

Research Paper

An analysis of how family relationships and psycho-social characteristics influence student aggression and self-esteem

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the psychosocial and family factors that may cause aggression, in order to identify the nature of aggressive behaviors and trend, to examine the nature of the family related factors that might lead to aggression and to examine the relationships between aggressive and non-aggressive student's level of self-esteem. A sample survey design was used for this study. 100 boy students aged between 11-14 years (50 identified as aggressive and 50 identified as non-aggressive) were included, from ten selected schools in Colombo. A self-developed Likert scale and semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. The Culture Free Self-Esteem Inventories-Third Edition (CFSEI-3) was used to measure student self-esteem. The study findings indicated that student aggression manifests in different ways; the most common indications of aggressive behavior exhibited by the students being talking, shouting and laughing loudly while the teacher presented the day's lessons, truancy, intentionally disturbing bystanders by being boisterous in the school playground, insulting, intimidating and taunting teachers, fighting in groups, resisting learning and deliberately disrupting the teaching-learning process. Aggressive students also displayed delinquent behavior and failed to complete homework and classwork, in contrast to other students. The aggressive students were found to have significant issues of conflict in their family relationships and very low scores in self-esteem, compared to the other students. Thus, it seems vital for teachers to develop better empathy in dealing with aggressive students. In order to manage and mitigate the problem of student aggression in schools, it is also important to provide integrated counseling services and opportunities for students to have more extracurricular and disciplinary activities as compared to exam-oriented education, from elementary school level onwards. It could also be useful to look into the possibility of offering practical education in life-skills to students, from an early age.

Keywords: *Psychosocial Factors, Family Relationships, Student Aggression, Self-esteem*

Aggression occurs at various levels in various aspects of social life everywhere, causing friction between nations, ethnic and religious groups, social groups, families and individuals. Today it is a common phenomenon and aggressive behaviors can be witnessed every day, in homes, workplaces and other social settings. Aggressive behavior is

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Received: June 29, 2020; Revision Received: August 04, 2020; Accepted: September 25, 2020

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now a particular problem in local schools and this has recently become a point of discussion and concern in Sri Lanka. Up to two or three decades ago, aggressive behavior was not a major concern in local schools and most students were respectful towards their teachers and others. The degree of open conflict between students was low because schools enforced strict rules regarding aggression and violent behavior. Schools were responsible for the academic life of their students while they were in school, but the school also had the power to control their students when they were outside the school premises. However, teachers had a tendency to bully and severely punish students (Paranagama, Fernando, & Senarath 2003) and discipline was often enforced through corporal punishment. Today, the situation is different-school counselors, principals, teachers, parents and even students themselves have observed that schools are becoming hidden battlefields where some students are the attackers and others the victims. It is still not clear if the reason for this is the nation's transition from being a traditional society to a modern one, where a loosening of the traditional family ties can be observed, including an increase in parental separation and divorce and where families are becoming more isolated with people spending more and more time focused on digital devices and social media. The maintenance of close personal relationships at home and in the work place is decreasing, causing conflict and unhappiness in young people, all of which can result in aggressive behavior (Pathirana, 2003; Olweus, 1993 and 1999). The prevalence of aggression in the Sri Lankan school system is not well researched. As far as this researcher knows, very few studies have been done on the subject so far and these did not address the causes together with the magnitude or severity of the problem. Additionally, the studies done were focused on the subject of violence as manifested by pre-school children and on the issues of children's violence and television. Nowadays, it is not uncommon to hear teachers and students complaining about the fact that school violence is becoming a serious problem and that the issue is being given little or no attention.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study was to identify the psychosocial factors that might be causing aggression in students and specifically, to investigate the levels of such aggression and its trends, to examine the educational value and academic performance between aggressive and non-aggressive students, to identify the nature of psycho social characteristics in-between both groups, to examine the nature of the family related factors that might lead to aggression, and to examine the relationships between aggressive and non-aggressive student's level of self-esteem.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Theoretical and empirical explanations of the causes of aggression

Aggression and aggressive behavior are serious social problems in most countries and researchers are now interested in identifying the factors that predispose individuals to such behaviors. However, there is still little agreement about the factors that account for aggression in students. Social, biological, environmental, family and contextual factors were all at the center of investigations by different researchers. This section of the study provides information about the theoretical and empirical perspectives relating to the research.

According to Olweus (1993), aggression can be classified into bullying and violence. Both actions are directed toward the intentional humiliation of another person and the destruction of objects. For him bullying represented a milder form of the aggression that is observed when a stronger person attacks another person who cannot defend him/herself. Violence on

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the other hand, represents a more severe form of aggression. One can observe from these definitions that both concepts involve elements of hostile aggression, physical and psychological attacks and other forms of negative interpersonal relationships.

Empirically, there are a wide range of variables reported to be causes of aggression. Some researchers have indicated that individuals who were physically and psychologically abused displayed antisocial behavior, and little anxiety but had high self-esteem and were defiant and disobedient to adults during childhood, tending to become aggressive as adolescents (Batsche & Knof, 1994; cited in Banks, 1997, & Olweus, 1993). Others (e.g., Massey, 1998), on the contrary, have reported that children who are bullies have low self-esteem. Others say that a lack of love and nurturing in early life might affect the brain chemistry of a child to a degree that seemingly innate negative personality characteristics could evolve (Embry & Flannery, 1999). Rekers and Jurich (1983) and Berkowitz (1993) attributed the causes of aggressive behaviors to the physiological changes that occur during pubescence on account of hormones, due to endocrine systems. Such changes could cause heightened emotionality, making it difficult for some adolescents to control their behavior.

Besides these theoretical explanations, there are a wide range of variables that have been empirically investigated by researchers as being causes of aggression. Researchers have also observed that a low value placed on education, a low motivation towards academic performance and low job aspirations are also contributing factors leading to aggressive behavior among school children (Beck, 2000 & Slavin, 1994). In a study of the predictors of adolescent violence, Beyers, Loeber, Wikstroam and Stouthamer-Loeber, (2001) reported that poor parent-adolescent communication, low adolescent involvement in family functioning and low supervision, significantly increased the risk for the development of later repeated violence. Bolger and Patterson (2002) discovered that maltreated children were more rejected by their peers and tended to exhibit higher levels of aggressive behavior. In a study looking at the association between parental use of psychological aggression and psychological maladjustment in a 12-year-old Sri Lankan school population, the annual prevalence of psychological aggression reported by the study sample was 75%. The study found that although many Sri Lankan parents use psychological aggression, it has negative consequences for their children (De Zoysa, Newcombe & Rajapakse 2010).

Family as a cause of aggression: another factor that has a profound effect on the entire course of development of an individual is the family. Many studies highlight the fact that parents occupy a key position in the well-being and performance of adolescents. Parents play a significant role (Rice, 1990). The available literature on parent-child relationships reveals that the parental bond (the close relationship between children and parents) remains of considerable importance. Some studies show that the quality of the parental bond has a positive psychological effect when viewed longitudinally (Allen et al 1994). A study on the parental bond proved it to have a significant relationship with a young person's general well-being (Dornbusch et.al. 2001). Families provide three different kinds of socialization experiences that contribute to the positive development of adolescents. These include the promotion of positive emotional connections between adolescents and significant others, the regulation of behavior and the development of psychological autonomy. Studies have repeatedly indicated that poor parental bonds contribute to children's problems and their progression. Walker, Colvin, and Ramsey (1995) stated that 'inadequate supervision is a key variable in predicting delinquency'. The way the child interacts with the members of the family will undoubtedly shape the child's personality. The parents 'good marital quality and

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the child's adjustment were found to associate positively, while the child's witnessing of parental conflict could cause emotional distress. Some studies proved that aggressive students were found to have less interest in or sense of learning, were more dissatisfied with school and had negative perceptions of their teachers (Averback, et. al. 1996).

METHOD OF THE STUDY

A sample survey and convenient sampling techniques were employed for this study. 100 boy students aged between 11-14 years (50 identified as aggressive and 50 identified as non-aggressive) were included, from ten selected schools in the Western Province. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, based on school student counselor, class teacher and peer student nominations in Colombo schools, Type 1C and Type 2.

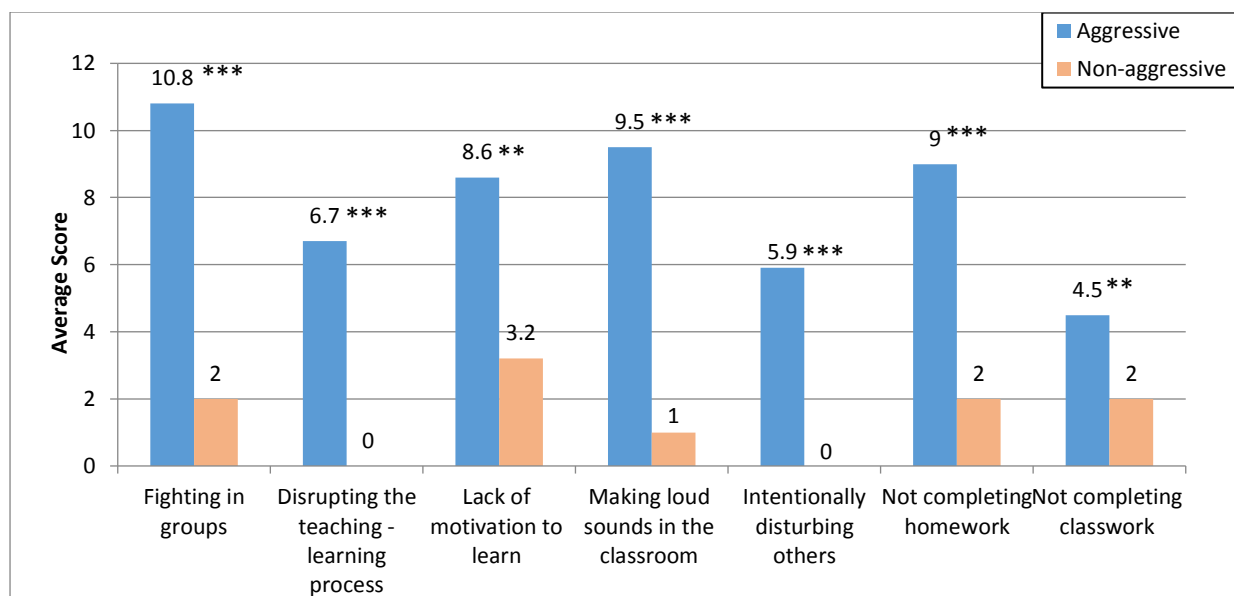
The data gathering instruments were composed of three parts. The first part consisted of background data, aggressive characteristics and six variables; academic motivation, social interaction, hopelessness, responsibility, education value and family interaction. Questions were from the Five Point Likert Scale and a self-developed observation sheet was used to measure the level of aggression in the students. The second part looked at the factors that were presumed to be causes of aggressive behavior, with "yes" and "no" responses. The Culture Free Self-Esteem Inventories-Third Edition (CFSEI-3) 29 item scale (Battle, 2002) was adopted. The standardized questionnaire was translated by three academics from the field of psychology. Reliability of the instrument presented in this study was ($\alpha = 0.73$). Semi structured interviews were conducted with school counselors, teachers and principals. The study mainly used quantitative data analysis techniques. The statistical package SPSS 20.0 for Windows with Mean and Standard deviation, t-test and correlations, analysis was employed. Data and information gathered from school counselors, teachers and principals were analyzed qualitatively.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Causes and characteristics of aggression

Student aggression presents in different ways. Some of the most common forms or indications of aggressive behavior exhibited by students are: (see Figure 1) talking, shouting and laughing loudly while the teacher presented the day's lessons, truancy, intentionally disturbing bystanders by being boisterous in the school playground, insulting, intimidating and taunting teachers, fighting in groups, resisting learning and deliberately disrupting the teaching-learning process. Aggressive students also displayed delinquent behavior and failed to complete homework and classwork, in contrast to other students.

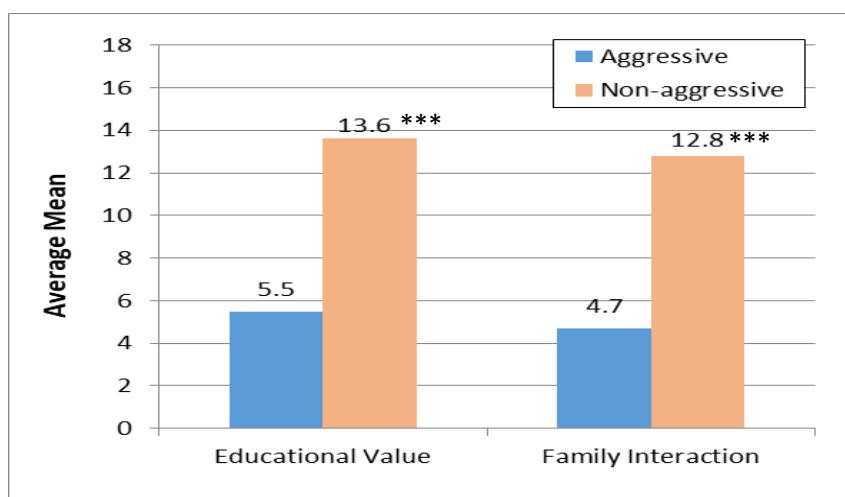
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Note. $p < 0.001$ ***, $p < 0.01$ **, $p < 0.05$ *

Figure 1: Nature of Aggressive Behaviors in the Classroom in Both Groups

According to figure 1, aggressive students presented different aggressive behaviors in the classroom, in contrast to the non-aggressive students. The aggressive students' mean scores for 'Fighting in groups' were ($M = 10.8$, $SD = 3.2$), this was in contrast to non-aggressive students' mean values of ($M = 2.00$, $SD = .45$) $p < .001$. The aggressive students' mean scores for 'Disrupting the teaching-learning process' were ($M = 6.7$, $SD = 2.7$), in contrast to the non-aggressive students ($M = 0.00$, $SD = 0.00$), $P < .001$ and a highly significant difference was shown. The aggressive students also had significantly higher mean scores for 'Making loud sounds in the classroom', in comparison to the non-aggressive students. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with class teachers and school counselors. The participants' responses were rank-ordered based on the frequency of aggressive behaviors, including throwing objects in class, fighting in groups, not completing homework, making loud sounds in the classroom, snatching and eating food belonging to fellow students and a lack of motivation to learn.



Note. $p < 0.001$ ***, $p < 0.01$ **, $p < 0.05$ *

Figure 2: Differences between Family Interaction and Educational Value in Aggressive and Non-aggressive students

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As indicated in figure 2, differences in the levels of family interaction and educational value were apparent. The aggressive students tended to have poor family interaction ($M=4.7$, $SD=1.86$) when compared to the non-aggressive students ($M=12.8$, $SD=2.22$) $P<.001$. The value of education for aggressive students showed a mean score of ($M=5.5$, $SD=2.4$) while non-aggressive students presented ($M=13.8$, $SD=1.89$) $P<.001$ a significantly higher value of education in contrast to the aggressive students.

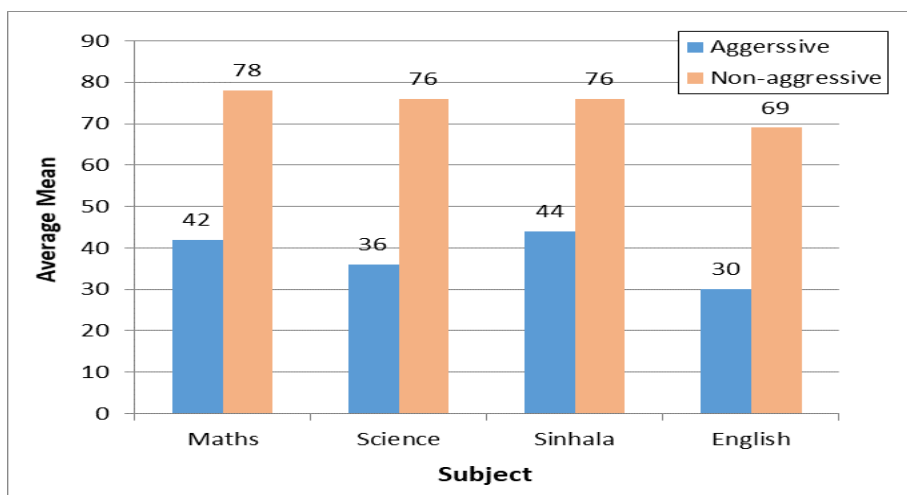
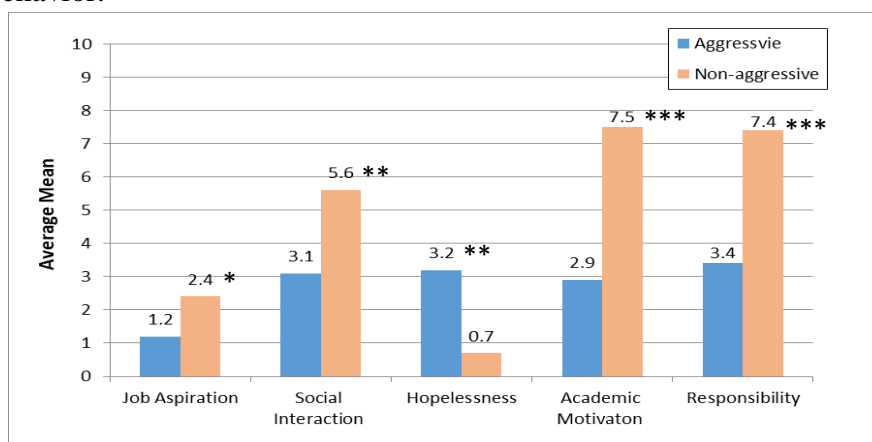


Figure 3: Differences in Academic Performance between Aggressive and Non-aggressive Students

Figure 3 shows the scores in Mathematics, English, Sinhala and Science and the overall average score in all subjects for Aggressive and Non-aggressive students. These scores represent the students' previous grade average scores on their first and second term tests. The results of the bar graph clearly showed that in all performance comparisons, the aggressive students scored much lower than their non-aggressive counterparts. All the differences were statistically and highly significant ($t=10.143$, $p<.001$, for Maths; $t=13.24$, $p<.001$, for English; $t=13.03$, $p<.001$, for Sinhala (mother tongue); for Science $t=12.2$, $p<.001$). In the interviews with school counselors and class teachers described their experiences with aggressive students' low student-teacher attachment, lack of effort and ineffective monitoring and management of students were also identified as school-related factors and lack of parental involvement for their children's education that could result in aggressive behavior.



Note. $p < 0.001$ ***, $p < 0.01$ **, $p < 0.05$.*

Figure 4: Characteristics of Aggressive and Non-aggressive Students

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As presented in Figure 4, the two groups also differed in the remaining variables. The non-aggressive students were shown to have reported higher levels of academic motivation, ($M=7.5$, $SD=2.2$) compared to the aggressive students ($M=2.9$, $SD=1.1$), $P<.001$; social interaction, ($M=5.6$, $SD= 3.2$.) in contrast to the aggressive students ($M=3.1$, $SD= 1.1$), $P<.01$; responsibility ($M=7.4$, $SD=3.98$) compared to the aggressive students ($M=3.4$, $SD=3.2$), $P<.001$, and job aspiration with lower degrees of hopelessness, in comparison to the aggressive students. All these differences were also statistically significant.

In the interviews with school counselors and class teachers, the respondents described their experiences with aggressive students. The respondents were asked to indicate or define the causes of aggressive behavior and some of the most common causes mentioned by the respondents were: a lack of parental supervision, a lack of perspective on the future (hopelessness), poor academic competence or intelligence, a poor or non-existent relationship between the parents and the schools that would help students solve their problems, large class sizes that do not encourage the active participation of students in class discussions, parental drug abuse, low parent-child attachment and low parent-school relationships, in contrast to the non-aggressive students. Particularly, school counselors described how most of the aggressive students had negative family relationships, such as parental conflict in the family, divorce, separation and alcoholism or substance abuse by the father. The socio-economic and education levels of the mothers were also often low, in comparison to the non-aggressive students' parents.

Table 1. Family Interaction in Both Groups

Nature of Family Interaction in Both Groups	Family Interactions											
	Aggressive						Non-aggressive					
	Yes		Sometimes		No		Yes		Sometimes		No	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
My parents encourage and support me in all aspects of my life	10	20	14	28	26	52	42	84	8	16	0	0
My parents force me to do every bit of every task	6	12	10	20	34	68	40	80	80	16	2	4
My parents are not always happy with what I do	44	88	5	10	1	2	2	4	3	6	45	90
As there is no peace between my parents, I hate staying at home	38	76	9	18	3	6	1	2	5	10	44	88
My parents and family focus more on my faults than my good sides	46	92	3	6	1	2	1	2	6	12	43	86
I am so happy that I get help and encouragement from my family	19	38	9	18	22	44	48	96	2	4	0	0
I discuss everything with my parents openly	18	36	13	26	19	38	34	68	10	20	6	12
I do what my friends tell me rather what my parents tell me to do	39	78	8	16	3	6	2	4	12	24	36	72
My parents usually conflict on monthly expenses	46	92	3	6	1	2	2	4	6	12	42	84
My parents are happy in their life	18	36	14	28	18	36	39	78	8	16	3	6
Most of the time my parents quarrel and argue each other	38	76	7	14	3	6	2	4	4	8	44	88

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Nature of family interaction: 11 items in the questionnaire related to the nature of family interaction and the findings indicated that aggressive students had poor relationships and weak parent-child interactions in comparison to the non-aggressive students (see Table 1). Only 20% of the aggressive students replied 'yes' to the question: *"My parents encourage and support me in all aspects of my life"*, in contrast to the non-aggressive students where 84% of the sample responded 'yes' to the same question. 88% of the aggressive students replied 'yes' to the question: *"My parents are not always happy with what I do"*, in contrast to the non-aggressive students, of whom 4% replied 'Yes' and 16% replied "Sometimes", while 80% gave no response to the same question. 76% of the aggressive students replied 'yes' to the question: *"As there is no peace between my parents, I hate staying at home"*, in contrast to the non-aggressive students, of whom 2% replied 'Yes' and 10% replied "Sometimes", while 88% gave no response to the same question. Of the aggressive students, 76% responded 'Yes' to the question: *Most of the time my parents quarrel and argue each other*", compared to 88% of the nonaggressive students who responded 'Yes' to the statement. According to the results proved that aggressive students' parents presented conflict their interrelationship in contrast to the non-aggressive students' parents. Further findings about parent-child interactions showed that the aggressive students had less interaction with their parents, in contrast to the non-aggressive students. 36% of the aggressive students agreed with the statement: *"I discuss everything with my parents openly"*, while 68% of the non-aggressive students agreed with the statement. Of the aggressive students, 78% responded 'Yes' to the question: *"I do what my friends tell me rather what my parents tell me to do"*, compared to 16% of the non-aggressive students who responded 'Sometimes' to the statement. Further interview respondents, counselors described that negative emotion including short tempers, frustration and excessive anxiety were also present, in contrast to the non-aggressive students. It has been shown that aggressive behavior develops from a combination of risk factors associated with weak family relationships, schools, family conflict, poor parental supervision and parental substance abuse.

By administering the CFSEI-3 scale for both the groups, findings showed that the aggressive students had a low level of self-esteem quotients (GSEQ < 70), in contrast to the non-aggressive children, who presented normal quotients (GSEQ = 90-110). The results of the study proved that non-aggressive students have positive parent relationships and emotions when compared to aggressive students. It can thus be concluded that aggressive students have a combination of risk factors associated with the family, such as family conflict, poor parental interactions, parents' substance abuse and weak parent-school relationships. These factors resulted in a decrease of self-esteem in aggressive students.

Table 2. Level of Self Esteem between Both Groups

Group	Mean	SD	Global Self Esteem Quotients (GSEQ)
Aggressive students	49	10.67	< 70 Very low self esteem
Non-aggressive students	82	8.32	90-110 Normal self-esteem

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of previous studies indicated that aggression is a problem in schools and the results of this study confirmed those findings. Almost all interviewees described how

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aggressive behaviors manifested in their schools. Research has identified many risk factors that contribute to the development of aggressive behavior, but many children and adolescents develop resiliency to deal with these risks. It has been shown that aggressive behavior develops from a combination of risk factors associated with individuals, families, schools, family conflict, poor parental supervision and parental substance abuse. Low parent-child attachment and weak parent-school relationships were all found to be factors that increased the likelihood of aggressive behavior among school children. Academic failure, lack of school commitment, low aspirations and goals, low teacher and student morale, low student-teacher attachment, lack of effort and ineffective monitoring and management of students were also identified as school-related factors that could result in aggressive behavior. Further, the results of this study proved that children constantly encountered aggressive behaviors of which the most common types were ridiculing, taunting and fighting in groups. Negative emotion including short tempers, frustration and excessive anxiety were also present, in contrast to the non-aggressive students. Aggressive students also showed very low levels of self-esteem when compared to the non-aggressive students.

Schools should have specific rules and regulations to control aggressive behaviors in students. It seems vital for teachers to develop better empathy with aggressive students. There is also a need to provide integrated counseling services and opportunities for students to have more extracurricular and disciplinary activities from elementary school onwards, in order to deal with the problems of aggression in school. Another point to be considered is the possibility of offering practical life-skills education to young students as well as an increased emphasis on aesthetics including music, dancing and art as class activities from primary to secondary school. Extra-curricular activities and sports activities help students develop skills and learn social interaction, trust, responsibility, self-regulation, tolerance and other pro-social behaviors and these could be introduced into school curricula. In order to reduce student aggression, the school culture and teacher-student interactions should also be improved and the teachers' interpersonal skills should be developed for them to be active and empathetic listeners, helping them to build caring, supportive relationships and a good rapport with their students.

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Acknowledgements

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: S Senarath (2020). An analysis of how family relationships and psycho-social characteristics influence student aggression and self-esteem. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 8(3), 278-287. DIP:18.01.035/20200803, DOI:10.25215/0803.035