



Research article

Paternal and maternal psychological and physical aggression and children's anxiety in China[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The goal of this research was to examine the unique relationships between paternal and maternal psychological aggression (PA) and physical aggression (corporal punishment [CP] and severe physical abuse [SPA]) and children's anxiety in China. A total of 1,971 father–mother dyads completed the Chinese version of Parent–Child Conflict Tactics Scales (CTSPC) and the Chinese version of Spence Children's Anxiety Scale for Parents (SCAS-P). Results indicated that when paternal and maternal PA, CP, and SPA were considered simultaneously, parental PA and maternal CP were both significantly predictive of children's anxiety, whereas SPA had no significant effects on children's anxiety. Specifically, both paternal and maternal PA were the most unique predictors of children's anxiety among parental psychological and physical aggression, whereas the effects of maternal CP and paternal CP were different, with maternal CP having a stronger effect on children's anxiety compared with paternal CP. The findings indicated that appropriate prevention and intervention efforts are needed to target parental PA and maternal CP.

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Introduction

Parental use of harsh discipline (e.g., psychological aggression, physical aggression) has been a common method of disciplining children worldwide (Gershoff, 2008; Ghate, Hazel, Creighton, Finch, & Field, 2003; Straus & Field, 2003; Tang, 2006; Wang & Liu, 2014). Psychological aggression (PA) is operationally defined as “the use of psychological force with the intention of causing a child to experience psychological pain or fear for the purposes of correction or control of misbehavior,” e.g., “threatened to spank or hit” (Straus & Field, 2003; Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998; Wang & Kenny, 2014). Corporal punishment (CP) and severe physical abuse (SPA) are the major forms of parental physical aggression in childhood (Clément & Chamberland, 2007; Gershoff et al., 2010; Straus et al., 1998; Wang & Liu, 2014). According to Straus et al. (1998), CP is defined as “the use of physical force by the parent intended to cause pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correction or control of the child's behavior,” e.g., “spanked on bottom with bare hand,” and SPA is defined as “the use of physical violence to cause pain and injury on their children, which is more severe than that allowed by laws for disciplining children,” e.g., “hit with a fist or kicked hard”. Numerous studies have demonstrated that parental PA, CP, and SPA may lead to children's internalizing and externalizing problem behavior (Gershoff et al., 2010; Lansford et al., 2005; Liu & Wang, 2015; Taillieu & Brownridge, 2013; Xing & Wang, 2012; Xing, Wang, Zhang, He, & Zhang, 2011).

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Children's anxiety (e.g., worry that something bad will happen), as an important aspect of internalizing problem behavior, represents one of the most common emotional disorders in children (Barlow, 2002). Previous research has documented that childhood anxiety disorders may act as a risk factor for other dysfunction, including poor academic performance, depression, and drug dependence (Merikangas & Avenevoli, 2002). Child anxiety is a serious concern when the severity and duration exceeds the actual threat and/or they adversely affect daily functioning (Stephen & Amy, 2008). However, some children's anxiety symptoms are not readily observable, and thus are easily neglected. Therefore, identifying children's anxiety symptoms and investigating the correlates of children's anxiety may be beneficial in reducing children's anxiety and promoting their positive adaptation and development.

Children's anxiety has been consistently found to be associated with parental psychological and physical aggression (Lansford et al., 2014; Liu & Wang, 2015; Miller-Perrin, Perrin, & Kocur, 2009; Rodriguez, 2003; Taillieu & Brownridge, 2013). For example, using a sample of 1,196 children aged 7–10 years old from eight countries, Lansford et al. (2014) found that CP was related to increases in children's anxiety over time. Similarly, Rodriguez (2003) analyzed data from 42 New Zealand families and found that children's anxiety was higher in those children whose parents had harsher physical disciplinary practices. In addition, using the parent–child conflict tactics scales, Miller-Perrin et al. (2009) found that PA was a significant predictor of college students' anxiety. Notably, most previous research examining the effects of parental psychological and physical aggression on children's anxiety was conducted in Western countries; little is known about this issue in China, especially in mainland China. As the Chinese proverb says, "Beating and scolding is the emblem of love," traditional Chinese culture views parental psychological and physical aggression as indication of parental involvement and love (Chao, 1994; Simons, Wu, Lin, Gordon, & Conger, 2000). In this cultural context, Chinese children may not perceive parental psychological and physical aggression behaviors as an indication of parental rejection, thus Chinese parental psychological and physical aggression may not lead to children's anxiety (Rohner, Bourque, & Elordi, 1996). However, an international study in six countries found that in all of the six countries, including China, higher use of parental physical discipline was associated with more children's anxiety (Lansford et al., 2005). Indeed, recent research with a Chinese sample found that parental PA and CP were related to children's anxiety (Wang, Liu, & Jin, 2015; Xing & Wang, 2012). These results suggested that in spite of the high acceptance of psychological and physical aggression in Chinese culture, Chinese children tend to be anxious after experiencing psychological and physical aggression. Thus, the first aim of the current study is to explore the association between parental psychological and physical aggression and children's anxiety in China. We expected that parental psychological and physical aggression lead to children's anxiety in China.

It should be noted that most research on the relationship between parental aggression and children's anxiety has included only CP or SPA or has reported combined data of CP and SPA (Lansford et al., 2005; Rapoza et al., 2014; Tang, 2006). Research on the effect of PA is far less extensive than research on physical aggression. However, the limited number of studies on parental PA has identified that PA had more negative effects on children's anxiety (McGee, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1997; Miller-Perrin et al., 2009; Taillieu & Brownridge, 2013). For example, in a study of young adults, Miller-Perrin et al. (2009) found that when parental PA, CP, and SPA were considered simultaneously, PA, rather than CP and SPA, was the more significant predictor of psychological outcome including anxiety. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, most previous research examining the effects of parental PA on children's anxiety has been conducted in Western settings. Given that compared with parental CP and SPA, PA is a less serious but more commonly used form of parental aggression in Chinese societies (Wang & Liu, 2014), the use of PA may be relatively more acceptable and normative in China. Within this context, PA may have less adverse effects on children's anxiety. However, CP and SPA, as more severe forms of paternal harsh discipline (Miller-Perrin et al., 2009), may be the more significant predictors of children's anxiety.

Moreover, several previous studies have shown the coexistence of psychological aggression and physical aggression (Gershoff, 2002; Wang & Liu, 2014). For example, Gershoff (2002) found that each form of parental discipline rarely occurs in isolation as a "pure" form. Similarly, Miller-Perrin et al. (2009) also noted that psychological aggression frequently overlaps with physical aggression. However, except for the research of Miller-Perrin et al. (2009), most previous studies examining the effects of parental psychological and physical aggression did not consider the coexistence of PA, CP, and SPA, and thus did not analyze the unique effects of PA, CP, and SPA.

Based on the above analysis, the current study extends prior research by elucidating the unique effects of PA, CP, and SPA on children's anxiety. We expected that when the effects of PA, CP, and SPA were simultaneously examined, CP and SPA, as more severe forms of discipline, would be more significant predictors of children's anxiety compared with PA in the high-acceptance context of parental psychological and physical aggression.

Additionally, most prior research investigating parental psychological and physical aggression and children's anxiety has predominantly focused on only mothers or has reported combined data from fathers and mothers (Herrenkohl & Herrenkohl, 2007; Lansford et al., 2014; Miller-Perrin et al., 2009; Tang, 2006; Xing & Wang, 2012). For example, the research of Miller-Perrin et al. (2009) combined data from fathers and mothers and did not investigate the differential impacts of fathers and mothers. It should be noted that the numbers of mothers who have entered the workforce have increased in recent decades. As a result, it is expected that both fathers and mothers play an important role in their children's development. Thus, it is necessary to elucidate the roles of both paternal and maternal psychological and physical aggression on children's anxiety. In fact, several studies have examined the relationship between both paternal and maternal psychological and physical aggression and internalizing problem behavior (e.g., anxiety, depression), but the results of prior research have been inconsistent (Aunola & Nurmi, 2005; Liu & Wang, 2015; Melançon & Gagné, 2011; McKee et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2015). For example, Liu and Wang (2015) found that maternal PA toward preschool children had an effect on children's

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