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ABSTRACT

This study examined gender differences in interactional style between parents and children, focusing on gender socialization and emotional expression. The subjects were 38 mother-child and father-child dyads from intact families, of which about 75 percent were Caucasian; 15 percent, Hispanic; and 10 percent, African American or Asian. Parents completed the Parenting Stress Index, Behavior Assessment Scale for Children, Culture Free Self-Esteem Scale, Dyadic Adjustment Scale, and a demographics form. Subjects were videotaped in two conditions, a timed, structured task (origami) and a non-timed, less structured task (story-telling). Interactions were coded for affective tone (frequency counts for positive, neutral, and negative feedback) and parental structuring (frequency counts for appropriate and inappropriate questions, suggestions, and comments and handling the origami material). Children's responses to parent structuring were coded as compliance, rejection, ignoring, or non-response, and their affective tone was coded similarly to that of their parents. Global ratings were obtained for affective tone and structuring by combining counts, creating a rating on a 5-point scale for each member on both tasks. The results indicated that mother-daughter dyads displayed more positive affect than other dyads. Fathers used more intrusion and made more inappropriate suggestions to both sons and daughters compared to mothers. No interaction was found between parent and child gender. The results suggested that parents differ in their expressive styles. Contains 11 references. (Author/KDFB)

Running Head: PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS DURING MIDDLE

# Parent-Child Relationships During Middle Childhood: Gender Differences in Interaction

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Abstract

This study considered differences in interactional style between parents and children, focusing on gender socialization and emotional expression. 38 mother-child/father-child dyads were observed in two conditions: a timed, structured task (origami), and a non-timed, less structured task (story telling). Predictions: interactions with sons would be cognitively focused, emphasizing self-reliance, while interactions with daughters would stress cooperation and compliance. Results: mother-daughter dyads displayed more positive affect. Fathers used more intrusion and made more inappropriate suggestions to both sons and daughters compared to mothers. No interaction between parent and child gender was found. Results suggest that parents differ in their expressive styles.

# Introduction

Emphasis on the socialization of emotion has increased in recent years(1), (2), (3). Moreover, within this general area exists an important subtopic: parent-child interaction and the roles played by both children and parents in this process. While maternal influences have been well documented (4), (5), there have been limited investigations considering the role played by *both* parents and how child sex influences parent behavior. Indeed, it has been proposed that it is insufficient to study only the individual, whether parent or child (6).

The purpose of this study was to consider differences in interactional style between parents and children, focusing on gender socialization and emotional expression.

**Hypotheses:**

**1) Parental differences in affective tone toward sons and daughters. More specifically, the most positive interactions are predicted between mother-daughter dyads, and the least positive interchanges will occur between father-daughter dyads. Finally, mothers will display more positive affect overall than fathers, sons, or daughters.**

**2) Significant differences in the amount of structuring done by parents during both tasks. More specifically, we predict that fathers will employ the most structure within the father-daughter dyad, and will encourage greater autonomy in their sons. Mothers will demonstrate similar amounts of structure for both sons and daughters.**

# Method

## Subjects

Thirty-eight intact families participated in this study; children ranged in age from 7 to 11 years (M = 8.5, SD = 1.5). Twenty children were girls. All marriages were first and ranged from 9 to 25 years in length, averaging 14.4 years. Approximately 75% of participants were Caucasian, 15% Hispanic, and 10 % either African-American or Asian; all were native speakers of English. Families were recruited through advertisements and word of mouth. Families were paid $25.00 for their participation.

## Procedure

Prior to participation, parents completed several paper and pencil measures sent via mail. Each parent completed all measures autonomously. Measures included: Parenting Stress Index(7),

Behavior Assessment Scale for Children (8), Culture Free Self Esteem Scale(9), Dyadic Adjustment Scale(10), and a demographics form.

Each mother-child father-child dyad was seated at a small table, and children completed an origami (structured) and story telling (unstructured) task with each parent separately. Two origami tasks and two stories were equated for difficulty such that all tasks were new for both parent and child. The order of parent participation and task order was balanced across all subjects, creating 8 possible orders. No order effects were found. All interactions were videotaped for later coding.

*Observational Measures*

**1) Affective Tone: Frequency counts were collected for parental positive, neutral, and negative feedback to the child's attempt at task completion. The child's response was coded (same behaviors). Counts were combined, creating a rating of affective tone on a 5-point Likert scale for each member for both tasks.**

**2) Parental Structuring: For both tasks, frequency counts were obtained for the number of appropriate and inappropriate questions, suggestions, and comments parents made. For origami, an additional code of 'hands on' was included; directions stated the child should perform the task. The child's responses to parent structuring was coded, including compliance, rejection, ignoring, or non-response. Frequencies were transformed into a similar global rating. 3 coders reached .88 interrater reliability (Cohen's kappa).**

# Results

## TABLE 1

### Analysis of Variance for Parental Affective Tone

| Source | df | F |
|---|---|---|
| Parent (P) | 1 | 16.70*** |
| Task (T) | 1 | 3.25 |
| P x T | 1 | 1.17 |
| Within-group error | 58 | (.29) |

Note. Values in parentheses = mse.

***p < .001

-Mothers (M=3.77) displayed greater positive affect compared to fathers (M=3.30) during both tasks and toward both daughters and sons.

TABLE 2

Analysis of Variance for Dyadic Affective Tone

| Source | df | F |
|---|---|---|
| Dyad (D) | 3 | 6.18** |
| Task (T) | 1 | 3.57 |
| D x T | 3 | .56 |
| Within-group error | 56 | (.29) |

Note. Values in parentheses = mse.

**p<.01

- mothers (M=3.84) in mother-daughter dyad displayed more positive affect in both tasks compared to father-son (M=3.30). There were no significant differences in opposite sex dyads.

Table 3

## Analysis of Variance for Parental Structure

| Source | df | F |
|---|---|---|
| Parent (P) | 1 | 4.91* |
| Task (T) | 1 | 2.41 |
| P x T | 1 | 1.57 |
| Within group error | 57 | (.36) |

Note. Values in parentheses = mse.

*p<.05.

-fathers (M=3.10) provide more structuring to both sons and daughters compared to mothers (M=2.75)in both tasks

## Discussion

This study investigated parent-child interaction with specific attention to gender differences. Results are perhaps best interpreted within the context of the sample; our unusually high functioning sample reported almost no marital dissatisfaction, limited parenting stress, and self-esteem was high for both parents and children.

Given this homogeneity, significant results are important. For parental affective tone, mothers were more positive toward both sons and daughters compared to fathers, with significantly more positive affect between mother-daughter dyads regardless of task. Fathers were more intrusive and made more inappropriate suggestions to both sons and daughters. Samples using high marital

dissatisfaction as a variable have found that father-daughter interactions are the most vulnerable to gender socialization(11). Fathers have also been shown to encourage greater autonomy in their sons compared to daughters. Our lack of confirmatory findings may suggest that marital distress is a key contribution to fathers' differing interactional styles with their sons and daughters.

Based on these findings, we would like to suggest that children may experience, and indeed, also observe different styles of expressivity, depending on parent gender. Implications might include: children's adoption of similar styles through modeling, or the development of expectations in terms of how sons and daughters are treated by each of their parents.

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