

## **ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOR BY BOYS**

**David Lowenstein, Ph.D.  
Psychologist**

Aggressive, antisocial behavior as an adult does not win you many friends, but the same behavior in elementary school can make you one of the most popular kids in school. That is one finding from a new study of 452 fourth-through-sixth-grade boys which shows that tough, antisocial boys were not only viewed as popular and antisocial by their peers but also by their teachers and themselves. The study appears in the January issue of *Developmental Psychology*.

The findings of the study are important because they show how children are rewarded with popularity for being antisocial. This study stated that if some popular children are also antisocial, they may be overlooked in programs (focused mainly on unpopular children) that assist children toward positive developmental outcomes, and they also may have a large and negative influence on their peers.

The study involved boys from 59 classrooms in elementary schools around the country. The schools involved included inner-city, suburban and rural schools. The study found that there were similarities and differences in the typical behavioral profiles of popular African American and European American boys. Most popular boys in both ethnic groups were model children - athletic, cooperative, studious and sociable. However, about a third of very popular children were extremely antisocial. These boys tended to argue, be disruptive, get into trouble and start fights. African American boys in mostly White classrooms were particularly likely to be antisocial and very popular. This finding, according to the authors, adds to previous research findings that some of the characteristics associated with popularity and status may reflect the values of particular peer cultures. An alternative interpretation is that aggression may be functional for African American children who are socialized in low-income and higher-risk communities.

This study raises questions of whether high popularity buffers antisocial boys from future adjustment difficulties. For instance, popular antisocial boys may escape many of the risk factors predicted by peer rejection. Conversely, popular antisocial children might be particularly resistant to making necessary lifestyle changes in adolescence if their oppositional behavior has generally been associated with social status and prestige. These boys may internalize the idea that aggression, popularity and control naturally go together, and they may not hesitate to use physical aggression as a social strategy because it has always worked in the past. Obviously, there will come a point in these boys' lives when this turns from an adaptive and fun to a lonely and potentially dangerous characteristic.

Although many popular antisocial boys may become lifelong bullies, the researchers noted that society effectively says that some kinds of aggression and rebelliousness are legitimate to express and are culturally rewarded, and some antisocial boys in our study may go this route. For instance, many political leaders, CEOs and supervisors use aggression in a nonviolent way (verbal aggression, manipulation, etc.) to get what they want. They may not be loved, but they are powerful and have status, prestige and social/professional connections.

This study only looked at popularity as it applies to boys, but the authors also have evidence that there are substantial gender differences for popularity. Previous studies have shown that even when educated in the same classrooms, preadolescent boys and girls are involved in segregated cultures that can best be described as "separate worlds." They add that future research examining the differences between popular children should consider this.