



Research Article

A longitudinal study of the role of children's altruism and forgiveness in the relation between parental aggressive discipline and anxiety of preschoolers in China



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ABSTRACT

Using data collected over a 1-year period on a stratified random sample of 368 parents with children studying in nurseries (mean age = 3.97 years), this study assessed the predictive effects of parental corporal punishment, parental psychological aggression, preschoolers' altruism, and preschoolers' forgiveness on preschoolers' anxiety symptoms in Hong Kong, China. Results of hierarchical regression analyses showed that parental psychological aggression, preschoolers' altruism and preschoolers' forgiveness at Time 1 significantly predicted preschoolers' anxiety at Time 2, when controlling for the initial level of preschoolers' anxiety and important demographic variables that co-vary with preschoolers' anxiety. Moreover, preschoolers' altruism moderated the predictive effect of parental psychological aggression on preschoolers' anxiety symptoms. The study has several significant contributions. First, the study supports the predictive effect of parental aggressive discipline on preschoolers' anxiety. Second, we provide evidence that preschoolers' altruism and forgiveness negatively predict preschoolers' anxiety symptoms. Third, preschoolers' altruism and forgiveness are shown to protect them against parental psychological aggression. A dual-focus approach to intervention and prevention is proposed to reduce aggressive discipline by parents as well as to enhance altruism and forgiveness in children. Parent training programs could be provided to teach parents positive discipline strategies. Home-based or school-based interventions could be designed for preschool children to foster and enhance their altruism and forgiveness.

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1. Introduction

Discipline is a key characteristic of parental control (Straus & Fauchier, 2007). Two types of aggressive discipline—corporal punishment and psychological aggression—have attracted recent research attention. Corporal punishment is defined as “the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correction or control of the child's behavior” (Straus, 1994, p.4). Spanking is one common example of corporal punishment. Psychological aggression is characterized by parents' use of emotional manipulation, harsh criticism, guilt induction, love withdrawal, harsh criticism and negative labeling towards their children (Straus & Fauchier, 2007).

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Corporal punishment and psychological aggression should be of international concern. Despite diverse cultural backgrounds, parents' use of aggressive discipline were found to be consistently associated with child-adjustment problems (Lansford, 2010). Previous studies have found that parental aggressive discipline is significantly associated with preschoolers' behavior problems. The present study sought to examine whether parental aggressive discipline would predict internalizing problems of anxiety in preschoolers. Conducted in the Chinese context, this study would contribute to the body of research on the links between parental aggressive discipline and preschoolers' adjustment in different cultures.

Another novel aspect of the present study was to examine the moderating effects of preschoolers' altruism and forgiveness. Based on the framework of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), this study posited that two character strengths (i.e. altruism and forgiveness) within preschoolers would buffer against the negative impact of parental aggressive discipline.

1.1. Parental aggressive discipline and preschoolers' anxiety symptoms

Accumulating evidence indicates that aggressive discipline generally peaks in the preschool years across different countries. In the United States, more than 90% of the parents used one or more forms of corporal punishment (Straus & Stewart, 1999) and psychological aggression (Straus & Field, 2003) towards their children aged 2–5 during the previous 12 months. Another study of 24 developing countries (China was not included) reported that an average of 63% of the parents used physical violence and an average of 66% of the parents used psychological aggression with their 2-to-4-year old child in the month preceding the study (Lansford & Deater-Deckard, 2012). In Mainland China, a study showed that around 70% of parents reported the use of corporal punishment and 90% of parents reported the use of psychological aggression towards their 3–6-years-old children (Wang & Liu, 2014). The above literature shows that aggressive discipline on preschool children is prevalent in both developing and industrialized countries. Hence, the impact of corporal punishment and psychological aggression on children should be of concern for both developing and industrialized countries.

A limited number of Western studies generally report a positive association between aggressive discipline and externalizing problems among preschoolers. Two longitudinal studies have shown that parental corporal punishment may predict preschoolers' behavioral problems. Mulvaney & Mebert (2007) reported that parental corporal punishment uniquely contributed to negative behavioral adjustment in children at both 36 months and first grade; the sample consisting of 705 male and 659 female children and their mothers in the United States of America. McLoyd & Smith (2002) using data collected over a 4-year period found that spankings predicted an increase in the level of problem behavior for African American, European American, and Hispanic children aged 4–5-years-old. Two cross-sectional studies have shown that parental psychological aggression was significantly associated with preschoolers' aggressive behavior. Nelson, Yang, Coyne, Olsen, and Hart (2013) studied a sample of 207 Russian preschoolers and their parents and found that parents' psychological control was significantly associated with child's relational and physically aggressive behavior. Similarly, Casas et al. (2006) revealed significant associations between parents' psychological control and children's use of both relational and physical aggression based on a sample of preschoolers in two large Midwestern cities of the United States.

Notably, the above-mentioned studies examining the effects of parental psychological and physical aggression on preschoolers' externalizing problems; little is known about the impact of parental aggressive discipline on preschooler's internalizing problems such as anxiety. The link between aggressive discipline and anxiety, however, has been reported for previous Western research with children and adolescents. For instance, using a sample of 1196 children aged 7–10 years old from eight countries, Lansford et al. (2014) found that parental corporal punishment was related to increases in children's anxiety over time. Miller-Perrin, Perrin, and Kocur (2009) reported that childhood experiences of psychological aggression were significantly associated with college students' anxiety. There is a need for more empirical attention to the linkage between parental aggressive discipline and preschoolers' anxiety.

To the best of our knowledge, in Chinese societies no study was conducted to examine the impact of parental aggressive discipline on preschoolers. Yet some Chinese studies suggested that parents' aggressive discipline have negative impacts on children or adolescents. Chinese adolescents (aged 12–16 years old) who had been corporally punished were more likely to report health problems and low self-esteem (Wong et al., 2009). Chinese children with psychologically aggressive parents showed less optimal developmental outcomes than those of supportive or easygoing parents (Kim, Wang, Orozco-Lapray, Shen, & Murtuza, 2013). Another study with 1971 father–mother dyads with 945 elementary school students aged 7–12 years old and 1026 middle school students aged 13–17 years old found that parental psychological aggression and maternal corporal punishment were both significantly predictive of children's anxiety (Wang, Wang, & Liu, 2016). Chinese culture values a hierarchical parent-child relationship, and children's compliance and obedience to their parents. Strict and firm discipline particularly via punishment was commonly used by Chinese parents, as reflected by the saying of “*da shi qing ma shi ai, bu da bu ma bu cheng cai*” (hitting and scolding are the emblem of love, and sparing the rod will spoil the child) (Kwok, Chai, & He, 2013; Kwok, Yeung, Low, Lo, & Tam, 2015). Given that the use of aggressive discipline is considered normative in Chinese societies, the present study expects to find a significant predictive effect of parental corporal punishment on preschoolers' anxiety.

An issue with research on parenting behaviors is to determine the direction of parent-to-child effect. While some studies assume that parenting behaviors impact child's development, it is possible that child characteristics play an important role in evoking different kinds of parenting behaviors (Lengua & Kovacs, 2005). Distinguishing the direction of effects between physical discipline and child outcomes is imperative. An effective way to deal with this issue is to employ developmental

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