

# Factors Relating to the Aggressive Behavior of Primary Caregiver Toward a Child

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## Abstract

This study aimed to testify the relationship between specific characteristics of family or the caregiver and the aggressive behavior of the caregiver toward a child. The survey was conducted from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> of December 1996 among grade-six students in schools under the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA). During the survey, self-administered questionnaires were used to collect data from the target group of 413 students. Among these, 81.8 per cent reported experiencing at least one form of aggressive behavior from their caregivers or parents. The findings revealed that the family relationship, economic status and caregiver's educational level reversibly correlated with the number of types of aggressive behavior with statistical significance at  $p$ -value < 0.05 and  $r$  = -0.7697, -0.2467 and -0.1641, respectively. The family crisis positively correlated with the number of types of aggressive behaviors with  $r$  = 0.1249 and  $p$ -value < 0.05. Furthermore, the results showed that students from nuclear families, living in congested surroundings, having a caregiver with experience of unskilled-work, unemployment or gambling had a higher mean score of the number of types of aggressive behaviors than their counterparts which were statistically significant by  $t$  and  $F$  tests ( $p$ -value < 0.05). Hence, the quality of the parent-and-child relationship should be strengthened and a proactive approach should be conducted for families potentially at risk.

**Key word :** Aggressive Behavior, Family Relationship, Family Crisis, Primary Caregiver, Grade-six Students

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Family is regarded as the first unit from which children attain love, care and the first contact in which socialization patterns develop<sup>(1)</sup>. Children brought up in a nurturing family with loving and understanding parents, opposed to those brought up in a family where they are neglected, feel safe and secure and are unlikely to show delinquent behavior during adolescence<sup>(2)</sup>. Hence, a satisfying interpersonal relationship between family members is an essential element of family happiness. Loving married couples who are prepared for parental responsibilities are able to cope with family crises and can solve problems peacefully. Their perceptions of family and family life style will be passed on to their offspring who will grow up with a positive self-concept and high self-esteem, as well as having trust and being optimistic toward other people<sup>(3,4)</sup>. On the contrary, a poor family relationship is followed by loose family ties, conflicts between family members, and a state of dissatisfaction. Parents who fail to deal with such situations appropriately are usually forced to become alcoholics, drug addicts, gamblers and are aggressive or abusive<sup>(5)</sup>.

In addition, the problems are less severe in an extended family than in a nuclear family since family functions and responsibilities are shared by family members, therefore, stress is decreased. Consequently, children born in an extended family do not feel lonely but feel secure as they are physically and mentally protected by adults e.g. their grandparents, aunts, or siblings<sup>(6)</sup>.

A number of studies have indicated some conditions influencing aggressive or abusive behavior of the caregiver, such conditions as unemployment of parents, poor housing conditions, overcrowding, lack of privacy, and drug addiction<sup>(5,7,8)</sup>.

With an interest on a relationship between some factors and aggressive behavior of the caregiver toward a child, a study was conducted aiming to testify the relationship between certain characteristics of family or caregivers and their aggressive behaviors.

## METHOD

The survey was conducted from 2nd to 30th of December 1996 among grade-six students in schools of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA). Bangkok Metropolis was divided into two geographical areas: inner and outer. Two districts from each area were selected by simple

random sampling, then one school in each district was randomly selected. According to the calculated sample size of at least 400 students and for even distribution of the samples, every grade-six student of two selected schools in the inner area was enrolled in the study. There were 182 students. For schools in the outer area, grade-six students from five out of eight classrooms in the first school and three out of five classrooms in the second were randomly selected with 293 students. Totally, the number of study cases was 475.

Self-administered questionnaires used in the study were composed of three parts: 1) family characteristics e.g. family relationship, crises, economic status, type of family, number of family members, and household surroundings; 2) primary caregiver's characteristics e.g. age, gender, educational level, occupation, improper behavior - alcohol consumption and gambling; and 3) aggressive behavior of the primary caregiver toward child- physical aggression, verbal aggression and child neglegence.

For the family relationship part, there were 10 questions on the emotional atmosphere at home, interaction and concern among family members, and the process of problem solving. Each answer had three rating scales from 2 to 0: frequently occurs, occasionally occurs, and rarely occurs, respectively regarding a positive family relationship. The total scores varied from 0 to 20. Alpha coefficient method was used to test the reliability of this part and the result was 0.71.

Regarding the economic status which was difficult to state directly, a child was asked to check the given list of 16 household possessions if available at home. The first five possessions: electric fan, electric iron, clock, electric rice-cooker, colored television were given one score each. The following eight possessions: radio, refrigerator, cassette player, motorcycle, bicycle, video player, telephone, and car were given two scores each. The last three possessions: washing machine, air conditioner, and water heater were given three scores each. The score was given according to the finding frequency from the previous study<sup>(9)</sup>. The total scores were 30 and families with a high score were regarded as high economic status and vice versa.

Students were also asked to record the aggressive behavior of the primary caregiver toward her/him according to her/his perception. The degree of aggressive behavior may be overestimated, however, the child's feelings should not be overlooked.

After that, Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient, *t*-test, F-test and Scheffe test were used for data analysis according to the type of independent variables.

## RESULTS

There were 413 students who completely answered the questionnaires. Out of these, 338 students (81.8%) reported an experience of at least one form of aggressive behavior by their caregivers. Physical aggression, by different means of punching, hitting with a stick or belt, throwing things at a child, pinching and slapping, was the most common among 66.1 per cent of all the students. This was followed by verbal aggression (64.2%) which was expressed by means of comparing a child to animals, threatening with a loud and vulgar voice or using rude words, and denouncing them as being bad. About 40.0 per cent of the students reported being neglected in the form of not providing the child with appropriate care and food, and frequently leaving the child alone at home, while 4.0 per cent and 10.9 per cent experienced physical and verbal aggression respectively almost on a daily basis. However, one third of the children did not know why they had been punished.

Regarding family relationships, the results revealed that the mean score was 15.90 (S.D. = 2.54,

range = 7-20). Among children experiencing aggressive behavior the mean score was 15.53 (S.D. = 2.83, range = 7-20), whereas, the mean score of the non experiencing group was 17.73 (S.D. = 1.62, range = 8-20).

Family crises were recorded as a severe accident, severe illness, unemployment, death, imprisonment, divorce or separation, and physical and mental disability of a family member. Most students (72.6%) had faced one to three crises, only 3.9 per cent faced more than three crises and 23.5 per cent reported no crisis. The most common events were a severe accident, serious illness and unemployment of family members. The results showed that the more crises the family faced, the higher the percentage was of children experiencing aggressive behavior from their caregivers (Table 1).

Most students were from nuclear families and had experienced more aggressive behavior or were more frequently neglected than those living in extended families. Only 12.3 per cent of all students lived in congested surroundings and most of them (91.2%) had experienced aggressive behavior from their caregivers. The percentage was lower (80.7%) in the families with good surroundings. A high percentage of aggressive behavior was also found in a big family of more than eight members (Table 1).

Table 1. Number and percentage of students by family characteristics and experience of aggressive behavior from caregivers

Family characteristics	Number (n = 413)	%	% of experiencing aggressive behavior	% not experiencing aggressive behavior
Family crises				
no crisis	97	23.5	79.4	20.6
1 - 3 crises	300	72.6	82.0	18.0
> 4 crises	16	3.9	93.7	6.3
Types of family				
nuclear	240	58.1	82.9	17.1
extended	173	41.9	80.3	19.7
Household surrounding				
congested	51	12.3	91.2	9.8
good	362	87.7	80.7	19.3
Family members (person)				
2 - 4	147	35.6	83.0	17.0
5 - 8	243	58.8	80.2	19.8
> 8	23	5.6	91.3	8.7
Economic status				
low (0 - 9 scores)	35	8.5	85.7	14.3
average (10 - 20 scores)	229	55.4	87.3	12.7
high (21 - 30 scores)	149	36.1	72.5	27.5

Family economic status was divided into three categories: low, average and high according to the total score. The results showed that 55.4 per cent were at an average status, 36.1 per cent had high economic status and only 8.5 per cent came from poor families. The results also revealed that the students from high economic status families were less likely to experience aggressive behavior (Table 1).

Regarding the primary caregiver's characteristics, the ages ranged from 20 to 72 years with the mean age of 39.04. The caregivers aged between 40 and 59 years were most likely to perform aggressive behavior toward their children. Most of them were female (77.2%), and the percentage of performing aggressive behavior was more or less the same in both genders. About 69.7 per cent had primary-level education or below, while 25.9 per cent were educated to the secondary level and only

4.4 per cent were higher educated. The study confirmed that caregivers with a higher education were less aggressive. In addition, 72.9 per cent were unskilled workers, 19.4 per cent currently unemployed and only 7.7 per cent were skilled workers. The study showed that the caregivers with skilled work were less likely to perform aggressive behaviors toward their children (Table 2).

Considering alcohol consumption and gambling, 48.2 per cent of caregivers did not drink alcohol, 43.8 per cent drank occasionally and 6.5 per cent drank regularly. The study revealed that caregivers who did not drink alcohol were less likely to express aggressive behaviors compared to those who drank. Furthermore, 35.6 per cent of caregivers occasionally gambled, 17.7 per cent gambled regularly, and 35.3 per cent did not. Also, caregivers who gambled were more likely to express aggressive behavior toward their children (Table 2).

**Table 2. Number and percentage of caregivers by general characteristics and aggressive behavior.**

General characteristics	Number (n = 413)	%	% of aggressive behavior	% no aggressive behavior
<b>Age (years)</b>				
20 - 29	15	3.6	73.3	26.7
30 - 39	224	54.2	79.9	20.1
40 - 49	138	33.4	85.5	14.5
50 - 59	22	5.3	86.4	13.6
≥ 60	14	3.3	78.6	21.4
(Mean = 39.04, min = 20, max = 72)				
<b>Gender</b>				
male	94	22.8	84.0	16.0
female	319	77.2	81.2	18.8
<b>Educational level</b>				
primary or below	288	69.7	86.5	13.5
secondary	107	25.9	74.8	25.2
higher education	18	4.4	50.0	50.0
<b>Occupation</b>				
unemployed	80	19.4	81.3	18.7
unskilled work	301	72.9	84.7	15.3
skilled work	32	7.7	56.3	43.7
<b>Drinking alcohol</b>				
do not drink	119	48.2	77.4	22.6
drink occasionally	181	43.8	85.6	14.4
drink regularly	27	6.5	88.9	11.1
do not specified	6	1.5	83.3	16.7
<b>Gambling</b>				
do not play	146	35.3	73.3	26.7
play occasionally	147	35.6	85.0	15.0
play regularly	73	17.7	89.0	11.0
do not specified	47	11.4	87.2	12.8

The *t*-test and F-test were used to compare the mean of types of aggressive behavior with family's or caregiver's characteristics such as type of family, household surroundings, gender, educational level, occupation, alcohol consumption and gambling. Each type of aggressive behavior toward a child was given one score. Therefore, it was implied that a child having a high score experienced different types of aggressive behavior. The results showed that children from nuclear families, living in congested surroundings, or having a caregiver who was unskilled, unemployed or gambled had a

higher mean score with statistical significance at *p*-value < 0.05 (Table 3). Scheffe test showed the details of the difference in occupation and gambling behavior (Tables 4 and 5).

Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was used to identify the relationship between the number of types of aggressive behavior and family relationships, family crises, number of family members, family economic status, and some caregiver's characteristics: age and years of education. The study revealed that the family relationship was strongly and reversibly correlated with the

**Table 3. Comparison of different mean scores of the number of types of aggressive behaviors by family and caregiver's characteristics.**

Characteristics	Number of types of aggressive behavior		<i>t</i> -value/ F-test	df	<i>p</i> -value
	Mean	S.D.			
Types of families					
nuclear	4.113	3.419	2.27	411	0.024*
extended	3.382	2.932			
Household surrounding					
congested	5.000	3.527	2.83	411	0.005*
good	3.638	3.167			
Gender of caretaker					
male	3.989	3.570	0.62	411	0.534
female	3.752	3.141			
Occupation					
unemployed	3.450	2.717	7.196	-	0.001*
unskilled work	4.090	3.366			
skilled work	2.031	2.596			
Drinking alcohol					
do not drink	3.603	3.363	2.850	-	0.059
drink occassionally	3.790	3.009			
drink regularly	5.183	3.659			
Playing gambles					
do not play	3.192	3.326	4.955	-	0.008*
play occassionally	3.993	3.247			
play regularly	4.589	3.303			

\* Statistical significance at *p*-value < 0.05

**Table 4. Scheffe test of different mean scores of the number of types of aggressive behavior by a pair of occupation.**

Occupation	Mean	Unemployed 3.450	Unskilled work 4.090	Skilled work 2.031
Unemployed	3.450			*
Unskilled work	4.090			*
Skilled work	2.031			

\* Statistical significance at *p*-value < 0.05

**Table 5.** Scheffe test of different mean scores of the number of types of aggressive behavior by a pair of gambling activity.

Gambling	Mean	Do not play 3.192	Play occassionally 3.993	Play regularly 4.589
Do not play	3.192			
Play occassionally	3.993	*		
Play regularly	4.589	*		

\* Statistical significance at p-value <0.05

**Table 6.** Correlation test between family's and caregiver's characteristics and the number of types of aggressive behavior.

Characteristics	Correlation coefficient (r)	P-value
Age	0.0690	>0.05
Years of education	-0.1641	<0.001*
Family relationship	-0.7697	<0.001*
Family economic status	-0.2467	<0.001*
Family crises	0.1249	<0.01*
Number of family member	0.0058	>0.05

\* Statistical significance at p-value <0.05

number of types of aggressive behavior with statistical significance at p-value < 0.05 ( $r = -0.7697$ ). The family economic status and years of education of the caregiver were also reversibly but slightly associated with the amount of types of aggressive behavior at p-value <0.05 ( $r = -0.2467$  and  $-0.1641$  respectively). In contrast, the number of family crises was positively and slightly correlated with the number of types of aggressive behavior with  $r = 0.1249$  and p-value < 0.05. However, the number of family members and age of caregivers did not significantly correlate with the number of types of aggressive behavior (Table 6).

## DISCUSSION

The results of the study strongly support the fact that the family relationship has a strong influence on family cohesion and happiness as children with a good family relationship are less likely to experience aggressive behavior from their primary caregivers. Affectionate family relationships compose of intimate communication, care and attention, sharing responsibilities and finding solutions for problems and conflicts in positive ways. Children of such families grow up with a good quality of

life and experience very few incidents of aggressive behavior or child abuse since interpersonal relationships among family members can be a buffer to lessen the effects of both internal and external pressures(5,10).

A family crisis is one kind of pressure in family life. The crises come in the form of sickness of family members, serious social problems, and emotional problems. Each family more or less faces such stress and some can effectively cope with it while others cannot. Families unable to handle hazardous life events usually play a crucial role in the manifestation of violence(2). Similarly, families confronted with numerous constraints are also vulnerable to family violence(10-13). The circumstances are vividly confirmed through this study.

Children in nuclear families are more vulnerable to aggressive behavior than those in extended families. In a nuclear family, parents usually have little or no constructive support from their relatives. Hardship may lead to aggressive or abusive actions. Contrarily, in an extended family the members normally share their feelings and help each other through difficulties(14).

Household surroundings can indicate a social condition and the family's economic status. In congested areas live low socioeconomic families whose knowledge of child growth, development and needs are lacking. Most of them, instead of understanding and clearly explaining, may use physical and verbal punishment when their children do something wrong. Economic stress upon the parents usually leads to deviate behavior(8,15).

Regarding the number of family members, the study revealed no correlation with the number of types of aggressive behavior. No matter how many persons live in the family, aggression or violence can occur. However, if it is an extended family, the relatives usually help the child and make the situation less severe.

Referring to the educational level, primary caregivers with high education and skilled work are less likely to be aggressive. These caregivers usually play supportive roles and appropriately discipline their children(2). In contrast, unemployment may create stress in the family and thus, bring about family violence<sup>(4)</sup>. Gambling is another factor contributing to aggressive behavior. Most gamblers who lose usually feel upset and may have deviant behavior.

The study showed no difference in aggressive behavior with regards to age and alcohol drinking. Some studies showed that young parents, male caregivers, and caregivers who drink alcohol con-

tribute a higher risk of child abuse(16,17). In this study, most caregivers in this study were over 30 years old and not heavy drinkers.

## SUMMARY

It is apparent that the quality of the parent-and-child relationship is a critical factor in the child's physical growth and personality development, and also lessens the chance of child negligence, abuse and exploitation. Hence, these are responsibilities of health and health-related personnel to enable families to build an affectionate parent-and-child relationship. A couple should be well prepared for married life and be responsible for planning and controlling the size of their family. In addition, proactive approaches should be conducted for families potentially at risk such as low socioeconomic families, nuclear families, families in crisis, families living in a congested environment, and families whose caregivers are unemployed, have unskilled work, gamble or have low education.

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## ปัจจัยที่สัมพันธ์กับการกระทำรุนแรงต่อเด็กของผู้เลี้ยงดู

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การศึกษานี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาความลับพันธ์ระหว่าง คุณลักษณะของครอบครัวและผู้เลี้ยงดู และการกระทำรุนแรงต่อเด็กของผู้เลี้ยงดู โดยศึกษาเชิงสำรวจในระหว่างวันที่ 2-30 กุมภาพันธ์ 2439 ประชากรที่ศึกษา คือ เด็กนักเรียนชั้นประถมปีที่ 6 โรงเรียนลังกัดกรุงเทพมหานคร จำนวน 413 คน โดยให้นักเรียนตอบแบบสอบถามด้วยตนเอง วิเคราะห์ข้อมูลโดยสถิติ Pearson Product Moment Correlation, *t*-test, และ ANOVA ผลการศึกษาพบว่า ร้อยละ 81.8 เคยมีประสบการณ์ถูกกระทำรุนแรงทางร่างกาย หรือ จิตใจจากผู้เลี้ยงดูอย่างน้อยหนึ่งวิธี และพบว่าสัมพันธภาพในครอบครัว สภาวะเศรษฐกิจของครอบครัว และระดับการศึกษาของผู้เลี้ยงดู มีความสัมพันธ์เชิงลบกับจำนวนวิธีที่กระทำรุนแรงต่อเด็กอย่างมีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติ (*p*-value < 0.05) โดยมีค่า *r* = -0.7697, -0.2467, -0.1641 ตามลำดับ ส่วนภาวะวิกฤตในครอบครัวมีความลับพันธ์เชิงบวกกับจำนวนวิธีที่กระทำรุนแรงต่อเด็ก อย่างมีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติ (*p*-value < 0.05) โดยมีค่า *r* = 0.1249 และพบว่าเด็กที่อาศัยอยู่ในครอบครัวเดียว หรือครอบครัวอยู่ในชุมชนแออัด หรือผู้เลี้ยงดูที่มีอาชีพไม่ใช้ฝีมือ หรือว่างงาน หรือเล่นการพนัน จะมีค่าเฉลี่ยของจำนวนวิธีที่กระทำรุนแรงต่อเด็กมากกว่า อย่างมีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติ ดังนั้น การเสริมสร้างลับพันธภาพผู้เลี้ยงดูระหว่างผู้เลี้ยงดูและเด็ก เป็นสิ่งที่ควรเร่งรัดดำเนินการโดยเฉพาะครอบครัวที่มีภาวะเลี้ยงด้วยการกระทำรุนแรงต่อเด็ก

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