

Mothers' and fathers' socialization of preschoolers' physical risk taking

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Abstract

This study examined how parents influence sex differences in young children's physical risk taking behaviors. Eighty three- and four-year old, mostly middle class and Caucasian children climbed across a five-foot high catwalk and walked across a three-foot high beam under their mother or father's supervision. Based on average preschooler gross motor capabilities, both of these activities posed potential threats to preschoolers' physical safety without proper parental monitoring. Analyses revealed that fathers of daughters monitored their children more closely than did fathers of sons. In contrast, mothers of daughters and mothers of sons monitored their children similarly. Differential treatment of preschool-aged girls and boys in risk taking situations is discussed as a contributor to sex differences found in children's physical risk taking and unintentional injuries.

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1. Introduction

Boys on average engage in more physical risks and have more unintentional injuries than do girls. This finding has been supported by epidemiological research (Baker, O'Neill, Ginsberg, & Li, 1992; Matheny, 1991), by semi-naturalistic research (Morrongiello & Dawber, 1999, 1998), and by laboratory studies (Horvath & Zuckerman, 1992; Morrongiello, Midgett, and Stanton, 2000; Zuckerman, 1994). Physical risk taking is related to increased physical injuries (Potts, Martinez, & Dedmon, 1995). In the United States, in 2000, 5600 children died from unintentional injuries and an additional 11.8 million children required some form of emergency medical treatment for injuries (Wallis, Cody, & Mickalide, 2003). In fact, more children die from unintentional injuries than from all other childhood diseases combined (Wallis et al., 2003). Considering the potential danger involved in excessive physical risk taking, and given that boys are much more at risk for suffering an unintentional injury than girls, the need to understand if and how boys are being raised to take more risks than girls is evident.

Past studies have demonstrated that parents have an impact on the socialization of children's gender differences (e.g. Greendorfer, 1993; Fivush, Broatman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000). A growing number of correlational studies have also examined how mothers may contribute to the sex differences found in children's physical risk taking and

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unintentional injuries (Morrongiello & Hogg, 2004; Morrongiello & Dawber, 1999, 2000). However, the role of fathers in the socialization of children's risk taking is not well known.

Past research suggests that fathers are important agents of children's gender-role socialization (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Coltrane & Adams, 1997; Lytton & Romney, 1991; Langlois & Downs, 1980). Research also has shown that fathers engage in more physical types of play with their children than do mothers (Bronstein, 1988; Levey & Fagot, 1997), and that fathers engage in more rough and tumble play with boys than with girls (Bronstein, 1988). Thus, to fully understand how boys and girls are socialized to take different amounts of physical risks, it is critical that fathers' roles are examined.

In the past, a combination of biological and evolutionary theories have been used to explain why boys tend to engage in more physical risks and have more unintentional injuries than do girls. Specifically, the classic explanation suggests that the degree to which a person is willing to take risks varies with the amount of androgen produced in the body. Men take more physical risks than women because their bodies produce more androgen (Zuckerman, 1985). Evolutionary theory argues that taking physical risks is a primarily masculine attribute because it served to benefit humankind evolutionarily (Wilson & Daly, 1985). It has not been until recently that researchers have begun to examine potential environmental influences on children's risk taking behaviors.

The earliest research on parental influences on children's physical risk taking involved two controlled laboratory studies. Parents were asked to examine pictures or videos of children engaging in potentially dangerous activities, and then to press a button when they felt they would intervene in the situation (Kronsberg, Schmaling, & Fagot, 1985; Fagot, Kronsberg, & MacGregor, 1985). These two studies found contradictory results; Kronsberg et al. (1985) found parents would intervene more quickly with boys and Fagot et al. (1985) found parents would intervene more quickly with girls. To explain these conflicting findings, Fagot et al. (1985) suggested that mothers' and fathers' actual socialization behaviors are rarely evident in the laboratory. Additionally, parents who view a hypothetical situation of a child who is not their own may be more likely to answer in ways that are socially desirable. If parents were to be put in more realistic risky situations with their own children, they might react to children's risk taking in more gender-stereotypical ways. To further corroborate this hypothesis, a major meta-analysis of sex-role socialization by Lytton and Romney (1991) concluded that naturalistic or semi-naturalistic settings were the most successful for detecting sex differences in parental socialization.

Taking this information into account, the next set of studies examining parental socialization of children's physical risk taking was conducted in semi-naturalistic settings examining parents' reactions to *their own* child in contrived or real life injury-risk situations (Morrongiello & Dawber, 1998, 1999, 2000). In the first study, Morrongiello and Dawber (1998) unobtrusively observed mothers and their 2 1/2 to 3 1/2 year old children sitting in a waiting room that contained a number of contrived hazards (e.g., scissors (dulled), a "hot" coffee pot (cold)). Boys were more often physically redirected from these hazards, whereas girls received more verbal redirection. In another study, mothers watched videotapes of their own children engaging in injury-risk activities on a playground (Morrongiello & Dawber, 2000). While watching these videos, mothers of daughters reported they would intervene more quickly and more frequently than did mothers of sons. Both of these studies suggest that mothers react differently to their sons and daughters in physically risky situations. Interestingly, these studies also found some contradictory results. Specifically, mothers seem to physically redirect the sons more in the first study, whereas mothers reported intending to physically redirect their daughters more in the second study. These findings seem to suggest that mothers' responses to children during *actual* injury-risk situations and reports of their behavioral intentions to respond to their child during risky situations may produce differing results.

In 1999, Morrongiello and Dawber conducted a study that examined parental reactions to children in actual risk taking situations. In this study, parents (either the father or the mother) were video recorded teaching their preschool age child to slide down a firehouse pole. Parent-child dyads were also recorded in a free-play session on the playground to assess more naturalistic interactions in potentially injury-risk situations. Similar to past results, boys and girls were treated differently during an injury-risk task by both mothers and fathers. Specifically, mothers and fathers gave sons more physical pressure and instructions on how to perform injury-risk tasks than daughters, and daughters were given more physical assistance by parents and more verbal cautions about their safety and injury risk.

Morrongiello and Dawber's (1999) study was pioneering in its examination of children in real life potential risk taking situations. However, the reactions of parents to children *during* injury-risk situations were never measured because none of the children did in fact slide down the fire pole. Parental socialization of children's injury-risk behaviors may differ depending on whether the child is *actually engaging* in an activity that is potentially dangerous versus *being taught* how to do an activity in which the child may or may not participate.

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