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Harsh parenting and peer acceptance in Chinese early adolescents: Three child aggression subtypes as mediators and child gender as moderator☆

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the mediating roles of three types of child aggression in the relation between harsh parenting and Chinese early adolescents' peer acceptance as well as the moderating role of child gender on this indirect relation. 833 children (mean age = 13.58, 352 girls) with their parents were recruited as participants from two junior high schools in Shandong Province, People's Republic of China. The results showed that paternal harsh parenting was only associated with boys' aggressive behaviors and maternal harsh parenting was only associated with boys' and girls' verbal aggression. Adolescents' verbal and relational aggressions were negatively associated with their peer acceptance. Verbal aggression was more strongly and negatively associated with girls' peer acceptance. The results imply that in the Chinese cultural context, paternal harsh parenting may compromise boys' peer acceptance through boys' verbal and relational aggression as mediators, whereas maternal harsh parenting may impair children's peer acceptance through children's verbal aggression as a mediator, especially for girls. These results provide a theoretical basis for ameliorating the negative effect of harsh parenting on early adolescents' peer acceptance by reducing their aggressive behaviors, with different strategies between boys and girls.

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1. Introduction

Researchers have long been interested in the relation of parental behaviors to children's peer relations, especially the multiple linkages between them (Kerns, Contreras, & Neal-Barnett, 2000). According to one model of family-peer linkages (McDowell & Parke, 2009), parental behaviors toward the child can function as a training ground for children's positive as well as negative social interactions with peers. Guided by this model, we examined the relations among harsh parenting, child aggression, and peer acceptance in Chinese early adolescents, focusing on examining the roles of three subtypes of child aggression (i.e., physical, verbal, and relational aggression) in bridging harsh parenting and early adolescents' peer acceptance. We also tested whether these relations varied across the gender of parents and children, issues rarely discussed before.

Harsh parenting involves parental discipline behaviors such as yelling, slapping, spanking, shoving, or beating the child with an object (Hinnant, Erath, & El-Sheikh, 2015; Surjadi, Lorenz, Conger, & Wickrama, 2013) and often involves parental over-control and negative emotions (Chang, Schwartz, Dodge, & McBride-Chang, 2003). Child aggression involves intentional

harmful acts and may take at least three forms, namely physical, verbal, and relational aggression (Olweus, 1995). Physical aggression comprises acts such as hitting and pushing. Verbal aggression consists of taunting and name calling, aimed at inflicting bodily harm and inducing painful feelings. Relational aggression refers to damaging the target's social relationships through acts such as exclusion, spreading rumors and withholding friendship (Crick, Ostrov, & Werner, 2006; Putallaz et al., 2007). Unlike past researchers who subsumed physical and verbal subtypes into the category of overt aggression, we use the three-category typology of aggression so as to examine more carefully whether harsh parenting is differentially associated with adolescents' three aggression subtypes.

1.1. Child aggression subtypes as potential multiple mediators

According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1986), parents enacting harsh discipline cannot perform as models of effective emotional and behavioral management. Coercive family process theory (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992) suggests that negative parent-child exchanges play an important role in socializing aggressive behaviors in children. Particularly, harsh parenting might provide models of aggressive behaviors as normative ways to achieve personal goals (Ross & Howe, 2009). Taken together, different forms of harsh parenting may make children more vulnerable to emotional dysfunction, overactivity and impulsivity (Shields & Cicchetti, 2001), more prone to aggressive cognitive bias (Fite et al., 2008) and more likely to resolve social problems in aggressive ways (Brody et al., 2014).

Prior research has demonstrated the association between harsh parenting and children's aggression (Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008; You & Lim, 2015). Parental physical punishment has been shown to be associated with preschoolers' lack of self control (Darwish, Esquivel, Houtz, & Alfonso, 2001) and aggressive behaviors (Nelson, Hart, Yang, Olsen, & Jin, 2006). Similarly, parental verbal criticism and hostility are also related to children's aggression (Shaffer, Yates, & Egeland, 2009). Generally, harsh parenting is thought to contribute to children's lack of emotional regulation, which in turn elicits aggressive behaviors (Chang et al., 2003).

According to social learning theory, children may learn different forms of aggressive behaviors through observation and imitation of parents' similar behaviors. Parents' corporal punishment of their children would convey the message that physical aggression is permissible in interpersonal interaction (Hart, Dewolf, Wozniak, & Burts, 1992). By definition, harsh parenting mainly involves parents' physical punishment and verbal criticism toward the offspring. Therefore, it should induce more physical and verbal forms of aggression than relational aggression in adolescents. Nevertheless, this may not be the case in that, modeling is not a simple process of mimicry of others' acts (Bandura, 1989). Children may demonstrate different aggressive behaviors depending on changing contexts (Kawabata, Alink, Tseng, van IJzendoorn, & Crick, 2011). They might be more capable of enacting aggressive behaviors covertly with increasing understanding of the aggression outcomes with age (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008). Björkqvist (1994) has proposed that human beings rarely use physical aggression to resolve interpersonal conflicts compared to other means (e.g., verbal and relational aggression). Compared to physical aggression, research regarding relational aggression is relatively sparse (Nelson et al., 2006). This is particularly true in terms of familial contributions to relational aggression (Park et al., 2005). Comparatively, verbal aggression has not been given due emphasis, either. It has often been treated as a component of overt or direct aggression, resulting in inadequate insight into its function. Thus, it is interesting and worthwhile to examine and compare the different effects of harsh parenting on the three types of adolescent aggression, separately. To our knowledge, research alone this line has been rarely undertaken in Chinese and even in western cultural settings.

Research has indicated that negative parenting tends to be related to peer victimization (Lereya, Samara, & Wolke, 2013), and that peers respond more negatively to children with more intrusive mothers (Pettit & Harrist, 1993). Kerns et al. (2000) have suggested that children would generalize their maladjusted emotional regulation strategies acquired from parent-child interaction to peer settings, resulting in lower peer acceptance.

Problems in children's peer relationship are among the varied maladjusted outcomes of aggressive behaviors. Crick (1996) found in her longitudinal study that overt and relational aggression of third- through sixth-graders could contribute independently to their peer rejection. One half-year longitudinal study with kindergarteners through third graders revealed that the initially aggressive children became excluded and victimized by peers in just a three-month period (Hoglund & Chisholm, 2014). Aggressive behaviors are strictly prohibited and harshly punished in Chinese collectivistic tradition because they may disrupt group harmony (Chen & French, 2008). As in other cultures, children's aggressive behaviors have been shown to be linked with poor peer relationships in China (Chen, Dong, & Zhou, 1997).

Researchers have proposed that one important distinction between direct and indirect aggression lies in their differential relations with maladjustment (Card et al., 2008). Accordingly, children enacting different types of aggression should be differentially rejected in peer settings. Researchers found that parental maltreatment was indirectly related with children's peer rejection through children's physical and verbal aggression (Anthonysamy & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007). Comparatively, less is known about the role of children's relational aggression as a link between negative parenting and their peer relationships. Incorporating the aforementioned impact of harsh parenting on children's aggressive behaviors and the negative influence of these behaviors on their peer relationships, it is reasonable to infer that the three types of adolescent aggression (i.e., physical, verbal and relational aggression) may act as multiple mediators playing different roles in the association between harsh parenting and early adolescents' peer acceptance.