

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54937/ssf.2023.22.3.93-100>

## **Výskumné zistenia prezentujúce latentné agresívne správanie detí v predškolskom veku**

### **Research Findings Presenting Hidden Aggressive Behaviour in Preschool Children**

Barbora Kováčová, Martina Magová, Vlasta Belková

#### **Abstract**

The study describes covert aggressive behaviour that occurs as early as pre-school age. It is specific in that at preschool age the aggressor acts without hiding yet. Uniform findings are related to preschool age, supplemented by research findings from Slovak kindergartens. The authors describe on a specific situation of hidden aggressive behaviour, which was identified during the monitoring of aggressive behaviour in kindergartens.

**Keywords:** Hidden aggressive behaviour. Kindergarten. Monitoring.

#### **Introduction**

Although there are relatively many research and theoretically orientated and theoretically scientific and popular paperworks about bullying in the school environment, the basic of this text is the relatively little elaborated specific form of bullying that is hidden aggressive action. This is an aggressive act, which takes place indirectly in the group towards an individual, or against several individuals. This form of aggression has many labels (social aggression, hidden aggression, aggression, indirect aggression, Kováčová, 2019), depending on the perspective of the practitioners who use them.

Despite the different nomenclatures, experts agree that it is an aggressive action that damages the group's social relations towards the individual individuals and is realized vicariously (Kováčová, 2011; Kováčová, 2014; Fábry Lucká, 2017).

#### **Hidden aggressive behavior of preschoolers**

What is specific about hidden aggressive action in kindergartens is that there is only one victim in the group (a child regardless of gender, religion, race, or health), who is gradually isolated from the usual daily activities. It is a slow process with escalating tendency to isolate the child.

Aggression takes place from several sides, from the aggressor, and from other children who are involved not only at the aggressor's initiative. The aggressor in pre-school age is very specific about his/her actions also in view of his/her age. He/she remains hidden in the sense of the prohibitions he/she pronounces against the victim. In the group of other children, he/she performs directly, especially with regard to the type of instructions:

- *And we will not play with this one!*
- *Do not call this one to come to us!*
- *He/She is not my friend, nor yours!*

His/Her directness in communicating with the group and secrecy in communicating with the victim is also due to the fact that at the beginning of his/her trial he/she is not sufficiently socially mature to handle the manipulation with the group in a secretive way. If the aggressor at the beginning of his/her affairs has favourable conditions, he/she relatively quick to learn to manipulate the group members and to isolate the selected child on the basis of untrue arguments, without reason.

Based on pre-schoolers reports, the latent aggressive behavior is typical of specific statements in situations (Figure 1, 2). These are defined on the basis of a research probe in Slovak kindergartens and an important role plays the so-called „message“ (an important warning for the victim).

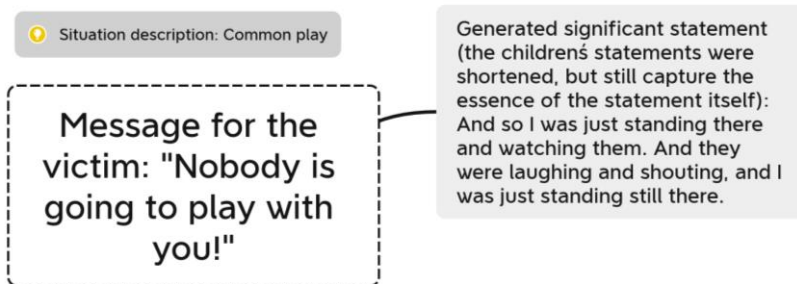


Figure 1: *Common play*

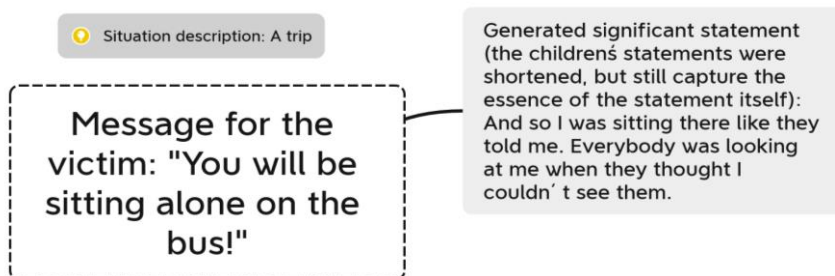


Figure 2: *A trip*

The basis of the described meta-communication is to inform the chosen child - the victim of the prohibition to participate in a particular situation and not to be present. The prohibition itself, as we have already mentioned, is given by another person (sympathetic to the aggressor), and the way the "prohibition" is carried out in a variety of forms - from verbal information during play, during walks, up to threats (this way of communication can be observed also in groups of pre-school children before joining an elementary school). Hidden aggression is a specific form of bullying that Crick- Grotpeter (1995) called as "non-physical aggression". From their point of view, it is a momentary effect in the mutual behaviour of people in society, at all levels of social contacts. Later, Fried (1996) said that this form of aggression should not be considered to be a typical aggressive behaviour because this silent, historically tolerated behaviour was considered as a natural part of socialization. Putallaz et al. (2007) confirmed that it is a deliberate ignorance of a member (victim) in various situations, but which strictly excludes any direct attacks on the victim. Later, they considered slander, obloquy aimed at weakening the position of the victim to be the indirect manifestations, resulting in damage to the reputation (concerning the "good name" or the social reputation) of the victim.

### **Characteristics of the hidden aggression in prechool age**

When linking the hidden aggression to the pre-school age of participants, we consider it correct to point to their closer characteristics. The description of this characteristic is considered to be significant in view of the analysis of the situation within this paper. The first study of hidden aggression (Crick, Werner, 1998) dwells on the fact whether in this age (meaning the early age) it is correct to write a paper on the hidden aggression. According to their research findings, the existence of hidden aggression in a child younger than 2,5 years has not been clearly confirmed. Crick (1997) stated that the emergence of the hidden aggression in early childhood (overlapping to the preschool age) is associated with a reduced level of mutual acceptance (negative preferences) and an increased tendency from the peer group to reject the peer, the friend, simply the one of them. Lovaš (2010) described a scenario theory by Huesmann, as an information processing model that illustrates the development of habitual aggression among children. The author claimed that a child creates the aggressive scenarios at an early age based on personal experience and learning by observing the surroundings. The result is "a network of cognitive scenarios of an aggressive behaviour in specific situations. To activate the scenario, it is sufficient to invoke and subsequently create conditions that can trigger the situation. It is enough to simply provide an information which carries the basic message to children we will not play with him/her, he/she will not be at our party, he/she will not sit with us at the table,

etc The aggressor does not need to hide According to Rigby (2001), a "lower" degree of concealment is typical for this age. At the age 3 to 5 years, the hidden aggression begins with prototype examples "You cannot come to my party", "You cannot play with us". This type of behaviour is obvious at the outset, the victim is informed, even present during the conversation. The preschool aggressor does not mind his . participation, usually it's a matter of maturing of the child. Gradually, he/she formulates his/her strategies through an intermediary In young school age, the latent aggressive behaviour becomes more discrete in terms of the form of aggression and aggressor's behaviour The behaviour of a school-aged aggressor is more elaborate and hidden Ostrov et al. (2004) claim that the identity of the perpetrator is always known, because the child in pre-school age is dealing with the situation here and now" Children have an effort to reach the goal of being in the spotlight being favourite" They are reaching their intention by shedding, joking on behalf of a member of the group (at this age this is not a conscious behaviour calculation). Rigby (2001) justifies this fact by saying that the younger aggressor (in terms of early and pre-school age) does not have the experience to act anonymously, but gradually acquires the competence by this procedure - to act aggressively Typical are the direct and indirect attacks of the aggressor against the victim (Archer, Coyne, 2005). When comparing the latency rate at younger school age, we can say that the aggressor has a reasonable ability to act aggressively in a hidden way, and his/her strategies are usually well thought out. It can influence the peer group members while managing the entire process of hidden aggression. Usually a child who started with aggression in pre-school age develops and evolves into concealed aggression, if the favourable conditions are created (see Ostrov et al., 2004).

### **Situations from research in kindergarten**

Kindergarten, as Kováčová wrote (2019), represents one of the first opportunities "to develop friendships and relationships that can even exceed the school environment." Social interaction as part of friendships, acquaintances, or brief meetings is considered by Walden et al. (1999) not only as one of the success indicators of the integration process, but also as a means of integration. In particular, it relates to the pre-school age in which the ability of social interaction with peers represents an important developmental stage, while this interaction carries an interpersonal context of social, speech and cognitive development. The space of a kindergarten where hidden bullying takes place is typical of the use of hidden elements in the behavior of the aggressor, the individual participants of the group, the entire group against the victim (Kováčová, 2011, Vodičková, 2022).

**a) A comment whose starting points are researched in connection with mediated aggressive behaviour in preschool age**

The research findings of Monks et al. (2005) have shown that the preschool age is an ideal time for carrying out the hidden aggression. Verlaan & Turmet (2010) confirmed that this form of aggressive behavior at this age is rather common. Practically, it appears in every collective where it is initially considered to be a common behaviour. The degree of acceptance of this form of peer group behaviour depends on the boundaries of the tolerability of the harming behaviour. Excluding a child from a particular game, a situation based on a secret ("do not tell it to him") suggests a higher form of mediated hidden action. At this point, the aggressors in the pre-school age are aware of their manipulative tendencies. The aggressor does not expect any of the present children to request reasoning (with true content). Currently, a touch of mystery that s joining the children and promotes this situation to be something extraordinary is enough.

**b) Recommendations for teachers and parents**

From this situation, it is clear that the use of role plays to clarify the overall course of the situation can be useful.

**c) The situation evaluation**

*... Him being an aggressor? No way, there are no serious problems with him. He is decent, he does not swear, he has friends, children like him, there are really no problems with him. It is true that he chooses his friends in a special way, but children do not complain. And really nobody played with Radko. He was on the playground alone, since no one came to him, so he put down his bounce-bike and went to the sandpit, where there was the pirates fight going on. Can I be a pirate, too? He asked. All children turned to Kamil. He pretended that the question does not concern him. Samko stepped out of the pirates group and turned to Radko, saying, "We're not picking up anybody anymore, come later ..."*

In this case, the occurrence of repeated aggression was confirmed. As this was a group of children between the ages of 5 and 6, they were confronted with the situation and the teacher asked them to explain why Radko isn't the right friend for them. Currently, this type of communication is not present in this group children. Since September, they will start the first year of elementary school. Kamil's parents have enrolled him to other elementary school than the children of the class will go to. It is not impossible that in another group Kamil will not try to use his experience to build the status of an aggressor. Of course this does not have to be the rule. It may even

happen that Kamil will meet a new leader in the new class who will be more skilled in the classroom manipulation strategy, or who knows the classmates from the kindergarten. In this situation, Kamil may even become a victim.

A stigmatized pupil/child involuntarily loses friends, as well as the social relationships with the group. Failure in the group and the feeling of inferiority increase the victimization in the areas in which the child/pupil figures in the position of the victim. Anxiety leads to a loss of interest in school, the victim does not even have to want to finish the school he/she can voluntarily leave or can be attempting an intentional exclusion because of a specific, often trivial reason (Rigby, 2001). In the pre-school age, education is an important part of the child upbringing. It should be conceived not only from the above mentioned facts, but it can be supplemented by the verbal rejection of the hidden aggression (not its understatement) and an analysis of the situation. Condemnation of the hidden aggression should be done by a teacher who is the authority in a given environment of the kindergarten for the child. Clarification of the process "I'm not playing with you, you're not my friend you're like this and that, let's not play with him" - is an important and primary step in educating pre-school children in the context of concealed aggression towards their peers. It is necessary to explain to the child that this type of behaviour causes to another one pain and suffering. It is strategic to evidence and argument all the information - why yes and why not, eventually to open a discussion about the feelings and experiences of the children. In case of children under the age of four, the clarification should be appropriately conducted by the use of a fairy tale, or a story of animal heroes with an emphasis on naming their inner experiencing.

## **Conclusion**

In the pre-school age, education is an important part of the child upbringing (Island & Bishop, 2008). It should be conceived not only from the above mentioned facts, but it can be supplemented by the verbal rejection of the hidden aggression (not its understatement) and an analysis of the situation. Condemnation of the hidden aggression should be done by a teacher who is the authority in a given environment of the kindergarten for the child. Clarification of the process "I'm not playing with you, you're not my friend you're like this and that, let's not play with him" - is an important and primary step in educating pre-school children in the context of concealed aggression towards their peers.

It is necessary to explain to the child that this type of behaviour causes to another one pain and suffering. It is strategic to evidence and argument all the information - why yes and why not, eventually to open a discussion about the feelings and experiences of the children. In case of

children under the age of four, the clarification should be appropriately conducted by the use of a fairy tale, or a story of animal heroes with an emphasis on naming their inner experiencing.

## Bibliography

- Archer, J.; Coyne, S. M. (2005). An Integrated Review of Indirect, Relational, and Social Aggression. In: *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 2005, 9(3), p. 212 – 230. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0903\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0903_2)
- Crick, N. R.; Werner, N. E. (1998). Response decision processes in relational and overt aggression. In: *Child Development*, 1998, 69(6), p. 1630 – 1639. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.1998.tb06181.x>
- Crick, N. R. (1997). Engagement in gender normative versus nonnormative forms of aggression: Links to social-psychological adjustment. In: *Developmental Psychology*, 1997, 33(4), p. 610 – 617. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.33.4.610>
- Fábry Lucká, Z. (2017). Liečebnopedagogická diagnostika problémového správania detí v psychomotorickej terapii. In: *Liečebnopedagogická diagnostika situácie dieťaťa s problémami v správaní*. Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského, 2017. 179 p.
- Fried, S.; Fried, P. (1996). *Bullies & victims: Helping your child through the schoolyard battlefield*. New York: M. Evans and Company, Inc.
- Kováčová, B. (2011). Špecifické formy šikanovania medzi žiakmi. In Adamík Šimegová, M., Kováčová, B. (eds.) 2011. *Šikanovanie v prostredí školy*. Trnava: Typi Universitatis Tyrnaviensis, 2011. p. 65 – 81. ISBN 978-80-8082-484-6.
- Kováčová, B. (2014). *Latentná agresia v škole*. Bratislava: Musica Liturgica, 2014. 97 p. ISBN 978-80-89700-02-8.
- Kováčová, B. (2019). *Agresia ohrozujúca sociálne vzťahy v predškolskom veku*. Ružomberok: Verbum, vydavateľstvo KU, 2019. ISBN 978-80-561-0714-0.
- Lovaš, L. (2010). *Agresia a násilie*. Bratislava: Ikar, 2010. p. 196.
- Ostrov, J. M.; Keating, C. F. (2004). Gender differences in preschool aggression during free play and structured interactions: An observational study. In: *Social Development*, 2004; 13(2), p. 255 – 277. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9507.2004.000266.x>
- Putallaz, M.; Grimes, C. L.; Foster, K. J.; Kupersmidt, J. B.; Coie, J. D.; Dearing, K. (2007). Overt and relational aggression and victimization: Multiple perspectives within the school setting. In: *Journal of School Psychology*, 2007, 45(5), p. 523 – 547. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2007.05.003>
- Rigby, K. (2001). Health consequences of aggression and its prevention in schools. In: J. Juvonen & S. Graham (Eds.). *Peer harassment in school*. New York: Guilford Press. p. 310 – 331.

- Rys, G. S.; Bear, G. G. (1997). Relational aggression and peer relations: Gender and developmental issues. In: *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 1997, 43, p. 87 – 106.
- Verlaan, P.; Turmel, F. (2010). Development Process and Outcome Evaluation of a Program for Raising Awareness of Indirect and Relational Aggression in Elementary Schools: A Preliminary Study. In: *School Psychology Review*, 2010, 39(4), p. 552 – 568.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02796015.2010.12087741>
- Vodičková, B. (2022). *Vývinové ťažkosti u detí v materskej škole v kontexte liečebnopedagogickej intervencie*. Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, 2022. 181 p. ISBN 978-80-223-5409-7.
- Walden, T.; Lemerise, E.; Smith, M. C. (1999). Friendship and popularity in preschool classrooms. In: *Early Education & Development*, 1999, 10(3), p. 351 – 371. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15566935eed1003\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15566935eed1003_7)

**Doc. PaedDr. Barbora Kováčová, PhD.**

Department of Special Education  
Catholic University in Ružomberok, Faculty of Education  
Hrabovská cesta 1, 034 01 Ružomberok  
[barbora.kovacova@ku.sk](mailto:barbora.kovacova@ku.sk)

**PaedDr. Martina Magová, Ph.D.**

Department of Special Education  
Catholic University in Ružomberok, Faculty of Education  
Hrabovská cesta 1, 034 01 Ružomberok  
[martina.magova@ku.sk](mailto:martina.magova@ku.sk)

**Doc. PaedDr. Vlasta Belková, PhD.**

Department of Special Education  
Catholic University in Ružomberok, Faculty of Education  
Hrabovská cesta 1, 034 01 Ružomberok  
[vlasta.belkova@ku.sk](mailto:vlasta.belkova@ku.sk)