

# PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF AGGRESSION AMONG CHILDREN BEFORE SCHOOL

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**Summary:** The paper discusses the problem of the child aggression in the postmodern society and school. The challenges, posed by this psychosocial phenomenon are presented. The thesis of the paper is that education requires an integral and consistent educational perception, when the organizing axis is the value of human dignity and respect. The purpose of education is perceived as integrating of the affective components of the child's personality and the cognitive components. Different approaches to overcoming aggression among children are presented.

**Key words:** Education, Aggression, Social Cooperation, Social Involvement, Children before School

The fundamental assumption at the basis of the educational systems in the Western democratic world today is that the overarching objective of education is to educate the child to be a decent person and citizen, who is oriented on achievement and involved. In most of the democratic countries, the education institutions (kindergartens<sup>1</sup> and schools) direct their students to achievement, encourage volunteering in the community, and engage in value-oriented education. Nevertheless, the target is not reached: the level of achievements does not increase and even decreases, the level of aggression increases, and the involvement in the community is forced and marginal. The argument in this paper is that the achievement of the objectives of education requires an **integral and consistent educational perception, when the organizing axis is the value of human dignity and respect**. It enables the assimilation of the value of human dignity in the different areas of learning, enables the practice of respectful skills in everyday life, creates a protected atmosphere, strengthens the student's feeling of belonging to society,

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<sup>1</sup> In Israel the kindergarten refers to the educational frameworks for children aged three to five, in essence encompassing the preschool period. In this paper kindergarten will be used to refer to these institutions.

and encourages him to be involved in society. In such a respectful, participative, and inviting climate, the student is emotionally available for learning (achievement), feels protected (decline in the level of aggression), behaves with respect in everyday life (decency), and feels belonging to society and wants to influence it (involvement).

The difficulty in the achievement of the objectives of education today – the student as a decent, achievement-oriented, and involved person – derives from life in a global world that is becoming complex and conflictual.

First, there has been a dramatic change in the learning environment in light of the sharp transition from the old world to the new world, a transition from the educational core program mandatory in a centralized state, where the ideology creates a mobilized society and a collective identity, to pluralism, the decentralized state in which there is a dynamic civil society, alongside the multiplicity of identities and multiplicity of educational programs. This is a transition from an era in which the teacher was the significant authority to an era of the crisis of authorities and the erosion of the teacher's status, from an era of the teaching of knowledge, when the student is obedient and passive, to an era of the teaching of independent learning skills for the active student, from the discourse of obligations to the discourse of rights. This is the transition from the management of education through the external means of discipline to the necessity to build internal discipline so as to achieve the goals of education (Kohn, 2006), from frontal communication to open dialogue, from limited literacy to diverse and online literacy.

Second, there is a change in the teacher's role. The teacher not only is in the role of 'teaching', who acts as a source of knowledge, but also is a 'democratic strategist', who creates opportunities for the joint planning of the teacher and her students and respects democratic values and 'caregiver', who manages the class in a way that will help all the students adjust to it personally and socially (Trow, 1960). The teacher, who aspires to establish an atmosphere of a constructive class, establishes this on an attitude of respect: she respects the children's interests, emotions, values, and ideas. She organizes the class according to the children's physical, emotional, and intellectual needs. She

organizes the class for peer work and the child's personal responsibility. She plans the educational activity so that it will meet the child's interests, experience, and cooperation. The teacher's role is to cooperate with the students through the attempt to understand their logic and coordinate the productive process. The teacher's role is to cultivate the cooperation among the children, through the reinforcement of their emotional balance, their coping ability, their interpersonal understanding, and their moral values (DeVrie & Zan, 1994). One of the paradoxes is that the teacher, as a citizen whose education is not perfect, needs to educate the citizens of the future on the basis of practices and moral principles (Gottman, 2002).

First, lacking an agreed-upon ideology and with the undermining of the collective identity, sectorial identities are built, of 'others' and of those who are different, which struggle for their rights and create clash between rights. Second, the legitimization of the discourse of rights, which includes the protection of minority rights, enables many 'others' to struggle not only for their rights but also for their place in society. Third, the development of the media on the one hand increased the children's awareness of their rights but not of their obligations and on the other hand weakened the connection between the individual and the community and it reduces the 'face to face' interactions of the children.

A number of results from this process are the weakness of the children (and the adults) to cope with the complexity and conflicts entailed by today's society (Shemer, 2009) and the depletion of their life skills. They find it difficult to identify themselves as 'others' (sometimes I am the weak one who is found in a minority and needs protection of my rights), and their ability to display tolerance of others, to cooperate in the group, to conduct the discussion of a dilemma in a respectful manner, or to resolve conflicts peacefully is lessened. Lacking skills of a shared life, the choice of violent solutions increases and the level of aggression in the educational system increases.

The students at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are growing up in a complex world, in which the discourse of rights constitutes a universal and legitimate norm, and it is in this environment that two problems arise. First, the children are aware of their rights and

demand them, but they are not necessarily aware of their obligations and their responsibility (personal and group) and they do not have the knowledge or skills to balance between rights and obligations and to balance between clashing rights. A reasonable outcome for the continuation of this problem is the development of a society in which egoism and aggression increase. The second is that children grow up in a world where there is increased demand for the strengthening of the sense of protection, belonging, and involvement, but the ability of the social systems to provide this is steadily weakening. A reasonable outcome of the continuation of this problem is the adolescent's alienation, the rise in the scope and quality of the aggression, the decline in the children's emotional availability to meaningful learning, the evasion of responsibility, and the lack of trust in their ability to lead a change in their lives and environment.

In the past the prevalent assessment was that the democratic regime offers frameworks, mechanisms, and norms (family, parties, ideology...), and in the processes of socialization liberal values are assimilated and they direct the person to be a decent and involved citizen and thus there is no need for a systemic intervention. Today there is the extension of the assessment according to which to transform the child into a citizen with democratic values (and if only in a minimal sense of protection of his right to freedom of expression and his right to influence the government) there is the necessity for systemic intervention through value-oriented education. A number of reasons were suggested: (1) it was proven that value-based preferences are a result of education, and (2) the school became – more than ever – the main agent of socialization and perhaps the only one that can lead to a systemic change.

Today there is a broadening of the assessment according to which it is necessary to develop among the students life skills in a complex and conflictual world as well as respectful and tolerant behavior, to recruit social support, to develop skills of self-control, and to strengthen the belonging and loyalty to society that is changing and lacking a collective identity, and to prepare for life in a digital environment (Munro, 2006), for critical thinking, for the management of conflicts in nonviolent ways (Kealey, 2005), for the renewal of the relationship of the individual with the community through the strengthening of the sense of social inclusion and the encouragement of volunteering and

involvement, for collaborations in the group and teamwork (Gupta, 2010), and even for the development of motivation and skills in the leadership of change (Mueller, 2005).

### **Teaching Democracy and Its Influence on the Educational Climate**

What should the school teach in a democratic country (in the multicultural global era)? Towards what goal should it strive? Does multicultural society need to cultivate among the students pluralistic perceptions (and cosmopolitan emotions) or national perceptions (and patriotic emotions)? In the democratic country, the education for democracy relies on the humanistic approach, and the common denominator of them is an attitude of respect of the whole person, with emphasis on values choices, preference, commitment, involvement, responsibility, and goals in the student's life. The work assumption is that education needs to integrate between the affective components of the student's personality (emotions, attitudes, values, and intuition) and the cognitive components (identity, belonging, and efficacy). According to this perception, one of the main goals of the school is to cultivate abilities and qualities of consideration (Gottman, 2002), to educate for logic and common sense. The explanation is that (1) in the context of education – education needs to address the students with respect and to promote their interests, to help them become self-aware adults, who are aware of their place and role in the social order and are trained to function as productive people in society, and (2) in the context of democracy, education for critical thinking will transform the student into a critical citizen, who can argue in a creative but valid way, examine different angles of the topic, critique the public policy, and promote change (Siegel, 2010).

The cultivation of judgment not only entails skills of reading and writing, mastery of numbers, contextual knowledge, and understanding and respect of the outlooks of others but also will enable examination of explanations for and against a certain step and discussion of them by the group. It cultivates the ability to say the truth, non-violence, practical judgment, civic integrity, nobility of the soul, basic opportunity for every individual, and aspiration for justice. The cultivation of consideration expresses mutual respect in that it expresses the effort for social cooperation based on authorities (Gottman, 2002).

Democracy is a significant topic with significant values, and in the global era, in which there are more immigrant minority groups, in which there is an increasing number conflicts based on the clash between cultures, it is essential to educate for democracy even the citizens who object to it (Gottman, 2002). There is education for democracy even for those who evaluate their non-democratic culture as above the democratic culture, since in this they can open to possibilities of change and cultural development and judge the change in their culture from a place of logic, facts, and relevance. Even those who object to democracy use the democratic tools upon which they were educated (freedom, equality, critical thinking, rights, and participation) to express their objection, and thus there is already meaning to democratic education.

Does the education institution constitute the center of the value-oriented change and is there a relationship between education for democracy and educational outputs? A comparative research study of 25 countries found that education for democracy is an independent variable, in that it increases significantly the tendency of children, as adults, to prefer values of liberty – primarily protection of freedom of expression and increase of the social values (Warwick, 1998). In other words, they are prepared to struggle over their rights and are more involved in society for the promotion of shared interests. This research study and others (Torney-Purta et al., 2001) found that democratic education increases the awareness of the children of the political world, connects them to the community, develops in them tolerance of ‘others’, inspires in them motivation to act, and provides them with tools and skills for the leadership of change in their life and environment. There are cultures, such as in the Far East, and in Japan especially, which encourage critical conversation, from the assumption that in this way harmony is reached: alleviation of the tensions and cultural conflicts through the discussion of them reduces the tension between the contradictions (Goldman, 1999). Education for democracy inserts the students into a process of the construction and justification of moral principles and thus helps the students understand alone and with the support of friends what their moral meaning is and how they should behave (DeVries & Zan, 1994).

The need for education for democracy arose in light of the rise in the scope of violence among children and youths, violence that originates as harm to the feeling of

respect, following insult, discrimination, bullying, shunning, harassment, and molestation (Thornberg, 2010).

The need for education for democracy, already in the stage of pre-elementary school education, was found to be essential in light of the findings of the research studies that indicate a sharp decline in the life skills and social skills of the children and the adults to cope with the conflicts of the global and complex world, skills such as self-awareness, management of emotions (control of drives, the delay of satisfaction, treatment of distress and anxiety), and empathy.

Education for democracy not only provides a framework for the discussion of the value of respect, rights, duties, and ways to balance between clashing rights but also enables the practice of respectful skills and invites experiences for active involvement. The finding is that democratic attitudes were based among students as a result of the acquisition of the sophisticated understanding of the social reality through the exposure of the school to diverse educational experiences.

Is it possible to be satisfied with learning and experience of democratic values on the way to the education of the student as a decent and involved citizen? The child, who learned in the relevant field of learning (civics, social education hour) the importance of the value of respect, can receive an excellent score in the test on the meaning of respect but in the first conflict he encounters he may choose violence as a solution. A dimension that conveys the acquired knowledge in relation to the appropriate values in society and respectful behavior in everyday life is lacking.

### **Development of Social skills and Life Skills and Their Influence on Aggression among Children**

Students need to receive the knowledge they need so as to understand the conversation for the understanding of the world in which they live, to take responsibility in a complex society, and to have a satisfactory life, so that they will develop a moral backbone and can make decisions for themselves, so that they will be generous and fair in their relations with others, so that they will have a sense of justice and decency, so that

they will understand the country and the world and the challenges they face, so that they will recognize the rich heritage of their society and other societies, so that they will be active and responsible citizens who are willing to think about issues in-depth, to listen to contradicting opinions, and to make rational decisions (Ravitch, 2010).

The purpose of education is to educate the child to display responsibility regarding himself and his community, in such a way that it is expressed in his everyday behavior (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). He will speak with respect, will behave respectfully, and will act to improve his life and his environment. The responsibility will be expressed in the assimilation of basic values and skills of integrity, decency, self-discipline, volunteering, and willingness for effort. The responsibility will be expressed in the building of the child's personality: respectful attitude, self-control, consideration of others and their emotions. To achieve this, it is necessary to translate the knowledge and awareness to the value of respect and respectful behavior, and it is necessary to practice cognitive and social behaviors, with the preservation of consistency (Hyttén, 2006).

The skills required in society are complex and include:

- Culture of attention and discourse – the ability to wait for the permission to speak and the ability to contribute in an appropriate manner to the conversation held in the class
- Skills of thinking and critical thinking
- Self-control
- Reinforcement of the belonging and loyalty to a society that is changing and lacking in collective identity
- Life in a digital society (Munro, 2006)
- Management of conflicts in non-aggressive ways (Kealey, 2005)
- Renewal of the individual's relationship with the community through the reinforcement of the sense of social inclusion, volunteering, and involvement
- Recruitment of social support
- Collaborations in the group and teamwork – Collaboration in the sense of the transformation of the student into a partner in the decision and thus cultivating in him the interest and motivation to make the decision. It entails the sharing of information and transparency of information, the cohesion of the staff through trust-building in-depth

familiarity, the alleviation of tensions, the building of a sense of partnership, the coordination of the expectations, and the orientation of all the staff members for cooperation in favor of the goal. In the cooperation there is room for reciprocal reinforcements, the raising of questions, mutual respect, opening of new initiatives, and preparation for changing situations. This skill builds mutual trust in that it develops value-oriented behavior based on integrity and honesty, bearing responsibility, and support. Teamwork helps children develop, forget their shyness, and improve their social communication (Gupta, 2010).

### **Education for Partnership and Social Involvement and Their Influence on the Educational Climate**

In the global era, education for democratic values, and especially the value of human dignity, contributes to the reinforcement of the sense of social belonging and encourages social involvement in a number of ways. First, as value-based education, it encourages the realization of community values such as philanthropy (helping others, contributing to the community), empathy (love of others, mutual guarantee, social cohesion), giving, public duty, and caring. Second, as value-based education, it acts to transform the extreme individualism into humane individualism, connected to the community, through the presentation of the connection between the personal interest and the public interest (in the sense of “I cannot achieve my goal/right alone, I need cooperation with others”). The personal interests of the volunteer will be channeled – to leave the house, to live a more interesting life, to occupy the self, to obtain social prestige, to cope with problems, to have fun, to be interesting people, and to have meaning in life (Beck, 2000).

The encouragement of the child’s social contexts and the encouragement to volunteer and to be involved in society empower the child in different ways. It was found that the practice of involvement in an ongoing manner, through the creation of social mechanisms that offer every child a role in society, reinforces the child’s sense of personal and social efficacy and thus reinforces the child’s safety and abilities (Hyttén, 2006). The process of volunteering builds self-esteem and self-confidence and improves

critical thinking and intellectual skills (Torney-Purta et al., 2001), increases the child's sense of independence and self-control, and increases his self-confidence in the making of decisions. The encouragement of the child's involvement in society was found to strengthen his mental resilience and to contribute to the reduction of risk behaviors. It was found that the social involvement increases the child's self-image, strengthens his sense of efficacy and motivation to act, and raises aspirations for the improvement in achievements (Johnson, Beebe, et al., 1998).

A direct relationship was found between the volunteering and the improvement of scholastic achievements: the improvement of the self-image because of the volunteering, the strengthening of the sense of security and social efficacy – these were duplicated to the sense of efficacy in the scholastic achievements.

A comparative research, conducted in the years 1996-2000 in 28 countries by the International Association of Education Achievements (IEA), the Civil Education Study, indicates a direct relationship between education for democracy and the increase in the children's level of civic involvement: education institutions around the world that have experienced education for democracy (based on an open and respectful climate) were most effective not only in the promotion of civilian knowledge but also in the promotion of social involvement – more children volunteered and acted to influence their lives and their environment (Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

### **The Integral Perception as a Basis for Change**

It would seem that there is nothing new in the dimensions noted: most of the education institutions engage in value-oriented education and encourage partnership and involvement. Nevertheless, they do not succeed in indicating systemic output of the improvement in the level of the achievements or in the educational climate. What, therefore, is missing?

The evaluation is that no program, which is limited in time and scope, has the power to effect a change in the enrooted value-based outlooks without the cooperation of all the factors relevant to the child's education (family, community, means of

communication, regime, etc.) (Damon & Colby, 1996), without the re-definition of the nature of the role of the education institution, its structure, and its system of relations from the inside and the outside (Weiss et al., 2003), and without the mediation between moral awareness and immoral behavior (Blasi, 1980). Primarily, the education institution needs to instill standards of courteous behavior and to enforce them. It needs to teach the students to respect themselves and their peers, since otherwise they cannot provide them with the safe and orderly environment essential for learning (Ravitch, 2010).

A research of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which was performed among educators from 28 countries, indicated that a value-oriented change can be realized only when it is assimilated in all the educational layers. It was found that the highest achievements were attained only when in the education institution an overall perception is implemented that assimilated the education for values in the learning contents (knowledge), in the culture of the education institution (skills), and in the extension of the circle of partners (experience and involvement), and this in an integral manner (Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

### **Conclusion**

In other words, positive systemic outputs are anticipated when the following occur:

1. We focus the entire educational process on a value-oriented organizing axis of human respect and dignity: the child will learn about rights and responsibility through the curricula (he will know and internalize that it is necessary to be respectful), will acquire skills that will translate the awareness into rules of behavior in everyday life (he will speak in respectful language, will listen to others, will manage conflicts in peaceful ways, etc.), and from a place of belonging and appreciation will be involved in the community and will act to improve his life and environment.
2. We will create collaborations with the children, the kindergarten staff, and the parents, and we all will speak in a respectful common language.
3. We will hold a consistent and continuous process while providing a personal example.

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