Relational Aggression in Children

What Role Does Parenting Play?

EDPS 650
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Presentation Overview

- What is Relational Aggression?
  - Definition
  - Occurrence
  - Consequences
- Research Question
- Theoretical Background
- Empirical Literature – Five Studies
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- Practical Implications
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Relational Aggression: Definition

- A form of covert aggression that is focused on harming (or threatening to harm) an individual’s relationships within his or her peer group.

- Based on social connections, friendship struggles, and feelings of acceptance/belonging

- Examples:
  - Cruel words
  - Silent treatment
  - Exclusion
  - Rumor spreading
  - Conditional friendships

(Young, Nelson, Hottle, Warburton, & Young, 2010)
Relational Aggression: Occurrence

- Often seen in middle-age children and adolescents

- Not unique to this age group; relational aggression has been found to exist in children as young as pre-school age (Crick et al., 1999)

- Contrary to popular belief, relational aggression is not limited to girls (Young et al., 2010)
Relational Aggression: Consequences

- This form of aggression can be just as painful as the physical form
- Research suggests that the effects of relational aggression may be longer-lasting (Yoon, Barton, & Taiariol, 2004)
- Academic difficulties
- Social problems
- Various forms of psychopathology
Research Question

- What Role does Parenting Play in Children’s Development of Relational Aggression?
Theoretical Background

- **Attachment Theory** (Bowlby, 1973)
  - Child’s attachment behavior not met with parental responsiveness and support = anxiety/anger
  - Repeated exposure = maladaptive social behavior

- **Social Learning Theory** (Bandura, 1973)
  - Children learn aggressive behavior through observing and interacting with others
Empirical Literature: Background

- Great deal of research on the etiology of aggressive behavior
- Most research in the field focuses on the relationship between parenting and physical aggression
- Lack of attention to aggression among girls and forms of aggression other than physical aggression
Empirical Literature: Five Studies

- The Association between Parenting and the Development of Relational Aggression in Children
First Study

- (Brown, Arnold, Dobbs, & Doctoroff, 2007)

- Examined the relationship between four aspects of maternal parenting (overreactivity, laxness, positive affect, negative affect) and relational aggression among both Puerto Rican and European American preschool children.

- Procedure:
  - Mothers filled out questionnaires
  - Parenting observations (video-taped interactions of mothers and children)
  - Teachers completed Preschool Social Behavior Scale (PSBS-TF; Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997)
Results

- Negative affect associated with relational aggression collectively
- Maternal laxness – relational aggression in girls (not boys)
- Overreactivity and laxness – relational aggression in European American children
- Positive affect – less relational aggression

*Gender differences – different socialization practices (Brown et al., 2007)*
Second Study

- (Casas et al., 2006)

- Study focused on three aspects of the parent-child relationship and their association with preschool children’s relational aggression:
  1. Parenting styles
  2. Psychological control
  3. Attachment theory

- Participants/Procedure
  - parents (both mothers and fathers) and teachers of both boys and girls aged 3 to 5 years completed various behavior scales and inventories
Results

Parenting Styles & RA
- Authoritarian and permissive – positively related to RA
- Girls – authoritarian parenting (both parents); permissive parenting (mothers)
- Boys – authoritarian parenting (fathers); permissive parenting (mothers)

Psychological Control & RA
- Frequent use of psychological control (parents) – children more likely to exhibit relationally and physically aggressive behavior
- Girls – both maternal and parental psychological control
- Boys – paternal psychological control (love withdrawal)

Attachment Theory
- Relationally aggressive girls – insecure attachment (mother)
- Relationally aggressive boys – insecure attachment (father)
Third Study

- (Nelson, Hart, Yang, Olsen, & Jin, 2006)

- Study assessed correlates of controlling parenting (physical coercion and psychological control) and examined associations with both physical and relational aggression in Chinese preschool children

- Expanded on previous research – examined the influence of parenting in mothers versus fathers

- Measures
  - Peer nomination procedure – assessment of child aggression subtypes (physical aggression and relational aggression)
  - Spouse-reports – assessment of parenting dimensions

- Social Learning Theory – foundation for this study
Results

- Aversive parenting styles (coerciveness and psychological control) predicted aggression in Chinese children

**Combined effects**
- Daughters exhibited physical and relational aggression when both parents engaged in psychological control.
- Sons exhibited physical aggression when both parents adopted physical coercion as a parenting style.

**Differential effects**
- Physical coercion (mothers) – girls more relationally aggressive
- Psychological control (fathers) – girls more relationally aggressive
- Differential effects not found for boys
Results (cont.)

- Effects of aversive parenting – gender differences
  - Aggression in girls associated with psychological control
  - Aggression in boys associated with physical coercion

- “These findings suggest that sensitivity to parental control may vary by gender” (p. 566)
- Gender sensitivity – consistent with research on relational aggression in Western studies
- Emphasize the importance of considering parenting styles of both mothers and fathers
Fourth Study

- (Park et al., 2005)

- Study examined early child and family risk factors associated with relational and overt aggression in middle childhood.

- Hypothesized that, because relational and overt aggression often co-occur (Crick et al., 1999), risk factors for the latter form of aggression would also be risk factors for the former.

- Negative parenting – one of these risk factors.
Results

- Risk factors associated with overt aggression were also associated with relational aggression
- “These similar patterns of bivariate association likely result from the frequent co-occurrence of relational and overt aggression” (p. 248)
- Negative affect and maternal negativity – more aggressive children
- Gender – key predictor (girls exhibiting increased relational aggression and boys exhibiting overt aggression)
Fifth Study

- (Sandstrom, 2007)

Examined the relationship between mothers’ disciplinary strategies and fourth grade children’s relational aggression

Procedure:
- Children – peer nomination questionnaire in group format
- Mothers – completed version of Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (Robinson, Mandieco, Olsen, & Hart, 2001); designed to evaluate parenting strategies (authoritative, authoritarian, or permissive)
Results

- Positive association between maternal permissiveness and relational aggression
- Gender a factor – association stronger for girls
- Permissive parenting – “a model for social behavior that is particularly risky for girls” (Sandstrom, 2007, p. 405)
Summary

- Parenting plays an important role in the development of relational aggression in children.

- Negative parenting styles/characteristics associated with relational aggression (authoritarian and permissive parenting; physical coercion and psychological control) – girls at particular risk.

- Different parenting styles have different effects on boys and girls – gender acts as a moderator.
  - Gender sensitivity

- Mothers’ and fathers’ combined parenting styles may have different effects on boys and girls.

- Association between negative parenting styles and relational aggression found in other cultures.
Practical Implications

- Understanding the role parenting plays in the development of relational aggression has important implications for treatment/interventions:

  - Early intervention that focuses on building children’s interpersonal relationships is important
  - Professionals must provide support for both children and their families
  - Parent training programs as part of intervention
Future Directions

- Further research is needed with regard to predictors of relational aggression, including parenting predictors (Brown et al., 2007)
- Continue to include fathers/other caregivers in future studies
- Examine the relationship between caregivers and the effect this may have on children’s relational aggression
- Examine relationships between siblings
- Increased focus on middle-age children
- Longitudinal studies that focus on children’s relational aggression at different development stages
- Incorporate observational methods in addition to parent/teacher reports and questionnaires
Final Thoughts…

Children Learn What They Live

If children live with criticism
They learn to condemn
If children live with hostility
They learn to fight
If children live with approval
They learn to like themselves
If children live with acceptance and friendship
They learn to find love in the world

- Dorothy Lee Nolte
Thank You
References

References

References