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Short communication

Power assertion in everyday mother–infant interactions

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ABSTRACT

Mothers' power assertion was assessed following everyday infant transgressions. Power assertiveness showed limited stability, increased with age, and was higher when infants were harming others and when the physical danger was more severe. Naturalistic research is key to understanding how power assertion influences social development.

Infants learn about moral and other rules in part by experiencing how others respond to their misbehavior. Power assertion – the use of coercion, for instance via physical interventions or angry vocalizations – is a key aspect of parental reactions to child misbehaviors (Baumrind, 2013; Grolnick, 2012; Grusec, 2012). Yet little research has investigated parents' use of power assertion in everyday interactions in family homes. Power assertion may be particularly relevant during infancy, when children lack many of the cognitive and self-regulatory skills needed to comprehend and adhere to rules (Thompson & Goodvin, 2007).

Most research on parental power assertion in early childhood has been conducted in structured laboratory settings. Laboratory studies have typically assessed power assertiveness in early life by instructing parents to encourage or discourage certain child behaviors. Using a prohibited toy paradigm, Kochanska, Aksan, and Nichols (2003) brought mothers and their infants to a room with several attractive toys. The researchers asked mothers to try to keep their child from approaching the toys during the observational period and assessed the power assertiveness of mothers' interventions (see also Kochanska, Aksan, & Joy, 2007).

Several studies have reported correlations between parental power assertion in prohibited toy contexts and child outcomes (Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1996; Kim & Kochanska, 2015; Kochanska et al., 2003), leading many researchers to describe power assertion as generally detrimental (e.g. Grolnick, 2012). In contrast, others have argued that power assertion is adaptive in many circumstances (Baumrind, 2013; Grusec, 2012) and that parental interventions vary greatly between situations (Grusec, Chaparro, Johnston, & Sherman, 2014).

During infancy, power assertion may sometimes be the only way of stopping infants' transgressions, given their limited communicative and regulatory abilities. This led us to hypothesize that a given caregiver would vary systematically in the use of power assertiveness across different situations. The present study investigated everyday home interactions between mother–infant pairs in the second year. This period is characterized by increasingly intense parent–child conflicts (Biringen, Emde, Campos, & Appelbaum, 1995; Rijt-Plooij & Plooij, 1993), which may elicit increased parental power assertion. The

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coding scheme for maternal power assertion was adapted from laboratory studies (Kochanska et al., 2003; Kochanska, Aksan, Prisco, & Adams, 2008).

This study addressed four main hypotheses about power assertion in naturalistic mother–infant interactions: (1) Does maternal power assertiveness in everyday life show rank-order stability? Such rank-order stability (meaning that parents who use the most power assertion at one assessment point also tend to use the most power assertion at other assessment points) would be a precondition for studying associations between overall power assertion and child outcomes in everyday life. (2) Does mean power assertion increase during the first half of the second year? In dealing with new levels of conflict with their barely verbal infants, mothers were expected to increase their use of power assertion early in the second year. (3) We also hypothesized that mothers would use more power assertion in response to *moral* transgressions (harming others) than to *pragmatic* transgressions (creating inconvenience), with *prudential* transgressions (affecting child welfare) falling in between (Dahl & Campos, 2013). Prudential transgressions were expected to elicit lower average power assertion than moral situations because many prudential transgressions are dealt with by prevention rather than intervention (Gärling & Gärling, 1995). (4) Finally, in prudential and moral situations, caregivers were expected to show more power assertion when the danger was more severe (e.g. falling down stairs vs. on the floor).

Twenty-four families participated in a 2.5-h home visit when the target child (11 female) was 13–15 months of age (M_{age} = 14.5 months, SD_{age} = 0.63) and a second visit five months later. (See Supplementary Online Materials for additional details on participants and procedures.) The observer videotaped mother–infant interactions and electronically logged when the mother intervened on the infant's transgressions. Coders classified the transgression as *moral* (harming others), *prudential* (behavior that could negatively affect child welfare), or pragmatic (creating inconvenience), agreement: κ_{Cohen} = .90 (Table S1). Situations with both pragmatic and moral or prudential concerns were classified as moral or prudential respectively. Situations involving both moral and prudential elements (N = 2) were excluded. The danger in moral and prudential situations were coded on a scale from 1 to 5, agreement: r = .87 (Table S1).

Maternal power assertiveness was coded for each situation. The coding scheme, modified from work by Kochanska and her colleagues (2003, 2008), was composed of two types of codes: global rating of maternal control style and physical interventions, each ranging from no control (=0) to forceful (=3) (see Table S1 and Kochanska et al. (2003)). Mothers were given *one* global rating of maternal control style for each situation. Each act of physical intervention in a situation was given a separate code, and a mean physical intervention score was calculated for each situation. (If no physical intervention was used, the situation was given a score of 0.) The global and mean physical scores were standardized across participants and situation types and then combined to create a composite power assertion score for each situation. A second coder coded 10% of the data to allow for assessment of inter-rater agreement: Global code: Cohen's κ = .77, mean physical score: Pearson's r = .87, presence of physical agreement: κ = .86, composite power assertion score: Pearson's r = .84. The main analyses used Linear Mixed Models (LMMs) to predict composite power assertiveness score for each situation (Hox, 2010). Models had random intercepts for participants and fixed effects of child age and situation type.

A total of 1203 situations were coded (61 moral, 462 prudential, 680 pragmatic; 561 at visit 1, 642 at visit 2). The mean raw global power assertiveness score was 1.51 (SD = 0.62), i.e. between gentle and assertive global control, and the mean raw physical power assertiveness score was 1.00 (SD = 0.87), corresponding to gentle physical control (60.7% of situations included at least one act of physical intervention). The correlation between global and mean physical power assertiveness scores was r = .10. Table S2 lists descriptive statistics.

(1) Rank-order stability in maternal power assertion. The addition of random intercepts for participants and visits significantly improved the fit of the LMM, $D(2)$ = 18.20, p < .001, intraclass correlation coefficient = .06, which provides evidence of limited stability in mothers' use of power assertiveness (Hox, 2010). There was a positive, non-significant correlation between mothers' mean power assertiveness at the two visits: Pearson $r(22)$ = .33, p = .11. Though non-significant, the correlation was similar to those obtained in laboratory assessments (Kochanska et al., 2003) (range: .14–.44, mean = .31). Correlations between mean power assertiveness in each situation type were: moral and prudential situations: $r(15)$ = .54, p = .02, moral and pragmatic: $r(15)$ = .25, p = .34, prudential and pragmatic, $r(22)$ = .35, p = .09.

(2) Heightened power assertion when infants were older. There was a significant positive effect of child age, $\hat{\beta}_{age} = 0.05$, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = 4.30, p = .038 (Table S3). Power assertiveness increased from −0.18 at visit 1 to 0.16 at visit 2. We note that most mothers (16/24) had a higher mean power assertiveness at visit 2 than at visit 1, although this pattern did not differ significantly from chance: Pearson $\chi^2(1, N = 24) = 2.67$, p = .10.

(3) Heightened power assertion in moral situations. There was a significant effect of situation type on mothers' power assertiveness, likelihood ratio test: $D(2)$ = 7.32, p = .026. As predicted, mothers were most power assertive in moral situations (M = 0.46), followed by prudential (M = 0.05) and pragmatic (M = – 0.07). Their scores for pragmatic and prudential transgressions were significantly lower than their scores for moral transgressions, Wald $\chi^2(1) \geq 4.90$, $ps \leq .027$. However, mothers' scores for pragmatic and prudential transgressions did not differ significantly from each other, Wald $\chi^2(1)$ = 0.80, p = .37. The situation effect was evident in most families. Among the mothers who had at least one situation in each category, 76.5% (13/17) had a higher mean power assertiveness in moral situations than in prudential and pragmatic situations, Pearson $\chi^2(2, N = 17) = 14.24$, p < .001. (We also note that there was a significant, although non-predicted interaction between visit and situation type, $D[2]$ = 9.44, p = .001. Between visits 1 and 2, power assertiveness increased more in moral [from 0.30 to 0.58] and pragmatic situations [−0.36 to 0.17] than in prudential ones [0.00 to 0.08].)