

Parents' Use of Praise and Criticism in a Sample of Young Children Seeking Mental Health Services

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ABSTRACT

Parents' use of praise and criticism are common indicators of parent-child interaction quality and are intervention targets for mental health treatment. Clinicians and researchers often rely on parents' self-reports of parenting behavior, although studies about the correlation of parents' self-reports and actual behavior are rare. We examined the concordance between parents' self-reports of praise and criticism of their children and observed use of these behaviors during a brief parent-child play session. Parent self-report and observational data were collected from 128 parent-child dyads referred for child mental health treatment. Most parents reported praising their children often and criticizing their children rarely. However, parents were observed to criticize their children nearly three times more often than they praised them. Self-reported and observed praise were positively correlated ($r_s = 0.32$, $p < .01$), whereas self-reported and observed criticisms were negatively correlated ($r_s = -0.21$, $p < .05$). Parents' tendencies to overestimate their use of praise and underestimate their use of criticism are discussed. *J Pediatr Health Care.* (2016) 30, 49-56.

KEY WORDS

Parenting, young children, praise, critical statements, parent self-report

Parents are a powerful source of feedback in shaping their young children's behavior and sense of self. It is within these earliest relationships that children first begin to acquire a sense of themselves as capable, competent, and loved (Bohlin, Hagekull, & Rydell, 2000; Bowlby, 1988; Cassidy, 1988). Two common sources of parental feedback used to shape young

children's behavior and self-esteem are *praise* (i.e., positive statements designed to reinforce desirable behaviors in children or communicate pleasure with the child) and *criticism* (i.e., negative statements designed to stop or change children's undesirable behavior or communicate displeasure with the child).

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Praise from parents has been used as a marker of positive parenting behaviors in numerous studies (Breitenstein et al., 2012; Chorpita, Calaiden, & Weisz, 2005; Wahler & Meginnis, 1997). Praise is often accompanied by other parenting behaviors indicative of parental warmth, responsiveness, and nurturance (Furlong et al., 2013). Although the question of whether excessive use of praise can negatively influence children's intrinsic motivation has been debated (Owens, Slep, & Heyman, 2012), substantial research now shows that praise, used strategically, can boost children's feelings of competence and confidence. Therefore, praise remains an important indicator of positive parenting behavior (Brummelman, Thomaes, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek, & Bushman, 2014; Cimpian, 2010; Henderlong & Lepper, 2002; Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Zentall & Morris, 2010).

Parents may use critical statements to express disapproval with their children's behavior or attitude. However, using criticism can undermine their self-esteem, lead to greater child defiance and aggression, and increase the likelihood of their developing behavioral problems (Barnett & Scaramella, 2013; Lorber & Egeland, 2011; Tung, Li, & Lee, 2012; Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1998). Thus, contrary to parents' expectations, using critical statements to shape child behavior actually may be counterproductive. In clinical studies of young children in mental health treatment, parents who directed more critical statements at their children were also more likely to drop out of treatment (Fernandez & Eyberg, 2009).

Given their salience in child development research, parent training interventions have been designed to increase parents' use of praise and reduce their use of criticisms with their children (Breitenstein et al., 2012; Brotman et al., 2009; Eyberg et al., 2001; Gross et al., 2009). In clinical practice and research, parents' use of praise and criticism is often assessed using parent self-report. However, some investigators have questioned the accuracy of using self-reports to measure actual parenting behaviors, particularly when those behaviors are susceptible to recall or social desirability biases (Morsbach & Prinz, 2006). These biases may be particularly heightened in a child mental health population,

where parents might be highly sensitive to feeling "blamed" for their child's illness or to the stigma of engaging the mental health system (Meltzer, Ford, Goodman, & Vostanis, 2011; Angold, et al., 1998).

This study examines the extent to which parents' self-reports of praise and criticism are reflected in their observed behavior in a sample of parents of preschool children referred for mental health treatment. We also explore whether two indicators of parents' tendency to hold negative attributions about themselves and their children, depressive symptoms and perceptions of their children as being more behaviorally difficult, moderate the relationship between self-report and observed use of praise and critical statements. Consistent with cognitive attribution theory, depressed parents may develop biases that their children's misbehavior is intentional and within their control, leading them to be less positive and more critical in their interactions (Dix, Ruble, Grusec, & Nixon, 1986; Leung & Slep, 2006; Scott & Dadds, 2009).

Using a descriptive, cross-sectional design, we posed the following research questions:

- What is the relationship between parents' self-reported and observed use of praise based on (a) frequency and (b) the proportion of statements to their child that are praise during a 15-minute free play session?
- What is the relationship between parents' self-reported and observed use of criticism based on (a) number and (b) the proportion of statements to their child that are criticisms during a 15-minute free play session?
- Do parents' depressive symptoms moderate the association between their self-reported and observed use of praise and critical statements?
- Do parents' perception of the severity of their children's behavior problems affect the association between their self-reported and observed use of praise and critical statements?

The goals of this study are to (a) understand the extent to which parents' self-reported use of praise and criticism accurately reflect the appraisals of their observed behavior and (b) offer guidance to practitioners on how to address these two important parenting practices in pediatric primary care with parents of young children at risk for mental health problems.

METHODS

This study is a secondary analysis of baseline parent-report and observation data collected as part of a larger clinical trial comparing two evidence-based parent training programs. The larger clinical trial was conducted in an urban mental health clinic serving low-income families with preschool children (Gross et al., 2014) and was approved by the Johns Hopkins University Medical Institutions Institutional Review Board.

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