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November 19, 2010

Fearless Preschoolers Lack Empathy?

By PAMELA PAUL

THE GIST *Fearless children are more unfeeling.*

THE SOURCE *"Fearlessness in Preschoolers: An Extreme End of the Approach and Withdrawal Temperamental Dimension" — Inbal Kivenson Bar-On, University of Haifa.*

THAT rascal who leaps off the monkey bars, landing smack onto an innocent 3-year-old bystander, and skips off, giggling all the while? According to a new paper out of Israel, he may not feel all that bad about the incident.

The study, conducted by Dr. Inbal Kivenson Bar-On at the University of Haifa, shows that high levels of fearlessness in 3- and 4-year-olds is strongly associated with aggression and a lack of empathy. This news will likely surprise risk-loving America, where parents typically beam with pride when their undaunted child mounts the big slide.

Fearlessness is a far-end point on the spectrum of what [psychologists](#) call the "approach and withdrawal dimension" — people's tendency to approach new stimuli (to gain information and acquire new skills) and withdraw from unfamiliar stimuli (to avoid danger). Striking the right balance is considered crucial to man's survival.

But what about preschoolers? There's a clear downside, Dr. Kivenson Bar-On discovered, after she observed lots of preschool play and machinations. In total, she documented 80 children at preschool, home and in the lab, measuring their propensity for fearlessness and other social and emotional characteristics at the beginning and end of one year.

Fearlessness was measured by observing reactions to various fright-inducing situations: separation from parents, the roar of a vacuum cleaner, a jack-in-the-box and the like. Those who displayed greater levels of fearlessness, the study found, had no trouble recognizing facial expressions of anger, surprise, happiness and sadness in other children — but they had a hard time identifying fear.

Over all, they were "emotionally shallow" and showed lower levels of empathy. They took advantage of friends and lacked regret over inappropriate conduct.

“These findings,” the paper explains, “suggest that fearlessness in preschool constitutes a clear risk factor for developmental pathways that lead to problems in morality, conscience development, and severe antisocial behaviors.”

At the same time, fearless children tended to be highly sociable. “One of the most interesting findings was that we could discriminate between friendliness and empathy,” Dr. Kivenson Bar-On said. “These kids are curious, easygoing and friendly, but they have a hard time recognizing emotional distress in others.”

Jamie Ostrov, a [psychology](#) professor at the [State University at Buffalo](#) who studies aggression, says that children at the extreme end of the fearless spectrum “may be charming, but they’re also highly manipulative and deceptive and skilled at getting their way — even at age 3 or 4.”

It could be that fearless children need stronger distress cues to activate their autonomic nervous systems, limiting their ability to detect distress cues in others. Their take seems to be, if I’m not worried about this, you can’t be, either. But should we be?