

Boy, You Really Like Me!

Positive Interactions with Male Peers Predict Increased Narcissism Over Time

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Introduction

- Several studies have identified cognitive and parenting variables that contribute to the development of narcissism during middle childhood (e.g., Cooper, Pauletti, Aults, & Perry, 2017).
- Given that narcissists often seek reinforcement and attention from their interaction partners, it is surprising that little research has examined the influence of peer relationships on narcissism during preadolescence.

The purpose of the current study was to explore whether the quality of peer relationships predicted increases in narcissism over a one-year period.

Methods

N = 195 4th-7th graders were tested in both the fall and the spring of the school year.

- **Narcissism** - Participants completed self-reports of narcissism (Thomaes et al., 2007)
- **Quality of interpersonal relationships** - Participants reported on *how much they liked each classmate* and *how much they thought each classmate liked them*. Participants also provided peer reports of aggression between classmates (Pauletti, Cooper, & Perry, 2014). Ratings were amalgamated across targets, separately by sex, yielding measures seen in Table 1.

Results

Table 1 shows T1 and T2 partial correlations for all measures.

Table 1
Associations Among Measures

Measures	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Narcissism	--	.02	.10	-.02	-.10	.01	.01	.07	.00
2. Aggression toward boys	-.00	--	.80***	-.13 [†]	-.12	-.78***	-.41***	-.09	-.08
3. Aggression toward girls	.09	.76***	--	-.08	-.22**	-.44***	-.44***	-.07	-.22**
4. Liking toward boys	.09	.13 [†]	.01	--	.34***	.49***	-.09	.89***	.33***
5. Liking toward girls	-.03	-.01	-.17	.22**	--	.05	.44***	.25**	.89***
6. Liking by boys	.07	-.42***	-.34***	.42***	-.11	--	.20**	.48***	.09
7. Liking by girls	.08	-.24**	-.43***	-.11	.51***	.14	--	-.10	.49***
8. Perceived liking by boys	.20**	-.03	.15 [†]	.81***	.22**	.36***	-.08	--	.35***
9. Perceived liking by girls	.09	.05	-.03	.31***	.84***	-.05	.47***	.41***	--

Note. Entries are partial correlations with age controlled. Time-1 correlations are above the diagonal; Time-2 correlations are below the diagonal. [†]p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01.

Multiple hierarchical regression was used to determine whether any interpersonal measure predicted spring (T2) narcissism. Sex, age, and fall (T1) narcissism scores were entered on Step 1, while each fall interpersonal measure took a turn on Step 2.

- Results revealed positive main effects of liking toward boys ($\beta = .14, p = .027$) and perceived liking by boys ($\beta = .17, p = .007$).
- An additional step was added to determine whether any main effects were qualified by age or sex. There were no interactions with sex. However, age interacted with aggression toward boys ($\beta = .12, p = .049$). Follow-up analyses revealed that high scores on aggression toward boys were associated with increased narcissism, but only in older children.

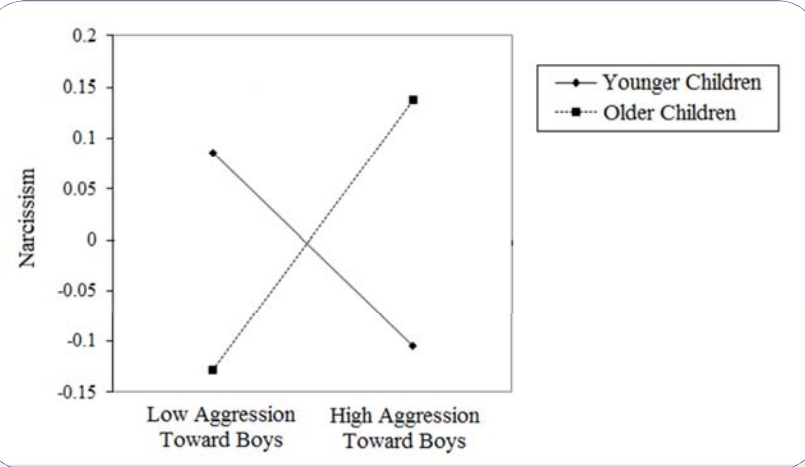


Figure 1. Interacting influences of age and aggression toward boys predicting a change in narcissism across the school year.

Discussion

Results suggest that both positive (liking) and negative (aggression) interactions with male (but not female) peers are conducive to the development of narcissism during preadolescence, and it should not go unnoticed that these effects were *not* moderated by participant sex. One possible explanation for this pattern is that boys provide interpersonal feedback consistent with a grandiose self-image, such as reinforcement for outlandish or aggressive behavior, whereas girls may be more likely to shun these behaviors. It should also be noted that the objective measure of liking by boys did not predict narcissism, a finding consistent with the notion that the narcissist's self-image is often not based in reality, but in perception. Future research should be geared toward examining the cognitive variables that may account for the relationships reported here (e.g., greater weight attached to liking by male, rather than female, peers).