



Parent vs. teacher ratings of children's shyness as predictors of language and attention skills[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Shyness in childhood has been linked to multiple adjustment outcomes, including poor peer relations, internalizing problems, and clinical anxiety. However, shyness does not consistently emerge as a negative predictor of children's success. This incongruity may stem, in part, from variations in the operationalization and measurement of shyness in different studies. Researchers often combine parent and teacher ratings of shyness, but correlations between parent and teacher reports are consistently small to medium. The purpose of this study is to examine parent and teacher ratings of shyness as they predict language and attention skills in preschool children, and explore discrepancies between parent and teacher ratings of shyness. Participants were 104 preschool children (48 males, 56 females), enrolled in 22 classrooms. Results from multi-level modeling revealed that teacher, but not parent, ratings of shyness using the shyness subscale of the Children's Behavior Questionnaire (CBQ) were significantly and negatively associated with children's early language and attention skills. Follow-up exploratory factor analyses with parent and teacher CBQ shyness subscale ratings revealed a similar two-factor structure reflecting shyness and low sociability. Results suggest that a) discrepancies between parents' and teachers' views of children's shy behaviors may stem from the different contexts and developmental time periods in which they observe children, and b) teachers' ratings of shyness are more closely associated with children's skills in an academic setting. Implications for research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Shyness in childhood has been linked to multiple adjustment outcomes, including poor peer relations, internalizing problems, and clinical anxiety (Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009). Shyness may be particularly impactful in early education settings (Arbeau, Coplan, & Weeks, 2010; Coplan & Weeks, 2009; Evans, 2001) where children experience significant socio-emotional and academic development, both of which are critical for later school success. Indeed, more shy children tend to have less positive relationships with teachers (Rudasill, Rimm-Kaufman, Justice, & Pence, 2006) and peers (Gazelle et al., 2005), and demonstrate less complex language (Crozier & Badawood, 2009) and poorer expressive and receptive vocabulary compared with their non-shy counterparts (Crozier & Hostettler, 2003; Evans, 2010; Spere, Schmidt, Theall-Honey, & Martin-Chang, 2004). There is also evidence that more shy children

are less engaged in classroom activities, hindering both academic and socio-emotional growth (Hughes & Coplan, 2010).

Although shyness may be a risk factor for children's positive adjustment in early childhood, it does not consistently emerge as a predictor of children's negative outcomes. For example, evidence suggests that shy children are less likely to act out in the kindergarten classroom, particularly during large-group activities (Rimm-Kaufman & Kagan, 2005), more likely to receive teacher attention during free play in preschool (Coplan & Prakash, 2003), and less likely to have conflictual relationships with teachers in preschool and early elementary grades (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009; Valiente, Swanson, & Lemery-Chalfant, 2012) compared to bolder peers. Thus, research on early childhood points to shyness as a protective and a risk factor. Although this seeming incongruity may be an artifact of the child outcome under investigation (such as compliance vs. expressive vocabulary), it may also stem, in part, from variations in the operationalization and measurement of shyness in different studies (Coplan & Rubin, 2010). A comprehensive review of links between shyness and academic performance revealed that most studies used parent or teacher assessments, or observations of children, to assess shyness (Evans, 2010). None, however, was an investigation of which mode of assessment was most closely connected to children's academic performance. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine parent

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and teacher ratings of children's shyness and determine the extent to which their ratings differentially predict children's vocabulary and attention skills in preschool.

Shyness is defined as fear of unfamiliar social stimuli, and conceptualized as a motivating force in an individual's choice to withdraw from social interaction (Coplan & Rubin, 2010); shyness is theorized as rooted in behavioral inhibition, or the early-emerging tendency to withdraw from novel stimuli (Kagan, Reznick, Snidman, & Steven, 1988). Yet, like many constructs in social science, there are abundant similar, overlapping constructs and terms, and different approaches to measurement. In early childhood, parent report is often used to measure child shyness and other behavior. This tendency is based on the notion that parents see children a variety of contexts, including unfamiliar ones, so they are best able to observe their children's patterns of behavior across multiple situations (Crozier & Badawood, 2009).

However, parents also may have a bias when reporting their children's behavior. For example, parents may be motivated to depict their children's behavior positively (Gartstein, Bridgett, & Low, 2012). In contrast, teachers might not have such bias. Teachers have the advantage of observing the behavior of multiple children in a classroom and, therefore, may be able to judge a child's behavior in comparison to other children of the same age (Crozier & Badawood, 2009). Concerning shyness specifically, teachers have the opportunity to observe children's behavior at school where they are engaged in social interactions for much of the day; thus, teachers may have opportunities to see more shy behavior than parents. However, evidence suggests teachers may have a negative perception of shy children, viewing them as less competent and more dependent than less shy children (Coplan, Hughes, Bosacki, & Rose-Krasnor, 2011; Evans, 2001; Ladd & Burgess, 1999). Interestingly, Coplan et al. (2011) also found that teacher shyness moderated teacher appraisal of shy children's academic competence, such that teachers who were low in shyness were more likely to view more shy children as less academically competent than their non-shy peers, whereas teachers who were high in shyness did not view shy children as academically different from other children. Teachers also see children in far fewer contexts than parents, and, thus, have less information about a child's typical behavioral responses to different social situations (other than the classroom). Indeed, evidence suggests that parents and teachers may see and rate shy behavior differently. Wang and Kemple (1993) found that parents' ratings of shyness are often based on their children's behavior around strangers, whereas teachers' ratings of shyness are typically based on children's relationships with classroom peers. Eisenberg, Shepard, Fabes, Murphy, and Guthrie (1998) found that parental ratings of shyness reflect a more temperamentally based wariness, while teacher ratings of shyness are more reflective of social inhibition brought on by social evaluation.

It is also important to note that cross-cultural differences in teachers' and parents' perceptions of children's shy behavior have been reported. For example, in Western cultures, inhibited behaviors tend to be regarded as socially immature, incompetent, and maladaptive, while in Eastern cultures, shy and inhibited children are believed to be well behaved and understanding (Rubin et al., 2009).

To capture a more complete picture of children's behavior, researchers often combine parent and teacher ratings. However, this approach may not be ideal, as the correlations between parent and teacher reports of children's shyness and other behavior are consistently low to moderate (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Measelle, Ablow, Cowan, & Cowan, 1998). For example, in a study of temperament, classroom engagement, and student–teacher relationships in kindergartners, Valiente et al. (2012) found that parent and teacher ratings of shyness had a modest correlation ($r = .33$). Crooks and Peters (2005) found a similar correlation ($r = .29$) between parent and teacher ratings of emotional functioning, which was composed of items assessing shyness and anxiety in 3- to 5-year-old children.

With growing evidence of the importance of shyness in early childhood as it relates to academic outcomes (see Evans, 2010, for a review),

the purpose of this study is to examine parent and teacher ratings of shyness as they are associated with language and attention skills in preschool children, and explore discrepancies between parent and teacher ratings of shyness. We expect that parent and teacher ratings of shyness will be negatively associated with children's language and attention skills and only moderately correlated with each other. It is likely that teacher ratings of children's shyness will be more strongly associated with children's performance on language and attention measures than parents' ratings; language and attention are academic skills, and teachers' perceptions of children's shyness are likely influenced by their knowledge of the demands of the school setting.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 104 children, including 48 males (46%) and 56 (54%) females, from a mid-sized Mid-western city. Children attended nine preschools in which administrators and all preschool teachers had agreed to participate in the study. All preschool children were invited to participate in the study, and parental consent was given for approximately 50% of children. Due to resource constraints, a maximum of seven children from each class was included in the study. In classes where more than seven children had parental consent, seven children were randomly selected to participate. In classes where seven or fewer had parental consent, all children participated. This resulted in a sample of 105 children. One parent withdrew a male child from the study, resulting in a sample of 104 children with demographic, temperament, and fall language and attention skills data. No other data are available on children or families who did not participate. Participant race was based on parent reports; the sample consisted of white ($n = 80$; 76.9%), Latino ($n = 5$; 4.8%), Asian ($n = 3$; 2.9%), African American ($n = 2$; 1.9%), and mixed race ($n = 13$; 12.5%) children. Race was not reported for one child. The mean age for the sample at the start of the study was 4.22 ($SD = 0.58$) years. Children were dispersed across 22 preschool classrooms; 21 teachers were white, and 1 was African American; 21 were female, and 1 was male. Average annual family income was \$65,000–\$75,000 (range: <\$5,000 to >\$95,000). Annual family income in this sample was highly skewed, with 63% of the sample reporting family income above \$75,000, and very few (12%) reporting income below \$25,000.

2.2. Children's Behavior Questionnaire

Both teachers and parents rated children on the Shyness subscale of the Children's Behavior Questionnaire (CBQ; Rothbart, Ahadi, Hershey, & Fisher, 2001). The CBQ has a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “extremely untrue of your child” to “extremely true of your child.” The Shyness subscale includes 13 items such as “Is sometimes shy even around people s/he has known a long time” and “Joins other quickly, even when they are strangers (reversed).” Internal consistency for the subscale with the current sample was high for teacher (.94) and parent (.92) ratings.

2.3. Language and attention skills

Children's receptive vocabulary was measured using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test Fourth Edition (PPVT-IV; Dunn & Dunn, 2007). For each item, the examiner instructed the child to point to the picture depicting a word (e.g., “Show me ‘necklace’”). Test–retest reliability estimates range from .70 to .90, and scores on the PPVT-IV are correlated ($r = .81$) with 2- to 4-year-old children's performance on the EVT-II (Dunn & Dunn, 2007).

Children's expressive vocabulary was measured with the Expressive Vocabulary Test (EVT; Williams, 1997), a standardized test of vocabulary knowledge and word retrieval. For the first 38 items, the child was asked

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