

## Serenity and Its Relationship to Prosocial and Aggressive Behaviors in Argentinean Children

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Serenity has been defined as a positive emotion that reflects feelings of inner peace and confidence. The development of serenity constitutes a valuable resource that enables children to cope with life stressors and to establish positive relationships with others. The present study examined serenity and possible gender group differences in Argentinean children. The second goal was to investigate the relation between serenity and prosocial and aggressive behaviors. Participants were 615 children aged 9 to 13 years (276 boys, 339 girls), from 11 public primary schools in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Gender analyses showed no differences between boys and girls in serenity scores. As expected, serenity proved to be positively related to prosocial behaviors and negatively related to physical and verbal aggression. These results indicate that children who describe themselves as more serene are also prone to give help and comfort to others. Moreover, serene children appear to be less aggressive towards classmates. Evidence suggests that peer relations can be enhanced by the utilization of serenity skills in the school context.

*Keywords:* Serenity, Prosocial behaviors, Aggression, Children

Serenity has been defined as a positive emotion that reflects feelings of inner peace and confidence, and that implies the harmony of body and mind (Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998; Fredrickson, Mancuso, Branigan, & Tugade, 2000). Serenity is not always being happy; rather it is being able to maintain an inner calm despite negative life events (Roberts & Whall, 1996).

Within the positive psychology framework, Fredrickson and colleagues (Fredrickson, 2003; Fredrickson et al., 2000; Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998) proposed that experiencing positive emotions can lead to states of mind and to modes of behavior that prepare an individual for later difficult times. It has been observed that positive emotions, compared to neutral or negative states, can promote a broader thought-action repertoire by stimulating the individual to pursue a wider range of thoughts and actions. According to Fredrickson and Branigan (2005), broadened thought-action repertoires play an essential role in the development of enduring personal resources (e.g., health, physical skills, executive control, resilience, creativity, and social support networks). With reference to serenity, research shows that experiencing this emotion can reduce

physiological arousal (e.g., decrease cardiovascular acceleration) after enduring a negative event (Fredrickson et al. 2000; Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998). Moreover, it has been observed that the elicitation of serenity and contentment by watching a film clip broadens the scope of attention in a visual processing task and increases thought-action repertoires (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005).

The study of serenity as a positive emotion is a relatively new area of research, and empirical studies concerning its relation with other psychological variables are scarce. However, since the emergent assessment of positive emotions with psychometric questionnaires and scales, serenity has begun

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to be measured in a more accurate manner (Oros, 2011; Regner, 2009; Roberts & Aspy, 1993; Schmidt, 2008). Peterson and Park (2004), for example, showed that adults scoring high on a measure of serenity also score high in a scale of spirituality and in a scale of forgiveness. Other work carried out by Kreitzer and colleagues (Kreitzer, Gross, Waleekhachonloet, Reilly-Spong, & Byrd, 2009) in an adult clinical population, found that those patients with high levels of serenity also presented high levels of positive affect, mindful awareness, and quality of life. On the other hand, high levels of serenity were inversely related to negative affect, anxiety, depression, perceived stressors, and health-related distress.

Serenity can be perceived as a very effective tool for coping with stress or other life challenges. It is believed that the capacity to be relaxed when facing difficult circumstances facilitates reflection, predisposes one to take action, and can increase receptivity and creativity (Nadeau, 2001; Roberts & Cunningham, 1990). Moreover, psychological research shows that positive emotional experiences can facilitate the development of beliefs, attitudes, and constructive behaviors to manage stress (Connors, Toscova, & Tonigan, 1999). For these reasons, serenity is considered to have a significant role in adaptive social functioning in childhood, as it can inhibit aggressive behaviors and facilitate positive responses in interpersonal relations. For example, a study carried out in Argentina by Richaud de Minzi and Oros (2009) found that serene children presented a lower tendency to solve conflicts aggressively and were more inclined to react in an assertive manner, compared to less serene children. In other research, Schmidt (2008) studied the correlation between positive emotions and coping strategies in Argentinean adolescents. This author found that tranquility was a good predictor of functional coping; those adolescents with higher scores in tranquility obtained lower scores on emotional discharge and somatization. In other words, when facing a conflict, participants who generally experienced sentiments of peace and comfort tended to remain in control, thus being able to think about different alternatives to solve their problems in a more appropriate way.

Children can face several stressful events in different periods of their lives, and when they do, many of them use inadequate or

ineffective coping strategies (Ryan-Wenger, 1992; Trianes Torres, 2002). For example, they may respond aggressively or be incapable of expressing their emotions in appropriate ways. Evidence suggests that aggressive behaviors can negatively affect children's general functioning, inhibit their learning, and damage relationships with family, teachers, and peers (Del Barrio & Carrasco, 2009; Levinson, 2006; Marín Sanchez, 2002). Also, aggressive behaviors can produce serious psychological consequences both in victims and aggressors (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Nansel, Craig, Overpeck, Saluja, & Ruan, 2004).

Numerous studies have found that the personal variables most related to children's aggressive behavior include impulsivity, emotional instability, difficult temperament, attention deficit, hyperactivity, poor skills related to conflict management, and lack of social skills (Ayala Velázquez, Pedroza Cabrera, Morales Chainé, Chaparro Caso-López, & Barragán Torres, 2002; Caprara & Pastorelli, 1993; Del Barrio & Carrasco, 2009; Del Barrio & Roa, 2006; Dorado Mesa & Jané Ballabriga, 2001; Farrington, 2005; Justicia et al., 2006). Interestingly, gender is another personal feature associated with children's aggression; most studies have shown that, as a group, boys exhibit significantly higher levels of verbal and physical aggression than girls (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008; Carlo, Raffaelli, Laible, & Meyer, 1999; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Galen & Underwood, 1997; Samper, Aparici, & Mestre, 2006).

In contrast, research show that a controlled emotionality, empathy, and prosocial behaviors serve as protective factors against aggressive impulses (Mestre, Samper, & Frías, 2002; Samper et al., 2006). It is believed that prosocial behaviors (i.e., voluntary acts intended to benefit or help others) constitute a protective factor against aggressiveness, by favoring social adaptation and social skills (Lemos, 2009). In addition, there is growing recognition that the development of empathy (i.e., the capability to understand and share other people's emotions) is a fundamental pre-requisite for the emergence of prosocial behaviors (Carlo, Mestre, Samper, Tur, & Armenta, 2010; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Mestre, Frías, & Samper, 2004; Roberts & Strayer, 1996). Some investigations suggest that individual differences in prosocial behaviors could be

attributable to differences in emotionality and impulsivity. In Spain, Mestre, Samper, and Frías (2002, 2004) found that emotional instability and impulsiveness constitute the main aggressiveness predictors in adolescents. In contrast, nonimpulsive, positive and empathic emotionality was the best predictor for adolescents' prosocial behavior.

It seems, then, that children and adolescents who are more emotionally unstable and have fewer skills to restrain impulsivity would be prone to behave aggressively, while more empathic and emotionally controlled subjects would be more prosocial. In this sense, serenity might have an important adaptive social function, as it promotes the substitution of aggressive and dysfunctional actions for more adequate ones (Nadeau, 2001). With this idea in mind, some interventions have been carried out in an attempt to promote positive socio-emotional development and diminish violence in elementary schools, by teaching children to relax and to employ effective stress control strategies (Gilbert & Orlick, 2002; Oros, 2008; Taylor & Orlick, 2004). For instance, Gilbert and Orlick implemented a *Positive Living Skills* program in an elementary school. During the intervention period, the experimental group was taught different relaxation techniques and essential concepts about stress and how to control it. Children were also taught to identify positive things in their lives and how to increase the frequency of these "highlights." The results showed that the children in the experimental group learned to relax at will, and significantly increased the frequency of their highlights, while children in the control group did not. Also, these learned positive coping strategies were generalized to a variety of situations besides the intervention sessions (e.g., at school, at home, with peers, in sports, and when going to sleep).

In adolescents, Nickel et al. (2005) tested the effectiveness of a progressive muscle relaxation program. The results showed that all stressed aggressive adolescents who participated in the study experienced a significantly positive change, as shown by the measures obtained on the State-Anger, Trait-Anger, Anger-Out and Anger-Control scales of the STAXI, as well as in social functioning, role-emotional, and mental health scales.

In Argentina, Oros (2008) implemented an intervention model to prevent aggressiveness and foster calmness in a group of six-year old children who attended an elementary school included in the Federal Plan for 1,000 Schools in poverty.<sup>1</sup> The intervention strategies were implemented within the classroom and included, among others, modeling, positive reinforcement, mental and physical relaxation techniques, breathing training, planned games, cost-benefits analysis, searching for alternatives, narrations, and behavioral practice. The relaxation model significantly reduced disruptive behaviors and promoted a progressive acquisition of more adapted responses to interpersonal stressful events. In the first assessment, previous to the intervention, not a single child mentioned specific attempts to relax or calm down before reacting to an insult or an offense; however, in the final assessment, 43% of children's responses included an attempt to use relaxation techniques before reacting impulsively. These results show that the promotion of positive emotions, such as serenity, can improve socio-emotional development and peer relations, even from early ages.

To summarize, all the studies mentioned above confirm that the development of serenity constitutes a valuable and healthy resource that enables people to cope with life stressors and to establish positive relationships with others. Interventions carried out at schools demonstrate that it is possible and desirable to educate children in the development and maximization of their inner calm. Also, research shows that teaching children how to manage anxiety and impulsivity in stressful situations can have beneficial and long-lasting effects on their socio-emotional development and interpersonal relations with others. The investigations performed with children and adolescents, although scarce, allow us to hypothesize that serene youngsters might be less aggressive and more prosocial than subjects who are less serene. However, and to the point of this study, the relation between serenity and prosocial and aggressive behaviors in children remains unknown.

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<sup>1</sup> This plan was included in the National Program for Educational Equality, designed by the Ministry of Education of Argentina (2004), in order to support educational institutions that work with children at greater social vulnerability, throughout the national territory.

Gender differences in children's serenity also remain as an unexplored area of research.

The present study aimed to provide further information about children's socio-emotional development in Latin America. The main purpose was to examine serenity in Argentinean children and analyze possible gender differences, utilizing a self-report instrument developed by Oros (2011). Our second goal was to analyze the relationship between serenity and prosocial behaviors, using the Prosocial scale developed by Caprara and Pastorelli (1993). Finally, we examined the relationship between serenity and aggressive behaviors, using the Physical and Verbal Aggression scale developed by Caprara and Pastorelli (1993). We expected to find a positive relation between serenity and prosocial behaviors, and an inverse relation between serenity and aggression. Furthermore, based on aforementioned aggression studies, we hypothesized that girls would obtain higher scores on serenity.

Showing how serenity relates to both prosocial and aggressive behaviors may provide a finer understanding of serenity in childhood and its possible implications in social interactions.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 615 primary school students (276 boys, 339 girls) aged 9 to 13 years ( $M = 11.16$  years,  $SD = 0.97$ ), from public schools located in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Students were in grades 5 (34.31%), 6 (33.33%), and 7 (32.36%). All children were native Spanish speakers, and came from middle-class backgrounds.

### Measures

**Serenity.** The Serenity Scale was developed by Oros (2011) to assess children's capability to remain calm when facing stressful situations (e.g., "When someone upsets me, I try to calm down") and their perceptions of their own serenity in everyday life (e.g., "I like being calm").

This self-report measure comprises 11 items rated on a 3-point scale (1 = *No*, 2 = *Sometimes*, 3 = *Yes*). Internal consistency of the instrument was good, as shown by Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha = .81$ ), and all items proved to be discriminative,  $p < .001$ .

**Prosocial behaviors.** Prosocial behaviors were assessed with the Prosocial Behavior Scale (Caprara & Pastorelli, 1993; Del Barrio, Moreno, & López, 2001). The original items of this self-report measure are 10, plus five control items that are not included in the final scores. The items offer a description of a child's behavior denoting altruism, trust, and agreeableness. Participants are asked to indicate the degree to which they engage in different types of prosocial behaviors (1 = *Never*, 2 = *Sometimes*, 3 = *Always*; e.g., "I help my classmates do their homework").

We included 4 extra items that were representative of Argentinean children's prosocial behaviors: "I lend my school supplies," "If somebody accidentally drops things on the floor, I help him/her to pick them up," "I share my sweets with others," and "If other person mess the place up, I help him/her clean." These items frequently appear as explicit codes of conduct at schools, and added more information to our study.

This extended version of the instrument proved to have stronger internal consistency ( $\alpha = .77$ ) than the instrument with the original items only ( $\alpha = .71$ ). All items proved to be discriminative,  $p < .001$ .

**Physical and verbal aggression.** Aggression was assessed with the Physical and Verbal Aggression Scale (Caprara & Pastorelli, 1993; Del Barrio, Moreno, & López, 2001). The items offer a description of the child's behavior aimed at hurting others physically (e.g., "I kick or punch") and verbally (e.g., "I say bad things about other kids").

This self-report scale comprises 15 items rated on a 3-point scale (1 = *Never*, 2 = *Sometimes*, 3 = *Always*), plus five control items that are not included in the final scores. Cronbach's alpha for the present study was satisfactory ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

### Procedure

The study was carried out in 11 public schools from the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina, with permission from school authorities. Recruitment letters were sent to parents with the cooperation of school personnel. Active parental consent and student assents were obtained prior to participation.

The measures were completed in the classrooms during 30-minute sessions (maximum group size of 30 students). Student

participation was voluntary. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality and were asked to complete the instruments individually. One investigator was present in the classroom to answer participants' questions and to ensure that the instructions were followed correctly.

**Results**

An ANOVA was performed to examine gender differences in serenity. Unexpectedly, no significant differences were found between boys ( $M = 23.28$ ;  $SD = 0.29$ ) and girls ( $M = 23.51$ ;  $SD = 0.26$ ) in the serenity scale,  $F < 1$ . Total scores for the serenity scale range between 11 and 33 points. Overall, participants presented a moderate level of serenity ( $M = 23.41$ ;  $SD = 4.75$ ).

A series of linear regression analyses were conducted to explore the contribution of children's serenity to prosocial and aggressive behaviors in interpersonal situations. As expected, serenity proved to be positively related to prosocial behaviors,  $\beta = .38$ ,  $t = 10.20$ ;  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .15$ . Separate analyses for girls and boys revealed highly similar results for both girls,  $\beta = .39$ ,  $t = 7.82$ ;  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .15$ , and boys,  $\beta = .38$ ,  $t = 6.77$ ;  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .14$ .

On the other hand, it was observed that serenity was negatively related to physical and verbal aggression,  $\beta = -.48$ ,  $t = -13.42$ ;  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .23$ , and these results were similar for girls,  $\beta = -.52$ ,  $t = -11.18$ ;  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .27$ , and boys,  $\beta = -.45$ ,  $t = -8.43$ ;  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .21$ . These outcomes thus indicate that greater serenity is associated with a weaker tendency to utilize physical and verbal aggression in interpersonal relationships.

aggressive behaviors as a function of their serenity level. Serenity scores were divided into three levels: high, moderate, and low.

To sum up, the evidence suggests that children who report greater serenity are also prone to give help and comfort to others. Additionally, serene children appear to be less aggressive towards schoolmates, compared to less serene participants (see Figure 1).

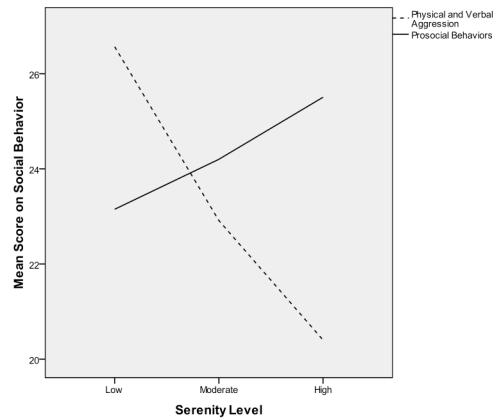


Figure 1. Means for prosocial and aggressive behaviors as a function of serenity level.

**Discussion**

Serenity is a positive emotion that has received relatively little attention in empirical research, despite the enormous psychological value that has been ascribed to it. The purpose of the present work was to make a preliminary step towards the study of children's serenity in Latin America, analyzing possible gender differences and establishing its association with two opposite social behaviors: prosocial and aggressive.

Regarding the first objective, we found that Argentinean boys and girls presented similarly moderate values of serenity; there was no evidence of a gender difference. Our hypothesis that girls would obtain higher scores emerged from previous findings concerning certain constructs that are opposite to a serene state, which are generally more prevalent in boys. For example, variables such as emotional instability, impulsivity, and hyperactivity tend to be higher in boys than in girls (Rucklidge, 2010; Samper, Tur, Mestre, & Cortés, 2008; Sotomonte Ariza, Jiménez Mendoza, & Cárdenas Niño, 2011; Trianes Torres, Cardelle-Elawar, Blanca Mena, & Muñoz Sánchez, 2003; Walker, 2005). One alternative idea that could explain the lack of

Table 1  
Means and Standard Deviations for Prosocial and Aggressive Behaviors by Serenity Level

	Serenity level					
	Low (n = 206)		Moderate (n = 244)		High (n = 164)	
Social behavior	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Prosocial	23.15	3.23	24.20	2.88	25.48	2.84
Aggressive	26.57	6.21	22.91	5.02	20.40	5.16

Additional descriptive information about the relationship between serenity and social behaviors is provided in Table 1. More specifically, we calculated the means and standard deviations for children's prosocial and

differences in serenity between boys and girls could be the fact that, although girls present weaker impulsivity and hyperactivity than boys, they tend to experience more internalizing problems (Galambos, Leadbeater, & Barker, 2004; Keenan & Shaw, 1997). That is, girls tend to show more concern, anxiety, and depression than boys (Pérez García & Giménez Barbero, 2011; Reyes & Mora, 2007; Southam-Gerow & Kendall, 2002) especially as they come close to puberty and adolescence (Petersen, Sarigiani, & Kennedy, 1991). Such qualities could be incompatible with the ability to maintain an inner calm despite negative life events (i.e., serenity), which could partially explain why there were no gender differences in serenity in our study. This idea should be considered in future studies, for example, by analyzing the relation between children's depression, anxiety, and serenity.

Moreover, although girls are generally identified as more passive than boys, in the sense that they show less externalizing behaviors, aggression, anger, and hostility (Carlo et al., 1999; Lacunza, 2010; Méndez, Hidalgo, & Inglés, 2002; Samper et al., 2008), this does not necessarily mean that girls have a greater internal experience of calmness. These visible differences in behavior could rather be attributable to the way that boys and girls *express* their emotions, due to gender characteristics, than to the way they *experience* them. This idea is in line with explicative models that question the supposed aggressive disposition of boys versus the conciliatory attitude of girls (Reyes & Mora, 2007). For example, some researchers argue that gender differences in aggression are highly dependent on the type of aggressive manifestation that is measured by the investigator (Bjorkqvist, 1994; Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988; Underwood, 2003).

Furthermore, in the present work we used a brief one-dimensional scale to explore serenity in boys and girls. The serenity scale developed by Oros (2011) proved to be reliable but, in future investigations, it could be interesting to evaluate different manifestations of this emotion, as other researchers have explored in adult population (Kreitzer et al., 2009; Roberts & Aspy, 1993; but see Kruse, Heineremann, Moody, Beckstead, & Conley, 2005, for further psychometric examinations of the scale). In

this sense it could be appropriate to analyze, for example, different aspects of serenity associated with the regulation of positive emotions, coping with negative events, feelings of confidence, inner haven, and the natural tendency to experiment calmness in order to deeply explore gender profiles.

Regarding the second goal, the study demonstrated that serenity plays an important role in the expression of prosocial and aggressive behaviors. The results indicate that this emotion could facilitate the development of prosocial behaviors in childhood. Children with higher levels of serenity expressed their disposition to give comfort to someone who was sad, help a classmate do homework, share sweets with others, and accompany friends, among other positive behaviors. These results are consistent with the idea that serenity constitutes a high social impact psychological resource (Oros, 2008). The tendency of serene children to be caring, sensitive, and altruistic could be, in part, due to the fact that serenity, like other positive emotions, broadens the scope of attention (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Fredrickson et al., 2000), thus allowing them to detect more easily when someone needs assistance. Also, it has been found that serenity increases thought-action repertoires (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Fredrickson et al., 2000), which could amplify children's social responses when facing a stressful situation (i.e., using functional behaviors instead of indifference or aggression).

Results also revealed that serenity was inversely related to physical and verbal aggression. Serene children reported that they were less inclined to kick, bite, punch, insult, and make fun of others. These findings are in line with the studies performed by Peterson and Park (2004) and Kreitzer et al. (2009), who reported that participants scoring high on serenity also scored high on spirituality and forgiveness, and presented lower scores on negative affect, anxiety, and perceived stressors, when compared to less serene subjects. Although these two studies were carried out with adults, it is plausible that similar results might be found in children. However this hypothesis needs to be tested in future investigations.

Other investigations carried out with Argentinean children support the findings of the present study. Richaud de Minzi and Oros (2009) and Schmidt (2008) found that children's serenity diminished the probability

of behaving aggressively in social interactions, facilitated assertive responses, and moderated inadequate emotional discharge in stressful situations. Furthermore, if we consider that serenity is closely related to emotional regulation (as it implies keeping calm despite negative events), its inverse relation with aggression is reasonable. Numerous authors express that emotional regulation reduces negative affect and inhibits aggressive reactions (Capella & Mendoza, 2011; Carthy, Horesh, Apter, Edge, & Gross, 2010; DeWall, Baumeister, Stillman, & Gailliot, 2007; Zeman, Cassano, Perry-Parrish, & Stegall, 2006).

In general, the present study provides evidence that serenity is a positive emotion with adaptive social value, which could allow children to develop healthy relationships with significant others, as it may facilitate the development of prosocial behaviors and inhibit aggressive reactions. This information could be useful to plan interventions aiming to promote serenity during this developmental stage. However, the study of serenity still faces many challenges, and present results open new questions that should be considered in future investigations. Specifically, it is advisable to explore the psychological variables that underlie the processes analyzed in the present study, for example, emotional regulation, willingness to forgive, cognitive ability to decode and interpret others needs, perception of social stressors, and coping with negative events, among others. Furthermore, social interactions and behaviors in school settings depend also on the characteristics of the classroom in which each child is immersed. To promote an ecological perspective on children's social behavior, it would be desirable to analyze to what extent prosocial and aggressive behaviors are explained by person variables and how much they depend on environmental characteristics. The effect of the interaction between person and environmental variables could be also analyzed as well. Given the evidence that family characteristics and school context constitute significant predictors of children's social behavior (Sandoval, 2006), it could be useful to use stratified samples to obtain representative subsamples of children from different family backgrounds, school courses and schools, in order to analyze how much variance depends on individual differences and how much it relies on family and school.

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