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ABSTRACT

This study examined parents' behaviors and interactional tone in a family setting and children's behaviors and interactional tone with unfamiliar peers, the association between parents' behaviors and interactional tone and children's peer ratings, and the relation between children's behaviors and interactional tone with peers and children's peer ratings. Participating were 46 4-year-old children and their parents, who were representative of the larger, predominantly Caucasian, working- to middle-class community. Mothers' and fathers' interactions with their children were videotaped during a game. Children were later asked to play a game with 2 or 3 unfamiliar peers and then to rate the children in each peer group with regard to how much they enjoyed playing with them. The results indicated that mothers' positive behaviors, negative behaviors, and positive tone were related to children's greater positive tone with peers. Fathers' positive behaviors were marginally associated with fewer aversive child behaviors with peers. Mothers' positive and negative behaviors were correlated with higher ratings of their children by peers. Mothers' negative behaviors were marginally related to higher self ratings and lower ratings by peers. Parents' interactional tone and fathers' behaviors were not related to peer ratings. Children's sad behaviors with peers were associated with lower ratings by peers and with higher ratings of peers. Children's aversive behaviors with peers were marginally correlated with higher peer ratings. Children's positive interactional tone with peers was related to higher peer ratings. (Contains 14 references.) (Author/KDFB)

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Relations between Parent Behaviors and Interactional Tone  
and Preschoolers' Social Interaction with Peers

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Poster presented at the 1997 Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Washington, D.C.

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Abstract

Learning about interpersonal relationships is an important developmental task for preschool-aged children. Recent research has focused on both interactions between parents and children and on how parent-child interactions relate to peer interactions. The purpose of the current study was threefold. First, parents' behaviors and interactional tone in a family setting and children's behaviors and interactional tone with unfamiliar peers were examined. Second, associations between parents' behaviors and interactional tone in a family setting and children's peer ratings were studied. Finally, the relations between children's behaviors and interactional tone with peers and children's peer ratings were investigated. Aspects of both mothers' and fathers' interactions with their children were associated with children's competent functioning in a peer setting and with peers' perceptions of children's social interactional skills. Further, children's behaviors and interactional tone within the peer setting were related to peers' evaluation of children's social functioning. These findings add to the literature linking parent-child and child-peer relationships. The importance of examining both mothers' and fathers' contributions to children's social functioning and of investigating children's independent contribution to peers' evaluations is highlighted.

Over the past several decades, researchers have been interested in describing and understanding interactions between children and members of their social worlds. In particular, family and peer contexts have each been designated as social domains that are critical to consider when conceptualizing young children's development (Ladd, 1992; Putallaz & Dunn, 1990). Within these contexts, children learn critical information about making and maintaining interpersonal relationships (Miller, 1993).

Most recently, researchers have noted the importance of understanding how children's interactions within each of these contexts may be related (Cowan, Cowan, Schulz, & Heming, 1994; Parke, Burks, Carson, Neville, & Boyum, 1994; Youngblade & Belsky, 1992). Researchers have noted the need for theories that interface between family and peer contexts, focusing on how interactions in each context influence relationships and behaviors within the other (Ladd, 1992).

Researchers have suggested that children learn about social interactions with their peers through social interactions with their parents. In particular, both the content and stylistic aspects of the interactions between parents and children are purported to relate to children's social functioning with peers (Pettit & Mize, 1993). The stylistic aspects of interactions may be particularly important, as children are exposed to these components of interaction with their parents on a nearly constant basis. Behavior and tone are two components of the parent-child relationship which have been independently related to children's functioning with peers (Cohn, Patterson, & Christopoulos, 1991; MacDonald & Parke, 1984; Youngblade & Belsky, 1992). Furthermore, researchers have suggested that mothers and fathers may play separate roles in

influencing children's social competency and interactional skills with peers (Parke, Cassidy, Burks, Carson, & Boyum, 1992).

The purpose of the current study was to examine several interrelations. First, the associations between parents' behaviors and interactional tone in a family setting and children's behaviors and interactional tone with unfamiliar peers were examined. Second, relations between parents' behaviors and interactional tone in a family setting and children's peer ratings were examined. Finally, associations between children's behaviors and interactional tone with peers and children's peer ratings were investigated. Aspects of both mothers' and fathers' interactions with their children were considered in relation to children's social functioning and peers' evaluation of interactional skills. These aspects were examined to more fully understand the relations between parents' and children's behaviors and interactional tone in family and peer settings.

### Method

Participants were forty-six 4-year-old children and their parents who participated in the Conflict Resolution in Families with Four Year Olds project. There were 20 boys and 26 girls. Children's mean age was 4 years, 5.16 months ( $SD = 3.48$  months). Families were recruited primarily through newspaper advertisements and fliers posted in public locations. The sample was representative of the larger predominantly Caucasian, working- to middle-class community from which it was drawn.

### Procedure

Families came to the lab for two separate sessions. The first visit involved the parents

and their child. The second visit involved the child with two or three unfamiliar, same-sex peers. The participants were involved in several activities. All of the interactions were videotaped. Specific information is provided here pertaining only to the tasks of interest to this study.

Family interaction task. The families were asked to play a game together. The game required each player to use a plastic net to catch cloth butterflies blown into the air through the trunk of a plastic elephant. Each family was instructed to play the game three times and then to clean up.

Peer interaction task. The children were asked to play a game together. The game required each player to try to match pairs of face-down cards. Each player's turn continued until a match was not found. The game was completed when all of the pairs had been found.

Peer ratings. The children were asked to rate the children in their peer group by placing a Polaroid photograph of each peer into one of three bowls. Each bowl had a face (either happy, neutral, or sad) signifying how much the child enjoyed playing with each peer.

### Coding Systems

The videotaped interactions were separately coded by blind coders to determine the behaviors and interactional tone exhibited by each participant during each task.

The Scale for Coding Affect and Interactions in Families (SCAIF). This global coding system was utilized to provide descriptions of behaviors and interactional tones for fathers and mothers separately during interactions with their children. This system draws from several existing systems utilized to assess aspects of family interaction (Lindahl & Malik, 1995;

Lindahl & Malik, 1994; Lindahl & Markman, 1991). Theoretically derived composites of behavioral and interactional tone during interactions were created and utilized for analysis in the current study.

Peer Interaction Coding (PIC). This coding system was utilized to provide a process description of behaviors and a global description of interactional tone for each child separately during interactions between children and their peers. This system draws from the work of Gottman and colleagues (Gottman, 1982). Theoretically derived composites of behavioral and interactional tone during interactions were created and utilized for analysis in the current study.

## Results

In order to examine relations between functioning by parents in family settings and children in peer settings, correlational analyses were conducted.

### Parent-child and Child-peer Interactions

Parent behaviors and interactional tones with their children in a family setting were correlated with children's behaviors with peers. Correlational results appear in Table 1. Mothers' positive behaviors within the family context were marginally significantly correlated with fewer sad child behaviors with peers. Fathers' positive behaviors within the family setting were marginally associated with fewer aversive child behaviors with peers.

Parent behaviors and interactional tones with their children in a family setting were correlated with children's interactional tone with peers. Mothers' positive behaviors, negative behaviors, and positive tone in the family setting were associated with children's greater positive tone with peers. Mothers' negative tone was not significantly correlated with children's

positive tone with peers. Further, fathers' behaviors and interactional tone within the family context were not significantly related to children's positive or negative tone with peers.

#### Parent-child Interactions and Children's Peer Ratings

Parents' behaviors and interactional tone within the family setting were related to children's peer ratings. Correlational results appear in Table 2. Mothers' positive and negative behaviors within the family setting were related to peer ratings. Mothers' positive behaviors within the family setting were significantly correlated with higher ratings of their children by peers. Mothers' negative behaviors within the family context were marginally related to higher ratings of self and lower ratings by peers. Mothers' and fathers' interactional tone and fathers' behaviors within the family setting were not significantly correlated with children's peer ratings.

#### Child-peer Interactions and Children's Peer Ratings

Children's behaviors and interactional tone were related to peer ratings. Correlational results appear in Table 2. Children's sad behaviors within the peer group were associated with lower ratings by peers and tended to be associated with higher ratings of peers. Children's aversive behaviors within the peer group were marginally correlated with higher peer ratings. Children's positive interactional tone with peers was associated with higher ratings by peers and marginally related to higher ratings by peers.

### Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to closely examine the relations among parents' behaviors and interactional tone within the family setting, children's behaviors and interactional

tone with peers, and children's peer ratings. While some of the results were consistent with past research, some of the results were counterintuitive.

#### Parent-child and Child-peer Interactions

The relations that were discovered between parents' behavior and tone and children's behavior and tone with peers supported previous research and intuitive conclusions about mothers' interactions with their children. Quality of maternal interaction appears to predict quality of child-peer interaction. Mothers' positivity was positively correlated with children's positivity with peers and negatively correlated with children's negativity with peers. Similarly, mothers' negativity was inversely correlated with children's positivity. Mothers may provide a model for their children's development of social skills for peer interaction.

The findings about fathers, however, are particularly noteworthy. While positive paternal behaviors were modestly related to fewer aversive behaviors by children with peers, no other associations between paternal interaction and children's interaction with peers were discovered. This stands in contrast to previous research suggesting the importance of both fathers' and mothers' influence on the development of children's social interactive competence (MacDonald & Parke, 1984). Previous research suggesting the link between father-child interactions and peer social competence has generally been conducted using dyadic parent-child interaction tasks. In this study, mothers' and fathers' behaviors and tones were measured during a triadic family task. Triadic family interactions may be qualitatively different from dyadic parent-child tasks. The relation between fathers' interactions and children's peer interactions may be weaker in triadic interactions than in dyadic interactions.

### Parent-child Interaction and Children's Peer Ratings

Mothers' positive and negative behaviors within the family setting are important for children's social acceptance. As expected, mothers' positivity was associated with higher ratings by peers while mothers' negativity was associated with lower ratings by peers. Surprisingly, mothers' negative behaviors within the family were related to children's higher self-rating. Children may compensate for negative family interactions by inflated perceptions of self-worth within the peer setting.

Counterintuitively, paternal interaction was not related to children's peer ratings. Again the differences between triadic and dyadic interactions may account for the lack of relations between father-child interactions and children's peer group functioning. At least two possible explanations for this finding exist. First, mothers may exert greater influence in triadic tasks, thereby weakening fathers' relative contributions. A second possible explanation could be that fathers' role in triadic tasks is more hierarchical than in dyadic tasks. In dyadic tasks, fathers may feel more free to play with the child whereas in triadic tasks fathers may feel more pressured to assume more conventional parenting roles.

### Child-peer Interactions and Child-peer Ratings

Children's behavior toward peers is important for their social acceptance. Sadness, as opposed to general negativity, seems to play a particularly important role in peer acceptance. Children's sad behaviors were associated with lower ratings by peers and higher ratings of peers. Children who are sad in new social situations may be particularly disliked by other children, due to their inability to skillfully interact to initiate and build relationships. In

addition, children who are sad in new peer settings may think more highly of their peers, either because of admiration of their competent interaction skills or because of fear of social rejection.

Children's aversive behaviors and positive and negative tone were all related to higher ratings by peers. Children who are highly visible in peer settings, either by getting attention through misbehavior or acting in a particularly dynamic way, may elicit higher ratings by peers. Longitudinal research on the development of new relationships within an initially unfamiliar peer group in preschool children should be conducted to address this issue.

### Conclusions

Taken together, the results of this study generally support previous research suggesting that parent-child relationships are associated with preschool children's relationships with peers. In order to understand these relations more clearly, further research which enables researchers to consider additional child characteristics is needed. Children's contributions to parent-child interactions and to child-peer interaction have not yet been carefully studied. While parental influences are clearly important, the emotional and stylistic qualities that the child brings to each relationship are also potentially important sources of variance. Future research should carefully examine child characteristics in order to more fully address these issues.

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Table 1

Correlations between Mothers' and Fathers' Behaviors and Interactional Tone in a Family Setting and Children's Behaviors and Interactional Tone with Peers

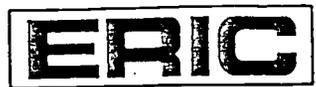
<u>Parent Characteristics</u>	<u>Child Characteristics</u>				
	Happy Behaviors	Sad Behaviors	Aversive Behaviors	Positive Tone	Negative Tone
<b>Mother</b>					
Positive Behavior	.06	-.27 <sup>a</sup>	.03	.31*	-.09
Negative Behavior	.02	.15	-.17	-.29*	.06
Positive Tone	-.004	-.15	.03	.31*	-.05
Negative Tone	-.08	.16	-.01	-.01	.13
<b>Father</b>					
Positive Behavior	.10	-.12	-.26 <sup>a</sup>	.03	-.11
Negative Behavior	.05	.12	.12	.004	.16
Positive Tone	.09	-.15	-.03	.18	-.03
Negative Tone	-.13	.02	.09	.15	.07

\*  $p < .05$ . <sup>a</sup>  $p < .10$ .

Table 2  
Correlations between Mothers' and Fathers' Behaviors and Interactional Tone in a Family Setting and Children's Peer Ratings and between Children's Behaviors and Interactional Tone and Children's Peer Ratings

<u>Characteristics</u>	Peer Ratings		
	Rating of Self	Rating by Peers	Rating of Peers
Mother			
Positive Behavior	-.13	.30*	.09
Negative Behavior	.27 <sup>a</sup>	-.26 <sup>a</sup>	-.05
Positive Tone	-.13	.21	.07
Negative Tone	.20	.02	.05
Father			
Positive Behavior	-.21	-.08	.03
Negative Behavior	.16	-.06	-.14
Positive Tone	-.14	.08	.08
Negative Tone	.15	.003	-.12
Child			
Happy Behaviors	-.14	.18	.002
Sad Behaviors	.06	-.31*	.26 <sup>a</sup>
Aversive Behaviors	.08	.28 <sup>a</sup>	.19
Positive Tone	-.04	.42**	.20
Negative Tone	.12	.27 <sup>a</sup>	.23

\*\* p < .01. \* p < .05. <sup>a</sup> p < .10.



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