

# **Aggression, Coping, and Mood: How It all Fits Together**

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*Allison Maxwell is a senior researching the link between familial aggression, coping skills, and children's daily mood*

One of the biggest areas of research in psychology is abuse, specifically its effects on women and children. Determining the effects of abuse requires looking at intermediate actions, such as aggression and coping. Allison Maxwell, a senior psychology student, did just that. Her honors thesis uses data from a larger longitudinal study, part of the *USC Family Studies Project*, to examine the relationship between familial aggression, coping skills, and children's daily mood. To organize her work, Maxwell had several hypotheses that she wanted to test. First, she wanted to see if increased aggression between parents would be associated with increased negative mood in children. She also wanted to see if increased aggression between parents or between parents and children would be associated with decreased use of coping mechanisms. Finally, Maxwell wanted to test whether or not children's use of coping mechanisms would be associated with decreased negative mood, even if conflict is present in the family.

These hypotheses all fall in line with the main goals of the *USC Family Studies Project*, which aims to examine several aspects of families, such as how they influence children, how they affect other parts of the family, and how they respond to stressors, among other things. The project used data from volunteer families in the Los Angeles area as well as archived data. Researchers utilized questionnaires, direct observation, diary entries, interviews, and biological tests to gather information about everyday processes in each family in order to reach several conclusions. Many of their conclusions have been published in different articles in several well-respected scientific, peer-reviewed journals.

Current research as a whole supports the idea that aggression negatively affects children in many areas of life. Previous research done by the Family Studies Project has shown both short and long term negative effects of familial aggression on children. Researchers have found that short-term effects of violence exposure include aggressive behavior, depression and anxiety, symptoms of PTSD, and problems in school. Other researchers have found that children's reports of being exposed to aggression between their parents within the last year were related to increases in withdrawal and anxiety. Maxwell's work is unique because it examines the

fluctuations in the day-to-day moods of children exposed to aggression as opposed to changes over longer periods of time.

A portion of the data from the Family Studies Project was the basis for Maxwell's work. Using data collected from previous studies is a method called archival research. Maxwell specifically took information from 119 families and examined the effects of three different types of violence – marital conflict, parent-child conflict, and community violence. The larger study took place over several years and required families to check in five times, between which they kept diaries. Each time they checked in, they completed questionnaires and had a videotaped interaction with a family member or peer. In the fourth and fifth assessments, saliva was collected from each family member. Maxwell utilized data from the fourth assessment, which took place between 2005 and 2007. She focused specifically on the diary entries that the children of the families recorded over the course of two weeks.

Maxwell chose diary entries as the basis for her measurements because they provide contexts in which the everyday processes of the family occurred in the child's point of view. They also allow for measurement of change in a given variable, for example mood, over a specified period of time (as long as the diary is properly dated). However, diary entries can also be unreliable due to external factors. It is assumed that the subjects were completely honest and that the other family members did not influence or alter what was recorded.

A critical aspect of any study is to clearly define the variables. For Maxwell's work, the independent variable is intrafamilial aggression, which includes both physical and psychological aggression. The dependent variable is children's mood. The mediating variable is children's coping. Maxwell believes that both aggression and coping have a combined effect on mood that is very unique from the effect either one would have by itself.

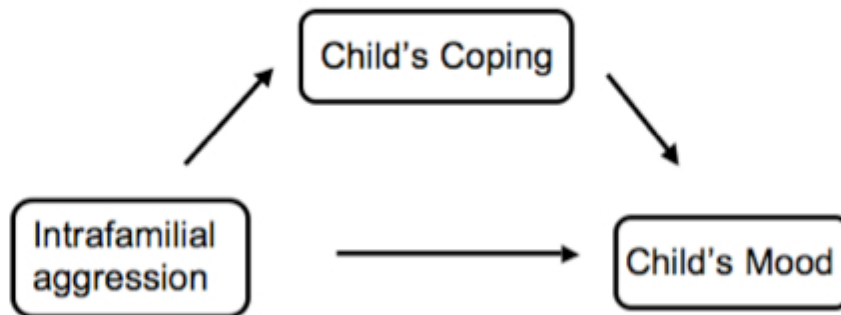


Figure 1. A diagram showing the mediating effect of coping between aggression and mood

Maxwell created a scale for each of these three variables. All of the scales contained a different number of items that could be found in the children's diary entries. Diary entries consisted of answers to questions about their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in the past 24 hours and about how frequently something occurred, from not at all a lot. Maxwell categorized the different questions into the three scales relating to her variables. For example, the ones that asked if children were feeling lonely or sad or happy were part of the mood scale. Ones that asked if children had seen a fight between their parents or got in a fight with their parents were

on the aggression scale. Questions on the coping scale focused on whether the child was able to talk to teachers or friends.

The data has been collected and chosen and the structure of the experiment is set. However, Maxwell still needs to complete some data analysis tests. It was important to her to analyze the data on a daily level, so it was organized using Structural Equation Modeling. This structure allows researchers to examine complex relationships between multiple dependent variables and independent variables. Once the data is collected, it is analyzed in two ways – exploratory factor analysis and multiple regression analyses. The former lets you identify and combine variables that are correlated with each other and independent of others into factors. The latter looks at correlations based on covariates, or other variables that may or may not have been the focus of the study but still can affect the results.

Maxwell has achieved some preliminary results that support her hypotheses. Increased aggression was linked to more negative mood in the children and more coping was linked to more positive mood. Coping also seemed to be a protective factor from the negative effects of aggression. Covariates still need to be examined to give the results more accuracy.

Previous research has closed in on more definitive ideas about children's coping in familial aggression situations. When children's coping mechanisms include the child becoming directly involved in familial conflicts, outcomes may actually be negative. But when coping takes place at a distance from the conflict, it can have very positive effects. Children who cope have outcomes more similar to children that never experienced familial conflict in the first place.

Although Maxwell has a long way to go before her work is complete, she couldn't have gotten where she is now without being at USC. The Office of the Provost helped fund her project through two fellowships. Also, Dr. Baucom, a professor in the psychology department and Maxwell's faculty advisor, helped propel her work and keep her motivated. "Dr. Baucom has inspired me throughout this whole process. Along the way, he's listened to my ideas and helped me shape them into a concrete project. He guided me along each step while still fostering my independence, trusting me enough to let me be the major decision maker. And when I made mistakes, he explained what happened and encouraged me to keep trying."

Once her work is complete, the findings can be applied to helping both families and children specifically. If the diary entries prove to be an accurate representation of children's mood, they may be used more in therapy sessions. Furthermore, findings on the effects of aggression can be used for parent education in schools located in high risk communities. Findings on coping can be used for children's education in schools as well. Maxwell's results will hopefully be used to intervene in family situations before they can escalate to the point of abuse. Her conclusions have the potential to save many children and families from very negative situations.