

# The Social Dynamics of Aggressive and Disruptive Behavior in School: Implications for Behavior Consultation

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The role of social dynamics in the establishment and maintenance of aggressive and disruptive behavior is reviewed and discussed in light of consultation. Three key areas are outlined: the contributions of social structures to interpersonal conflict, the relation between peer associations and problem behavior, and the relation between social positions and problem behavior. This article suggests that direct intervention efforts (e.g., social skills training, behavior management strategies, peer support strategies, grouping practices) can be augmented by information about ongoing social dynamics in the classroom and school. Specific ways that behavior consultants can use social dynamic information to support the direct intervention efforts of teachers and administrators are discussed.

Concerns about aggressive and disruptive behavior in school have increased in recent years. Researchers and interventionists responded to these concerns by focusing on programs (e.g., social skills training, anger coping) to improve the behavior of antisocial students and by identifying disciplinary practices to make schools safer (Bear, 1998; Walker & Gresham, 1997). Less focus has been placed on how to utilize the school social context to prevent antisocial behavior despite recent investigations in the sociology of education and developmental psychology indicating that so-

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cial dynamics may contribute to aggressive and disruptive behavior in schools (Baker, 1998). Although problem behavior may be attributable to specific students, events leading up to and contributing to problems may be precipitated by the actions of friends, classmates, and enemies. Understanding these dynamics may enhance the prevention of school antisocial behavior.

The need to include a focus on the social context as a contributor to antisocial behavior is consistent with a developmental–interactional or developmental systems perspective (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Cairns & Cairns, 1994). According to this framework, individual factors (e.g., biophysical, cognitive, affective, behavioral) and extraindividual factors (e.g., friendships, peer groups, classrooms, families, neighborhoods) tend to influence each other bidirectionally as they mutually contribute to the establishment and maintenance of social behavior, including antisocial patterns. For the purpose of understanding antisocial behavior in school, two fundamental questions emerge from this perspective: How do characteristics of the student elicit responses from the social context that maintain problem behavior? How does the social context evoke and support the student's problem behavior (Farmer, Farmer, & Gut, 1999)? This perspective does not compete with other frameworks for understanding the intervention needs of antisocial youth, but it does extend it. Specifically, it indicates a need for developing interventions that are responsive to the dynamics between the individual and the social context (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). Accordingly, this article addresses two aims. First, I discuss how social dynamics contribute to aggressive and disruptive behavior patterns in school. Second, I outline ways behavior consultants can monitor social dynamics and provide support to help teachers and administrators intervene with the social context to prevent antisocial behavior.

### SCHOOL SOCIAL DYNAMICS AND PROBLEM BEHAVIOR

In schools, students construct their identities and status through their social interactions and peer relationships. As early as preschool, students develop social structures of distinct peer groups or cliques (Strayer & Santos, 1996). Preschool children are quite selective in their peer affiliations (Snyder, West, Stockemer, Gibbons, & Almquist-Parks, 1996). They tend to spend most of their time with a small group of peers and little time with the remaining peers. Such selectivity is sustained across the school years as students create and modify their identity, behavior, and values through their peer relationships (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Kinney, 1993).

Social hierarchies emerge in classrooms and schools as some peer groups gain greater social prominence and influence than others. For example, Adler and Adler (1996) identified popular cliques, wannabes, middle groups, and social isolates in elementary social structures. Popular *cliques* were composed of “cool” students and their followers. Students in popular cliques commanded attention from others and set the tone for the behavior of the rest of the class. Typically, they composed one third of the class. *Wannabes* were students on the periphery of the popular cliques. They were not actual members, but they hung around popular cliques and tried to gain acceptance although most of their friends were outside the clique. Wannabes usually made up about 10% of the class. *Middle groups* were composed of students who did not try to be cool or accepted by popular students. These students clustered into small groups, tended to be loyal and accepting of others, and usually made up about half the class. *Social isolates* were students who were loners or pariahs. Generally, they did not associate with others, but occasionally they became default friends with other isolates. These students typically made up about 10% of the class.

The hierarchical structures described by Adler and Adler (1996) are consistent with other work on classroom social networks (e.g., Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Strayer & Santos, 1996). Social processes that maintain such structures can support problem behavior in three interrelated ways. First, interpersonal conflict can emerge as students work to maintain or improve their status. Second, students may develop peer associations that support antisocial behavior. Third, problem behavior may be (or may be perceived as) an avenue to social success for some students. These three points merge to suggest that aggressive and disruptive behavior serves a variety of different functions that are supported by school social dynamics.

### **Social Structures and Interpersonal Conflict**

Direct confrontations and physical attacks (particularly for boys) and social aggression such as gossiping, starting rumors, turning friends against each other, and ostracism (particularly for girls) are standard forms of interpersonal expression in youth (Cairns & Cairns, 1994). Interpersonal conflict reflects natural social dynamics and peer group processes. In school social structures, maintaining and improving one’s status is a high-stakes proposition that can often lead to disagreements and fights (Merten, 1997). Although some of the most severe forms of school aggression may be the domain of bullies who systematically target certain students as victims (see Pellegrini, 1998), many highly aggressive students are well embedded in

the mainstream of school life and engage in high levels of prosocial as well as aggressive behavior (Pepler, Craig, & Roberts, 1998). In popular cliques, Adler and Adler (1996) found that differences in popularity, power, and control separated leaders from second-tier members and followers. Most cliques had a single leader who had the power to set the clique boundaries, raise or lower people in favor, and set the trends and opinions of the group. Just below leaders were second-tier members (usually one or two people) who were either best friends of the leader or who had their own support in the clique. The majority of the members of the popular cliques were followers. These individuals legitimized the leader's power through their acceptance of his or her actions.

The most central or prominent members of popular groups tend to be the most popular students in the class, and they often wield considerable social influence in the entire social network (Adler & Adler, 1996; Xie, Cairns, & Cairns, 1999). Such power breeds envy, jealousy, and discontent in and among groups (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Merten, 1997). Students may attempt to enhance their social positions by building coalitions and by prompting the demotion or social ostracism of others. This is done through such strategies as gossiping, starting rumors, manipulation of friendships, abandoning existing friendships for friendships with higher status peers, or developing friendships with peers who will help to challenge the social power of one's adversaries. Students may also bully (i.e., verbal or physical attack) others to demonstrate and enhance their social superiority (Adler & Adler, 1995; Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Pellegrini, 1995; Salmivalli, Huttunen, & Lagerspetz, 1997).

A considerable level of meanness and interpersonal conflict is directly instigated by popular students as they work to enhance their own status. Popular girls use social aggression (e.g., gossiping, manipulation, ostracism) to gain a competitive advantage in the pursuit of popularity. Merten (1997) described a group of girls who were labeled by their teachers as the "dirty dozen." These junior high girls were very popular, yet they were extremely mean to each other as they jockeyed for power and status in the group. Popular boys use their physical prowess to establish social power and control. Adler and Adler (1995) noted how Robert, a follower in a popular fourth grade peer group, was mystified by the manipulative skills of Scott, the leader of his group:

Robert: He'd start a fight and then he would get everyone in it, 'cause everyone followed him, and then he would get out of it so he wouldn't get in trouble.

Q: How'd he do that?

Robert: One time he went up to this kid Hunter Farr who nobody liked, and said, "Come on Farr, you want to talk about it?" and started kicking him, and then everyone else started doing it. Scott stopped and started watching, and then some para-prof[essional] came over and said "What's going on here?" And then everyone got in trouble except him." (p. 154)

Evans and Eder (1993) found that students in middle school who are perceived as extremely aberrant in appearance, gender behavior, or mental maturity are usually avoided but sometimes ridiculed and mercilessly picked on by peers. As an example, they described a situation in which a girl in special education was pestered by a few students. In a 10-min period this incident escalated into a mob action where the girl was surrounded by 50 students. A core of about 10 students took turns trying to hit her, kick her, or aggravate her in some way. The rest of the crowd encouraged the students to continue or encouraged the girl to fight back. Evans and Eder suggested that such incidents occur because students are insecure about their own social acceptance and scapegoat the students who have been collectively labeled as aberrant. By picking on students who are socially isolated, other unpopular students can assert some social influence, release their own frustrations, and deflect negative attention away from themselves.

In addition, classroom social structures may be formed in ways that promote bullying. An examination of the peer networks of bullies in sixth-grade classes suggests that youth take on social roles that support bullying processes (Salmivalli et al., 1997). Students who are bullies associate with peers who assist or reinforce their antisocial behavior, and they develop larger social networks than students who are victims, defenders, or outsiders. Additional work in this area suggests that some students take on the role of victim and engage in behaviors that support the aggressive attacks of bullies. In fact, Pellegrini (1998) suggested that bullies and victims may be attracted to the same peer group because their behaviors are mutually reinforcing.

### **Peer Associations and Problem Behavior**

A second way that school social dynamics can support problem behavior is through affiliations with similar peers. As previously noted, students are selective in their peer associations. Typically, students associate with peers who are similar to them on key social characteristics (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Kinney, 1993). As students form social structures of distinct peer groups, their strategies for inclusion and exclusion in groups become a mechanism

for shaping their behaviors, beliefs, and values (Adler & Adler, 1995; Cairn & Cairns, 1994). Thus, students' friends and associates can play an important role in the establishment and maintenance of their behavior.

A common view is that students with problem behavior are rejected by peers, but although they may not be well liked, most students with high levels of problem behavior have friends or associates. As early as preschool, students tend to associate with peers who are similar to them in terms of aggressive behavior (Farver, 1996). Snyder, Horsch, and Childs (1997) found that both aggressive and nonaggressive preschoolers were highly selective in their peer affiliations and spent the majority of their time with a few same-sex classmates. Most children established strong, stable, mutual affiliations with peers similar to them in aggression. Analyses of dyadic interactions of stable peer associates indicated that highly aggressive students were in dyads characterized by significantly higher levels of conflict.

Throughout their school careers, youth have a propensity to affiliate with the same types of peers, and highly aggressive and disruptive students tend to be members of peer groups that are characterized by high levels of problem behavior (Cairns & Cairns, 1994). Although their associates change across time, the characteristics of one's associates tend to be stable from year to year (Neckerman, 1996). Such stability appears to be critical in the maintenance of one's behavior patterns and may increase students' risk for later problems. Youth who associate with deviant peers have higher levels of school dropout, conduct disorder, substance abuse, criminal behavior, and adult adjustment problems (Bullis, Walker, & Stieber, 1998; Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Fergusson & Horwood, 1996).

A social-interactional framework may explain how deviant peer associations contribute to the development of disorder. Individuals influence each other's behavior through synchrony in social interactions (Cairns, 1979). Researchers at the Oregon Social Learning Center have investigated interactions of delinquent and nondelinquent friendship dyads in laboratory settings. Friends of delinquents supported rule-breaking and violent behavior by laughing and giving verbal approval when subjects endorsed antisocial themes. This support was uniquely associated with subjects' level of violence in later years (Dishion, Eddy, Haas, Li, & Spracklin, 1997). Also, antisocial boys were bossy with their friends and were involved in negative reciprocal cycles of social interchange. No differences between antisocial and nonantisocial boys were found for the occurrence of prosocial behaviors (Dishion, Andrews, & Crosby, 1995).

The laboratory findings of Dishion and his colleagues have recently been reflected in a naturalistic investigation of playground behaviors of

aggressive and nonaggressive elementary students. Pepler, Craig, and Roberts (1998) used structured observations to code students' interactive behavior, affective valence, and play states. Aggressive students had higher rates of verbal and physical aggression, more prosocial behaviors, and higher rates of interaction than nonaggressive students. Sequential analyses indicated a high degree of reciprocity in peer interactions. Prosocial behaviors were met with prosocial behaviors. Antisocial behaviors were met with either antisocial or prosocial behaviors. This finding suggests that the behavioral styles of aggressive students may elicit maintaining responses from peers. This may occur either through escalation (i.e., reciprocal antisocial response) or direct reinforcement (i.e., acquiescence to coercion) on the part of the interactive partners of aggressive students. As Pepler and her colleagues concluded, the socialization experiences of aggressive students in the peer group may support continuity in their aggressive behavior.

The research findings on the social affiliations of aggressive students converge to suggest that the formation of classroom social structures as early as preschool may set in motion a developmental process that supports and maintains a student's problem behavior across his or her school career. Students' level of aggressive behavior influences the types and quality of peer associations that are available to them. Students who are aggressive early in their school careers are likely to become embedded in a social network with other aggressive students. The types of social interchanges that these students establish with each other (e.g., coercion, bossiness, positive valuation of aggression) will support the development of behaviors, values, and beliefs that are consistent with aggressive and disruptive patterns. As they grow older, their aggressive behaviors and values are likely to increase the probability that they affiliate with peers who also engage in problem behavior. In turn, these affiliations are likely to sustain their problem behavior.

### **Social Positions and Problem Behavior**

A third way that social dynamics may support problem behavior is through the prominence and social influence that such behavior affords students. Sociometric status research clearly shows that aggressive and disruptive behavior is associated with rejected status, whereas prosocial behavior is associated with popular status (Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990). However, sociometric status does not provide a complete picture of students' social positions in the classroom or school (Cairns, Cadwallader,

Estell, & Neckerman, 1997). By focusing exclusively on likability, sociometric status procedures overlook other aspects of students' social positions, including their peer group membership, prominence in the social structure, social influence, characteristics of their friends and associates, and dominance status.

Sociometric status procedures assess how well students are liked by peers in general. To identify sociometric status with peer nomination techniques (e.g., Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982), all participating students are asked to nominate the three peers they like most and the three they like least. To identify sociometric status with rating procedures (e.g., Asher & Dodge, 1986), participating students are asked to rate how much they like each of their classmates on a Likert scale. Students who receive a high number of positive nominations or ratings and few negative ones are identified as *popular*. Students who receive a high number of negative nominations or ratings and few positive ones are identified as *rejected*. With these procedures status is inferred from how well students are liked, yet being liked is only one dimension of popularity or social position.

It is possible for a student to be viewed as popular or dominant in the social structure but not be well liked by peers. A recent investigation bears this out by differentiating between sociometric popularity and perceived popularity. Parkhurst and Hopmeyer (1998) used standard sociometric status procedures to identify the students who were liked most by their peers (i.e., popular sociometric status). In addition, they asked peers to nominate the students that they thought were most popular (i.e., perceived popularity). Although there was some overlap between the two constructs, most sociometrically popular seventh and eighth graders were not perceived by peers as popular, and most students who were high on perceived popularity were not sociometrically popular. Students who were high on perceived popularity but not sociometric status were characterized by peers as dominant, aggressive, and stuck up but not as kind or trustworthy. Sociometrically popular students who were not perceived as popular were characterized by peers as kind and trustworthy but not dominant, aggressive, or stuck up.

These findings are consistent with ethnographic studies of popularity. For example, Eder (1985) found that the most popular girls in middle school tended to be also the least liked. As the popular girls grew in popularity, everyone wanted to be their close friends. However, to maintain their popular status, popular girls developed strong skills of social manipulation to limit their friendships to other popular students. Thus, they quickly grew to be viewed as stuck up and were highly disliked although everyone considered them to be popular. Adler, Kless, and Adler (1992)

found that popular elementary boys were more disruptive, disobedient, and challenging to teachers and that they used their physical prowess and athletic ability to establish dominance over peers. Although they were mean, made fun of peers, and fought other boys to establish their superiority, the most athletic boys tended to be the most popular boys. Similarly, Pellegrini (1995) found that boys used rough-and-tumble play to establish dominance in the social hierarchy as they began middle school. Rough behavior on the playground was negatively correlated with sociometric status (i.e., being liked) but positively correlated with peer ratings of social dominance. Boys who were nominated by peers as tough systematically chose less tough boys to exploit during rough play.

The findings of such naturalistic investigations correspond with a growing body of survey research that shows that antisocial behavior is sometimes associated with influential social positions. Studies of social network centrality (i.e., position of the student and his or her peer group relative to other students and peer groups) showed that many highly antisocial boys are nuclear in their classroom or school social structures (Farmer & Rodkin, 1996; Xie et al., 1999). These students were among the most prominent members of highly prominent peer groups. Additionally, studies using configural analyses to identify subtypes of antisocial students found that some high antisocial boys were rated as popular by teachers and cool by peers (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, in press). Analyses of social network centrality also indicated that these boys were highly prominent in the social structure.

An investigation of the sociometric status and peer reputations of students in urban middle schools showed two distinct types of sociometrically popular students, those frequently nominated by peers as being prosocial and those frequently nominated as aggressive or disruptive (Luthar & McMahon, 1996). This finding suggests that in some settings highly aggressive and disruptive students are well liked by their peers. Stormshak et al. (1999) investigated the relation between behavior problems and peer preference across different first-grade classroom contexts. The acceptability of aggression varied from classroom to classroom. Aggression was considerably more likely to lead to low preference when it was nonnormative in the peer context and more likely to be positively associated with peer preference in highly aggressive classroom contexts. In addition, recent work suggests that there are ethnic and gender differences in who youth admire and hold in high esteem (Graham, Taylor, & Hudley, 1998). In contrast to minority (African American and Latina) girls and European American youth, early adolescent minority males tended to nominate low achieving (e.g., disobeys rules, puts little effort into school, good

at sports) peers as the students that they most admired, respected, and wanted to be like. These studies suggests a need to look beyond likability as an index of students' positions in the social structure and also consider the beliefs, values, and normative behaviors of the broader social context in which they are embedded.

The concepts of dominance and social prominence may help to explain the maladaptive social goals of aggressive youth. Many aggressive youth place a higher priority on retaliation than friendship maintenance (Erdley & Asher, 1999). By retaliating, aggressive youth may be attempting to demonstrate and maintain dominance over offending peers. Also, aggressive youth may view problem behavior as a means of enhancing their social positions. Maggs, Almeida, and Galambos (1995) reported that students who engage in frequent problem behavior in early adolescence reported more peer involvement and greater feelings of acceptance than students who did not engage in such behavior. Carroll, Durkin, Hattie, and Houghton (1997) examined the social goals of adolescents and found that adolescents who are delinquent or at risk attach more importance to goals associated with developing a social image (e.g., delinquency, freedom, autonomy), whereas adolescents not at risk are concerned with goals associated with an academic image (e.g., educational, interpersonal). As these researchers suggested, youth who are delinquent or at risk may attach a higher level of importance to relative peer status. If students perceive problem behavior as a means to achieve or protect their status and they attach a high level of importance to such status, they are likely to persist in problem behavior.

The social dynamics of problem behavior in school are summarized in Table 1. Other factors outside school (e.g., family, neighborhood peer groups, gangs) significantly contribute to students' behavior. Additionally, there are several school factors (e.g., disciplinary practices, instructional strategies, level of parental involvement, materials and resources) beside social dynamics that can strongly affect students' behavior. However, the aim of this article is to focus on how students form social structures and how their social roles in these structures affect their behavior. Accordingly, the following section is centered on understanding the implications of school social dynamics for school-based social interventions.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR BEHAVIOR CONSULTATION

Traditional interventions to address aggressive and disruptive behavior are focused at the level of the individual. Such interventions include

TABLE 1  
Summary of Social Dynamics of Problem Behavior in School

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1. Students construct their identities and status through their interactions with peers.
    - Students tend to form groups with peers who are similar to them on key characteristics including level of aggression, popularity, socioeconomic status.
    - Social hierarchies emerge in classrooms and schools (e.g., popular cliques, middle groups, wannabes, social isolates).
    - The role (e.g., leader, secondary or peripheral follower, social isolate) that a student plays in the social structure influences how he or she behaves and how others behave toward him or her.
  2. Interpersonal conflict emerges as students try to protect or improve their social positions or roles.
    - Social aggression (e.g., gossiping, manipulation, ostracization, coalition building).
    - Direct confrontation (e.g., threats, teasing, name calling, verbal challenges).
    - Physical confrontation (e.g., fights, physical assaults, displays of physical dominance).
  3. Students who are aggressive and disruptive tend to associate with peers who support or complement their problem behavior.
    - Behavioral support occurs when a student affiliates with peers who share his or her aggressive behaviors, values, and beliefs.
    - Complementarity occurs when a student affiliates with others who engage in behaviors that make his or her own behavior possible (e.g., follower with leader, bully with victims).
  4. Aggressive and disruptive students' social positions may support their behavior.
    - Student may be an influential leader of a peer group that supports aggression.
    - Student may be a follower who engages in problem behavior to protect his or her status or to gain favor with prominent leaders.
    - Student may be a victim or scapegoat who elicits aggressive interchanges with others by virtue of his or her responses to teasing and provocation by peers.
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behavior management strategies and social skills training. In addition, peer support strategies (e.g., cooperative learning, peer tutoring) and a variety of grouping practices (e.g., ungraded classrooms, mixed ability grouping, structured seating arrangements) are used by teachers and administrators to manipulate the social structure. Such practices are typically utilized without much consideration for how they may influence and be influenced by the ongoing social dynamics in the classroom and school. Intervening at the level of the social context does not require a new group of strategies or practices. Rather, it requires an independent assessment of how individually oriented (e.g., behavior management, social skills training) and structurally oriented (e.g., peer support strategies, grouping practices) interventions affect each other. Attention must be paid to how the ongoing social dynamics inhibit the effectiveness of individualized interventions and to how the

social structure can be modified so that social dynamics enhance the positive effects of intervention practices. Making assessments and collaborating with teachers and administrators to identify strategies to adjust interventions and contexts should be two primary concerns of behavior consultants.

This section outlines the information necessary for behavior consultants to assess the relationship between interventions and social dynamic processes. Research on school social dynamics has implications for intervention at three distinct levels. The first level involves the influence of school and classroom social structures on student behavior. The second level involves the contributions of peer associations and social roles in the development of aggressive behavior. The third level involves the role of the student's own behavior in eliciting and constructing social systems that support his or her problem behavior.

### **Social Structures and Student Behavior**

Table 2 lists diagnostic questions that can guide the consultant in assessing how the school and classroom social dynamics contribute to problem behavior. One of the first considerations that behavioral consultants should have in addressing disruptive and aggressive behavior is determining whether a hierarchical social structure supports such behavior. Even "good" students contribute to problem behavior by developing elite peer groups that promote a social hierarchy. Interpersonal discord and conflict are likely to grow as some students are relegated to lower social positions or groups. A general intervention to prevent aggressive and disruptive behavior may be the development of strategies that inhibit social hierarchies and instead give students a variety of possible avenues for developing positive social identities.

Eder and Parker (1987) found that in middle schools extracurricular events tend to be structured around sport activities that promote gender stereotypes. With limited resources for extracurricular activities, male-dominated athletic events were institutionally promoted as the prominent social activities. The findings suggest that by placing male athletes and cheerleaders at the center of the social world, schools help to build a hierarchical social structure that revolves around male athletes and cheerleaders. Without formal support for a variety of extracurricular activities, many students are not provided with opportunities to develop positive social roles and identities. Schools may be able to avoid some of the conflict between elite peer groups and counterculture groups by promot-

TABLE 2  
Diagnostic Questions to Assess Social Dynamics of Problem Behavior

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1. Do institutional practices at the school or classroom level support problematic social structures?
    - Are the interests and activities of some groups given more social prominence and support from adults than the interests and activities of other groups?
    - Is the social aggression or bullying by good students overlooked because it is being directed toward problem students?
    - Do instructional or disciplinary practices group together students who are likely to support or complement each other's problem behavior?
    - Do disciplinary practices (e.g., writing names on the board, calling the names of students for detention over the intercom) identify some students as bad or provide them with recognition for their problem behavior?
  2. Is the social structure in the school or classroom highly stratified in ways that promote animosity and interpersonal conflict among distinct peer groups?
    - Are there clearly identifiable elite peer groups?
    - Are there clearly identifiable outcast or counterculture groups?
  3. Does the general social context support aggressive and disruptive behavior?
  4. Are there antisocial peer groups or groups of bullies?
  5. Do nonparticipants in bullying support bullying by indicating their approval, acquiescing, looking the other way, or protecting bullies from teacher detection?
  6. Is the aggressive and disruptive student in a peer group that supports or complements his or her problem behavior?
  7. Does the aggressive and disruptive student have a social role that supports his or her problem behavior?
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ing a wide range of social activities in ways that prevent certain groups as being dominant and other groups as being outcasts. In support of this view, Kinney (1993) found that students who had social difficulty in middle school were able to develop positive social identities in high school because of the vast array of extracurricular activities available to them. It is possible that broadening the availability and prominence of other extracurricular activities may be one way to reduce the high-stakes social climate that is prevalent in many schools. The use of extracurricular activities to support students' social adjustment is also consistent with the finding that involvement in extracurricular activities serves as a protective factor for youth at risk (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997).

Following from the determination of whether a hierarchical social structure exists, behavioral consultants should also identify the types of inclusionary and exclusionary strategies that students use. Do considerable gossiping and friendship manipulation prompt fights? Do students

engage in physical assaults to display their dominance or to exert social influence over others? If so, it is helpful to be aware of the social dynamics in the school and to monitor activities (e.g., lunch, recess, class change times) to prevent such behaviors from escalating into fights. Behavior that is likely to promote conflict should be addressed with clear and consistent consequences before fights occur. In addition, efforts should be made to help students develop alternative behaviors to meet their social needs without causing conflict.

A third consideration is whether the general social climate in the school or classroom supports problem behavior. Do students see problem behavior as a viable means to social success? If so, it is necessary to reframe the social structure so that students view prosocial behavior as the most likely way to be socially successful. Such instances require a very carefully structured and consistently monitored schoolwide or classroom discipline plan (see Colvin, Kameenui, & Sugai, 1993; Nelson, 1996). In addition, educators need to work carefully with students who have high status in the social structure to garner their support and modeling of prosocial behaviors and values at the group, classroom, and school level (Xie et al., 1999). Teachers who are effective at managing behavior often use an invisible hand to manipulate the classroom climate (Cairns & Cairns, 1994). To do this it is necessary to make the social influence of prominent students contingent on their prosocial behavioral expression, to reinforce their prosocial expression with increased social responsibilities and opportunities, and to enlist their support in sanctioning the problematic behavior of their peers.

A fourth consideration is whether the social structure of the school or classroom supports bullying processes. Do students use rough-and-tumble play and demonstrations of their physical prowess to enhance their own status and dominance in the classroom? Do bullies affiliate with peers who support or complement their behavior? Do bullies affiliate with victims? If bullying is a risk in a school, the social network should be carefully monitored for structural supports of bullying and direct intervention should be taken to redirect such behavior, and, if necessary and appropriate, to break up peer groups that support bullying. Garrity, Jens, Porter, Sager, and Short-Camilli (1997) outlined a five-component intervention model of bullying that includes a focus on victims, the majority of students, the parental community, teachers and staff, and the bullies. This comprehensive intervention model is indicative of the point that structural as well as individual changes are necessary to prevent bullying in schools.

## Peer Associations and Social Roles

Social development research in the current decade indicates that students' peer group associations and social roles are important in promoting continuity or change in their social behavior (Dishion, French, & Patterson, 1995; Neckerman, 1996; Pepler et al., 1998; Snyder, Horsch, & Childs, 1997). In developing interventions for aggressive students, it is important to consider whether they are in a peer group, the characteristics of their peer group, and the role of the student in the group. Contextual level interventions should be tailored to address the social factors that support a student's problem behavior, and efforts should be made to promote the development of a new context that supports prosocial behavior patterns (Hartup, 1996; Xie et al., 1999).

Contextual level interventions for a student who is socially isolated must be responsive to the group process factors that promote the scapegoating of the student by others and must also take into consideration the social reputation of the student (Coie, 1990). Are there particular groups that scapegoat the student? If so, consequences at the group level should be considered along with strategies that provide such students alternative avenues of behavioral expression. It may be possible to identify a peer group that has a solid standing in the social structure and that will not be susceptible to using the student to promote their own social purposes. If so, it may be appropriate to provide opportunities for the student to interact with this group and to foster a more positive standing in the social structure. However, such transformations can be extremely difficult if the student has a longstanding negative reputation. Therefore, such efforts should be carefully monitored and accompanied by other strategies to enhance the student's social reputation (e.g., social skills training, an increase in activities that highlight the student's strengths, a decrease in activities that highlight the student's social vulnerabilities).

Contextual level interventions for a student who is peripheral in the social structure should consider the type of group the student is attempting to gain entry into and the ways that the group manipulates or supports the student's problem behavior. Is the group a fairly prosocial one that encourages the student's problem behavior for entertainment purposes? Or does the student engage in social skirmishes with other peripheral members of the group to gain social preference? If the group is aggressive, is the student used as a victim for group members to display their dominance and physical prowess? Is the student enlisted by the group to engage in battles or problem behavior to deflect the risk of higher status group members? Does the student engage in high-risk behavior to gain the attention and fa-

vor of the group? Issues such as these must be carefully considered in developing interventions for peripheral aggressive youth. In some instances it may be appropriate to encourage the student toward a group that is less likely to manipulate or support the student's problem behavior. In other instances it may be more appropriate to address the behavior of the entire group and to help the group reframe interactional processes and social identities.

Contextual level interventions for a student who is a follower but a stable group member must consider whether the problem behavior is supported by the general values, behaviors, and beliefs of the group or whether the behavior is due to the efforts of the student to maintain his or her status in the group. If the student is in an aggressive group, it may be necessary to help him or her develop relationships with a new group that embraces prosocial norms and behaviors. This may be done through involvement in extracurricular activities or the careful use of peer-based interventions (e.g., cooperative learning, peer tutoring, peer mentors). It may be appropriate to help the group develop alternative forms of behavioral expression and to promote involvement in prosocial activities. If the student's problem behavior does not reflect the norms and values of the group but centers on conflict with peers of similar status, it may be necessary to develop interventions aimed at specific dyads of students. Such efforts may be aimed at reframing the interactions of the dyad by changing their behavioral responding toward each other. In these instances it may also be helpful to assist each student in developing a unique and positive identity in the group and classroom social structure.

Contextual level interventions for a student who is a leader of a group should consider whether or not the student's status is gained by being tough and aggressive or whether the problem behavior is due to efforts to maintain a position at the top of the social hierarchy. Problem behavior is likely to be a source of status and a mechanism for maintaining status for highly aggressive leaders of highly aggressive groups. Effectively addressing such situations may require a concerted effort by administrators and teachers in terms of establishing clear expectations for the student and group, developing activities that promote the student's and the group's productive engagement and adoption of school values, and fostering positive relations among the student, school staff, and peers in other groups (Xie et al., 1999). As the leader begins to move toward prosocial behaviors and values, it is necessary to support such changes in the other members of the peer group and to facilitate the reorganization of the peer support system to prosocial patterns. Otherwise, social vulnerability is likely to

prompt the leader back to problem behaviors in an effort to maintain power in the social structure.

In general, contextual-level interventions must consider how the peer group and classroom support the problem behavior in terms of both interactional exchange and direct reinforcement. If students develop consistent interactional patterns that support problem behavior with peers, both in their own group and with peers in other groups, it is necessary to document patterns in such interchanges and identify the mechanisms that support them (i.e., functional assessment). Can the interactions be avoided by manipulating the social structure? Can they be reframed by prompting different responses from students in the group or class? When problem behaviors are directly reinforced by peers (e.g., laughter, approval, acquiescence, instrumental gain), interventions should be developed to inhibit such support, and the environment should be restructured in ways that support prosocial behaviors.

### **Behavioral Elicitation**

Students' placement in the classroom and school social structure is not a random process. Students select and are selected into peer groups and social roles that correspond with their general attributes, behaviors, and values. Students with aggressive and disruptive behavior play a role in constructing their social worlds in school by virtue of their interchanges with peers. When aggressive students respond to the ovations of peers with coercive, disruptive, argumentative, or confrontational strategies they may be actively creating an environment that supports their problem behavior (Cairns et al., 1997). Peers who use prosocial strategies may avoid them, peers who are afraid of them may support their behavior through acquiescence, peers who are equal to them may support their behavior through reciprocity, and peers who are more dominant may bully or manipulate them into further problem behavior.

Thus, when developing interventions for aggressive students it is useful to consider the types of responses and interactions that the student's behavior elicits from others. Interventions directed at changing the context must take into consideration how the student's behavior may affect the context. Strategies that involve grouping students together (e.g., cooperative learning, peer tutoring) may have unintended deleterious effects. The student may become so disruptive that the other students ignore and avoid him or her rather than encourage appropriate behavior. The student may be paired with another student who is mutually provocative, and

they may escalate each other's problem behavior. The student may become socially dominant and prompt problem behavior from the other students. The student may be so reactive or submissive that the other students in the group enjoy upsetting and bullying him or her.

Therefore, as contextual interventions are developed to support the positive behavior of aggressive students, teachers must carefully monitor the student's behavior and help him or her develop skills that correspond with the demands of the social context. Social skills training that focuses on the specific social challenges and needs of the student are most likely to be effective (Gresham & MacMillan, 1997). The aim is to bring the behavior and context in line so that they are mutually supportive of prosocial expression. Table 3 summarizes intervention activities to reduce problem behavior at the three levels of school social dynamics.

### **The Need for Comprehensive Interventions**

From a developmental systems perspective, there is likely to be a wide variety of factors (e.g., attentional difficulties, levels of reactivity, parenting practices, family instability and emotional stress, poverty, neighborhood groups or gangs, highly established patterns of problem behavior, problematic social-cognitive processing patterns) that contribute to the maintenance of problem behavior in aggressive and disruptive youth. These factors tend to work in a system such that problems in one factor or domain are likely to support problems in another domain. Thus, to bring about long-term change in the behavioral patterns of students with chronic adjustment problems, it is necessary to help these factors change in such a way that they mutually support the student's positive behavioral adaptation. This is likely to require systems-of-care services that involve the coordinated efforts of education, special education, mental health, health, social services, juvenile justice, and community recreation agencies (Kutash & Duchnowski, 1997) or prevention programs that focus on promoting competence in the child, family, and school (Bierman et al., 1992).

Although it is not possible to address the development of systems-of-care or prevention programs adequately here, it is important to recognize that schools can play an influential role in such programs not only by coordinating efforts with other agencies but also by developing interventions that promote the reorganization of a student's behavior patterns in school. To do so requires interventions that actively focus on each of the three levels described in this article and that are responsive to how change at one level influences change at another level. It is helpful to view

TABLE 3  
Intervention Activities to Address Problem Behavior

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*School and classroom processes*

1. Identify school and classroom practices that contribute to hierarchical social structures and modify such practices to promote positive social identities for all students.
  - Promote a variety of extracurricular activities and prevent elitist structures by directing equal levels of attention and support to a range of activities and groups.
  - Develop instructional and disciplinary practices that do not group together students who support and complement each other's problem behavior.
  - Avoid the use of disciplinary practices that identify students as bad or that bring recognition to them because of their problem behavior.
  - Structure instruction so that all students are successful.
2. Develop a systematic structure to help teachers monitor and prevent social aggression and bullying.
  - Promote teachers' awareness of social aggression (e.g., gossiping, starting rumors, building coalitions, manipulating friendships) and bullying (e.g., verbal threats, name calling, physical attacks).
  - Develop a system of adult monitors for social aggression and bullying during noninstructional periods (e.g., class change time, lunch time, recess).
  - Develop and enforce clear and consistent social consequences for incidents of social aggression and bullying (e.g., student must have adult escort during class change time, student must have lunch at an adult-monitored table).
  - Promote activities that positively reinforce students' acceptance and tolerance of each other.

*Peer group and social roles*

1. Identify and closely monitor peer groups that routinely engage in activities (e.g., threats, teasing, bullying, social aggression) that promote interpersonal conflict.
    - For each group, have one or two adults develop a positive rapport with group members.
    - Have the adult frequently check in with groups to identify problems and to positively support and reinforce their prosocial activities.
  2. Identify students who are in social roles that support a lot of interpersonal conflict (e.g., bullies, victims) and help them reconstruct their social roles to reduce their involvement in and support of problem behavior.
    - Help teachers to direct the social opportunities of the leader of an antisocial group so that his or her leadership role is contingent on his or her support of prosocial behavior in the groups. For example, don't allow the student to be a team captain if he or she supports the bullying of others.
    - Help teachers develop group-level contingencies for prosocial behavior and enlist the support of the group leader by providing him or her with suggestions for how the group can meet expectations. For example, give behavior-specific directions on how the group can earn the opportunity for a preferred activity during free time.
    - Help teachers to anticipate and avoid placing students who are frequently bullied in situations that promote their being picked on by peers.
- 

*(Continued)*

TABLE 3 (Continued)

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- Help teachers provide students who are frequently picked on with opportunities that highlight their social strengths and that minimize their social liabilities.

*Behavioral elicitation*

1. Identify specific problem behaviors (e.g., verbal threats, arguing, whining) that elicit maintaining responses from peers and help the student develop alternative behaviors or skills in a structured social skills training program.
  2. Develop social opportunities or roles for the student that help him or her use and refine the social skills that he or she is learning in formal social skills training.
    - Provide student with carefully structured and monitored peer tutoring opportunities.
    - Use cooperative learning with carefully selected peers who will reinforce the newly acquired skills.
  3. Provide behavioral contracts and contingencies to positively reinforce the sustained performance of the newly acquired skills in real-life situations.
    - Develop personal goals for the student that focus specifically on the accurate performance of the newly acquired skill.
    - Develop a system for the student to self-monitor his or her use of the skill.
    - Provide the student with reminders or prompts about his or her personal goal.
    - Reinforce with positive social opportunities or roles when possible.
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the school social context as a system in which the social structure influences and is influenced by individual groups and their interrelations, groups influence and are influenced by the behaviors and attributes of individuals, and individuals influence and are influenced by the norms and values constructed in the social structure. The interrelatedness of these different components suggest that changing one component will be effective only to the degree that there are corresponding changes in the other components. Thus, interventions for antisocial youth will likely be most effective when they include a coordinated focus on behavior elicitation (i.e., social skills), peer group associations and social roles, and school and classroom social structures.

In summary, aggressive and disruptive behavior has many different functions that depend upon the characteristics of the social structure of the school and classroom, the peer associations and social roles of the student, and the student's personal attributes and behavioral proclivities. The ways in which these components work together influence the intervention needs of aggressive and disruptive students. Behavior consultants can help teachers and administrators create a school climate that promotes prosocial behavior by identifying how the social context contributes to problem behavior and by helping to identify ways to insure that social dynamics support rather than impede individualized interventions. Such ef-

forts can be viewed as successful when natural social processes envelop the student in a social system that maintains the student's prosocial behaviors, and these behaviors enhance the likelihood that the student becomes embedded in a comparable social system in subsequent school years and adult life.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported in part by the Office of Special Education Programs, U. S. Department of Education Grants H023A50033 and HO23C970103; and by National Institute of Mental Health Grant MH52429 to the Center for Developmental Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The views expressed in this article are mine and do not represent the granting agencies.

I thank my colleagues Beverley Cairns, Robert Cairns, Elizabeth Farmer, Ruth Pearl, Philip Rodkin, Rick Van Acker, and Hongling Xie for their guidance, support, and comments.

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