Review of Human Sciences *Volume: 26/ N°: 01 (2026), p 442-460*

Psychological Implications of Aggressive Behavior in a School-Aged Child : A Clinical Study Using the Projective Family Drawing Test on Two Cases from Biskra Province

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Received: 04/10/2025 *Accepted: 19/05/2026* *Published:10/06/2026*

Abstract:
This study aims to uncover the manifestations of aggressive behavior in school-aged children through the application of the projective Family Drawing Test and semi-structured interviews with both the mother and the teacher. The research was conducted on two school-aged cases. The findings revealed that aggressive behavior is an intense expression of emotional and relational identity disturbances, stemming from a family environment that lacks stability, consistency, and emotional containment. This was evident in the symbolic psychological indicators in the drawings, such as violent lines, dark colors, the absence of specific details (e.g., hands or feet), and repetitive patterns that reflect internal anxiety and limited coping mechanisms, as well as emotional fragility and poor self-regulation.
Keywords: Psychological indicators, aggressive behavior, school-aged child, projective Family Drawing Tes.

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1. Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Aggressive behaviors in childhood are complex psychological phenomena that cannot be confined solely to their behavioral or educational dimensions. Rather, they require an analysis of the underlying psychodynamic structure behind such behaviors. From a psychoanalytic perspective, aggression as an instinctive drive does not always manifest in overt, external violence. It can also take indirect forms, encoded within the child's symbolic and behavioral language. This highlights the importance of employing the projective approach to understand this symbolic expression of aggressive behavior—not as a deviation from normal behavior, but as a message reflecting the child's internal representations of self or others. During the school-age period, the child interacts with new systems of authority, belonging, and discipline, which may activate deep-seated conflicts related to separation, identity, or existential threats. These conflicts may not find an outlet in socially regulated verbal expression but instead emerge symbolically through drawings, movements, or incomplete narratives. This is where the Family Drawing Test gains its importance, as a projective medium that allows the child to express their internal structures freely and reveals symbols and indicators that illuminate the hidden areas of the psyche. The symbols produced by the child offer a rich field for tracing internal tension dynamics, sources of anxiety, and aggressive drives directed either toward the self or others. The absence of facial features, exaggerated arms or hands, or distorted body proportions are not neutral technical details but psychological markers deeply associated with feelings of threat, anger, or emotional insecurity. From this perspective, projective analysis becomes not just a diagnostic tool but a means of psychological deconstruction.

This study aims to provide an analytical approach to two school-aged children who display varying patterns of aggression in the school environment, through analysis of their outputs in the Family Drawing Test and supported by field interviews with their mothers and teachers. This approach allows for a multidimensional view—psychological, social, and educational—of the structure of aggressive behavior in its unconscious context.

Furthermore, despite efforts by educational institutions to manage behavior within classrooms, aggression remains one of the most concerning behavioral expressions displayed by some children during school years. It threatens their psychological balance, academic performance, and social relationships. Though this behavior appears outwardly directed toward others, it often conceals unresolved internal conflicts, negative self-representations, or disturbed relationships with parental or educational authority figures. From this angle, the Family Drawing Test is one of the tools that enables a deeper understanding of the child's psychological structure through symbolic output, where they unconsciously project their feelings, fears, and inner conflicts.

Hence, we pose the following research question: What are the psychological indicators of aggressive behavior in school-aged children through the projective Family Drawing Test?

First: Theoretical Aspect

1. Study Objectives

To uncover the psychological indicators underlying aggressive behavior in school-aged children through the analysis of symbols and representations in the Family Drawing Test as a projective tool.

2. Operational Definitions of the Study Concepts*:*

2.1 **Psychological Indicators**:

These are the symbols and representations unconsciously expressed by the child and inferred through analysis of the drawing content. They reflect internal psychological states such as tension, rejection, anxiety, or repressed aggression.

2.2. **Aggressive Behavior:**

A form of verbal or physical behavior exhibited by the child within the school setting, documented through interviews with the teacher and mother, as well as symbolic indicators in the Family Drawing Test.

2.3 **School-aged Child**:

A child between the ages of 6 and 12 who regularly attends primary school and displays aggressive behavior within the educational institution.

2.4 **Projective Family Drawing Test**:

One of the projective tools used by specialists to explore psychological experiences by assessing family relationships and personality traits. It also allows for the evaluation of the child's adjustment level and the study of aggressive behavior—whether directed at the self or others. It is simple to administer. (Bousena, 2004)

Second : Field Study

1. Study Methodology:

This study adopts an in-depth case study approach to understanding individual personality—whether normal or pathological—by examining the subject's current behavior in light of their past history and present performance. The aim is to diagnose the present condition and anticipate its possible future development. This method is particularly suitable for individuals suffering from

behavioral problems and psychological disorders who seek clinical support and guidance.

The approach relies on a comprehensive examination of the subject's personal history and current psychological state, ultimately aiming to identify core psychological conflicts. Various techniques appropriate to the case are used, such as observation, interviews, tests, and rating scales (Abed el Moumen, 2008).

It is considered the most suitable method for exploring aggressive behavior in its unconscious depth, through direct interaction with the case and qualitative interpretation of psychological indicators in a specific personal context.

2. Study Instruments

2.1. Semi-Structured Interview with the Mother and the Teacher

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to collect data about the family background, the child's relationship with the mother, and daily interactions both at home and in school.

2.2. Family Drawing Test

A projective tool used to explore the unconscious representations the child holds regarding their family environment**.**

***2.2.1* .Instruction:** The specialist provides the child with a blank sheet of paper, a well-sharpened pencil, and colored pencils, then asks: *"Draw your family for me"* or *"Draw the members of your family."* The test is typically used with children aged between 5 or 6 and 15 years old**.**

The analysis of the family drawing includes three levels:

- Linear Level (line quality, pressure, etc.)
- Formal Level (structure, proportions, shapes)
- Content Level (symbols, omissions, distortions, positions)

*3.*Cases of the Study*:*

3.1. Case Presentations*:*

Case 1

- **Initial:** "A"
- **Gender:** Male
- **Age:** 11 years
- **Father's Occupation:** Day laborer
- **Mother's Occupation:** Housewife
- **Living Conditions:** Good
- **School Level:** 4th grade, Primary
- **Birth Order:** Fifth
- **Number of Siblings:** 6

Case 2

- **Initial:** "M"
- **Gender:** Female
- **Age:** 9 years
- **Father's Occupation**: Gas station employee
- **Mother's Occupation:** Housewife
- **Living Conditions:** Poor
- **School Level:** 4th grade, Primary
- **Birth Order:** Second
- **Number of Siblings:** 3

4. Study Results*:*

4.1. Study Results – Case 1*:*

*4.1.1.*Case 1: Findings from the Interview with the Mother

A Family Climate Charged with Emotional and Verbal Tension

Although the mother does not describe the marital relationship as constantly conflictual, she notes that disagreements are typically expressed through shouting and breaking objects (in the past), followed by withdrawal and isolation (currently). These forms of disorganized emotional expression serve as internal models for the child in how to manage anger, often reinforcing a defensive-aggressive response pattern in similar situations.

-Behavioral Shift in the Child's Personality

The mother reported that the child was initially shy, fearful, and unable to confront those who wronged him. Over time, however, his behavior changed—he became quick-tempered, responded aggressively, and expressed his emotions through crying, shouting, and destructiveness.

This behavioral transformation suggests the development of immature defense mechanisms. The child now uses aggression as a way to protect himself and regain a sense of control amid ongoing anxiety and perceived threats within the family**.**

- The Mother as a Mirror of Emotional Outbursts

The mother admitted to breaking objects when angry and now resorts to isolation or yelling. This partially explains the child's adoption of a similar pattern of emotional release. Aggressive behavior in children often mirrors parental models of emotional expression.

- Emotional Sensitivity Despite Aggressive Behavior

The mother described the child as « kind, affectionate, and not vindictive. » These qualities indicate a strong emotional side that contrasts with his outward behavior . This contradiction reflects an internal struggle between the desire for protection and the impulse to escalate as a form of reaction. It reinforces the idea that his aggression is not fixed or pathological, but defensive and situational.

- Interest in Violent Scenes as Symbolic Discharge

The child's fascination with fights (wrestling, boxing, animal battles) reflects an unconscious need to discharge psychological tension through fantasy models. This symbolic mechanism serves as an indirect outlet for feelings of helplessness and anxiety.

The child displays aggressive behavior not as a fixed trait, but as a defensive mechanism shaped by an emotionally unstable family environment. His aggression reflects a psychological need for protection and a reaction to feelings of injustice or emotional neglect.

There is a clear contradiction between his kind, emotional nature and the violent expressions that emerge when he feels threatened.

***4.1.2.*Findings from the Interview with the Teacher.**

-Behavior in the Classroom:

The child behaves cautiously in the school environment. He avoids conflicts and fears punishment, indicating excessive self-control driven more by fear than by internalized discipline.

His aggressive responses tend to emerge outside formal classroom settings, suggesting the presence of repressed emotions that are hidden from authority figures (teacher or administration).

Peer Interaction :

He often engages in fights in response to provocation or perceived injustice, implying that his aggression is defensive rather than offensive.

He seems to understand his mistakes and apologizes when he realizes them, reflecting a moral and emotional awareness that is not yet fully developed.

-Psychological Interpretation:

The child experiences internal conflict between his desire to express emotions and his fear of punishment or loss.

The school environment represents a "surveillance space" rather than a safe outlet for emotional release. Thus, he suppresses aggression within school but expresses it outside

***4.2.* Projective Psychological Analysis of Aggressive Behavior – Case "A"**

In exploring psychological indicators related to aggressive behavior in the school context, the Family Drawing Test, as an indirect projective tool, provides the opportunity to investigate underlying emotional tensions and internal conflicts that may manifest behaviorally as aggression—whether in the classroom or in interactions with peers and teachers.

Based on the drawings produced by the child, several symbolic

indicators were observed, pointing to tendencies of aggression either directed at the self or others.

.4.2.1 **Visual Indicators of Repressed or Directed Aggression**

- Intense Line Pressure on the Paper

The heavy pressure and bold lines suggest a physical expression of acute internal tension. This often results from difficulty expressing emotions in a socially appropriate manner. Drawing becomes a substitute channel for this release, reflecting a tendency to use force—a mirror of actual aggressive behavior that may surface in class or among peers under stress or provocation**.**

- Distortion or Smudging of Facial Features (Especially the Mouth)

The child's portrayal of the father's mouth as smudged or distorted symbolically expresses aggression directed toward paternal authority. This projection could later extend to authority figures in school. It suggests unresolved internal conflict with authority, potentially leading to defiance or resistance in the school setting**.**

- Oversized Head and Strongly Drawn Limbs

Exaggerated heads and arms symbolize a compensatory psychological need to assert power or dominance, possibly to offset feelings of inferiority. This may translate into controlling or domineering behavior in the classroom**.**

4.2.2 **Behavioral Markers of Self-Directed Aggression**

- Drawing the Self Smaller Than Other Figures

This reflects a diminished self-perception, which may lead to passive aggression (e.g., withdrawal, refusal, isolation, or self-deprecation). Such feelings might manifest in academic decline or self-ridicule in front of others. This inward aggression may also lead to avoidance of participation or sudden emotional outbursts as a defense mechanism.

- Neglecting Cleanliness or Leaving Drawings Unfinished

Disorganized or messy drawing execution points to inner turmoil and chronic feelings of worthlessness. These signs align with patterns of

passive aggression—where the child expresses anger through non-compliance or indirect resistance to rules.

4.2.3. Family Conflict as a Root of Aggression

The child's drawings reveal a contrast between real and imagined family representations, indicating emotional disconnect or internal conflict regarding familial relationships. Tense home dynamics or feelings of being undervalued may prompt the child to transfer emotional stress into the school environment through aggressive behavior—especially if the home is perceived as emotionally unsafe.

Interestingly, the depiction of siblings in harmonious ways (despite real-life conflict) reflects a defensive fantasy of restored relationships. However, since this desire remains unmet in reality, it may deepen frustration and contribute to aggression in peer interactions.

4.2.4. Bodily Symbolism in the Drawings: Indicators of Emotional Dysregulation

- Long Neck: Suggests difficulty in regulating impulses and emotions. This is common in children prone to emotional outbursts or exaggerated reactions to frustration.
- Omission of Ears and Excessively Open Eyes: Indicates a persistent sense of anxiety and threat, as well as rejection of guidance or criticism. This may lead to confrontational behavior with teachers or defensive, reactive responses.
- Open Hand: While generally a sign of openness, in an aggressive context it may represent a defensive barrier or a symbolic demand for attention—often through disruptive means when healthy expression is not met.

-The child's drawings reflect intense internal tension rooted in frustration, low self-worth, and familial conflict. These emotional burdens are externalized as aggressive behavior—sometimes overt, other times indirect—especially in school contexts where authority figures or peers may be perceived as threats or competitors.

Aggression here is not simply a behavioral issue but a psychological signal of deeper emotional imbalance, calling for a more comprehensive understanding and intervention

*4.3*Study Results – Case *2*

*4.3.1.*Case *2*: Findings from the Interview with the Mother

- Disturbed Family Environment as a Constant Source of Anxiety

The child lives in an emotionally unsafe home environment marked by daily violence and shouting. This has created a chronic state of fear, anxiety, and insecurity. Her reaction—crying and hiding with her siblings—represents a defensive response, mimicking a "flight" reaction to perceived threats. Despite her young age, she assumes a protective role, which adds to her psychological burden.

- An Emotionally and Functionally Absent Father

Describing the father as "emotionally absent" or a "living dead" reflects the loss of a protective male figure. This absence contributes to identity confusion, low self-esteem, and conflicting emotions toward male figures (ranging from fear to aggression).

- Internalization of the Mother's Anger

The child mirrors the way her mother expresses anger—through crying and victimhood. Although this differs from the father's explosive behavior, it shows that the child has emotionally identified with the mother. This emotional model, however, remains unstable and confusing.

- Contradiction in Attitudes Toward Violence

Although the child verbally rejects violence, she resorts to it to defend herself when she feels wronged. This inner conflict reveals a gap between what she believes and what she experiences, highlighting her difficulty in integrating values that are inconsistent with her lived reality**.**

- Preference for Peaceful Stories and Films

Her inclination toward princess tales and calm, affectionate content—

while avoiding violent media—points to a deep emotional need for safety, gentleness, and containment. This preference serves as a symbolic compensation for the emotional deprivation experienced in her real family life.

4.3.2 Psychological Interpretation of the Mother's Interview

- Reflection of Domestic Violence on the Child

The mother confirms that the child mimics the father's behavior in expressing anger (hitting, shouting, breaking things). This shows that the child has not developed a clear distinction between appropriate and inappropriate emotional responses and has adopted violence as a primary form of communication and protest.

-Anger as a Primary Mode of Interaction

The mother describes the child as someone who takes what she wants by force, refuses to admit fault, and never apologizes. This indicates a persistent pattern of impulsive and poorly regulated aggression, which may lead to long-term difficulties in social interactions and school discipline if not addressed.

- Lack of Healthy Communication Models in the Family

The child does not know how to engage in dialogue or use language to express anger. This stems from the absence of constructive communication within the household, where yelling and destruction are the primary outlets for emotional expression. As a result, the child's social skills are underdeveloped.

- Variation in Behavior Based on Source of Threat

The child reacts differently depending on who she interacts with:

- With adults: She withdraws and exhibits fear.
- With peers: She responds with aggression.

This suggests an unbalanced perception of authority and a tendency to recreate family dynamics in her social relationships.

The child lives in an emotionally fragmented family lacking psychological and emotional safety. Her aggressive behavior is a result of:

- A violent and intimidating father figure
- A passive mother who responds to conflict with withdrawal or crying
- An environment that does not encourage dialogue or emotional regulation

Aggression here is not an isolated disorder, but the cumulative outcome of painful familial experiences and an expression of the child's inability to cope in healthy ways

Projective Psychological Analysis – Case "M" (Based on the Family Drawing Test)

The results drawn from both real and imagined family drawings show strong projective indicators of internal and external aggression. These aggressive tendencies stem from a disturbed family environment and emotional instability.

- Structural and Chromatic Indicators (Level of Tension and Aggression)

- Heavy Line Pressure and Extensive Use of Space: The intensity and spread of lines across the drawing suggest a high level of internal tension and overt aggressive tendencies, possibly resulting from deep-seated feelings of oppression or chronic fear.
- Dominance of Red and Black Colors: The prevalence of red and black in various parts of the drawing reflects poor emotional regulation, suppressed fear, and unstable mood. These colors often correspond to violent or explosive behavior as a means of emotional discharge—confirmed by the child's spontaneous use of physical aggression or involvement in peer conflicts.

- Use of Dark Colors (brown, black): Suggests a depressive mood and regressive tendencies, highlighting an unmet emotional need for safety and affection at home.

- Representation of Family Members in the Drawing

- Detailed and Oversized Mother Figure vs. Small, Marginalized Father:
  This contrast reveals emotional polarization in the family dynamic—an idealized attachment to the mother and a rejection of the authoritarian father. This generates internal conflict around the concepts of safety and authority.
- Neglect of Male Figures (father and brothers) Compared to Detailed Female Figures:
  This symbolic exclusion indicates negative representations of males, possibly linked to defensive-aggressive tendencies toward male peers at school, especially in cases involving bullying or perceived injustice**.**

- Body Symbolism in the Drawing

- Large Head:
  Indicates a self-centered need for control over the environment, typical of children raised in threatening surroundings.
- Long Necks for Female Figures, Short Necks for Males: Points to emotional tension and distorted perceptions of power dynamics—between dominance and submission.
- Absence of Limbs (hands or feet): Suggests feelings of helplessness, insecurity, and low confidence in oneself and others. These signs align with a defensive-aggressive pattern that may erupt in school settings when healthy expression tools are lacking.
- Torso Composed of Two Parallel Lines:

Indicates a fragmented emotional and personal identity, reinforcing the hypothesis that aggression is used as a means to restore inner balance in the face of emotional contradictions.

- Relational and Emotional Structure in the Drawing

- Similarity Between Real and Imagined Families (Same Character Placement):
  The lack of creative or compensatory reimagining suggests an inability to mentally escape or reconstruct a better version of reality. This reflects difficulty in overcoming painful family experiences, which in turn increases the likelihood of outward aggressive behavior.
- Drawing the Family on the Left Side of the Page: Indicates psychological regression and an unconscious desire to withdraw—often linked to a pressuring family environment.
- Clean Drawing with No Scribbling or Smudging: Suggests relatively mature defense mechanisms, though insufficient for stable emotional regulation.

The drawing reveals an internal world marked by conflict, threat, and unmet emotional needs. The absence of safety and emotional containment at home drives the child to express aggression as a form of defense, whether toward others or herself. This aggression is projected onto symbolic elements in the drawing, such as distorted proportions, absence of limbs, and aggressive colors.
Aggression here is not merely behavioral—it is symbolic of deeper identity and emotional dysregulation that requires therapeutic attention

*4.4.*General Conclusion for the Two Cases:

4.4.1-Clinical-Projective Analysis of the Psychological Significance of Aggressive Behavior:

The aggressive behavior of the studied child manifests as a result of a complex interaction between disturbed family factors, distorted internal representations of relationships, and immature psychological defense mechanisms, as revealed through both clinical interviews and the projective Family Drawing Test.

-The Family Environment as a Source of Stress and Aggression

The narratives of the mother and teacher indicate that the child grows up in a emotionally unstable environment, where the father represents an authoritarian and violent figure. Aggressive behavior appears as a result of constant threat. This observation aligns with Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), which explains how children imitate adult behaviors, especially if violence is part of daily interaction patterns.

The mother, despite serving as a limited emotional refuge, appears weak in the face of paternal violence, leaving the child oscillating between partial containment and constant exposure. This is reflected in the child's aggressive behavior, where aggression becomes a defensive means of communication or self-protection rather than a rational, mature response.

-School as a Stage for Reenacting Conflict

The teacher observed that the child reproduces at school the same pattern of aggression experienced at home, particularly toward male peers, while relationships with female peers are less aggressive. This is consistent with John Bowlby's Internal Working Models of early relationships (Bowlby, 1969), which suggest that children replicate patterns of attachment and early relational experiences in later environments such as school.

-Projective Significance of the Family Drawing

The symbolic analysis of the family drawing revealed:

- **Emotional bias toward the mother:** Represents an excessive emotional attachment, indicating fragile dependency and a strong need for security.

- **Deprecation of the father and male figures:** Indicates internal conflict with authority and aggressive masculinity, which is projected onto others at school.
- **Sharp lines and high line pressure in the drawing:** Symbolize repressed internal tension and unprocessed violent impulses.
- **Absence of hands and feet in some figures:** Suggests symbolic helplessness in action and expression, reinforcing aggression as a compensatory mechanism.

These findings are supported by studies in children's projective psychology (Koppitz, 1968), which link projective drawing elements—lines, sizes, colors—to internal emotional representations and psychological conflict.

-Defense Mechanisms and Psychological Adaptation

The child uses aggression as a defense against feelings of helplessness, fear, and rejection, through:

- **Identification with the aggressor:** Imitating the father's aggressive model and reproducing it in environments where he is weaker.
- **Denial and projection :** Justifying aggression as a response to perceived injustice and projecting emotional motives onto others.

Nevertheless, there are signs of internal containment, such as crying, attachment to the mother, and a preference for peaceful stories and calm drawings, indicating an internal conflict between the desire for aggression as self-protection and the desire for reassurance. This aligns with Freud's theory of conflict between instincts (Id) and conscience (Superego) (Freud, 1936), where aggression manifests as a release of repressed instincts.

***4.4.1*Theoretical Conclusion:**

It can be summarized that the aggressive behavior of the studied child is not merely a reaction to violent upbringing, but rather the result of a

complex relational-psychological process, relying on:

- Loss of security within the family.
- Negative representations of authority and relationships with male figures.
- Use of aggression as a defensive mechanism against threat or humiliation.
- Difficulty expressing emotions and impulses in mature ways.

Through his aggressive behavior, the child seems to "cry out" in search of safe boundaries and recognition of existence, reenacting scenes of pain and fear at school in the absence of sufficient psychological containment within the family.

5. CONCLUSION

The results of the clinical interviews and the Family Drawing Test indicate that the aggressive behavior of the studied child does not stem solely from individual traits, but rather reflects an accumulation of emotionally unbalanced experiences within the family environment. These experiences are projected symbolically in his drawings through clear representations of rejection, exclusion, and conflict.

Moreover, disruptions in family representations—such as differentiation between the father and mother, or the exclusion or diminishment of male figures—reveal an internalized conflict between the desire for protection and fear of harm, as well as between the need for recognition and belonging versus feelings of marginalization or oppression.

In light of this analysis, the child's aggressive behavior is not merely a response to external stimuli or a situational school-related reaction, but an intense expression of disturbances in emotional and relational identity, stemming from a family environment lacking stability, consistency, and containment. This is evidenced by elements in the drawing, such as violent lines, dark colors, absence of specific

details (like hands or feet), and repetitive patterns reflecting internal anxiety and limited coping mechanisms.

Therefore, the child's aggressive behavior, as revealed by the assessment tools, is not merely behavioral but a psychological indicator of fragility in emotional structure and deficits in self-regulation. This underscores the need for a comprehensive intervention that addresses both relational and symbolic dimensions in therapy, relying on a deeper understanding of the child's internal experiences as represented through his symbols and projections.

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