



## Family-peer linkages for children with intellectual disability and children with learning disabilities



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### ABSTRACT

Family interactions are potential contexts for children with intellectual and learning disabilities to develop skillful social behaviors needed to relate effectively with peers. This study examined problem solving interactions within families of elementary school-age children (7–11 years) with intellectual disability ( $n = 37$ ), specific learning disabilities ( $n = 48$ ), and without disabilities ( $n = 22$ ). After accounting for group differences in children's behaviors and peer acceptance, across all groups, mothers' behaviors that encouraged egalitarian problem solving predicted more engaged and skillful problem solving by the children. However, mothers' controlling, directive behaviors predicted fewer of these behaviors by the children. Fathers' behaviors had mixed associations with the children's actions, possibly because they were reactive to children's unengaged and negative behaviors. For the children, greater involvement, more facilitative behaviors, and less negativity with their families were associated with greater acceptance from their peers, supporting family-peer linkages for children at risk for peer rejection.

### 1. Introduction

Interactions among family members can prepare children for interpersonal functioning outside of the family, including relationships with peers (Ladd & Pettit, 2002). Extensive research on parenting practices indicates that when parents display warmth, engagement, and support for the child's autonomy, the children are more likely to develop positive friendships and experience acceptance from their peers (Ladd & Pettit, 2002). In contrast, negative parent-child interactions are associated with children's negative peer experiences (e.g., MacKinnon-Lewis, Rabiner, & Starnes, 1999). However, relatively little is known about whether family interactions can help to improve peer functioning for children who have functional limitations that place them at high risk for peer rejection. The purpose of the present study is to investigate whether and how family problem-solving interactions are associated with peer adjustment for two groups of children who often experience peer rejection; children with intellectual disability, and children with specific learning disabilities.

Social rejection by peers is a critical problem for promoting the full integration of children with intellectual disability and children with learning disabilities in school and recreational settings (Estell et al., 2008; Son, Parish, & Peterson, 2012). For children with intellectual disability, their functional limitations in social communication and peer relationship skills constrain positive engagement with peers (Kasari,

2016). For example, children with intellectual disability display ineffective and isolating social play behaviors as early as pre-school (Guralnick, 1999). Later, elementary school-age children with intellectual disability make critical errors in understanding and responding to peer problem situations (Leffert, Siperstein, & Widaman, 2010). Research on children with learning disabilities also has identified a wide array of social skills deficits that impede social problem solving and effective engagement with peers (Wiener, 2004). Similar to children with intellectual disability, these limitations include both social-cognitive errors such as misunderstanding social behaviors and failure to recognize the consequences of their own actions (Fink, Begeer, Peterson, Slaughter, & de Rosnay, 2015), and social communication problems such as difficulties generating conversation and communicating clearly enough to be understood (McCabe & Meller, 2004). In addition to functional limitations, children with learning disabilities often display behavioral excesses and poor emotional regulation skills in the form of disruptive and aggressive behaviors that alienate peers (Metsala, Galway, Ishaik, & Barton, 2017). It is important to help these children succeed socially because social skills are as important as cognitive skills for influencing the well-being and adjustment of people with disabilities (Kasari, 2016).

Competent social behaviors are particularly relevant for children's peer adjustment during elementary school because peer relationships become increasingly complex at this time (Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt,

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1990). During this developmental period, children become more aware of the thoughts and feelings of their peers, which affects their ability to create and maintain friendships (Selman, 1980). The elementary school years are also a time when the number of close friend selections increases steadily (Epstein, 1986), and friendship choices are more likely to be reciprocated (Schneider, 2000). However, this is also a developmental period of heightened intergroup biases and selective peer rejection, which can exacerbate insecurities about peer acceptance (Adler & Adler, 1995). For children with intellectual disability and learning disabilities, developmental delays in acquiring the cooperative and competent social behaviors needed for reciprocal friendships, possibly along with disruptiveness or aggression, put them at risk for neglect or rejection by their peers during and beyond the elementary school-age years.

### 1.1. Family-peer linkages in problem solving

In this study we examine family problem solving as a context for the development of children's interpersonal skills relevant to their peer relationships. In order to problem solve effectively, family members must regulate hostility, disclose openly, support and validate each other, and generate new ideas and solutions to family problems (Alexander, Waldron, Robbins, & Neeb, 2013). These behaviors can reduce family stress and build closeness, which, in turn, contribute to the growth and well-being of family members (Cox & Paley, 1997). Additionally, family problem solving interactions likely give children opportunities to learn and practice responsive communication skills and group negotiation strategies. In this way, they are indirect mechanisms for family-peer linkages, which occur when children learn patterns of relating and social skills in the family and bring these skills to their interactions with peers (Ladd, Profilet, & Hart, 1992).

In a review of research with typically developing samples, Putallaz and Heflin (1990) proposed that parenting behaviors influence the peer status of children through parent-child interactions that are either symmetrical or complementary. Symmetry occurs when parents model social behaviors that are imitated by children. Effective problem solving behaviors by parents might model emotional responses for the child, foster emotional regulation, and teach emotional encoding and decoding. This process accounts for similarity in the affective quality of parents' and children's behaviors. Complementarity occurs when parents' behaviors evoke coordinated responses from children, which is most relevant to influence attempts and autonomy-granting. Russell, Pettit, and Mize (1998) proposed that these parent-child interactions can be vertical or horizontal. Vertical parenting occurs when parents exert greater control than the child, such as when they give commands and directives that the child is expected to follow. Vertical parenting is prominent with young children, but in situations such as family problem solving, extensive reliance on vertical patterns might prohibit egalitarian disagreement and sharing, two skills that are important for children's peer relationships. In contrast, horizontal interactions are mutual and egalitarian, such as when parents evoke autonomous child behaviors by displaying autonomy-giving behaviors toward the child. Horizontal autonomy-giving elicits initiative and self-confident responding from children. Also, because horizontal interactions with parents resemble peer circumstances, children can learn and practice the types of social skills they can use with peers. Research supporting these processes comes from studies of typically developing children, but the processes are likely applicable to children at risk for peer-related problems as well.

### 1.2. Family problem solving and children with intellectual disability and learning disabilities

Previous studies of problem solving interactions among families of school-age children with intellectual disability have focused on how the presence of the child with disability affects the family interaction

process. The findings suggested that these families experience unique challenges, but generally adapt to their circumstances without resorting to negative or ineffective styles of relating. Costigan, Floyd, Harter, and McClintock (1997) examined families of 6–18 year-old children with intellectual disability as compared to families with typically developing children, and concluded that there was evidence of both disruption and resilience in family problem solving interactions. The children with intellectual disability had difficulty actively and effectively engaging in the discussion, and their mothers and fathers adapted to the children's needs by being more directive than other parents. However, the parents and the siblings engaged in active problem solving, used effective communication skills, and showed low rates of negative exchanges, all of which were similar to the families with typically developing children. Similarly, a separate examination of reciprocal exchanges in these families (Floyd, Harter, & Costigan, 2004) found that the parents used lower-limit controls (e.g., questions, directives) to engage the children with intellectual disability in the family discussions, and the parents and the siblings discussed and resolved problems while avoiding negative exchanges, similar to comparison families with typically developing children and children with chronic illnesses. Thus, despite adaptations, normative styles of effective family interaction process were maintained.

Research with children with intellectual disability also has begun to address how family patterns of problem solving might influence the social skills and peer adjustment of the children. Building on the notion of complementary patterns of parent-child interactions that are elicited by horizontal versus vertical parenting, Guralnick, Neville, Hammond, and Connor (2007) showed that mothers who used horizontal forms of relating with 4–6 year-old children with mild intellectual disability elicited more effective influence attempts by the children. In turn, the children showed parallel forms of these effective behaviors in their interactions with peers. A follow-up study (Guralnick, Connor, Neville, & Hammond, 2008) showed that the children's behaviors with their mothers predicted their levels of involvement and successful social behaviors with peers two years later. Similarly, Fenning, Baker, and Juvonen (2011) showed that reciprocal discourse between parents and 8 year-old children with and without mild intellectual disability during a discussion of an emotionally upsetting incident predicted the children's prosocial behaviors on a social problem solving task.

Studies of relationships between parents and children with specific learning disabilities have documented the importance of secure attachment styles for children's social adjustment (e.g., Al-Yagon, 2016), but have not examined specific family interaction behaviors. However, a longitudinal study of family interactions for children with early developmental delays (Baker, Blacher, Crnic, & Edelbrock, 2002) includes a subgroup of relevant families. The children were initially identified with early language or motor delays at age three, and were tested for general cognitive delays after age five, when only a portion of the children met criteria for intellectual disability. The remaining children had milder forms of learning delays which, though labeled "borderline intellectual functioning", overlap with characteristics of specific learning disabilities. Some reports from this investigation combined the subgroups and showed that they differed from families of children without delays. In particular, at age nine years, these children showed relatively limited expression/negotiation skills during a problem solving task, and their mothers displayed relatively high levels of directiveness (Wieland, Green, Ellingsen, & Baker, 2014). Thus, the findings for this combined sample resembled results involving only children with significant intellectual disability. More notably, other reports that examined the separate subgroups identified important distinctions for the families of children with milder learning delays. Specifically, during naturalistic interactions in the home observed at age five, mothers of children with milder learning delays showed the lowest levels of positivity and sensitivity, and the highest levels of detachment compared to families with both typically developing children and children with more significant intellectual disability (Fenning, Baker, Baker, & Crnic,

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