VU VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT AMSTERDAM

VU Research Portal

High self-perceived social competence in rejected children is related to frequent fighting

van Boxtel, H.W.; Orobio de Castro, B.; Goossens, F.A.

published in
European Journal of Developmental Psychology
2004

DOI (link to publisher)
10.1080/17405620444000102

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication in VU Research Portal

citation for published version (APA)
van Boxtel, H. W., Orobio de Castro, B., & Goossens, F. A. (2004). High self-perceived social competence in rejected children is related to frequent fighting. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, *1*(3), 205-214. https://doi.org/10.1080/17405620444000102

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

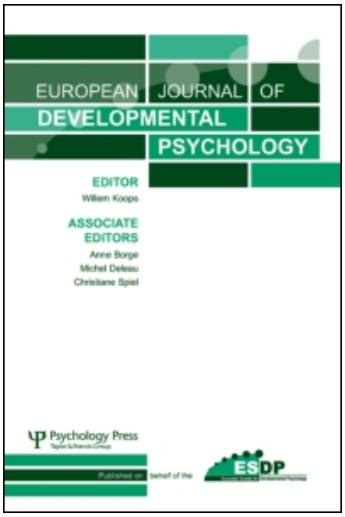
- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:
vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

Download date: 13. Sep. 2021

This article was downloaded by: *[Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam]*
On: *8 December 2010*
Access details: *Access Details: [subscription number 925872306]*
Publisher *Psychology Press*
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



European Journal of Developmental Psychology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713684600

High self-perceived social competence in rejected children is related to frequent fighting

Dr Herman W. van Boxtel[a]; Bram Orobio de Castro[a]; Frits A. Goossens[b]
[a] Department of Developmental Psychology, Utrecht University, The Netherlands [b] Department of Developmental Psychology, Free University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

To cite this Article van Boxtel, Herman W. Dr, de Castro, Bram Orobio and Goossens, Frits A.(2004) 'High self-perceived social competence in rejected children is related to frequent fighting', European Journal of Developmental Psychology, 1: 3, 205 — 214

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/17405620444000102

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17405620444000102

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY, 2004, *1*(3), 205–214

High self-perceived social competence in rejected children is related to frequent fighting

Herman W. van Boxtel and Bram Orobio de Castro
Department of Developmental Psychology, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

Frits A. Goossens
Department of Developmental Psychology, Free University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Downloaded By: [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] At: 14:10 8 December 2010

High levels of aggression have long been assumed to be related to low self-esteem. Empirical studies have, however, never demonstrated any relation between low self-esteem and aggressive behaviour. Recently Baumeister and colleagues (1996) proposed that aggressive behaviour does not result from low, but from unrealistically high self-esteem. They expect aggressive behaviour to occur when an unrealistically positive evaluation of oneself is disputed or threatened by others. In the present study Baumeister's proposition was tested for the domain of social acceptance in 179 third- and fourth-grade children. Self-esteem in the social domain was operationalized as self-perceived social competence, while threats to high self-perceived social competence were operationalized as rejection by peers. Participants completed the Dutch version of the Self-Perception Profile for Children and sociometric ratings of (dis)likeability and aggressiveness. Three rival hypotheses were tested: (1) the traditional hypothesis that aggressive behaviour is associated with low self-perceived competence; (2) the simplified hypothesis that aggressive behaviour is associated with high self-perceived competence; and (3) Baumeister's original hypothesis that aggressive behaviour is related to high self-perceived competence only when the latter is combined with less-favourable judgments from others. No support was found for the traditional hypothesis. Baumeister's original hypothesis was supported and explained more variance in aggressive behaviour than the simplified hypothesis.

High levels of aggression and rejection by peers have long been assumed to be related to low self-esteem. Based on this assumption prevention and intervention programs aim to bolster children's self-esteem, expecting this will reduce or prevent aggressive behaviour problems. However, numerous

Correspondence should be addressed to Dr Herman van Boxtel, Department of Developmental Psychology, Utrecht University, P. O. Box 80140, 3508 TC Utrecht, The Netherlands. E-mail: H.vanboxtel@fss.uu.nl

© 2004 Psychology Press Ltd
http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/pp/17405629.html DOI: 10.1080/17405620444000102

empirical studies with children and adults have consistently failed to show any relation between low self-esteem and aggressive behaviour (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Veerman & Straathof, 1993). Moreover, there is no clear theoretical rationale as to why one would expect low self-esteem, rejection, and aggressive behaviour to be related.

These indecisive and at times contradictory empirical findings may also be due to the use of global or inadequately defined concepts, such as aggressive behaviour, peer rejection, and self-esteem. Aggressive behaviours comprise a wide range of different behaviours with unique causes, correlates, and consequences (Tremblay, 2000). It seems unlikely that all these diverse aggressive behaviours would have a similar relation to peer rejection and self-esteem.

Similarly, the broad construct of rejection by peers merely indicates a certain reputation of a child in a particular group. The reasons for this reputation may differ considerably between rejected children. Even though, on average, rejected children display higher levels of disruptive behaviour and lower levels of co-operative behaviour, rejected children are certainly not a homogeneous group, as children within this group may be rejected for very different reasons. Some rejected children, for example, are anxious and withdrawn, whereas other rejected children are disruptive.

Self-esteem is also a very global construct. Several studies have shown that rather than a global evaluation of self-worth, people value themselves very differently in different domains (e.g., Harter, 1983). For example, a child may have very high self-esteem for his academic qualities, but very low self-esteem for his social competence. It appears that self-esteem for a specific context is based on perception of one's own behaviour in that context and of other people's responses to one's behaviour in that context. Incorporating other people's responses in one's self-evaluations produces a certain degree of congruence between one's self-evaluation and evaluation by others. Because people's behaviour and other people's reactions vary considerably from context to context, so does one's context-specific self-regard.

Thus, to meaningfully predict relations between aggressive behaviour, rejection, and self-esteem, a first requirement is to specify the kind of aggressive behaviours, the reasons for rejection by peers, and the context for self-evaluation the theory applies to. Having specified these elements, it would seem reasonable to expect a certain degree of congruence between social status in a peer group, and self-evaluation of social functioning in that peer group. For brevity, we further refer to this expectation as *the congruency hypothesis*.

Some studies have specifically investigated relations between sociometric status and self-perceived social competence. Consistent with the congruency hypothesis, rejected children generally indicate somewhat lower self-perceived social competence than other children (Finn, 1985; Van Boxtel,

Downloaded By: [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] At: 14:10 8 December 2010

1992), although this relation is not always found (Van Boxtel, 1990). That differences in self-esteem between rejected and non-rejected children are sometimes small or even nonexistent (Coie, 1990) can partly be explained by the lack of homogeneity in the rejected group itself. It becomes increasingly clear that the distinction between aggressive and non-aggressive rejected children is especially important (e.g., French, 1988; Parkhurst & Asher, 1987).

Given the diversity in causes for rejection by peers, these findings probably do not apply equally to all rejected children. Aggressive rejected children differ in many regards from non-aggressive rejected children. If the congruency hypothesis did apply to aggressive rejected children, rejection by peers would lead them to lower their self-perceived social competence. However, as indicated above, empirical studies have consistently failed to show that these children perceive their own social competence to be low. Coie (1990) even suggested that certain aggressive rejected children "boost" their self-evaluation. If anything, self-reports suggest some of these children do indeed hold more favourable views of themselves than other children do.

Baumeister et al. (1996) proposed a very different view on this topic. They maintained that aggressive behaviour does not result from low, but rather from unrealistically *high* self-esteem. They expect aggressive behaviour to occur when an unrealistically positive self-evaluation is challenged by negative judgments or behaviours from others. On such occasions aggressive behaviour serves to silence or reprimand those disputing the overly positive self-evaluation (Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000). Thus, certain children do not attain congruency by lowering their own self-evaluation, but by trying to force others to heighten their evaluation of them. If this proposition is true, the highest levels of aggressive behaviour are to be expected when there is a large discrepancy between negative evaluation by others and favourable self-evaluation. That is, in the context of social relations, for rejected children with *high* self-perceived social competence.

In the popular press, Baumeister et al.'s hypothesis was simplified to the hypothesis that aggressive behaviour is related to high self-esteem. This hypothesis is obviously opposite to the traditional low self-esteem hypothesis.

Baumeister and colleagues' original hypothesis is in line with recent findings on emotion and social information processing. Current emotion theories predict that anger and fighting result from the appraisal of being harmed unjustly (e.g., Lochman & Wells, 2002). From this perspective, being rejected while one considers one's own social behaviour appropriate will evoke high levels of anger and aggressive behaviour. In contrast, from an emotion theory perspective, low self-perceived social competence would not be related to aggressive behaviour. Being rejected for social behaviour that one also evaluates negatively oneself would lead to feelings of sadness, guilt or shame, that inhibit aggressive behaviour rather than promote it.

Downloaded By: [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] At: 14:10 8 December 2010

Studies of highly aggressive and disruptive boys' social information processing show that these boys overestimate other children's responsibilities for conflicts, while they underestimate their own responsibility (Lochman & Dodge, 1998). This applies most strongly for children who are aggressive *and* rejected (Orobio de Castro, Veerman, Koops, Bosch, & Monshouwer, 2002), that is, for those children who probably experience the largest discrepancy between relatively positive self-evaluation and negative evaluation by peers.

In the present study, Baumeister et al.'s hypotheses were tested for the domain of social behaviour for third- and fourth-grade children. Three rival hypotheses were tested:

- The traditional *low self-esteem hypothesis* that aggressive behaviour is related to low self-perceived social competence;
- Baumeister et al.'s simplified *high self-esteem hypothesis* that aggressive behaviour is related to high self-perceived social competence; and
- The original *interaction hypothesis* that aggressive behaviour is related to a combination of high self-perceived social competence and rejection by peers.

Downloaded By: [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] At: 14:10 8 December 2010

METHOD

Participants

Participants were recruited from eight classrooms in four Dutch elementary schools. Sociometric data were collected for 179 children in Grades 3 and 4. Twenty-five participants were classified as rejected (see Measures).

Measures

Sociometric status

This was established by means of the standardscore method (Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982). Children were asked to nominate the three other pupils in their class whom they liked and disliked most. The sumscores for received nominations were standardized per class. This standardized "dislike" score is considered a valid indicator of peer rejection. Next, sociometric status was computed for each child.

Behavioral reputation was assessed with the same nomination procedure. From a questionnaire of 16 items (using short behavioural descriptions from Coie et al., 1982), the standardized sumscore of the received nominations for the "fight"-item was used to represent the level of physically aggressive behaviour as perceived by peers.

Downloaded By: [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] At: 14:10 8 December 2010

Self-perception Profile for Children (SPPC)

Self-perceived social competence (SPSC) was operationalized by means of the Social Acceptance subscale of the Dutch version of Harter's SPPC (CBSK; for details see Veerman, Straathof, Treffers, Van den Bergh, & Ten Brink, 1987). Reliability for this subscale is sufficient (internal consistency $> .70$; test–retest reliability is .68); data on validity are indecisive still.

Data analyses

Data analyses were conducted in two ways[1]. First, the three main hypotheses were tested *categorically*, by comparing correlations between self-perceived social competence and aggressive reputation for subgroups of rejected and non-rejected children. Second, to fully use the dimensional information concerning sociometric status, the three main hypotheses were tested *dimensionally*, by means of hierarchical regression analyses. Fight reputation (''fights'') served as dependent variable in the regression analyses. Independent variables were entered into the regression equation in two consecutive steps, see Equation 1.

$$\begin{aligned} &\text{Model 1: } Fights = \text{constant} + b1 \times dislike + b2 \times SPSC \\ &\text{Model 2: } Fights = \text{constant} + b1 \times dislike + b2 \times SPSC + b3 \times dislike \times SPSC \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

Dislike and SPSC main effects were entered in the first step. A multiplicative interaction term of *dislike* $\times$ *SPSC* was added in the second step. The *low self-esteem hypothesis* predicts a negative beta value for SPSC in the first step. The *high self-esteem hypothesis* predicts this beta to be positive. The *interaction hypothesis* predicts that inclusion of the interaction term in the second step of the analysis significantly increases explained variance in ''fights''.

RESULTS

Categorical analyses

Correlations between fight reputation and SPSC for rejected and non-rejected children are shown in Table 1. As predicted, the *low* and high *self-esteem hypotheses* were not supported for any grade, as there were no

[1]Because the hypotheses did not concern the children's sex, this variable was not included in the data analyses reported here. Explorative analyses of possible sex effects showed that the main findings held after controlling for sex.

TABLE 1
Correlations between fights and SPSC for rejected and non-rejected children

All	*Rejected*	*Non-rejected*	Z *of difference*[a]
.10	.58**	.01	2.86**

Notes. [a]*Z* for statistical significance of the difference between correlations for rejected and non-rejected children, calculated using Van den Brink & Koele's (1987) algorithm.
**$p < .01$.

Downloaded By: [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] At: 14:10 8 December 2010

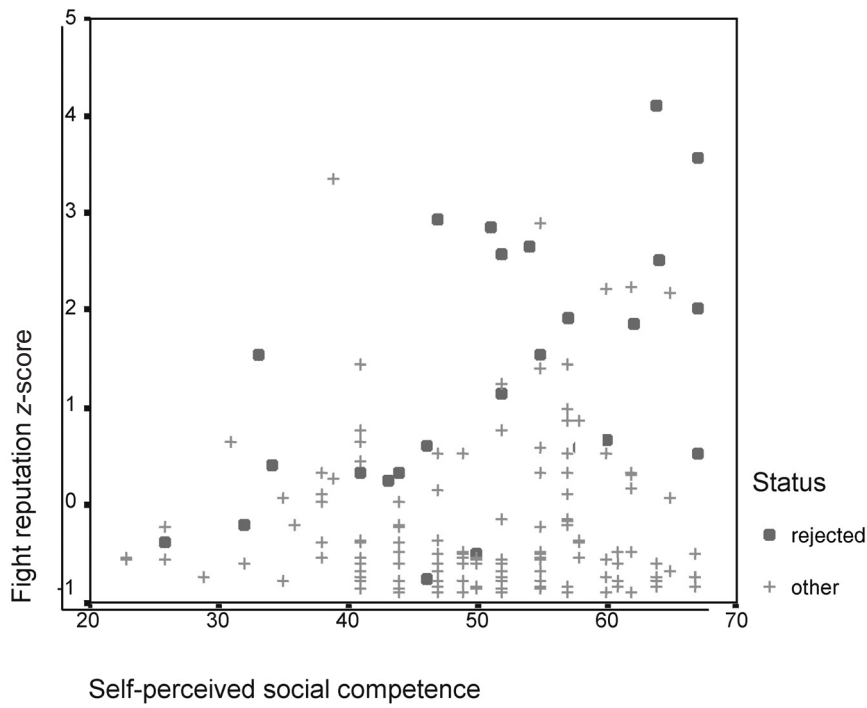


Figure 1. Fight reputation by self-perceived social competence and rejection

significant correlations between "fights" and self-esteem. The *interaction hypothesis* was supported. As shown in the right-hand column of Table 1, correlations differed significantly between the rejected and the non-rejected group. No correlations between fights and SPSC were found in the non-rejected group, while strong *positive* correlations were found in the rejected group. These findings demonstrate that of those children who are evaluated unfavourably by their peers, those who evaluate their own social behaviour most positively have the highest fight reputations. The

TABLE 2
Hierarchical regression of fight reputation

		B^a	R^2	p
Model 1	Rejection	.72		.001
	SPSC	.13		.011
			.53	.001
Model 2	Rejection	− .23		.408
	SPSC	.11		.025
	Interaction	.97		.001
			.56	.001

Note. [a]Standardized beta.

Downloaded By: [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] At: 14:10 8 December 2010

different relations between fights and SPSC for both status groups are depicted in Figure 1.

Dimensional analyses

When classifying children in the above status groups, dimensional information regarding rejection is reduced to dichotomous information, resulting in considerable loss of information. To make full use of the dimensional information concerning rejection, data analyses were also conducted dimensionally, by means of hierarchical regression analysis with fight reputation as dependent variable. Results of this analysis are shown in Table 2.

In the first step of the analysis, rejection and SPSC main effects were entered. Both rejection and SPSC explained variance in "fights". The positive value of beta for SPSC supports the *high self-esteem hypothesis*, as it indicates that higher SPSC is related to a higher fight reputation. In the second step of the analysis, a multiplicative interaction term for rejection times SPSC was included. The *interaction hypothesis* was supported as inclusion of the interaction term significantly increased explained variance, $p < .001$. The relatively high beta values for the interaction term indicates a relatively strong contribution of peer-evaluation/SPSC discrepancy to fight reputation.

DISCUSSION

Three rival hypotheses concerning the relations between aggressive behaviour, sociometric status, and self-esteem were tested: (1) the traditional low self-esteem hypothesis that aggressive behaviour is associated with low self-perceived competence; (2) the high self-esteem hypothesis that aggressive behaviour is associated with high self-perceived competence;

and (3) the interaction hypothesis that aggressive behaviour is related to high self-perceived competence when the latter is combined with less-favourable judgments by others. As expected, no support was found for the traditional hypothesis. The interaction hypothesis was supported and explained more variance in aggressive behaviour than the simplified hypothesis.

In line with Baumeister and colleagues' theorizing, the present findings could be interpreted as evidence for the proposition that rejected-aggressive children act aggressively when their relatively favourable self-evaluation is threatened by peers who reject them. From the aggressive child's perspective it may seem logical to oppose aggressively what he or she perceives to be unjust rejection. This aggressive behaviour may in turn exacerbate rejection by peers, leading to cycles of escalating behavioural interactions between the aggressive child and its peer group, resulting in a developmental pathway of progressively externalizing problem behaviour as described by, for example, Rubin, LeMare, and Lollis (1990).

However, the present study leaves many steps in this proposed chain of events unoperationalized, and thus unclear. In theory, aggressive rejected children fight when they experience a discrepancy between their own positive appraisal of their social behaviour on the one hand, and other children's negative appraisal of their behaviour, which they believe to be unjust. Although the present findings are in line with this theory, they do not demonstrate the actual process the theory proposes. From the present findings, we cannot tell whether aggressive rejected children themselves are aware that many peers dislike them, even though this would be a requirement for the discrepancy process to occur.

We are also not sure that aggressive rejected children's relatively high SPSC scores reflect actual favourable self-perceptions, or rather a successful attempt to show a positive image to the experimenter (and themselves?) while filling out a questionnaire. Clinicians have suggested that highly aggressive children try to present an image of superiority to others, even though they know that this image is far from realistic. Unfortunately, this hypothesis is hard to falsify, as any failure to demonstrate that aggressive children do not "really" perceive themselves to be very competent may be disregarded as failed assessments of these children's "real" self-perceptions. Future research may clarify this issue by studying whether self-perceived competence measurements on questionnaires like the SPPC are unrelated to possibly more valid indices of "real" self-perceived competence like disclosure to friends, diaries or trusted adults.

Future studies may assess the processes responsible for the established relation between fighting reputation, relatively high SPSC, and rejection. Analyses of mutual like and dislike nominations in sociometric data may be used to test whether generally disliked aggressive children maintain

Downloaded By: [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] At: 14:10 8 December 2010

relatively high self-perceived social competence because they are liked by a small subgroup of (equally aggressive?) children (e.g., Dishion, Bullock, & Granic, 2002). By observing children in actual conflict situations while inquiring about their evaluations of their own and other children's behaviours (e.g., Lochman & Dodge, 1998), relations between children's observed behaviour, self-reported social information processing, and evaluations of their own and other children's behaviour may be tested validly in "real time", while minimalizing socially desirable response tendencies (Orobio de Castro, Veerman, Koops, & Bosch, 2004; Van Nieuwenhuijzen, 2004).

Presently, we only tested hypotheses cross-sectionally. Ongoing longitudinal studies of the present sample may clarify stability and changes over time in the demonstrated relationships between SPSC, rejection, and fighting reputation. It may be particularly interesting to discriminate between aggressive and/or rejected children who maintain their relatively positive self-perceived social competence and children who do not. Such analyses may show whether decreases in discrepancies between self-perceived social competence and rejection are accompanied by reductions in fighting with peers.

The present study clearly demonstrates the heterogeneity of characteristics of children in rejected sociometric status groups and the importance of discriminating different aspects of self-esteem. The same appears to be true for the operationalization of different kinds of aggressive behaviour. Specification of global concepts like "self-esteem" and "aggression" into more precise constructs like self-perceived social competence and fighting reputation is a prerequisite for advances in theory and research in these fields.

Downloaded By: [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] At: 14:10 8 December 2010

REFERENCES

Baumeister, R. F., Bushman, B. J., & Campbell, W. K. (2000). Self-esteem, narcissism, and aggression: Does violence result from low self-esteem or from threatened egotism? *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *9*, 26–29.

Baumeister, R. F., Smart, L., & Boden, J. M. (1996). Relation of threatened egotism to violence and aggression: The dark side of high self-esteem. *Psychological Review*, *103*, 5–33.

Coie, J. D. (1990). Toward a theory of peer rejection. In S. R. Asher & J. D. Coie (Eds.), *Peer rejection in childhood*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Coie, J. D., Dodge, K. A., & Coppotelli, H. (1982). Dimensions and types of social status: A cross-age perspective. *Developmental Psychology*, *18*, 557–570.

Dishion, T. J., Bullock, B. M., & Granic, I. (2002). Pragmatism in modeling peer influence: Dynamics, outcomes, and change processes. *Development and Psychopathology*, *14*, 969–981.

Finn, M. G. (1985). *Being disliked: Self-report and social status*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Duke University, Durham, NC.

French, D. C. (1988). Heterogeneity of peer-rejected boys: Aggressive and non-aggressive subtypes. *Child Development*, *59*, 976–985.

Harter, S. (1983). Developmental perspectives on the self-system. In P. H. Mussen (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology* (4th ed., Vol. 4, pp. 275–385). New York: Wiley.

Lochman, J. E., & Dodge, K. A. (1998). Distorted perceptions in dyadic interactions of aggressive and non-aggressive boys: Effects of prior expectations, context, and boys' age. *Development & Psychopathology*, *10*, 495–512.

Lochman, J. E., & Wells, K. C. (2002). Contextual social-cognitive mediators and child outcome: A test of the theoretical model in the Coping Power program. *Development & Psychopathology*, *14*, 945–967.

Newcomb, A. F., & Bukowski, W. M. (1984). A longitudinal study of the utility of social preference and social impact sociometric classification schemes. *Child Development*, *55*, 1434–1447.

Orobio de Castro, B., Veerman, J. W., Koops, W., Bosch, J. D., & Monshouwer, H. J. (2002). Hostile attribution of intent and aggressive behavior: A meta-analysis. *Child Development*, *73*, 916–934.

Orobio de Castro, B., Veerman, J. W., Koops, W., & Bosch, J. D. (2004). Social information processing, emotion attribution, and emotion regulation in boys with antisocial behavior problems. *Manuscript submitted for publication*.

Parkhurst, J. T., & Asher, S. R. (1987). Goals and concerns: Implications for the study of children's social competence. In B. B. Lahey & A. E. Kazdin (Eds.), *Advances in clinical child psychology* (Vol. 8, pp. 199–228). New York: Plenum.

Rubin, K. H., LeMare, L. J., & Lollis, S. (1990). Social withdrawal in childhood: Developmental pathways to peer rejection. In S. R. Asher & J. D. Coie (Eds.), *Peer rejection in childhood*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Tremblay, R. E. (2000). The development of aggressive behavior during childhood: What have we learned in the past century? *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, *24*, 129–141.

Van Boxtel, H. W. (1992). *Sociometrische status in de adolescentie* [*Sociometric status in adolescence*]. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Nijmegen University, The Netherlands.

Van den Brink, W. P., & Koele, P. (1987). *Statistiek* [*Statistics*]. Meppel, The Netherlands: Boom.

Van Nieuwenhuijzen, M. (2004). *Social information processing in children with mild intellectual disabilities*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. Utrecht University, The Netherlands.

Veerman, J. W., & Straathof, M. A. E. (1993). Zelfwaardering bij depressieve en gedragsgestoorde kinderen [Self-esteem in depressed and behavior-disordered children]. *Kind en Adolescent*, *14*, 173–186.

Veerman, J. W., Straathof, M. A. E., Treffers, Ph. D. A., Van den Bergh, B. R. H., & Ten Brink, L. T. (1987). *Competentiebelevingsschaal handleiding* [*Self-perceived Competence Scale: Test manual*]. Lisse: Swets & Zeitlinger.

Manuscript received 2 October 2003
Manuscript accepted 15 April 2004

Downloaded By: [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] At: 14:10 8 December 2010