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Mother's perceptions of physical and verbal aggression in pre-school children

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Abstract

The present study was conducted to study the perception of mothers about childhood aggression. The study was conducted in Hisar city for urban study and Block-II of Hisar district for rural study. From Block-II, Kaimari and Mangali villages were selected as per the demand of the study. Sixty aggressive children in the age-group of 4-6 years were selected from various preschools of Hisar city and sixty from the selected villages. Thus, a total of 120 children were the sample size for the present study. Mothers of these aggressive children were also the respondents of this study. Thus 120 children, 60 from urban and 60 from rural in the age group of 4-6 years constituted the sample. When asked if the mother had noticed preschool children displaying behaviours like hitting, snatching, pushing and stubbornness; all urban and rural mothers unanimously replied in affirmative. They all, also, agreed to have noticed these behaviours in their children. Perception of the mother about the source of aggression i.e., where these behaviours come from or the child learnt from, the responses swing largely in the direction of family environment, surroundings, media, peers etc. were the probable sources of aggression in preschool children.

Keywords: Childhood aggression, perception, family environment, surroundings, meu peers

Introduction

Aggression manifests itself in a child's behaviour from early years. Aggressive behaviours tend to be highly stable from early childhood to adolescence and adulthood (Waldman, 1996). In preschool years, childhood aggression is an important predictor of difficulties in social adjustment, delinquency (Hay, Castle and Davies, 2000) ^[2] and psychological dysfunction (McFayden-Ketchum *et al.*, 1996) ^[3]. Highly aggressive behaviour often occurs along and may be predictive of poor academic performance and increased risk of dropping out of school (Rubin *et al.*, 1998) ^[4].

Aggression in childhood and later ages can be related to problem behaviour in future. The possibilities for intervention, to curb (may be to just an extent) aggression and violence, would surely be increased if one could identify younger children who are already showing precursors to behaviour problems.

"Aggression is that behaviour that is intended to hurt or harm others" (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995) ^[5]. According to Baron (1985) ^[6], aggression is any form of behaviour directed towards the goal of harming or injuring another living being who is motivated to avoid such treatment. According to Crick, Brigher and Howes (1996) ^[7], anger and intent to harm have been two defining features of aggression. Shaw, Giliom & Giovannelli. (2000) ^[8] described early aggressive behaviour as an "act directed toward a specific other person or object with intent to hurt or frighten, for which there is a consensus about the aggressive intent of the act."

Aggression manifests itself in the early years. Children quarrel, bite or fight, kick or punch, threaten to hit and shoot and call names. Some amount of aggressive behaviour in children has been accepted by most psychologists as normal and universal. Lorton (1979) thought that pre-schoolers sometimes use aggressive types of behaviours to work out or display their emotions, because of their ego-centric nature.

Young children are quick to display pleasure or anger. As preschool children grow older, they tend to participate more frequently in group play, aggression and conflicts occur with increasing frequency as part of the whole pattern of social participation. Aggression becomes a way of releasing or showing emotions. Dunn (1988) ^[10] observed an increase in aggressive behaviours of children in the second year of life. Pre-schoolers with an increase in the development of vocabulary and physical strength indulge in physical as well as verbal forms of aggression. Carson and Butcher (1992) ^[11] had labelled this as "Un-socialized aggressive reactions". Unsocialized aggressive children manifest such characteristics as covert or overt

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hostility, disobedience, physical and verbal aggressiveness, quarrelsomeness, revengefulness and destructiveness.

Aggression as instinctive behaviour - The oldest perspective comes from Sigmund Freud (1930). In Freud's view, Aggression stems primarily from the redirection of the self-destructive death instinct away from the person and outward towards others. Such behaviour is innate and inevitable. If Thanatos (the death instinct) is not turned outwards onto others, it results in self-destruction. He also suggested that a discharge of the destructive energy of Thanatos might be obtained through the expression of aggression-related emotions such as anger.

A second explanation of human aggression that focuses largely on innate tendencies has been proposed by Lorenz (1963)^[12]. According to him, aggression stems primarily from a fighting instinct that human beings share with many other organisms. The elicitation of aggressive actions is primarily a joint function of the amount of accumulated aggressive energy and pressure and strength of aggression releasing stimuli in the environment. He, like Freud, holds that aggression is inevitable.

In an alternate approach called Frustration - Aggression Hypothesis given by Miller and Doob (1941)^[28], Frustration the blocking of ongoing goal-directed behaviour leads to the arousal of a drive whose primary goal is to remove or attack the source of frustration. Frustration is the instigating condition for aggression.

The work of Berkowitz (1962)^[13] might be conceptualized as a modified Frustration - Aggression theory. Reaction and accompanying anger create readiness for aggressive acts. Aggression occurs only when a suitable aggressive cue stimulus associated is present or some previous anger instigators are present in aversive circumstances producing flight (escape) or fight (strike out) at the perceived source of unpleasantness or another suitable target. Berkowitz (1982)^[14] recognizes that aggression is not produced by objective happenings but by the way the event is understood.

Social Learning

The third distinct perspective on aggression is that of Social Learn Albert Bandura (1961) is one of the leading researchers in the social learning theory. In a classic experiment, Bandura found that violent behaviour can be learned through observation and imitation. In his experiment, children watched adults engage in violent behaviour, and were observed afterwards Bandura found that children who observed adults playing violently were likely to copy the violent behaviour. This regards aggression primarily as a learned form of social behaviour - one that is acquired and maintained as other behaviours are learnt. Human beings engage in assault against others because they have acquired aggressive responses through past experiences and responses that have been rewarded or reinforced. The instigation to aggress also comes from specific social or environmental factors. The famous Bobo doll experiment by Bandura and Ross (1972)^[15] showed that children exhibited learning of aggression through modelling and reinforcement.

The important hypothesis of Catharsis derived from instinct theory proposes that aggressive energy is drained off by acting out or viewing some sort of aggressive act. Parenting styles and child-rearing practices are often linked to a child's behaviour. Punishment, which is often considered a deterrent to aggressive behaviour, is an important component of parenting styles. Research gives evidence that parents of

under-controlled aggressive children are highly directive, intrusive and rejecting (Rubin *et al.*, 1996)^[16]. Not only this, they have been found to be highly punitive and critical of their children. (Berk, 1994)^[17].

Empirical work in child development has confirmed that variations in parenting behaviour are associated with children's regular display of aggressive and disruptive social behaviour. (Rubin *et al.*, 1998)^[14].

The mother is considered to be the most important figure for a child and also forms one of the most influential socialization agents in early life. Mother's beliefs about child rearing and socialization are largely reflected in her behaviour and reaction towards children.

So, keeping the above facts in view the study on childhood aggression is taken into consideration with the objective to study the perception of mothers about childhood aggression.

Materials and Methods

The present study was conducted purposively in rural and urban areas of Hisar District of block-II in Haryana State. From Hisar city, three schools were selected randomly. A list of 60 children from Hisar city was prepared. Similarly, from rural areas, three preschools were selected from village Kaimari and three preschools were selected from village Mangali. A list of 60 children from rural areas was prepared. Thus, a total of 120 children was the sample size for the present study. Mothers of these aggressive children were also the respondent for the study.

Tools for data collection Questionnaire-cum-Interview Schedule for mothers

A detailed interview schedule was prepared for mothers to collect information regarding their perceptions of aggression in their children.

A set of 20 questions was prepared covering different types of aggressive behaviour shown by 4-6-year-old children to know how mothers reacted in a respective situation so as to see what sort of strategies were used to deal with the situation when the child was displaying aggression.

Mothers of aggressive children have been asked about various situations that can arise in their daily routine while coping with the aggression of their children. The extracted perceptions/experiences of mothers were analysed. These experiences provided a base for formulating the strategies used by mothers to cope with the aggression of their children.

Results and Discussion

Perceptions of mothers about childhood aggression

When asked if the mother had noticed preschool children displaying behaviours like hitting, snatching, pushing and stubbornness; all urban and rural mothers unanimously replied in affirmative. They all, also, agreed to have noticed these behaviours in their children. Most of the urban and rural mothers reported that these behaviours were a daily affair in their children. While reporting some mothers especially highlighted certain behaviours as more common e.g., some mothers said, "They enjoy breaking and throwing the objects".

When asked by the investigator which behaviour of their child they saw as aggressive i.e., harming another person or intending to do so, urban and rural mothers replied in negative. There was no behaviour in their child which was harmful to another or intended to do so. In other words, they didn't see any behaviours of their child which could harm

another person. As mentioned earlier, these mothers had reported noticing behaviours like pushing, hitting, and snatching on their children. Some mothers reported only the physical actions of their children as harming or intending to harm others. The commonly mentioned behaviours were physical hitting, pushing, and throwing things. Hitting was harmful as it hurt the other child. Pushing was considered aggressive as the mother reasoned that the pushed child could fall or get knocked to some other object and get hurt "Throwing things at" was considered aggressive for similar reasons.

One mother reported that she had noticed her child once pelting stones and she thought this was harmful as could hit any person around. Some other physical actions mentioned as aggressive were - punching and kicking, as causes of physical pain. Some mothers mentioned verbal behaviour as aggressive along with physical actions. The behaviour mentioned as harming or intending to do so was screaming and shouting.

One mother who reported screaming as aggressive reasoned that her child was in the habit of screaming at a younger child next door. This screaming scares the younger child and makes him obey the demands of her child. So, this fear, of scaring other children is harmful and is wrong. She also reported that since the younger child gave in to her son's demands, he has got encouragement. The majority of mothers in the study were of the opinion that the child's aggressive behaviour should be tolerated. "Parents should tolerate to an extent after that they should punish the child" were verbatim responses of some urban mothers. Some Rural mothers in the sample said that the parents should and have to only tolerate the child's behaviour. Some of them felt that since the child was too young, they could not punish the child, or some felt because of the young age of the child they could not make him understand why he should not do certain behaviours. Some mothers said, "This age is immature and illogical". They felt that the parents should explain to the child when he/she shows aggressive, unacceptable behaviours.

The mothers stressed on avoidance of punishment and clearly mentioned that only explaining to the child and telling the child not to misbehave is sufficient. Some Rural mothers in the sample said aggressive behaviours of the child should be punished and parents should not practice tolerance in such cases. They were of the opinion that punishment should be given to stop the behaviour at the earliest possible.

Perception of the mother about source of aggression i.e., where these behaviours come from or the child learnt from, the responses swing largely in the direction of an environment as cause and source of aggression in preschool children. Some urban mothers mentioned the surroundings, and atmosphere around the child, as the source, from which the child learnt aggressive behaviour. They mentioned loosely all the factors in the environment (surroundings) as a source of aggression. Some mothers especially mentioned peers, besides surroundings, as the agents of teaching aggression to children. Some urban mothers under the surroundings category emphasized on home atmosphere, and parents as sources of aggression. One mother implied that the parent's fight as Standing for self was not mentioned by another mother who was of the opinion that by the ability to fight back, the child would be able to be assertive and stand for self. Standing for self was not mentioned by another mother who was of the opinion that by the ability to fight back, the child would be able to help self. One mother shared her belief and practice that she tells her child never to get beaten, "Hit if you are

being hit" is her advice to her son. Some urban mothers disagreed with the opinion of a person and child being able to fight back. The dominant emerging reasons were - that fighting is bad, fighting doesn't help, peaceful solutions should be always sought, fighting increases tension, and fighting should not be done. Some of the Rural and urban mothers could not decide on the issue and hence were classified under the no opinion category.

Although many mothers in the sample favoured fighting back capacity in the children and people, the majority of the mothers in the sample did not see aggression as any benefit to children. Some Rural mothers said that they could not see any use of aggression to children. They equated aggression with fighting mainly and didn't see fighting of any use.

They said that fighting was wrong so aggression couldn't be beneficial to children. Some urban mothers said that harming/hurting others is wrong and is of no use. They interpreted aggression as destructiveness and said that restriction could never be of any use to anybody. Aggression was worded as ill will by one mother and she didn't see it to be of any use.

Some Rural mothers felt that aggression may be beneficial to children. According to one urban mother "This habit builds confidence in child model for child's aggressive behaviour and source of child's subsequent aggression. Junior, (1999)^[19] discussed the mother's interactions with each child, her role as a model for identification, and marital relations in light of their impact on sibling relations. The evolution of a positive attachment between siblings is explored. Rivalrous behaviour between siblings is also discussed, particularly in association with the mother's treatment of her own children and the manner in which the mother deals with her own aggression. Another factor emerging as the source of aggression was their lax parenting (parents not putting sufficient control on children encouraged children's aggressive behaviours learnt from the environment). Some Rural mothers mentioned only television as a source of aggression.

According to them, T.V. provided models of aggressive behaviour for children. Scenes watched on T.V. like WWF fights or action movies enhance different kinds of aggressive behaviour mainly fighting, and hitting peers. Some Rural mothers specifically mentioned that action scenes of Hindi movies, watched attentively by their children were sources of aggression.

One mother shared an incident to illustrate her view of T.V. and specifically Hindi movies as a source of aggression for preschool children. One day after coming out of the cinema hall the whole family watched a Hindi movie, Krrish. She saw her two sons aged 6 and 4 pretending to do the same actions as the hero of the movie had done in the climax fighting scene of the movie. In this study, the mother's beliefs that children learn aggression from surroundings namely home, atmosphere, T.V. etc. has corresponding evidence in research. Studies suggested that aggressive behaviour is often learned in family or context or both in which behaviours are elicited, modelled reinforcement.

Some urban mothers attributed aggression in their preschool children to individual differences. She reasoned that it could not be school peers, because even before children joined school or played in the neighbourhood, she had noticed fondness of her child for throwing, breaking and destroying objects Giles and Heyman (2005)^[20] examined the young children's beliefs about the relationship between and aggression across 3 studies (N=121). These findings

suggested that even before children reach school age, they have organized patterns of beliefs about gender that affect the way they process social information. Some mothers had no opinion about the source of aggression in preschool children. They were not sure from where or how did these behaviours come into child's repertoire. Some Rural mothers mentioned that they had never thought about this and on being asked for the same, were not sure of their opinion.

Mother's opinions were taken and the idea that a person should be able to fight back and children should be encouraged to do the same. Agreed with the idea, some Rural mothers said that a person and even a child should be able to fight back. The explanations they gave included - "one should not accept other's oppression or under dominance" and "one should not accept other's unapproved hitting". Some mothers opined that the child should

back if he/she has been hit by another child. Protecting oneself and one's rights were mentioned by some of the Rural mothers. One explained that though in her opinion hitting should be avoided at times fighting back was good and one ought to be assertive and stand for oneself and defend Rural mothers. One mother avoided but at the same assertive and stood up for herself. Standing for self was not mentioned by another mother who was of the opinion that by the ability to fight back, the child would be able to be assertive and stand for self. Standing for self was not mentioned by another mother who was of the opinion that by the ability to fight back, the child would be able to help self. One mother shared her belief and practice that she tells her child never to get beaten, "Hit if you are being hit" is her advice to her son. Some urban mothers disagreed with the opinion of a person and child being able to fight back. The dominant emerging reasons were – fighting is bad, fighting doesn't help, peaceful solutions should be always sought, fighting increases tension, and fighting should not be done. Some of the Rural and urban mothers could not decide on the issue and hence were classified under the no opinion category.

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physical aggression. Results provided support for hypotheses and suggested that mothers hold different beliefs about relational versus physical aggression.

Some of the rural respondents were put under the no opinion category. Two mothers said they didn't know what to say on the matter, as they had never thought about it. When asked to think about it then only, they couldn't be sure of their opinion. Ostrov, Pilot and Crick (2006) [22] indicated that aggression subtypes and assertion strategies are related but conceptually unique constructs with differential predictions to indices of sociometric status. Ways in which these findings extend the developmental and early childhood literature were discussed.

Conclusion

The overall conclusion showed that all urban and rural mothers said that behaviours like hitting, snatching, pushing and stubbornness were com their children. They had noticed it regularly. Most of mothers the aggression of their children should be tolerated to a certain extent. ness was common in le mothers thought that certain extent. Afterwards, the real risks of media communities fail to educate the general public about the real risks of violence exposure to children and youth. Maximum of mother's favour fighting back capacity of the children. Most of the mothers did not aggression of any benefit to their children.

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