

## Predictors of defending behaviour during early childhood

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### Biography

*Dr Cara Swit is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Health at the University of Canterbury. Her main research activities attempt to understand how parent-child, teacher-child, sibling, and peer relationships evolve overtime and how children learn to understand and engage with their social world. Cara currently teaches in the Child and Family Psychology programme and is the facilitator of the new micro-credential Understanding and Responding to Child Behaviour.*

### ABSTRACT:

Bullying is a group process that involves various participant roles outside of that of the bully and victim. Defenders are thought to be a protective role that may help alleviate some of the negative repercussions of bullying for victims, and defending behaviour has been shown to exist in early childhood. However, relatively little is known about the contribution of social, emotional, and cognitive factors to the prediction of defending behaviour in early childhood. The present study examines the concurrent role of social (i.e. relational aggression, physical aggression, prosocial behaviour, positive peer interactions, and peer rejection), emotional (i.e. anger, empathy), and cognitive (i.e. social withdrawal, inhibitory control and attention) predictors of defending behaviour in an early childhood sample (N = 87, M age = 46.74 months, SD = 10.13, 56% males). Children were recruited from Kindergartens located in three diverse socio-economic communities in the South Island of New Zealand. The findings of a series of hierarchical regressions showed that, after controlling for age, lower levels of social withdrawal predicted higher levels of defending behaviour. For older children ( $\geq 46.7$  months), empathy was a strong predictor of defending behaviour. Defending behaviour was positively associated with age, however, no differences were found in teacher reports of boys' and girls' use of defending. The practical implications of these findings will focus on ways practitioners can promote defending behaviour in young children.