



## Attitudes and Beliefs Towards Violence and Aggressive Behavior Among School Children

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**Abstract**

AACCI – Association of Adolescent and Child Care in India has a project to prevent violence in children in India. As part of this project multicentric studies are conducted. This study sample comprised 750 students studying in standard I to Standard XII in an elite English medium Coed school in Mumbai. The data was collected using a validated self-reported, pre-tested questionnaire containing a scale to assess aggression (11 items), beliefs supporting aggression (6 items) and attitude towards violence (6 items) based on the Centre of Disease Control Compendium of tools measuring aggression. The school authorities and study participants were explained the purpose of the study and assured privacy and confidentiality of the information. Parental consent and students' assent was obtained. Results showed that mean Aggression belief score showed a significant increase from primary school to high school ( $p < 0.001$ ). This reflected in the Inter-group analysis: mean Aggression behavior score was significantly greater in secondary school as compared to primary school students ( $p = 0.009$ ); in high school students as compared to middle school students ( $p = 0.004$ ).

Attitudes and beliefs toward aggression held firm relational probability for males while the females showed a difference between the attitudes held and the level of aggression exhibited ( $p < 0.001$ ). The study demonstrated that attitudes and beliefs about violence contribute to the active expression of aggression. Workshops in the school were held for parents' teachers and students in this school for understanding prevention of violence Strengths and limitations of the study are discussed and scope for future research is indicated.

**Keywords:** Aggressive behavior, Violence prevention, School children, Aggressive attitudes, Aggressive beliefs.

## Introduction

The rising Global incidence of violent behavior among children and adolescents has become a great cause of concern (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry). Everyday an estimated 227 children and youth (0-19 years) die as a result of interpersonal violence and many more are hospitalized with injuries (WHO). The World Health report on violence and health (WHO) estimated that 199,000 youth murders took place globally in 2000. Existing evidence also suggests that the rate of serious violent acts has also increased drastically amongst children and adolescent in last few decades (World Bank). Even though research on adolescent violence in India is limited, recent investigations reveal violence exposure is prevalent even in the lives of Indian adolescents (Mahajan et al.).

Research findings are identifying factors in the development of aggressive and antisocial behavior from early childhood to adolescence and into adulthood (NIMH). Some children exhibit problem behavior in early childhood that gradually escalates to more severe forms of aggression before and during adolescence (WHO). By the preschool and early elementary years, individual differences in the propensity to behave aggressively are apparent (Anderson & Heusmann).

It has been hypothesized that many beliefs seem to play a role in preparedness to aggress (Anderson & Heusmann). In a study by Huesmann and Guerra among urban students in 1997, it was demonstrated that normative beliefs about aggression and violence get established in middle-elementary grades for most of the children (Huesmann & Guerra). Archer and Haigh have also predicted a link between belief about aggression and level of aggression. On the other hand, attitude to violence correlate with both mild and serious forms of aggression among adolescents and youth (Huesmann & Guerra). Lopez et al. conducted a systematic review to estimate the relationship between attitudes toward violence and school violence and found a significant positive relationship between attitudes toward violence and school violence in children and adolescents. Positive attitudes towards violence in general prepare certain individuals for aggression. In this regard, Martínez et al. studied the relationship between parental and adolescent attitudes toward aggression and empathy and how it influences school violence; results indicated that beliefs in favour of the use of aggression in adolescents correlate positively with the perception of strong support from parents for aggression in response to conflict. Similarly, the type of school students attend and the kind of guardians they live with at home also influence aggressive behaviors and attitudes (Mundia). Modern theories of aggression define beliefs, attitudes and behavioral tendencies as personological factors that along with situational factors converge to result in aggressive behavior (Huesmann & Guerra).

Thus, it is evident that children form their mental frameworks and patterns in their early formative years which provide them with a reference manual of sorts for later behavioral evaluations and commitments. Further, gender differences in aggressive attitudes, beliefs and actions, the role that age plays in the same, the other socio demographic factors that may perhaps contribute would change from culture to culture and will also change along the dimension of time as the global scenario begins to affect individual nations and societies. However, rather than using theoretical underpinnings to explain these differences, this paper attempts to study empirically the various patterns that emerge, treating this study as a pilot for the phenomena in this country, at least in the urban and metropolitan areas.

## **Material and Methods**

### **Settings and Participants**

It was school based cross-sectional study conducted amongst all the students studying in an elite, English medium Coed school in Mumbai. All 750 students studying in this school from nursery to Standard X were part of this study.

### **Sample size**

Based on the prevalence of 69% violence ever experienced by school adolescents in a previous study (Mahajan et al.) and taking absolute error of 5% with 95% confidence interval, minimum sample size was calculated to be 342. However, all the 750 students studying in standard I to Standard XII were included in the study.

### **Study tool**

A validated self-reported, pre-tested questionnaire containing a scale to assess aggression (11 items), beliefs supporting aggression (6 items) and attitude towards violence (6 items) was used for data collection. This questionnaire is based on Centre of Disease Control (CDC) Compendium of tools measuring aggression (CDC). Internal Consistency of 11 item scale to assess aggression is 0.88-0.90; 6 items scale on beliefs supporting aggression is 0.66 and 6 items scale to assess attitude towards violence is 0.67.

### **Scoring system (CDC)**

The 11-item scale measuring anger and aggression was assessed using point scoring system with minimum value 0 and maximum value 66 as described in the manual. The shorter 6-item tool for assessment of beliefs supporting aggression was scored with point values such as '4' for 'strongly agree', '3' for 'agree', '2' for disagree and '1' for strongly disagree. Point values are summed for each respondent. The intended range of score ranged from 4-24, with higher scores indicating more beliefs that support aggressive behavior. The tool for assessing the attitude towards violence consisted of 6 items which were scored with point values '5' for 'strongly agree', '4' for 'agree', '3' for 'neither', '2' for disagree and '1' for strongly disagree. The item 2 and 5 are reverse scored. A total score of 30 is possible by summing across all items. Higher scores indicate a positive attitude toward violent strategies and limited use of nonviolent strategies.

### **Theoretical basis of aggressive behavior:**

An aggressive belief is firmly held opinion or conviction which is often deep rooted. An aggressive attitude is a settled way of thinking or feeling, reflected in a person's verbal and/or non-verbal behavior. Both beliefs and attitudes translate into aggressive behavior which is defined as an overt observable action or reaction, more exhibited by males. Sometimes, in certain societies where aggressive behavior is not socially desirable, a person may curb overt aggression and even try and mask aggressive attitudes. But since their beliefs make them want to hurt other, this can be expressed through verbal or non-verbal aggressive behavior, more so in females. (Fig1)

### **Study methodology**

We conducted an awareness workshop for parents and teachers on understanding and prevention aggression with permission of school management. The school authorities and study subjects were explained the purpose of the study and assured privacy and confidentiality of the information provided by them. Parental consent was obtained. We then conducted workshops grade wise for all the 750 children and the questionnaires were filled under supervision of the AACCI team.

### **Ethical clearance**

The study was approved by Institutional Ethical Committee of the Association for Adolescent and Child Care in India.

Written assent was taken from children aged 8 years and above while filling the questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed to all students VI standard onwards and filled by them under the supervision of the research team. Careful proctoring was done in the classroom as children physically filled up the scales, since they were young and may need guidance to understand the meaning of some items.

### **Statistical analysis**

Data were entered into excel sheet and analyzed by SPSS version 18 software. Descriptive statistics including mean and standard deviation for quantitative data and proportions for qualitative data were used to characterize the study population. For quantitative data, the difference between the means of two groups was compared using the t test (for normal distribution) or Mann Whitney test (non-normal distribution). Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated for independent factors with total aggression score. Multiple linear regression analysis was done to assess the contribution of various factors in total aggression score of the children. All significance tests were 2-tailed and statistical significance was defined as a value of  $p < 0.05$ .

### **Results**

The total number of students in this school from Std I-X were 750. Forms were filled by all students. We discarded 57 (7.6%) forms which had some answers missing, giving a total of  $n=693$  students for final analysis. There were 69.1% ( $n=479$ ) boys and 30.9% ( $n=214$ ) girls. There were 276 students (39.8%) students studying in primary school (standard I-V) while 266 (38.4%) and 151 (21.8%) participants belonged to middle (standard VI-VIII) and high school (standard IX-X) respectively.

Overall, the mean age of the group was  $11.36 \pm 2.60$  years (Range=6-16 years). Standard wise analysis showed that the mean belief score supporting aggression score showed significant increase from primary to high school ( $p=0.001$ ). Even though there was no significant difference between primary and middle school belief score ( $p=0.160$ ), there was significant difference in the belief score between middle school and high school students ( $p=0.010$ ).

The mean score of attitudes towards violence among the primary school students ( $15.39 \pm 4.54$ ) was greater than those of the middle school students ( $14.92 \pm 4.31$ ) though the difference was not significant ( $p=0.217$ ).

The difference between mean attitude score of primary school students and high school students was also not significant ( $p=0.141$ ) neither was the difference between middle school and high school students ( $p=0.133$ ). The total aggression score significantly increased among primary school to high school children ( $p<0.001$ ). Inter-group analysis showed that the mean aggression score was significantly greater among the middle school students from primary school students ( $p=0.009$ ) and among high school students as compared to middle school students ( $p=0.004$ ). (Table 1)

Standard/Level of school	Beliefs supporting Aggression MEAN $\pm$ SD	Attitude towards violence MEAN $\pm$ SD	Aggressive behavior MEAN $\pm$ SD
<b>Primary School (n=276)</b>	<b>12.32<math>\pm</math>3.77</b>	<b>15.39<math>\pm</math>4.54</b>	<b>12.79<math>\pm</math>11.96</b>
I	14.59 $\pm$ 4.23	18.66 $\pm$ 4.17	16.80 $\pm$ 14.59
II	11.21 $\pm$ 4.54	15.17 $\pm$ 4.57	11.36 $\pm$ 14.92
III	12.11 $\pm$ 3.75	15.60 $\pm$ 4.54	12.96 $\pm$ 8.70
IV	11.20 $\pm$ 2.81	14.02 $\pm$ 4.63	11.02 $\pm$ 10.84
V	12.63 $\pm$ 3.14	14.66 $\pm$ 3.85	12.61 $\pm$ 10.88
<b>Middle School (n=266)</b>	<b>12.74<math>\pm</math>3.18</b>	<b>14.92<math>\pm</math>4.31</b>	<b>14.00<math>\pm</math>10.31</b>
VI	11.84 $\pm$ 3.35	13.36 $\pm$ 4.04	11.09 $\pm$ 8.18
VII	12.77 $\pm$ 2.70	14.93 $\pm$ 3.91	11.52 $\pm$ 8.10
VIII	13.70 $\pm$ 3.26	16.28 $\pm$ 4.66	20.02 $\pm$ 12.06
<b>High School (n=151)</b>	<b>13.61<math>\pm</math>3.43</b>	<b>15.57<math>\pm</math>4.07</b>	<b>16.97<math>\pm</math>11.43</b>
IX	13.16 $\pm$ 3.82	14.73 $\pm$ 4.06	16.07 $\pm$ 10.55
X	14.05 $\pm$ 3.0	16.39 $\pm$ 3.94	17.87 $\pm$ 12.25
P value (overall)	<b>&lt;0.001*</b>	0.141NS	<b>&lt;0.001*</b>

Significant \* $p<0.001$  NS – Non-Significant

**Table 1:** Aggressive behaviour, beliefs and attitude regarding violence among school students

Gender wise comparison showed significantly higher overall mean belief ( $p=0.008$ ) and aggression score ( $p<0.001$ ) among the boys as compared to girls. However, though belief and attitude score at all the school levels were higher among boys as compared to girls, the difference was not significant. But, mean total aggression score of boys in primary, middle and higher schools was significantly more than the girls ( $p<0.05$ ). (Table 2)

Level of school	Beliefs supporting aggression MEAN (SD)		Attitude towards violence MEAN (SD)		Aggressive behavior MEAN (SD)	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Primary school	12.56 (3.7)	11.86 (3.8)	15.64 (4.8)	14.93 (3.9)	13.83 (12.4)	10.8 (10.8)
p value	0.143		0.218		<b>0.046*</b>	
Middle school	12.94 (3.3)	12.24 (2.9)	15.04 (4.4)	14.62 (4.15)	15.49 (10.6)	10.12 (8.5)
p value	0.111		0.483		<0.001*	
High school	13.86 (3.6)	13.02 (2.8)	15.79 (4.2)	15.04 (3.7)	19.29 (12.0)	11.51 (7.5)
p value	0.171		0.303		<b>&lt;0.001*</b>	
Overall	13.00 (3.6)	12.24 (3.3)	15.53 (4.5)	14.85 (3.9)	15.71 (11.8)	10.72 (9.4)
	<b>P= 0.008*</b>		0.103 NS		<b>p&lt;0.001*</b>	

Significant \*p<0.05 NS – Non-Significant

**Table 2:** Gender wise comparison of Aggressive behavior, beliefs and attitude regarding violence among school students

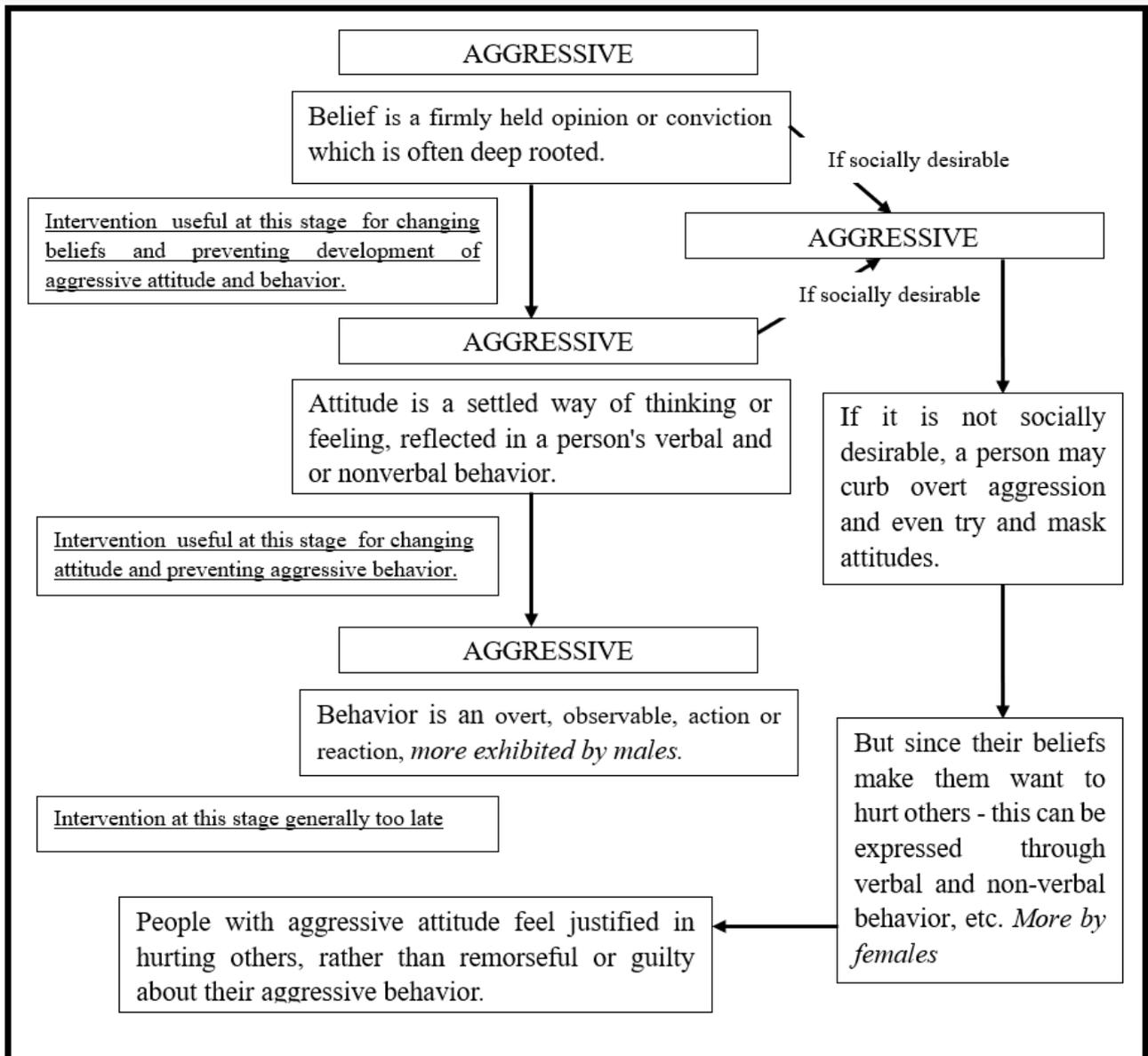
Total aggression score was found to be positively correlated with attitude score (Pearson correlation=0.232; p<0.001), belief score (Pearson correlation=0.315; p<0.001) and age of the school children (Pearson correlation=0.132; p=0.001). (Insert Figure 2A, B, C here). Multiple linear regression analysis was run to predict the total aggression analysis from belief score, attitude score, age and gender. These variables statistically significantly predicted the total aggression score, F (4, 688) = 30.820, p < 0.001, R<sup>2</sup> = 0.147. All four variables added statistically significantly to the prediction, p < 0.05. (Table 3)

Dependent Variables	Independent variables	Unstandardized coefficients	p value
Total Aggression score F statistic=30.820, p<0.001 R=0.39; adj. R <sup>2</sup> =0.147	Belief score	0.757	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
	Attitude score	0.347	<b>0.001</b>
	Age	0.439	0.005 NS
	Gender	-4.103	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
	Constant	-0.403	0.884 NS

Significant \*p<0.001 NS – Non-Significant

**Table 3:** Multiple Regression Analysis of total aggression score with various independent factors.

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**Figure 1:** Theoretical basis of Aggressive behavior

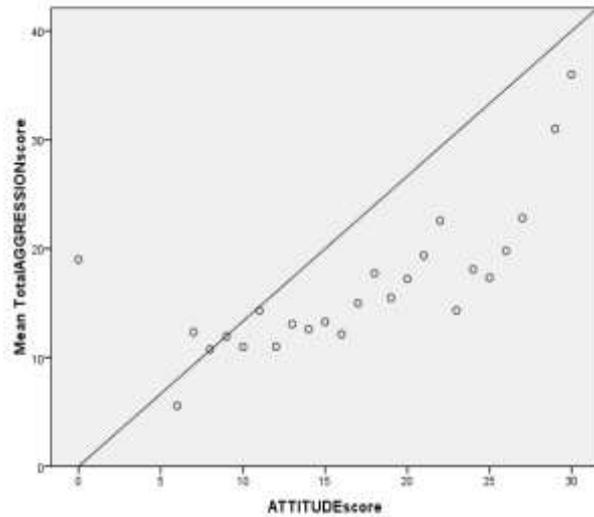


Figure 2A: Correlation of Total aggression score with attitude score

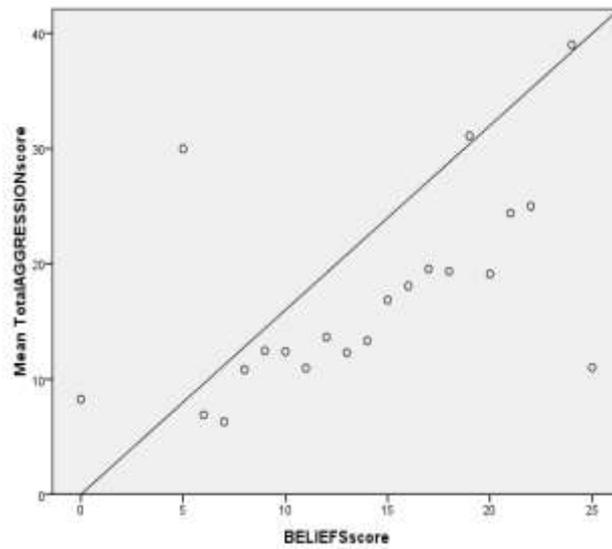


Figure 2B: Correlation of Total aggression score with belief score

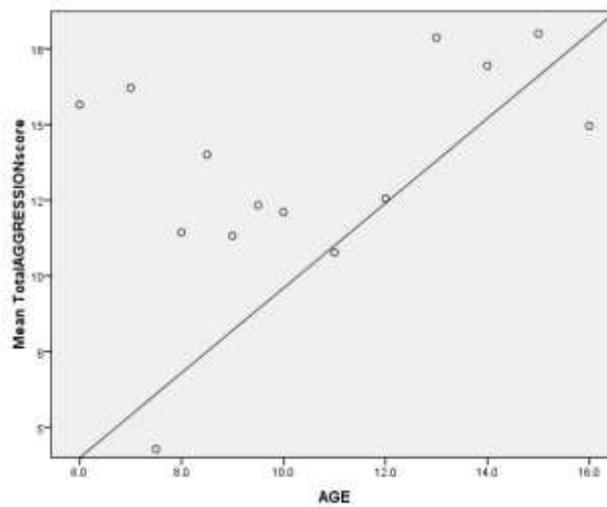


Figure 2C: Correlation of Total aggression score with age

## Discussion

Research on children and adolescent violence is limited in India. However, the studies reviewed show that it is on the rise (Mahajan et al., Ray & Malhi, Sharma et al.). Family factors and environment play a significant role in increased aggression (ICEST, Rana & Malhotra, Sharma & Sangwan, Sharma, Kumar & Thakur), and that is why we took a workshop for parents including teachers prior to collection of this data from school to make them aware of the importance of parental role in reduction of aggression.

Further, evidence suggests some of the predictors for violent and aggressive behavior emerge during the initial part of first decade of life itself (Office of the Surgeon General). Therefore, present study was attempted to assess the prevalence of aggressive behavior, attitudes and beliefs related to violence right from the time when child enters the primary school.

The results of the study showed that mean belief score about violence showed a significant increase among students from primary school to high school. In a study among urban children, it was demonstrated that normative beliefs about violence usually stabilize in middle-elementary grades for most children and can increase as the child age (Anderson & Heusmann). Interestingly, when we compare the mean attitude score of the children, the difference shows a V pattern in the current study. There are many factors that shape the attitude of children towards antisocial behavior. Since the current study did not study those factors, it would be difficult to explain such a trend in the current context.

Most studies on gender differences in aggression in India have shown boys to be more overtly aggressive as compared to girls (Bjorkqvist et al., Owusu-Banahene et al., Anand et al). In western countries as well, these attitudes are seen to be more prevalent in boys and adolescents (Ruiz-Hernández et al.). We have also used these scales in a rural children set up in Delhi which indicated that beliefs, attitudes and aggressive behavior in private co-ed school was highest while in all girls' school had lowest; being male studying in private co-ed school and having attitude towards violence contributed significantly to total aggression score (Anand et al.). The findings of current study also in are in sync with the rural study from Delhi (Anand et al.) where in gender (male) too emerged as an important determinant of aggressive behavior as has been reported in Western literature as well. Attitudes and beliefs toward aggression more or less hold firm relational probability for the males while the females show a difference between the attitudes held and the level of aggression exhibited. This can be accounted for by the variations in the manifestations of aggression. The male behavioral disposition is to engage in the violent outburst, fist fights and name calling. However, females have a tendency to use more of gossiping, rumors and sometimes active provocation. Also the social

environmental factors of stereotypical behaviors and role playing allows for the boys to be able to express and accept their behavioral actions as a part of their natural disposition, while the females are limited in their expression so that they fit into the accepted norms of the society. Hence social learning theories working on values and rewards for the aggressive behaviors' functions gender typically. This calls for accounting gender while designing specific interventions for prevention of aggression among children and adolescents. Salimi et al. also investigated factors associated with aggression among elementary school girls and boys using the Social Cognitive Theory framework and found that self-efficacy, perceived social norms, observational learning, outcome expectations, outcome expectancies and perceived situational predicted aggressive behaviors in the students based on the Social Cognitive Theory constructs.

The study demonstrated that attitudes about violence and the beliefs about it are both contributing factors to the active expression of aggression. This further supports the social cognitive theory where beliefs and attitudes determine the appropriateness of aggression (Anderson & Heusmann). Also, beliefs and attitudes go deeper and add valence to the behavior, deciding whether it can be called 'good' or 'bad' and whether or not it is 'justified.' However, the worrisome fact is that by the time the child grows older, the link between thought, action and attitude becomes tenuous, and therefore they may in fact become more suggestible and plastic in the hands of antisocial forces. Research has also shown that violent attitudes during high school are associated with subsequent violent behavior as young adults (Torres). This goes to emphasize the importance of the need for intervention strategies in early school life and help in the cementing of their thoughts in the formative years.

The strengths and limitations of the study need to be acknowledged. Use of validated scales for measuring aggression, beliefs and attitudes, large sample size and inclusion of wide range of age groups adds to strength of the study. However, cross-sectional nature of the present study and use of self-report method is a limitation of the study. Further, the study has been conducted in a single school limits external validity of the findings.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the limitations, the research has not defeated its purpose. The study adds to the relatively smaller body of research linking beliefs, attitudes and reported levels of aggression, particularly for children and adolescent students. The study provides further impetus for conducting large scale multi-centric longitudinal studies for examining this casual hypothesis. Further, the study demonstrates gender and age differences in aggressive attitudes, beliefs and behavior as reported mainly in western

countries. Considering the age wise increase in aggressive behavior but establishment of aggressive beliefs and attitudes at younger age, there is need to intervene at an earlier age for curbing the menace of violence and aggression among children and adolescents.

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