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Anti-social behaviour in schools: Conference reveals new psychological research

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Anti-social social behaviour by teenagers – and its solutions – is the subject of a two day international research conference to be held at the University of Greenwich in London next month, in partnership with the British Journal of Educational Psychology.

An impressive roster of keynote speakers from around the world will present new research findings to an invited audience of academics, educationalists and policy-makers at the conference, *Psychology and anti-social behaviour in schools*, which will be held on Tuesday, September 1 and Wednesday, September 2. It will be opened by the university's Vice-Chancellor, Baroness Blackstone.

Professor Pam Maras, conference organiser and Director of the Centre for Children, Schools & Families at the University of Greenwich, says: "Psychology has a key role to play in helping schools and society to understand, and tackle, this important social issue."

Professor Maras will speak at the conference about her own research, revealing two large scale studies of over 6,000 children in the UK which show that teenagers can have more social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and that where this is the case their confidence in terms their academic ability as well as their views about the amount of effort they are going to put into school work and how important they think school is. In a comparative study, teenagers in China were found to show a similar "developmental dip" to those in the UK but at a slightly older age. The good news is that teachers can use this understanding to plan the curriculum and make other interventions which can help young people.

The emotional consequences of **cyber bullying** are explored by Dr Claire Monks and Professor Rosario Ortega Ruiz from the University of Greenwich. Their survey of over 1600 Spanish schoolchildren found that this new form of bullying was less likely to leave pupils feeling defenceless; indeed a high proportion reported feeling indifferent to their harassment. These pupils were more likely to have higher self-esteem, to talk with their friends, and to end contact with the aggressor. Other children reported that they were worried by the bullying.

An overview of the memory difficulties often experienced by individuals with **Autism Spectrum Disorders** (ASD) will be given by Dr Sebastian Gaigg from City University's Autism Research Group. People with these disorders are generally able to recall specific details of past experiences, whilst their memories of how these details relate to one another are sometimes fragile. Under many circumstances this 'relational' memory difficulty hinders the process of learning and it can make it difficult for individuals to make sense of what they recall. However, circumstances can be created that ameliorate these difficulties by creating learning situations that favour the detail-focused



memory strengths of individuals with ASD whilst placing fewer demands on relational memory processes.

Professor Anthony D. Pellegrini from the University of Minnesota says that much of the current theory and research in educational and developmental psychology suggests that aggression is indicative of individuals' social cognitive deficits or psycho-pathology. Situating aggression in the context of social dominance, Professor Pellegrini argues that **aggression in children and adolescents** can be used strategically, to access resources. He documents how children and adolescents systematically choose to aggress against their own sex, and decrease their use of aggression after dominance is established. Adolescents' use of instrumental aggression predicts their subsequent peer leadership and attractiveness to the opposite sex. In preschool children, use of aggression is a predictor of their ability to understand and predict other people's intentions and predict the way other people might be thinking – both of which are important skills.

The most effective anti-bullying strategies in schools are revealed by Professor Peter Smith from Goldsmiths, University of London.

There is no one cause for **Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder** according to Professor Edmund Sonuga-Barke, who argues that both biological and environmental factors may play a part and that a child's early development is an especially important indicator of later problems such as AD/HD.

Impulsive and disruptive behaviours in the classroom may look similar on the surface but may have very different causes, according to new findings from Dr Essi Viding of University College, London. Two recent research studies have identified different sub-groups of disruptive pupils, who each process information differently. Children with "callous-unemotional" conduct problems, for example, have difficulty in feeling and acting on the emotion of guilt, whereas their peers with non-callous conduct problems do not have that problem. Children with AD/HD symptoms tend to act impulsively in situations where they have to change their strategy quickly. Children with early onset conduct problems tend to act impulsively because they do not appear good at anticipating punishment. These different groups of children may benefit from different interventions by their teachers and educational psychologists.

The climate in the classroom has a positive effect on children's sense of belonging in their school, with knock-on benefits for their behaviour and, for girls, their academic achievement, according to Professor Norah Frederickson, from University College London.

Professor Silvia Koller from Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil who argues that factors such as family support and a sense of attachment to one's school help to enhance healthy development in young people. In contrast, factors such as pervasive poverty, vulnerable families and violence can lead to maladjusted behaviour with problems such as drug taking, sexual risk taking and delinquency.

ENDS

Media are invited to attend the conference, in whole or in part. For a pass, further information, images or interview requests, please contact:

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Notes for editors:

The British Psychological Society is the professional and learned organisation promoting psychologists and psychology in the UK. For more information about the

society email: mediacentre@bps.org.uk

The British Journal of Educational Psychology is one of 11 journals published by the society, covering a wide range of subjects across psychology. For further information about the society's journals email: mail@bpsjournals.co.uk

Professor Pam Maras - Profile

Pam Maras, Professor in Social & Educational Psychology and Director of the Centre for Children, Schools & Families at the University of Greenwich is organiser of the conference.

She is an experienced media interviewee who has appeared on BBC Radio 4's "All in the Mind", BBC-1's "The Child in Time" and numerous TV news items in the UK and overseas.

Her work focuses on children and young people, especially at school, looking at how they see themselves and their peer groups, and how this affects their motivation and learning. She is also interested in child and adolescent mental health as well as emotional, behavioural and other disorders, including AD/HD.

Her research is mainly applied within the context of social inclusion and widening participation and includes local and national policy and multi-agency work.

Pam is Honorary General Secretary of the British Psychological Society and one of its past presidents.