

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 358 924

PS 021 420

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 TITLE Conflict Strategies: Parents with Children and Children with Peers.  
 PUB DATE Mar 93  
 NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (60th, New Orleans, LA, March 25-28, 1993).  
 PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
 DESCRIPTORS Child Rearing; Conflict; \*Conflict Resolution; Emotional Adjustment; Followup Studies; Hypothesis Testing; \*Parent Child Relationship; \*Parent Influence; \*Power Structure; \*Predictor Variables; Social Behavior; Social Development; Socialization; Young Children

ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether parents' use of power-assertive or negotiating strategies to resolve conflicts with children predicted children's psychosocial adjustment and use of comparable strategies with peers. The study also determined whether children's behavior with mothers at 2 years of age predicted their behavior with peers at age 6. The study began with a sample of 95 predominantly white, middle-class families and concluded 4 years later with 42 of the mothers, 28 fathers, and their children (20 boys and 22 girls). When the children were 2, mothers and children were observed during a laboratory clean-up task, and children and other family members were observed at home during dinner preparation. Tapes of the observations were transcribed and coded to indicate the frequency of parental use of negative control, control, guidance, and responsiveness. Affective responses and child defiance or compliance were also coded. When the children were 6, the families were recontacted. Parents were administered the Parent Child Conflict Interview and the Child Behavior Checklist; and children were independently administered the Child Peer Conflict Interview and the Preschool Interpersonal Problem Solving Test. Both fathers' and mothers' coercion during parent-child conflict predicted children's concurrent use of coercion with peers. Children of coercive fathers had more aggressive and total problems. Both maternal and child power assertion at age 2 predicted child behavior adjustment at age 6. Finally, the results suggested different developmental trajectories for male and female children. (AC)

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CONFLICT STRATEGIES: PARENTS WITH CHILDREN AND CHILDREN WITH PEERS Susan

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Researchers have often equated conflict with aggression, and questions of early development have focused on the use of physical and verbal power-assertion in relationships. Existing studies indicate that power-assertion between parent and child begets the use of power-assertion with peers. Equally important is identification of experiences that encourage negotiation and compromise in resolving conflicts because negotiation is more likely than other strategies to produce a resolution that allows individuals to meet their goals without interfering unduly with the goals of others. Whether parents' use of negotiation during parent-child disputes has a similar impact on children's use of negotiation with peers remains to be tested.

The purpose of the current study was to test the following hypotheses: First, that mothers' and fathers' use of power-assertive and negotiating strategies to resolve conflicts with children predict children's use of comparable strategies with peers and their psychosocial adjustment both concurrently at age 6 and predictively from age 2. Second, to determine whether children's behavior with mothers at two years of age predicts behavior with peers at age 6. Third, to determine whether any association between 2-year mother or child behavior and children's behavior and adjustment at age 6 is mediated by parents' behavior at age 6. And fourth, to determine whether the associations between parent behavior and child behavior and adjustment at age 6 are accounted for by parent or child behavior at age 2.

Methods

Subjects

Forty-two mothers, 28 fathers and their 6-year-old children (20 boys and 22 girls) participated in the current study. Families were largely middle class. The sample was predominantly Caucasian

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(81%), 7% Hispanic, 4% Asian, and 3% of mixed racial/ethnic background; the remaining 5% of the families declined to report on their racial/ethnic background.

### Two Year Measures Procedures

Procedures and frequency measures are described in detail in Crockenberg & Litman (1990). Brief descriptions are provided below.

Mothers and children were seen on two occasions: in a laboratory clean-up task and at home, by different observers in each setting.

Laboratory observation. Mothers and children came to the laboratory at a time judged by the mother to be optimal for the child. Following a 6-minute free play period and a 35-minute interview during which many toys were available to the child, the mother was instructed to have the child pick up all the toys in the playroom and put them in a large basket. No instructions were given about how this should be done. The mother and child were video taped through a one-way mirror. The task varied from 6 to 15 minutes, depending on how quickly the clean-up was completed.

Home observation. Children were observed interacting with their mothers and other family members during a home visit that was scheduled to coincide with dinner preparation and dinner on the assumption that this was time during which opportunities for mothers to exercise control would be frequent. Verbal interactions between the child and other family members were recorded on audiotape and their nonverbal behavior was recorded simultaneously into a separate channel by one of three trained observers. The observer also provided information necessary to insure the correct interpretation of the audio recording, for example by describing the force with which a mother physically enforced a directive. Home visits ranged in duration from 40 to 90 minutes, depending on how long it took the family to complete their dinner-time routine.

### Coding of Frequency Measures

Videotapes of the laboratory compliance task were transcribed verbatim to provide a complete running record of the mother-child interaction. One of two trained research assistants then coded every discrete behavior, while viewing the videotape and transcript simultaneously. Maternal and child behaviors were coded using a previously developed comprehensive coding system for describing mother-toddler interaction (Crockenberg, 1987). The coding system emphasized, but was not limited to, maternal control strategies and children's compliance and defiance. Codes were exhaustive and mutually exclusive, with the exception of affective codes such as anger or annoyance, which could be assigned simultaneously with codes for specific maternal behaviors. Audiotapes of the home observations were transcribed and coded in a manner similar to that described for the laboratory data.

Percentage agreement reliability (agreements/total of agreements plus disagreements) was determined separately for laboratory and home behaviors. For the laboratory data, raters achieved an 80% or better average percent agreement for approximately 90% of the total number of behaviors. For the home data, inspection of individual reliabilities revealed that all were greater than .75.

The dependent variables analyzed in the current study were the frequency measures of strategies mothers used to control child behavior in the laboratory clean-up task and at home during dinner time. The strategies were: negative control, control, guidance, and responsiveness in each setting. The child strategies included frequencies of defiance and compliance in the same two contexts.

### Six Year Procedures

When the children were six-years-old, families were recontacted. Forty-two of the original ninety-five families agreed to return to the laboratory and participate in the current study.

Parent Measures. Parents were first administered the Parent Child Conflict Interview (PCCI)

which assesses the nature and amount of parent-child conflict, a "most important" conflict, and the strategies used by parents to resolve the conflict. The strategies parents reported were categorized as coercion, power assertion (coercion + control), control, reasoning, and guidance (reasoning plus other negotiation).

Child Measures. Children were independently administered the Child Peer Conflict Interview (CPCI) which is a two part assessment. Part 1 assesses the nature of children's conflicts with peers, a "most important" conflict, and the strategies used to resolve it. Part 2 assesses the strategies children use in a standardized "favorite toy" conflict when a friend is playing with a toy the target child wants to play with, and when the friend takes the toy home without asking. The CPCI yields the following categories coercion, negotiation, asks adult to help, and avoidance. After completing the CPCI children completed the Preschool Interpersonal Problem Solving Test (PIPS). The PIPS is a standardized measure of children's ability to generate strategies to resolve toy-related peer conflicts (Shure, 1989). The dependent variable used in the current analyses was a composite of original coded responses from the PIPS coding system and was labeled manipulation.

In order to measure child behavior at age six parent's also completed the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), a standardized measure of children's competencies, externalizing and internalizing symptoms, and behavior problems (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1986). Parent's report of social competence, total competence, aggressive behavior, total problems, total externalizing and total internalizing symptoms were analyzed in the current study.

## Results

### Age Six Predictors

To test the association between concurrent measures of parent-child and child-peer conflict behavior, zero-order correlations were calculated. All reported correlations are significant at  $p \leq .05$ .

For both mothers and fathers, self-reported power-assertion during parent-child conflicts was associated with children's self reported coercion during conflicts with peers. Specifically, for mothers', greater use of power assertion was related to greater child use of overt coercion with peers, while fathers' use of coercion was related to children's use of manipulation with peers.

Power assertion by fathers and mothers predicted psychosocial adjustment, but differently as a function of parent and child gender. Greater use of coercion by fathers with children was related to more aggressive and total problems in all children; additionally, boys of more coercive fathers were more delinquent. Mothers' use of coercion was related to less internalizing behavior for girls. Finally, fathers' use of guidance/reasoning during parent-child conflicts predicted child behavior and adjustment. Specifically, fathers' use of guidance/reasoning was related to greater use of negotiation, decreased externalizing behavior, fewer aggressive behaviors and fewer total problems for boys.

#### Age Two Predictors

To test the association between two year and six year behaviors, zero order correlations were calculated first, followed by hierarchical multiple regression when more than one two-year variable predicted to age six behavior. Only associations that remained significant when other two-year variables were entered simultaneously in the regression model are reported. The associations reported are significant at  $p \leq .05$ , several trends ( $p < .10$ ) are also reported.

Mothers' behavior at child age 2 predicted children's behavior with peers and their psychosocial adjustment at age 6. When mothers used more power assertion at home at two-years, their boys used more manipulative and coercive strategies with peers at age six. When mothers used less power assertion at home, their children (especially girls) were more competent by parental report on the CBCL at age six. Additionally, when mothers were responsive to their children's cues in the lab at age two, their children (especially girls) exhibited fewer internalizing behaviors by parent

report on the CBCL at age six.

Children's behavior at age 2 also predicted child behavior with peers and psychosocial adjustment at age 6, with some significant differences by gender. High lab defiance at two years predicted increased avoidance of conflict by children and less asking adults for assistance by girls at age six. Girls who were less defiant at age two were also rated by parents as being more socially competent. Compliance at home predicted less child coercion in peer conflicts at age six, especially for girls. Moreover, compliance in the lab predicted fewer aggressive behaviors, total problems, internalizing symptoms, and greater competence for girls, but predicted more internalizing symptoms for boys.

#### Independence of Two-Year and Six-Year Predictors

To test the independence of two year and six year predictors, zero order correlations were calculated first, followed by two sets of hierarchical multiple regressions. In the first, six year parent variables were entered first, followed by two-year parent variables; and in the second two-year parent variables were entered first, followed by six year parent variables. The reported regressions are significant at  $p \leq .05$ , several trends ( $p < .10$ ) are also reported.

Two year maternal and child behavior predicted child behavior and adjustment at age 6 independently of parents' reports of 6 year behavior. First, maternal negative control significantly predicted boys' manipulation, and there was a positive trend in prediction for child coercion, after partialling the variance accounted for by maternal power assertion and father control at six years. Maternal negative control negatively predicted girls' social competence, while child compliance positively predicted girls' competence after partialling father reports of reasoning/guidance at six years. Finally, child defiance significantly predicted girls' avoidance in peer conflicts and there was a negative trend towards prediction for girls' asking adult for assistance in child conflict, after partialling maternal reasoning.

In addition fathers' behavior at 6 years predicted child behavior and adjustment independently of age 2 effects. First, fathers' control predicted boys' manipulation in conflicts with peers. Second, there was a trend for fathers' reasoning to predict girls' competence as reported on the CBCL. Third, fathers' report of coercion in father-child conflict predicted lower social competence for girls.

In no instance did mothers' behavior at 6 years predict child behavior or adjustment independently of age 2 effects.

### Summary and Conclusions

The current study provides evidence of the significant contribution of fathers' behavior in the development of important dimensions of children's behavior with peers and in psychosocial adjustment. This can be inferred from the current findings that both fathers' and mothers' coercion during parent-child conflict predicted children's concurrent use of coercion during conflicts with peers. Both parents' use of coercion predicted children's psychosocial adjustment, but only fathers' reports were as expected. Children of coercive fathers had more aggressive and total problems; boys were more delinquent. Moreover, only fathers' use of guidance/reasoning predicted children's negotiation with peers, as well as fewer externalizing symptoms, and fewer aggressive and total problems, but only for boys. Fathers' (but not mothers') behavior at age 6 predicted children's behavior and adjustment independently of any age 2 effect. It is uncertain however, whether this father effect is age specific since no data were collected on fathers' behavior when children were two.

This study also provides support for the use of early intervention with parents and toddlers around conflict and conflict negotiation. Both maternal and child power assertion and child compliance at age 2 predicted child behavior adjustment at age 6, and did so independently of age 6 parental behavior. This supports the possibility of identifying children at risk and of intervening with

mothers and toddlers to prevent relationship and adjustment problems at school age.

Finally, the results suggest different developmental trajectories for male and female children. Specifically, maternal behavior predicted child behavior and adjustment differently as a function of child gender. Early maternal power assertion predicted manipulation and coercion for boys only, although there were no gender differences in these behaviors at age 6. Child behavior also predicted differently by gender. Compliance at age 2 predicted competence in girls at age 6, but not in boys. Compliant boys showed more, compliant girls fewer, internalizing symptoms at age 6. Defiance at age 2 predicted less social competence for girls at age 6. Defiant girls were less likely to ask adults for help during conflict with peers, and were described as less socially competent on the CBCL. The correlations for boys were not significant.