

# Study Roundup: Is TV Making Our Kids "Mean Girls"?

A new study finds that social aggression is depicted on a vast majority of children's TV programs, and could be playing into increases in psychological bullying.

By [The Healthline Editorial Team](#) | Published Sep 27, 2012

## The Gist

We've all heard the adage: "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." But is it true?

Over the years, considerable attention has been paid to combating the "sticks and stones"—namely, nose-bloodying schoolyard bullies. We've given less thought to hurtful words. However, mounting evidence suggests that our kids can't ignore this psychological bullying.

In recent years, studies have shown that "social aggression"—mean-spirited behaviors like excluding peers, giving dirty looks, manipulating friends, and spreading rumors—can cause real damage. Victims of social aggression experience adjustment problems, suffer low self-esteem, and, in severe cases, commit suicide. The problem has become so severe that, in 2006, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services labeled "psychological bullying" a serious public health issue.

But where do children learn to behave this way? [New research](#) published today in the *Journal of Communication* provides keen insight on one possible cause: TV. In the study, researchers analyzed the content of the 50 most popular children's television shows, from *American Dad* to *Zoey 101*. They charted how often incidents of social aggression occurred, what kind of aggression occurred, and how that aggression was portrayed.

## The Expert Take

The head of the study, Dr. Nicole Martins, said the study highlighted the antisocial messages prevalent on TV. The study found that 92 percent of the shows studied depicted instances of social aggression.

In an interview with Healthline, Dr. Martins explained the idea behind the study. "[We looked for] any behavior intended to damage the self-esteem or social standing of a target. This could include something as simple as calling someone a mean name...[or engaging in] more nuanced behaviors like cruel gossip."

Dr. Martins and her research partner Dr. Barbara J. Wilson found that, on average, incidents of social aggression occurred 14 times per hour. That's one rolled eye, cutting comment, or sarcastic laugh every four minutes.



They also considered context—whether the show depicted social aggression in an appealing way. The result? “Socially aggressive acts were significantly more likely to be committed by an attractive perpetrator,” writes Dr. Martins. In addition, the characters that perpetrated these actions were rarely punished.

Dr. Russell Hyken, a psychotherapist and bullying expert, says that this trend is troubling. “If kids see [socially aggressive behavior] on TV...it becomes commonplace and ultimately accepted,” Dr. Hyken says. “It can also spawn copycat behavior.”

Dr. Hyken notes that, based on his own personal observation as a psychotherapist and former school administrator, this sort of social bullying is on the rise. “The bully behavior used to be physical—bloody noses, bruises. You could spot it a lot easier.”

Today, he says, “the bullying has become more sophisticated”—i.e., socially aggressive—and harder to see. However, it still leaves profound emotional scars.

What’s more, the lessons kids learn today stay with them for life. “It’s important to keep in mind that young bullies grow into adult bullies,” says Dr. Hyken.

So what does this mean to parents? Should you throw away your TV?

“These findings should help parents and educators recognize that there are socially aggressive behaviors on programs children watch,” writes Dr. Martins. “Parents should not assume that a program is okay for their child to watch simply because it does not contain any physical violence.”

She suggests that parents “use these shows as a teaching tool. When parents see a socially aggressive portrayal in a program that their child is watching, [they should] remind the child that these behaviors are not okay and can cause real harm.”

### **Source and Method**

Researchers from Indiana University Bloomington and University of Illinois analyzed 150 programs—three episodes each of the 50 most popular American children’s TV programs according to Nielsen Media Research. In order to measure social aggression, they noted each instance in which a perpetrator committed a socially aggressive act directed toward a target.

The study found that a vast majority of the children’s TV programs sampled featured instances of social aggression. These acts occurred frequently, and they were often perpetrated by attractive characters. These characters’ actions almost always went unpunished.

### **Other Research**

While social scientists have done a great deal of research about the link between television-watching and physical aggression, the link between TV-watching and social aggression has not been widely studied. Only two previous studies examined social aggression on television.

[A 2004 study](#) published in *Aggressive Behavior* found that 92 percent of the programs sampled—a group of shows popular with British adolescents—showed instances of social aggression.

[Another study](#), published in 2005, focused on TV programs popular with teens and young adults. That study found that 93 percent of female characters in comedies engaged in indirect aggression, a close cousin of social aggression.

Dr. Martins and Dr. Wilson performed [another study](#), published in *Human Communication Research*, which examined the psychological effects of watching social aggression on TV. They found that children who spent more time watching shows depicting social aggression were more likely to perpetrate these behaviors at school.

-- *Megan McCrea*