



Relationship Between Parenting and Proactive Versus Reactive Aggression Among Chinese Preschool Children



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between parenting and proactive versus reactive aggression among preschool children in China. Children (1164) from 10 kindergartens in Shanghai were rated by their parents and teachers using the Parent Behavior Inventory (PBI) and the Aggressive Behavior–Teacher's Checklist. Children had higher levels of reactive than proactive aggression, and older children and boys had higher levels of both proactive and reactive aggression. Hostile/coercive parenting style and low father education were significantly linked to aggression in children. These findings suggest that parenting style and type of aggression should be addressed when considering prevention and intervention.

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Aggressive behavior has been reported as a serious mental health issue among children even in early childhood in both Western and Eastern cultures (Fung & Tsang, 2006; Harachi et al., 2006; McNamara, Selig, & Hawley, 2010; Vitaro, Barker, Boivin, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 2006). In China, the prevalence rate of aggressive behavior among preschool children was found to be from 8.8 to 11.9% (Guan, Wang, Liu, & Chen, 2005; Guan et al., 2005). Aggression is stable in children and may last into adulthood, which can have adverse influences on children (Huesmann, Dubow, & Boxer, 2009). Previous studies confirmed that aggressive behavior could affect children's psychological health and social development, and even lead to behavioral disorders in adolescence and crimes in adulthood (Harachi et al., 2006; Huesmann et al., 2009). Therefore, identifying risk factors associated with the aggressive behavior of children has meaningful implications for formulating effective ways to improve their lives.

PROACTIVE AGGRESSION AND REACTIVE AGGRESSION

Child aggression has been conceptualized into two subtypes according to differences in function or motivation underlying the behavior: proactive aggression (PA) and reactive aggression (RA) (Dodge & Coie, 1987). Proactive aggression is described as planned and goal-oriented aggressive behaviors utilized to reach a goal, including material or territorial gain or social dominance (Card & Little, 2006; Hubbard, McAuliffe, Morrow, & Romano, 2010). Alterna-

tively, reactive aggression is defined as frustrated and hostile behavior in response to provocation or stimulation (Hubbard et al., 2010; Vitaro et al., 2006; Xu, Farver, & Zhang, 2009).

Increasing evidence suggests that proactive and reactive aggression are empirically and theoretically distinct subtypes of aggression with different antecedents and consequences, although the same individual often experiences both. This distinction appears to have significant implications for prevention and intervention in children's aggression (Card & Little, 2006; Dodge & Coie, 1987; Dodge, Coie, & Lynanl, 2006; Kempes, Matthys, de Vries, & van Engeland, 2005; Vitaro et al., 2006; Xu et al., 2009). However, to date, studies on aggressive behavior in Chinese children are far fewer than those in Western culture, and the majority of these studies concentrated on physical aggression or disruptive behaviors. Therefore, a focus on proactive and reactive aggression in Chinese children will add new knowledge to the literature.

PARENTING AND AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR AMONG CHILDREN

It has been proposed that parenting style is a specific, fixed combination of parenting behaviors rather than any single parenting behavior that contributes to child development, competency, or psychopathology (McKee, Colletti, Rakow, Jones, & Forehand, 2008). Although there are many methods of categorizing parenting styles, in order to understand parenting difficulties among children with behavioral problems, two dimensions of parenting styles are of primary interest: supportive/engaged and hostile/coercive. Supportive/engaged parenting is defined by behaviors that display the parent's acceptance of the child through affection, shared activities, and emotional and instrumental support, while hostile/coercive parenting refers to behaviors that manifest a negative affect or

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indifference toward the child and may include the use of threat, coercion, or physical punishment to affect the child's behavior (Lovejoy, Weis, O'Hare, & Rubin, 1999).

It has been found in a handful of studies that both the absence of supportive/engaged parenting (i.e., lack of affectionate contact and teaching between parent and child) and the presence of hostile/coercive parenting (i.e., restrictive control of child) affect the development of behavioral problems in children (Nelson, Hart, Yang, Olsen, & Jin, 2006). Children with parents who employed more supportive parenting practices showed fewer disruptive behaviors when compared to children who experienced coercive parenting practices (Denham et al., 2000; Kim et al., 2003). It was also proposed that supportive/engaged parenting approaches that minimize the probability of aggressive behavior in children include warm, supportive, sensitive, responsive parenting; parental involvement; and parental monitoring (Beyers, Bates, Pettit, & Dodge, 2003; O'Connor, 2002). In contrast, hostile/coercive parenting behaviors, including harsh discipline, hostile parental control, punitive/non-reasoning strategies, and low levels of warmth and nurturance are associated with negative outcomes, such as higher levels of aggression, conduct problems, and less pro-social behavior in children (Benzies, Keown, & Magill-Evans, 2009; Chang, Schwartz, Dodge, & McBride-Chang, 2003; Kim et al., 2003; McNamara et al., 2010; Nelson et al., 2006; Vitaro et al., 2006; Xu et al., 2009).

According to some studies, Chinese parents are more authoritarian or controlling than their Western counterparts (Liu & Guo, 2010; Pearson & Rao, 2003). Studies in China have also indicated that authoritarian parenting is positively related to aggressive behavior in young children (Chan, 2010; Chang et al., 2003; Chen, Wang, Chen, & Liu, 2002; Chen, Wu, Chen, Wang, & Cen, 2001; Nelson et al., 2006). However, studies that examine how different parenting styles correlate with aggression among preschool children in Chinese culture are still limited.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Although some studies concerning negative parenting and children's aggression have been carried out in China (Chan, 2010; Chang et al., 2003; Chen et al., 2002, 2001; Nelson et al., 2006), studies focusing on the associations between different types of parenting and proactive versus reactive aggression are still limited. In this study, proactive and reactive aggression among preschool children are addressed, and their relationship with supportive/engaged and hostile/coercive parenting will be explored.

METHODS

Participants

Using a stratified cluster sampling design, eight public kindergartens and two private kindergartens in six districts of Shanghai, China were chosen for this study. In each kindergarten, children were recruited from two classes of each age group, including 3–4-year-olds, 5-year-olds, and 6-year-olds. Parents and teachers of these children were also invited to participate in this study. Children who were eligible for inclusion were those between 3- and 6-years-old and who lived in Shanghai. Children for whom primary caregivers were not parents, or those who had severe physical diseases or mental disorders were excluded. About 1700 children were approached for this study, and questionnaires were distributed to their parents and teachers. All of the teachers ($N = 53$) completed the questionnaires, and 1164 (68.47%) parents completed the questionnaires with complete and effective information, resulting in a sample size of 1164 for the present study.

Procedure

Consent was obtained from the 10 kindergartens prior to the beginning of study, and the teachers of the recruited children were motivated to arrange two group meetings for the purposes of the study. The parents were invited to attend two, approximately 45-minute group meetings. At the first group meeting, researchers explained the purpose and procedures of the study to parents and teachers, and consent was obtained prior to data collection. Parents and teachers were guaranteed confidentiality of all information collected in the course of the study, and parents were informed that they could withdraw themselves or their children at any time. In addition, parents were asked to sign a release of information that allowed research staff to receive information from teachers regarding the children's behavior at school.

The demographic questionnaire and the Parent Behavior Inventory (PBI) were distributed to parents in the first meeting to be filled out at home and returned at the second meeting 1 week later. Families were compensated for their participation with a small gift to the children. Teachers completed an Aggressive Behavior—Teacher's Checklist for recruited children based on the observation of their daily behaviors. Teachers were compensated for their participation with a gift card. All questionnaires were tested in a pilot study for their psychometric properties and application in Chinese culture.

Measures

Demographic Questionnaire

Characteristics of children and their families were investigated using the demographic questionnaire, including the age and gender of the children, number of children in the family, family structure, household income, parents' age, education and occupation.

The Parent Behavior Inventory (PBI)

The Parent Behavior Inventory (PBI) is a 20-item measure of parenting behavior that uses a six-point Likert scale (0 = never, 5 = almost always) to evaluate the two types of parenting—supportive/engaged and hostile/coercive—with the score of each dimension ranging from 0 to 50. The PBI focuses on parenting practices rather than beliefs or attitudes, which makes it appropriate for behavioral assessment of parents of preschool-age or young elementary school-age children. The PBI's two subscales, supportive/engaged and hostile/coercive parenting, show sufficient content validity, have adequate internal consistency and test–retest reliability, and relate to measures of parental affect, parental stress, and child behavior problems (Lovejoy et al., 1999).

In this study, the PBI was translated into Chinese according to the Brislin translation model (Jones, Lee, Phillips, Zhang, & Jaceldo, 2001). Factor analysis showed that two components were extracted, which explained 55.70% of the total variation, and the items in each component were almost the same as in the English version, which confirmed the construct validity of the PBI. Factor loading of each item ranged from 0.395 to 0.731 in the support/engaged subscale and from 0.260 to 0.649 in the hostile/coercive subscale. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the PBI and its supportive/engaged and hostile/coercive subscales were 0.672, 0.807, and 0.652, respectively. Test–retest (between 2 weeks) reliability coefficients of the supportive/engaged and hostile/coercive dimensions were 0.964 ($p < 0.01$) and 0.986 ($p < 0.01$), respectively.

Aggressive Behavior—Teacher's Checklist

Proactive and reactive aggression were assessed using the Aggressive Behavior—Teacher's Checklist (Dodge & Coie, 1987). This six-item questionnaire comprises three items for each aggression subtype. The three items for proactive aggression (PA) are as follows: "Threatens or bullies others in order to get his/her own way,"

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