly to any members of the other teams and that they must be prepared to say mean things about kids in the other teams and to have them left out of games and activities.

To manipulate the timing of the group norm and school norm messages, half the children heard the group norm manipulation before the school norm manipulation; whereas the remaining half of the children heard the group norm manipulation after the school norm manipulation.

After completing the experimental manipulations, the participants were directed to their response booklet. To ensure that each child was comfortable with using the unipolar and bipolar scales, they first completed some practice questions under the direction of the experimenter. The participants were then asked to pretend that it was the day of the drawing competition but, before presenting the questions and statements from the response booklet, the children were reassured that, unlike schoolwork, there are no right or wrong answers, and that we are just interested in what you think is the best answer for you. The experimenter next read out the five scenarios in turn, each of which was followed by four questions, two of which assessed the participant’s direct and indirect aggressive intentions. As indicated above, the participants’ responses to each vignette were recorded on 5-point unipolar scales ranging from 1 (Very unlikely) to 5 (Very likely).

When the sessions were completed, the participants were debriefed and given the opportunity to ask any questions they had. In an attempt to control for possible contamination between participants, the participants were then asked to keep the details of the pretend game secret from the other children so that it would be a new game for them. All the participants agreed to do so. They were then given their own photos, thanked for their participation in the pretend game, and returned to their classrooms.

**RESULTS**

**Exploratory Analyses**

Exploratory analyses were first carried out to ensure that the data on each of the measures was suitable for analysis on ANOVA. This analysis revealed that no data were missing from any participant on any of the variables and that the distributions met the requirements for analysis on ANOVA.

**Main Analyses**

The summed scores on the direct and indirect aggression measures were analyzed in a 2 (participant...
age: 7 vs. 10 years) × 2 (participant gender: females vs. males) × 3 (group norm: inclusion vs. exclusion vs. exclusion + relational aggression) × 2 (school norm: inclusion vs. no school norm) × 2 (aggression type: direct vs. indirect) factorial ANOVA, with the last factor measured within subjects. In the first pass, we included timing in the analysis but, because no timing effects were revealed, the subsequent analysis summed over this variable.

Six significant effects were revealed in the analysis, including a significant group norm main effect, \(F(2/359) = 11.89, P = .000\), partial \(\eta^2 = .06\). This effect indicated that the participants’ aggressive intentions in the inclusion norm condition (\(M = 7.44, SD = 2.96\)) were significantly lower than were the participants’ aggressive intentions in the exclusion norm condition (\(M = 8.84, SD = 4.08\)), whereas the aggressive intentions in the latter condition did not differ significantly from those in the exclusion-plus-relational aggression group norm condition (\(M = 9.63, SD = 4.80\)).

There was also a significant aggression type main effect, \(F(1/359) = 129.92, P = .000\), partial \(\eta^2 = .27\), revealing that the participants displayed significantly greater indirect (\(M = 9.45, SD = 4.22\)) rather than direct aggressive intentions (\(M = 7.82, SD = 4.02\)).

Finally, there was a significant main effect for participant age, \(F(1/359) = 45.78, P = .000\), partial \(\eta^2 = .28\), with 7-year-old participants revealing (\(M = 9.89, SD = 4.76\)) greater aggressive intentions than the 10-year-old participants (\(M = 7.62, SD = 2.99\)).

However, the preceding effects were qualified by an aggression type × participant age interaction, \(F(1/359) = 5.39, P = .02\), partial \(\eta^2 = .01\), that, in turn, was qualified by 2 4-factor interactions. First, there was a significant participant age × participant gender × school norm × aggression type interaction, \(F(1,359) = 6.13, P = .01\), partial \(\eta^2 = .023\). As indicated in Table I, comparison of the cell means, using Duncan’s Multiple Range Test (\(P < .05\)), revealed that the participants’ direct and indirect aggressive intentions tended to be generally lower when there was a school norm endorsing inclusion and friendliness. However, the school norm significantly reduced more of the participants’ indirect vs. direct aggression, with its effect tending to be greater for males vs. females, and for the younger vs. older participants. Thus, the school norm significantly reduced the 7-year-old female (\(M_S = 10.21\) vs. 11.25) and 10-year-old male participants’ indirect aggressive intentions (\(M_S = 8.14\) vs. 9.40) as well as the 7-year-old male participants direct aggressive intentions (\(M_s = 8.23\) vs. 9.39).

Second, the analysis revealed a significant participant age × group norm × school norm × aggression type interaction effect, \(F(2,359) = 4.22, P = .01\), partial \(\eta^2 = .023\). As indicated in Table II, comparison of the cell means using Duncan’s Multiple Range Test (\(P < .05\)) revealed that, across group and school norms and aggression types, the younger children had higher aggressive intentions than the older children. In addition, across ages and aggression types, the group norms of exclusion and exclusion-plus-relational aggression, increased the participants’ aggressive intentions compared with the inclusion group norm condition. However, for the younger children, there was a significant difference in both their direct and indirect aggressive intentions caused by both the exclusion group norm conditions. In contrast, for the older children, and in relation to both their direct and indirect aggressive intentions, there was a significant difference between the inclusion norm condition and the exclusion-plus-relational aggression condition, with the exclusion norm condition tending not to differ from either of the other two conditions.

Importantly, the results also indicated that the school norm tended to decrease the impact of the group norm on the children’s aggressive intentions.

TABLE I. Means and SDS for Participant Age × Participant Gender × School Norm × Aggressive Type Interaction on Aggressive Intentions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Direct aggression</th>
<th>Indirect aggression</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School norm</td>
<td>No school norm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>8.23&lt;sub&gt;bc&lt;/sub&gt; (4.95)</td>
<td>9.39&lt;sub&gt;f&lt;/sub&gt; (4.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>8.80&lt;sub&gt;c&lt;/sub&gt; (5.08)</td>
<td>9.16&lt;sub&gt;d&lt;/sub&gt; (5.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>7.02&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt; (2.99)</td>
<td>7.52&lt;sub&gt;cd&lt;/sub&gt; (2.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>6.85&lt;sub&gt;c&lt;/sub&gt; (1.61)</td>
<td>6.41&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt; (2.19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Means sharing different subscripts are significantly different, Duncan’s Multiple Range Test, \(P < .05\).
when the two norms were in opposition, although this effect was only significant for the younger children. Thus, the school norm significantly reduced 7-year-old participants’ direct aggressive intentions when the group had a norm of exclusion-plus-relational aggression (M = 10.69 vs. 9.62), as well as their indirect aggressive intentions when the group had an exclusion norm (M = 12.08 vs. 10.93) or a norm of exclusion-plus-relational aggression (M = 13.09 vs. 10.71). In contrast, the older children’s direct and indirect aggressive intentions were significantly less than those of the younger children under each group norm condition, and were not reduced further by the school norm.

**DISCUSSION**

As anticipated, the findings revealed a significant main effect of *social group norm*, with children displaying significantly greater aggressive intentions when their social group had a norm of exclusion or exclusion-plus-relational aggression, as opposed to a norm of inclusion. Although this finding is consistent with other research [e.g., Boiven et al., 1995; Henry, 2001; Henry et al., 2000; Nesdale et al., 2008, 2004; Salmivalli and Voeten, 2004; Stormshak et al., 1999; Wright et al., 1986], it is noteworthy that the effect occurred despite the children never having met any other ingroup members and their membership of their “social group” being excessively brief. In addition, whereas earlier research has revealed the influence of classroom norms on children’s aggression [Henry, 2001; Henry et al., 2000; Salmivalli and Voeten, 2004; Stormshak et al., 1999], it is also noteworthy that the children in this study showed a similar degree of responsiveness to their social group, despite its limited size. This emphasizes the importance of group membership to young children, extending to an apparently strong need to conform to the group’s norms.

Central to this study was the question of whether school norms that oppose the norms endorsed by children’s social groups can extinguish or, at least, moderate, the effects of the social group’s norms on children’s aggression. Consistent with this, the findings revealed that, regardless of their age, the participants’ direct and indirect aggressive intentions were lower in the school norm vs. no school norm condition in both the exclusion and exclusion-plus-relational aggression group norm conditions. However, the reduction was only significant among the younger and not the older children. Moreover, although there was a significant reduction in their indirect aggressive intentions regardless of their exclusion norm condition, the reduction in relation to their direct aggressive intentions was significant in the exclusion-plus-relational aggression group norm condition, but not in the exclusion group norm condition.

One reason why the school norm effect might not have been stronger is that the group vs. school norms might have had differential salience, Duncan’s Multiple Range Test, *P* < .05.

### Table II. Means and SDS for Participant Age × Group Norm × School Norm × Aggressive Type Interaction on Aggressive Intentions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Direct aggression</th>
<th>Indirect aggression</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School norm</td>
<td>No school norm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion norm</td>
<td>7.00bcd (2.85)</td>
<td>7.24acd (2.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusion norm</td>
<td>9.03ghi (5.17)</td>
<td>9.85abc (4.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusion norm</td>
<td>+9.62abc (6.12)</td>
<td>10.69abc (5.39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion norm</td>
<td>5.83abc (1.52)</td>
<td>6.16abcd (1.55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusion norm</td>
<td>6.45abc (2.04)</td>
<td>6.54abc (2.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusion norm</td>
<td>+7.16abc (3.11)</td>
<td>7.96abc (3.34)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Means sharing different subscripts are significantly different, Duncan’s Multiple Range Test, *P* < .05.

broadcast (i.e., they may be secret). Perhaps, one implication of the foregoing discussion is that teachers and school administrators should give special consideration to methods that can be employed to keep school norms and rules fresh and vibrant to young children.

In addition to the preceding effects, the analysis also revealed a set of significant effects on participants’ aggressive intentions involving participant age. In general, these effects revealed that the older children were generally less disposed toward displaying either direct or indirect aggressive intentions than were the younger children.

These findings are contrary to the approach that argues that aggression is predominantly physical among younger children who have not acquired sufficient verbal skills and social intelligence to be able to use the more sophisticated, manipulative aggressive strategies that are required in indirect aggression and are displayed more by older children [Bjorkqvist et al., 1992; Kaukiainen et al., 1996]. In addition, the findings are contrary to the approach that proposes that girls display more indirect vs. direct aggression, whereas boys do the reverse, especially as they increase in age [Crick et al., 1997; Ostrov and Crick, 2007; Rigby, 2005]. Instead, the present findings are consistent with other studies that have not found the aggression type × gender effect [e.g., Atlas and Pepler, 1998; Galen and Underwood, 1997; Little et al., 2003; Nesdale et al., 2008, 2009; Salmivalli and Kaukiainen, 2004], including a meta-analysis of 148 studies which concluded that “the support for negligible gender differences in indirect aggression seems conclusive” [Card et al., 2008; p 1203].

Rather, the present findings are more consistent with the view that the participants might have been self-regulating their aggressive intentions. This explanation fits with other evidence mentioned earlier that with increasing age children have an increasing awareness that negative attitudes and behaviors are considered unacceptable by adults and that children show a growing tendency to engage in self-presentation behavior that puts them in the best possible light when they are being observed by adults [e.g., Aloise-Young, 1993; Banerjee, 2002; Banerjee and Yuill, 1999; Bennett and Yeeles, 1990; Bigler and Bigler, 2004; Greenwald and Banaji, 1995; Killen et al., 2001; Theimer et al., 2001; Rutland, 1999; Rutland et al., 2005].

In sum, these findings indicate that school norms can moderate, if not extinguish, contrary social group norms, at least in younger vs. older children. However, given that the latter participants may have been managing their impressions, and that the school norm generally tended to lower the participants’ aggressive intentions, there are good grounds for pursuing the utilization of school norms as yet another strategy for moderating children’s aggression. Research now needs to explore ways in which school norms can be developed, endorsed, and presented, so that they have their most lasting effect on children.

REFERENCES