Learning Task 4: Research Paper

The Role Parenting Plays in Children’s Development of Relational Aggression

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Relational aggression currently receives a great deal of attention from parents, educators, and the media. A covert form of bullying, this form of aggression is based on harming or threatening to harm an individual’s relationships with his or her peers, and it often takes the form of social exclusion, the ‘silent treatment,’ and spreading gossip or rumors in person or electronically (Young, Nelson, Hottle, Warburton, & Young, 2010). Like physical aggression, relational aggression has severe consequences. In fact, Crick and Grotpeter (1996) pose that relational aggression may cause just as much or more damage to an individual as physical aggression. In particular, victims and perpetrators are at risk of developing both internalizing and externalizing behaviors such as peer rejection, depression, and anxiety (Crick, Casas, & Nelson, 2002). For this reason, it is imperative that parents and professionals working with children understand risk factors related to the development of relational aggression in children. One risk factor deserves particular attention: the role of parenting. This paper provides information about the theoretical background underlying the association between parenting and aggression, reviews empirical literature in the area of parenting and relational aggression, and highlights practical implications this literature has with regard to interventions for relationally aggressive children.

Theoretical Background

Attachment theory is a theory that has frequently been used to explain the relationship between parenting and childhood aggression. According to this theory, a child’s relationship with his or her parents can have a profound effect on his or her psychological and social adjustment; if this relationship is not characterized by parental comfort and support, the child may experience anger and anxiety (Bowlby, 1973). Typically, a child’s anger and anxiety - whether directed
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toward his or her attachment figure or another person – is in response to the frustration he
experiences in not having his attachment needs met (Bowlby, 1973). With regard to relational
aggression, this theory makes sense in that children’s frustration in not having their needs met is
directed toward their interpersonal relationships.

Another theory that seeks to explain the relationship between parenting and aggressive
child behavior is social learning theory. Social learning theory holds that children learn and
develop behavior strategies when they observe and interact with other people (Bandura, 1973).
Parents thus act as models, and children often imitate their social interactions with other
individuals and each other (Bandura, 1973). With regard to relational aggression, if children
witness their parents purposely isolating or excluding another person – behaviors associated with
this form of aggression – there is a chance that they will internalize this behavior and use it for
the basis of their own interpersonal relationships.

Empirical Literature

Until recently, there has been a lack of attention to the link between parenting and forms
of aggression other than physical aggression. Research in this area, however, is on the rise.
Brown, Arnold, Dobbs, and Doctoroff (2007) investigated the association between relational
aggression and specific parenting predictors among Puerto Rican and European American
preschool children. In this study, the authors focused on four aspects of maternal parenting:
overreactivity, laxness, positive affect, and negative affect. Fifty-seven children and both their
mothers and teachers took part in this study, with teachers completing the Preschool Social
Behavior Scale (PSBS-TF; Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997) and mothers agreeing to have
interactions between them and their children during a clean-up task videotaped. Trained research
assistants coding the videotaped interactions between mothers and children looked for specific
maternal behaviors such as irritation and annoyance (overreactivity), not following through on commands and coaxing (laxness), positive body movements, facial expressions, and language (positive affect), and negative body movement, facial expressions, and language (negative affect).

Brown et al. (2007) found that, insofar as the collective group of children that took part in this study was concerned, negative maternal affect was positively associated with relational aggression. In particular, maternal laxness was found to predict increased levels of relational aggression in girls and both maternal overreactivity and laxness was found to predict increased levels of relational aggression specifically in European American children. Interestingly, none of the four aspects of parenting was found to predict relational aggression in Puerto Rican children. Finally, maternal positive affect was associated with less relational aggression in all children regardless of gender or ethnicity.

Based on the results of this study, gender differences exist with regard to the effect parenting has on children’s development of relational aggression. According to Brown et al. (2007), “girls may be more likely than boys to respond to laxness with relational aggression” (p. 156) or parents may respond to relational aggression in different ways depending on the sex of their child. The fact that positive maternal affect was associated with less relational aggression is promising but not conclusive. As the authors highlight, the premise of the videotaped interactions between mothers and their children in this study “may not have elicited the type of intense positive emotion that might be associated with relational aggression” (Brown et al., 2007, p. 156). Thus further research in the area of positive affect and children’s relational aggression is warranted.
In another study, Casas et al. (2006) investigated parenting styles, psychological control, and attachment theory, three perspectives that have in the past been helpful in explaining the association between parenting and childhood physical aggression. The authors of the present study sought to determine if the same might hold true for the relationship between parenting and relational aggression. For this study, both teachers and parents of preschool participants completed a range of behavior scales, inventories, and questionnaires that assessed not only children’s relational aggression but also mothers’ and fathers’ perceptions of their children’s relational aggression, parents’ perceptions of each other’s interactions with their child, and finally parents’ perceptions of their own interactions with their children.

As Casas et al. (2006) highlight in the discussion of their study, results varied according to the aspect of the parent-child relationship assessed, the context in which relational aggression was considered (e.g., home versus school), and the gender of both the child and the parent. With regard to the association between parenting styles and relational aggression, both authoritarian and permissive parenting styles were found to be positively correlated with children’s exhibition of this form of aggression. In particular, authoritarian parenting demonstrated by both parents was a strong predictor for girls whereas authoritarian parenting demonstrated by fathers was a strong predictor for boys. Maternal permissive parenting was associated with relational aggression for both girls and boys. With regard to psychological control, frequent use of this parenting style was positively associated with both physical and relational aggression in children. For girls, the use of psychological control by both parents was associated with relational aggression, whereas for boys an association existed only between paternal psychological control and relational aggression. Finally, maternal insecure attachment was associated with relational aggression in girls and paternal insecure attachment was associated with relational aggression in
boys. With regard to all three aspects of parenting explored in this study, gender of both parent and child played an important role as a predictor of relational aggression. Casas et al. (2006) caution, however, that context is an important factor to consider in the assessment of a child’s relational aggression, especially as agreement between respondents (e.g., parents and teachers) may not always exist.

In yet another study, Nelson, Hart, Yang, Olsen, and Jin (2006) investigated the associations between aversive parenting and both physical and relational aggression in Chinese children. These authors based this study on social learning theory and focused on two particular types of aversive parenting: physical coercion and psychological control. This study is unique for two important reasons: 1) most research on childhood aggression in China has focused on physical aggression; and 2) both the combined and differential effects of maternal and paternal parenting were examined. Two-hundred and fifteen preschool children in Beijing, China took part in peer nomination assessments that measured physical and relational aggression, and their parents assessed each other’s parenting styles in the form of spouse-reports.

Overall, physical coercion and psychological control were found to predict aggression in the sample of Chinese children included in the study. Insofar as the combined effects of parenting were concerned, daughters exhibited physical and relational aggression when both parents engaged in psychological control and sons exhibited physical aggression when both parents adopted physical coercion as a parenting style. With regard to differential effects of parenting, girls with physically coercive mothers and psychologically controlling fathers were more relationally aggressive. Differential effects were not found for boys. According to Nelson et al. (2006), “These results suggest that inconsistencies in parenting may contribute uniquely to the appearance of aggressive behavior in Chinese children, especially girls” (p. 566).
Like the aforementioned studies, results of the present study found gender differences in the effects of aversive parenting. Aggression in girls was associated with psychological control and aggression in boys was associated with physical coercion. Nelson et al. (2006) hold that “these findings suggest that sensitivity to parental control may vary by gender” (p. 566), an idea that is consistent with Western research in the area of relational aggression. As most research in the area of relational aggression focuses on mothers’ parenting styles, this study does offer important contributions to the field of parenting and relational aggression because it emphasizes the importance of considering parenting styles of both mothers and fathers.

Park et al. (2005) conducted a study that focused specifically on relational and overt aggression in middle childhood and the risk factors associated with these two forms of aggression. They hypothesized that, because relational aggression and overt aggression often co-occur, risk factors for overt aggression would also be risk factors for relational aggression. Negative parenting was one of the risk factors these authors focused on in their study. The present study included 207 families and was part of a larger longitudinal study. Child temperament and maternal negativity were assessed through observations and home visits that were recorded and coded. In addition, relational aggression and overt aggression were assessed when children were in Grades 1, 3, and 5 in the form of mother, teacher, and child reports.

The results of this study confirmed the authors’ hypothesis: risk factors associated with overt aggression were also associated with relational aggression. According to Park et al. (2005), this is likely the result of the frequent co-occurrence of the two forms of aggression. With regard to parenting, negative affect and maternal negativity were positively associated with more aggressive children. Once again, gender was “the key predictor” (Park et al., 2005, p. 249) in this study, with girls exhibiting increased relational aggression and boys exhibiting overt aggression.
With regard to the limitations of this study, Park et al. (2005) suggest that “there may be risk factors in addition to child gender that differentially predict relational and overt aggression” (p. 251), and that further longitudinal research that takes into consideration the interplay of additional risk factors may help determine which of these factors specifically leads to the development of each form of aggression.

Finally, Sandstrom (2007) examined the relationship between mother’s disciplinary strategies and fourth grade children’s relational aggression. In this study, children completed peer nomination questionnaires and mothers completed a questionnaire designed to evaluate parenting strategies. Results of this study found a positive association between maternal permissiveness and relational aggression. According to Sandstrom (2007), the association between a permissive parenting style and relational aggression seems appropriate: “In addition to specific modeling effects, the high level of indulgence that typifies permissive parenting may create a general sense of entitlement among children, such that they view the use of social manipulation and coercion as appropriate means of getting one’s way” (p. 405). Similar to the findings of previous studies, gender played an important role in this study: the association between permissive parenting and relational aggression was stronger for girls. As Sandstrom (2007) explains, however, because of the cross-sectional nature of this study, it is impossible to determine the directionality of this association; further research would benefit from including longitudinal data that might “provide more insight into the causal mechanisms” (p. 406) behind relational aggression.

**Discussion: Results and Implications**

Overall, the results of these five studies yield consistent findings: parenting does in fact play an important role in the development of relational aggression in children. In particular, negative
parenting styles such as authoritarian parenting, permissive parenting, physical coercion, and psychological control are positively associated with relational aggression. As findings of each of the aforementioned studies reveal, gender acts as an important moderator, with parenting styles having different effects on boys and girls. Nelson et al. (2006) suggest that this could be due to gender sensitivity: girls may be more sensitive to certain parental behaviors and thus respond to these behaviors in different ways compared to how boys might respond. In addition, mothers’ and father’s combined parenting styles – as well as inconsistencies in parenting - can influence children’s development of aggression, with girls being more at risk in comparison to boys.

Finally, the association between negative parenting styles and relational aggression is not limited to Western children and has been found to exist in other cultures.

Understanding the association between parenting and relational aggression has important practical implications with regard to interventions for relationally aggressive children. First and foremost, educators and professionals working with children must develop effective intervention strategies that focus specifically on building children’s early interpersonal relationship skills. In addition, not only is providing support for relationally aggressive children important but so too is providing support for their parents. Developing parent training programs that focus on positive parenting strategies and the outcomes these strategies have on children is thus practical; as Brown et al. (2007) suggest, however, more research in this area is needed. Based on the fact that studies on the association between parenting and relational aggression have yielded results suggesting that gender is an important moderator in this association, careful consideration of gender with regard to both parent and child in the development and implementation of interventions is important.
Conclusion

Above all, research in the area of relational aggression is important because it can help educators and other professionals working with children develop and implement interventions that protect these children from developing “life-course persistent problems” (Park et al., 2005, p. 251) associated with this form of aggression; providing this protection is incumbent on understanding the ecological underpinnings of this form of aggression and exactly how it affects a child’s social-emotional development. Although more research is needed in the area of relational aggression and the role parenting plays in children’s development of this form of aggression, the research that currently exists serves as a solid foundation on which to build current and future school psychologists’ knowledge of this very important issue.
References


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