11.2

 Aggression

As you wait for the train you observe two children wrestling with one another. The man and woman in the corner are yelling at one another and the woman begins to cry. Are these behaviors aggression? **Aggression** is intentionally harming someone who is motivated to avoid that harm. In order to be labeled as aggression the behavior does need to be intentional. The result does not matter as much as the intent. Whether or not the punch connects, the behavior is aggression. If you were swinging your arm around with no intention of hitting someone and accidentally did, your behavior may be careless but it is not aggression. Both the children and the couple appear to satisfy this requirement: Their actions have intention. To be labeled as aggression the behavior must also have the intent of harm. Harm may be relational, such as an insult, or physical, such as a punch. Harm can also differ in whether it is direct, like an insult or a punch, or covert, like gossip or adding poison to someone's drink. The wrestling children might qualify as expressing aggression, if their actions are intended to harm one another and not to relieve the boredom of waiting. The fighting couple is likely showing aggression, as their words seem to be designed to harm each other. For a behavior to be labeled as aggression, the person toward whom the behavior is aimed must be motivated to avoid the harm. A visit to the oral surgeon, for example, may result in pain. But the oral surgeon was not acting aggressively when she took out your wisdom teeth, as you willingly submitted to the surgery.



**Intentionally spreading a hurtful rumor can also be considered aggression.**

We might engage in deliberate actions that harm someone else without the action being aggressive. When competing for a job, our getting the job does harm the other candidates, but we were not being aggressive in our actions. The intent of the action was not harm; the intent of this action was employment (Felson, 2002). At times we engage in aggressive acts as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. A bomber pilot who drops a bomb on a terrorist training camp intends to harm individuals there, but the pilot's final goal is to stop terrorist attacks, not cause harm to those particular individuals. Boxers throw punches to win a boxing match, not because of a desire to cause lasting harm on their opponents. When aggression is a means to an end we call it **instrumental aggression**. If one member of the couple in the train station was saying hurtful things in order to bring about a breakup, that would be instrumental aggression. In contrast, at times the harm an aggressive behavior is intended to cause is our goal. A fifth grader who spreads a rumor about an enemy may have hurting that enemy as his or her final goal. This type of aggression is called **hostile aggression** (Baron & Richardson, 1994). Physical aggression that has the potential of severely harming someone is **violence** (Felson, 2002; Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). A gunshot to the chest is violence, while a slap on the cheek is better described as aggressive behavior.

**Origins of Aggression**

Where does aggression originate? We find aggressive behavior in a variety of human cultures and find evidence of aggression in the remains of early humans, suggesting that aggression is something that is innate to the person (Buss & Shackelford, 1997). Sigmund Freud, for example, believed that all people were endowed with aggressive energy, called thanatos. Human cultures, he argued, were needed to control this aggressive drive. Today, evolutionary psychologists suggest that humans evolved a tendency toward aggression because aggression provides an evolutionary benefit (Buss & Shackelford, 1997). Inflicting harm on a rival is one way of gaining territory or mates, thus making it advantageous to use some degree of aggression in human relationships.

Although most cultures exhibit some degree of aggression, wide variations exist between cultures and over human history, suggesting that aggression is to some extent affected by the social environment (Bond, 2004; Munroe, Hulefeld, Rodgers, Tomeo, & Yamazaki, 2000). For example, rates of aggression against partners tend to differ depending on the level of gender equality and individualism in a culture. In cultures with greater gender equality and more individualism, violence toward women is lower, although victimization of men tends to be higher in these cultures (Archer, 2006). Overall aggression is an inborn tendency that appears in most cultures and is either increased or decreased by the norms of that culture.

Just as aggression rates among cultures vary, so do rates among individuals. Differences in rates of aggression between individuals are due to a combination of inborn or innate qualities (nature) and the environment (nurture). Some degree of the difference between people in rates of aggression can be traced to genetic differences. Identical twins, who share the same genes, are more similar to one another in rates of aggression than fraternal twins, who share only half of their genes (Hines & Saudino, 2009). But differences between twins with the same genes still exist, suggesting that, in the end, it is neither just genes nor just environment that influence aggression. Individuals whose genes predispose them toward aggression may become more aggressive in an environment that encourages aggression or not show this predisposition in an environment that does not encourage aggression. For example, in one study of adoptees, only 10.5% of the adoptees whose biological and adoptive fathers did not commit a crime committed a crime. These individuals had neither the genetic predisposition toward crime nor the environment to support criminal actions. Those whose environment but not biology included criminality, in other words those whose adoptive father but not biological father committed a crime, did not show much more criminal behavior than the previous group. Only 11.5% committed a crime. When the biological father, but not the adoptive father, committed a crime, 22% of the adoptees committed a crime themselves. Finally, of those individuals whose biological father and adoptive father committed a crime, 36.2% committed a crime (Hutchings & Mednick, 1977). In the end, then, biology is an important factor in aggression. Individuals with inborn tendencies toward aggression are likely to be more aggressive than those who do not have such inborn tendencies. But the environment also contributes to expression of aggression, building on those genetic predispositions.

**Gender and Age Differences in Aggression**

As you sit at the train station, you hear some kind of aggressive behavior happening behind you. When you turn around, who do you think would be most likely to be the perpetrator? A man or woman? A boy or girl? How old would you expect that person to be? When we look into differences in aggression we find that men show more physical aggression than women. This does not mean that women are never physically aggressive; they simply show less of this type of aggression than men. Women are generally more verbally aggressive than men (Bettencourt & Miller, 1996; Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008; Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Ostrov, 2006). Some of this difference may come from gender roles. Women are expected to be less aggressive than men, and women may therefore show less physical aggression in order to be in line with the expectations for their gender. Such an idea is supported with the finding that when individuals are angered or aggression is instigated, essentially no differences in aggression are found between men and women (Bettencourt & Kernahan, 1997). Given the right situation women can be as aggressive as men.



**Toddlers are the most physically aggressive group.**

The most physically aggressive age group is, surprisingly, toddlers. Children begin to use physical aggression in their second year and this aggression decreases as they learn that hitting, kicking, and biting are not socially acceptable behaviors. Because the hit of a 2 year-old is generally not going to do much damage, we usually do not think about the frequency of physically aggressive behaviors in this age group (Tremblay, 2000). Overall, physical aggression tends to decrease through adolescence, though there is a great deal of variability amongst individuals (Underwood, Beron, & Rosen, 2009). For at least a subset of individuals, aggression increases in adolescence and young adulthood (Loeber & Farrington, 1998; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1998).

Relational aggression shows a different developmental trajectory. **Relational aggression** is aggression focused on the destruction of relationships or social status through direct actions, reputation attacks, or exclusion (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). When a person spreads a rumor designed to damage someone's reputation, excludes someone from a social group, or tells someone they cannot join one's group unless they do a favor, that individual is engaging in relational aggression. Original research on the concept included direct, rather than covert, acts, but much of the subsequent researchers have focused primarily on the nondirect types of aggression, such as spreading rumors or exclusion (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Geiger, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Crick, 2004; Tomada & Schneider, 1997). Relational aggression largely begins in the preschool years and rises through childhood. Children learn how to use techniques like ostracism and gossip to harm others and get their way. Girls and women tend to use more relational aggression than men (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Relational aggression is common between cultures (Tomada & Schneider, 1997).

High aggression in childhood and adolescence can have negative long-term effects, including increased risk of alcohol and drug abuse, divorce, unemployment, and mental illness (Farrington, 1991; Loeber, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loeber, Moffitt, & Caspi, 1998; McCord, 1983; McCord & McCord, 1960; West & Farrington, 1977). Both physical aggression and relational aggression have negative effects (Crick, 1996).

12.1

 Altruism



**Two people decided to be altruistic and help pick up the fallen papers, rather than rushing off toward their own destinations. Why do you think they did this?**

In the train station waiting for your scheduled departure you notice a woman drop her ticket. The man behind her picks it up and returns it to her. She accepts it with a smile of relief and hurries off to catch her train. This may be an ordinary occurrence, but it leaves us with the question of why the man helped the woman by returning her ticket. Was he hoping to make a connection and get her phone number? Was he hoping for a reward? Did he want to look like a hero? Or, even though he was a stranger and not helping would not have affected him, was he just trying to make sure she made her train? When we help others, do we help because we truly care about the welfare of the other person, or are we helping with the hope of helping ourselves? This is the basic question in the debate about altruism. Altruism occurs when our motive for our behavior is entirely for the interest of others and is not motivated by self-interest. On the other hand, when we do something entirely for self-interest, we are being egoistic.

Imagine you bought the person sitting next to you in the train station coffee and a bagel. If you bought those treats for your neighbor entirely because you wanted to make that person happy, you would have acted altruistically. Your ultimate goal was the happiness of the other person. An **ultimate goal** is the true goal, the end toward which one is aiming. In these types of situations we can also talk about another type of goal called an instrumental goal. **Instrumental goals** are the things we do to obtain our ultimate goal. Your instrumental goal was to buy the coffee and bagel and give them to your neighbor. As stepping stones toward our ultimate goals, instrumental goals may change depending on our ability to do them. If coffee and a bagel were not available, you might have told your neighbor a funny story or given him or her $5 to reach your ultimate goal of making that person happy.

When you engage in actions for **altruistic** motives, your ultimate goal is the welfare of the other person, not yourself. You might receive benefits for your action. The other person might show gratitude, your significant other might be impressed by your generosity and give you a kiss, or you might look good in front of your boss who is waiting in the train station with you. If you received benefits for an action, was your action still altruistic? Yes: when self-benefits are an unintended consequence of an action, that action may be truly altruistic. With altruism, the ultimate goal is still the welfare of others, and the action would have been done whether or not the self-benefits were present (Batson, 2010).

Using this terminology, actions undertaken for **egoistic** motives involve an ultimate goal of self-benefit (that kiss from your significant other) with the happiness of the other person being only an instrumental goal. If there had been another way to reach the goal of impressing your significant other, you may have taken that option instead. If you have ever volunteered so that you would have something to put on your resume, you engaged in volunteering for an egoistic motive. The type of volunteering you might choose to do may depend on whether you are egoistically or altruistically motivated (van Emmerik & Stone, 2002). Table 12.1 shows how our ultimate and instrumental goals are related to egoistic and altruistic motivations.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 12.1 Ultimate and Instrumental Goals of Altruistic and Egoistic Actions** | | |
| **Motive** | **Welfare of the Other** | **Self-Benefits** |
| **Altruistic** | Ultimate goal | Unintended consequence |
| **Egoistic** | Instrumental goal | Ultimate goal |
| *Based on Batson, 1990.* | | |

We engage in altruism, according to researchers, when we feel empathy for another person. By adopting that other person's perspective we are able to act in an altruistic way. This is called the **empathy-altruism hypothesis** (Batson, 1990; Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, & Birch, 1981). You might know what it is like to be hurrying through a train station, hoping to make your train, so when you see someone else hurrying you may help because you have been in that person's shoes. If we see that someone else is in trouble and needs help but do not adopt that person's point of view, we feel not empathy but personal distress. For example, if someone slipped and fell in front of you and you did not feel empathy, you might instead be upset that you had to see blood or be inconvenienced by someone else's clumsiness. In this case you might help so you do not need to see the injury or so you can be on your way quickly, not because you truly care about that person's well-being. Egoistic (self-focused) motives might involve personal distress, a concern about how one might be viewed by others, or a desire to feel better about oneself.

The problem researchers face in examining whether we engage in activities for truly altruistic motives is that the action itself does not clearly show the motive behind the action. That coffee you bought for your neighbor in the train station may have earned you a kiss from your significant other, but was your action egoistically motivated by that potential kiss or altruistically motivated by a desire to make your neighbor happy? On the surface the action and reaction are identical.

To look into altruism, researchers set up situations in which participants who were feeling empathy for someone else could either help that person or get out of the situation without looking or feeling bad. For example, in one study the participants could help by taking the place of another participant (actually a confederate) and receive electrical shocks in her place. For some participants, escape from the situation, and therefore their own distress, was easy. For other participants, escape was difficult. The idea was to see whether people were motivated by true altruism (they would help whether escape was difficult or easy) or egoism (they would help only if escape was difficult). In this, and other studies like it, researchers found that when empathy was high people seemed to act in truly altruistic ways. Even when they could escape the situation or leave feeling happy or looking good without helping, they still helped (Batson et al., 1989; Batson et al., 1991; Batson et al., 1988). Altruism can even occur when it violates the principle of justice. When we feel strong empathy for someone, we may act to increase that person's welfare even when that act will be unfair to others. An individual might cover for a co-worker whose mother has died even when that is unfair to another co-worker or the department in general (Batson, Batson, Todd, & Brummett, 1995; Batson, Klein, Highberger, & Shaw, 1995).

Altruism does vary from culture to culture (Cohen, 1972; Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003; Gurven, Zanolini, & Schniter, 2008). For example, altruism is higher in Thailand than in the United States. The reasons for such differences are likely quite varied, but in interviews Thais remarked that their Buddhist religion was an important factor in their desire to help others (Yablo & Field, 2007). Even when given the same resources, older individuals tend to donate more than younger people, suggesting that altruism is something one, in part, learns from culture (Rai & Gupta, 1996). This is not to say altruism is entirely based in culture. Evolutionary psychologists propose that altruism is at least partially genetically based and it is an interaction of genetic influences and cultural influences that determine altruism (Gintis, Bowles, Boyd, & Fehr, 2008; Knafo & Israel, 2010).