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Applied Developmental Psychology 27 (2006) 209–227

Applied Developmental Psychology

Early parenting and children's relational and physical aggression in the preschool and home contexts

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Available online 6 March 2006

Abstract

This study investigated early parent–child relationships and how children's use of relational and physical aggression varies with aspects of those relationships during the preschool years. Specifically, parenting styles, parents' use of psychological control, and parents' report of their children's reunion behaviors were assessed. Analyses revealed significant associations between children's use of both relational and physical aggression and parents' reports of their own and their partner's parenting style, psychological control behaviors, and indicators of the attachment relationship. The results highlight the importance of investigating both mothers' and fathers' parenting and the sex of the child in studies of potential links between parenting behaviors and young children's relational and physical aggression. Findings were considered in the context of each perspective and suggestions for future research and implications for intervention and prevention are discussed.
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Keywords: Relational aggression; Physical aggression; Parent–child relationship; Parenting styles; Sex differences; Early childhood

1. Introduction

Researchers have long known the importance of early childhood aggression in the prediction of future social–psychological adjustment problems (Berkowitz, 1993; Parker & Asher, 1987). As a result, there has been much work dedicated to the understanding of factors that are associated with the etiology of aggressive behavior (Coie & Dodge, 1998; Dishion, French, & Patterson, 1995). Although a substantial amount has been learned from work in this area, a more complete understanding of aggression has been delayed because historically attention was directed solely at physical forms of aggressive behavior (Block, 1983; Parke & Slaby, 1983), a form of aggression more characteristic of boys than girls (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

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doi:10.1016/j.appdev.2006.02.003

More recently, researchers have begun examining a form of aggression called relational aggression. In contrast to physical aggression, which harms others through physical damage or the threat of such damage (e.g., pushing, hitting, and threatening to beat up a peer), relational aggression harms through damage to relationships (e.g., using social exclusion or rumor spreading as a form of retaliation). As a result of this conceptualization, our understanding of the various ways in which children, both boys and girls, can aggress towards one another has been broadened. It is not surprising that sex differences in aggression exist given the sex and gender segregated nature of boys' and girls' play groups during early childhood. Crick & Grotpeter (1995) have argued that, when attempting to inflict harm on others (i.e., aggressing), children do so in ways that are most likely to thwart or damage the social goals of the target. As a result, boys are likely to use physical forms of aggression that hinder the instrumentally oriented dominance goals that tend to be characteristic of boys (Block, 1983). In contrast, Crick & Grotpeter (1995) hypothesized that girls are more likely to use relational forms of aggression because they are effective in hindering the affiliative, intimacy goals that tend to be more typical of girls (Block, 1983).

Studies of relational aggression demonstrate the importance of examining relational aggression when trying to understand children's adjustment difficulties (for a review see Crick et al., 1999). Specifically, studies in this vein have shown that relationally aggressive children are significantly more socially and emotionally maladjusted than their nonrelationally aggressive peers. Studies have found that, in middle childhood, relational aggression is associated with both concurrent and future rejection, and with internalizing and externalizing problems for both boys and girls (Crick, 1996; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick, Ostrov, & Werner, in press; Rys & Bear, 1997; Zalecki & Hinshaw, 2004). This growing body of work provides evidence that the lack of attention to aggression among girls and forms of aggressive behavior other than physical aggression has greatly impaired our ability to garner a complete understanding of aggressive behavior and associated aspects of adjustment (i.e., social–psychological functioning) among children. While the association between relational aggression and adjustment seems fairly robust, there is recent evidence to suggest that it is a complex relationship. Specifically, recent work by Nelson, Robinson, & Hart (2005) on peer reports suggests that for some socially skilled preschoolers relational aggression is associated with greater peer status.

Although a great deal of research has been generated recently with respect to relational forms of aggression, a major limitation is the lack of studies focusing on the early childhood period (Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999). This special issue highlights recent advances being made in this developmental period and underscores the need for more empirical attention to the etiology of relational aggression in order to more fully understand the developmental course and possible outcomes of aggression. Previous studies have shown that by preschool age, relationally aggressive behaviors are already quite common in peer interactions and that engagement in relational aggression is associated with social–psychological adjustment problems (Bonica, Yeshova, Arnold, Fisher, & Zeljo, 2003; Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997; McNeilly-Choque, Hart, Robinson, Nelson, & Olsen, 1996; Ostrov & Keating, 2004; Ostrov, Woods, Jansen, Casas, & Crick, 2004). These studies provide evidence that researchers must look to the early childhood period for a complete understanding of the etiology of relational aggression.

This study explored three perspectives on the parent–child relationship (i.e., parenting styles, psychological control, and attachment theory) that have been implicated in children's use of physical aggression to see if they might also be helpful in understanding the origins of relational aggression as well. The idea that parents play a role in determining their children's behavior is not new (for a review see Maccoby & Martin, 1983). For example, Diana Baumrind (1967, 1971) identified typologies of parenting styles that are differentially associated with various child behaviors, including physical forms of aggression (Hart, Olsen, Robinson, & Mandleco, 1997). This research has found that authoritarian and permissive parenting styles are associated with higher rates of physical aggression in children (e.g., Baumrind, 1967; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Rubin, Stewart, & Chen, 1995). The precise connections between these styles of parenting and physical aggression have not been clearly delineated. It has been suggested that authoritarian parents who use power assertive behaviors (e.g., corporal punishment) towards their children may teach their children that physically aggressive behaviors are acceptable when interacting with others (Hart, DeWolf, Wozniak, & Burts, 1992). Conversely, permissive parents may unwittingly communicate to their children that physically aggressive behaviors are acceptable by not punishing their child when the child physically aggresses towards others. In support of this premise, work by Olweus (1980) has found that relative to a variety of other commonly studied parenting factors, maternal permissiveness of aggression was the best predictor of actual childhood physical aggression. Cross-cultural work by Hart, Nelson, Robinson, Olsen, & McNeilly-Choque (1998), investigating dimensions of parenting styles and relational aggression with preschool samples in Russia, found that maternal and paternal coercion and maternal lack of

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