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Distinguishing Communication  
Behaviors of Mothers High and  
Low in Trait Verbal Aggression

*A Qualitative Analysis of  
Mother-Child Playtime Interactions*

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FELICIA ROBERTS, STEVEN R. WILSON,  
JULIE E. DELANEY, and JESSICA J. RACK

Parent-to-child maltreatment includes a wide range of problematic parenting practices such as physical and verbal aggression, neglect, and sexual abuse. (See Chapter 1 of this book.) In this chapter we focus on verbal aggression (VA), defined by Vissing, Straus, Gelles, and Harrop (1991) as a symbolic act (i.e., either verbal or nonverbal) which, whether active or passive, is intended—or perceived as intended—to cause psychological pain. Vissing and Bailey (1996) emphasize the complexity of VA because it is associated with both intent and behavioral outcomes. In the Communication discipline, verbally aggressive behavior has been distinguished from argumentative behavior by “the locus of attack,” in that aggressive behavior attacks the self-concept rather than the ideas or positions advanced by another person (Infante & Rancer, 1996). Trait verbal aggression, in turn, is the tendency to enact such behavior when differences or disagreements arise (Infante & Wigley, 1986).

Verbal aggression is commonly viewed as a catalyst for physically abusive behavior (Roloff, 1996), but it may be as harmful as physical

abuse (Ade-Ridder & Jones, 1996). In the domain of child development, verbally aggressive acts can be particularly injurious by negatively affecting a child's psychosocial development. Although no causal link has been demonstrated, an association has been found between parents' self-reports (during telephone interviews) of verbally aggressive behavior and negative psychosocial outcomes for their children (Vissing et al., 1991). Research also suggests that even in situations that do not elicit explicitly aggressive messages, parental trait VA is associated with a broad range of less than optimal parenting practices. For example, parents high in trait VA report employing an authoritarian rather than an authoritative style of parenting (Bayer & Cegala, 1992), possess less appropriate and effective plans for responding to child resistance (Beatty, Burant, Dobos, & Rudd, 1996), and use corporal punishment more frequently than parents who score low on trait VA measures (Kassing et al., 1999; Roberto, Carlyle, & McClure, 2006).

Although we can define with some confidence what constitutes verbally aggressive behavior, and may indeed be able to correlate it with other parental traits and types of outcomes for children, it is difficult to study VA as it naturally emerges. When observation times are relatively long, differences in negative parental behavior may emerge (e.g., Bousha & Twentyman, 1984; see also Wilson, Shi, Tirmenstein, Norris, & Rack, 2006 for a metaanalysis). However, observation of verbal aggression alone cannot provide a more generalized view of common communication behaviors that may characterize parents at risk for verbal aggression. If we wish to better understand this phenomenon in its full scope as a communication phenomenon, in the interest of providing education to reduce the risk of children's exposure to parental verbal aggression, then communication indicators besides overt verbal aggression may be helpful as entry points for prevention.

Self-reports of verbal aggression using standard scales (e.g., Infante & Wigley, 1986; Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998) in tandem with observational study may help us better ascertain whether the disposition to verbal aggressiveness is indicated in other sorts of communicative behaviors. The current study aims to explore that possibility by posing the following question: Are there interactional patterns that are common to verbally aggressive parents that may not be aggressive per se but that might be indicators of trait verbal aggressiveness? In this chapter we address this question by first describing and justifying our approach in the background section, then by detailing our qualitative methodology, and finally by providing results in terms of communication patterns as exemplified in a series of transcribed excerpts from eight mother-child playtime interactions.

The excerpts presented here are not intended as proof of differences in frequency of behaviors; those frequency differences are analyzed elsewhere and in terms of the larger sample from which the interactions for the current study were drawn (Wilson, Roberts, Rack, & Delaney, 2008). The excerpts provide, instead, the sort of qualitative detail that allows us to fill in and explain a central finding from the larger study about frequency differences in mothers' directing behavior. The current follow-up study allows us to compare and contrast the mothers with the highest and lowest VA scores so that we can examine similarities and differences in the ways that the same speech act (e.g., directing) may embody and project different courses of action (e.g., controlling an activity vs. supporting an activity).

### Background

The central concern of this study is to explore whether mothers with an apparent predisposition to verbal aggression (as measured through a self-report measure; Infante & Wigley, 1986) exhibit communication orientations that are different from comparison mothers, even during short, nonconflictual play periods. We approached this problem by analyzing videotaped interactions of mothers and children playing together in a controlled setting. These interactions were collected as part of a larger study, which is fully described elsewhere (Wilson, Morgan, Hayes, Bylund, & Herman, 2004; Wilson et al., 2008). The analysis presented here is a qualitative examination of a subset ( $n = 8$ ) of these naturalistic instances of mother-child interaction (each lasting about 12 minutes).

The larger study (Wilson et al., in press) examined, among other relationships, the relationship between maternal self-reported scores of trait VA and coded observations of playtime behaviors. Observers were masked to trait VA scores. Overall, mothers as a group ( $n = 40$ ) exhibited virtually no verbally aggressive behavior. That is, less than 1% of the 6-second intervals (of a 12-minute interaction) coded for a range of 21 behaviors had an instance of child criticism. However, in terms of other common parental behaviors, mothers' trait VA scores were positively associated ( $r = .48$ ) with the frequency with which they used directives, defined as attempts to alter their child's behavior (e.g., commands, suggestions). This finding, while provocative, is not easily extended in a practical manner: all parents regularly direct their children's activities, whether cooperative or not. This raises the question of whether the rate of directing is a sufficient indicator of verbal aggression or whether the higher rate of commands and suggestions is actually tapping some underlying disposition toward interaction with the child or the task or both.

In a similar vein, Sabourin and Stamp (1995) developed a procedure for examining adult couples (with and without a history of abuse) by asking them to talk to each other about their typical day. These interviews were conducted in the couples' homes with the researcher present to occasionally probe. In this way, the couples engaged in near natural conversations, which were then subject to detailed analysis. The description of the day's routine, "a seemingly innocuous chore," nonetheless evoked a "degree of animosity . . . in the abusive couples [that was] particularly pronounced" (p. 237). The mother-child playtime activities examined for the current study, while presumably fun and innocuous, nonetheless elicit interaction patterns that may well be normal for these moms and kids and that provide more accessible material for developing approaches to intervention.

Method

Participants

For the current analysis, we examined 8 of the 40 mother-child dyads from a larger study of whether mothers' potential for verbal and physical aggression was evident behaviorally during short playtime interactions (Wilson et al., 2004; Wilson et al., 2008). The mothers were recruited from one of two social service agencies in a large North American city to participate in a study of communication and parenting. Mothers were paid \$50 for participating.

The subset of 8 dyads was chosen based on the mothers' trait VA score. Specifically, the 4 mothers from the larger sample who scored the highest on Infante and Wigley's (1986) VA scale and the 4 who scored the lowest were selected for this qualitative analysis. By choosing the extreme ends of the scale (4 mothers in each category) we hoped to capture more easily any qualitative distinctions in the interactions that go beyond just rates of directing. (Henceforth, the shorthand "high VA" and "low VA" mother is used to indicate the two categories we created of those mothers scoring highest or lowest on the trait VA scale.) As would be expected, the average score on the VA scale of the 4 high VA mothers ( $M = 36.25, SD = 1.71$ ) was substantially higher than that of the 4 low VA mothers ( $M = 10.25, SD = 0.50$ ), Cohen's  $d = 20.63$ . Additionally, these high VA mothers issued, on average, directives in 70% of the 6-second segments in their play period, as compared to only 27% for the low VA mothers.

Table 8.1 presents demographic descriptive statistics for the 8 mother-child dyads. The 2 groups of mothers in the subsets for this

TABLE 8.1  
Descriptive Statistics for 8 Mother-Child Dyads

Trait	VA	Score	Ethnicity*	Mom Age	Age 1st Birth	# Years Education	# Kids	Child Age	Child Sex
High VA	6	38	AA	31	17	13	6	5	Male
	18	34	AA	58**	N/A	13	3	6	Male
	21	37	Mixed	21	15	12	4	3	Male
	24	36	AA	43	39	15	1	4	Male
	2	10	Latina	29	24	15	1	5	Male
	31	10	AA	21	15	10	2	6	Male
	38	11	AA	23	16	14	3	5	Female
	41	10	AA	29	18	12	5	8	Male
Low VA	6	38	AA	31	17	13	6	5	Male
	18	34	AA	58**	N/A	13	3	6	Male
	21	37	Mixed	21	15	12	4	3	Male
	24	36	AA	43	39	15	1	4	Male
	2	10	Latina	29	24	15	1	5	Male
	31	10	AA	21	15	10	2	6	Male
	38	11	AA	23	16	14	3	5	Female
	41	10	AA	29	18	12	5	8	Male

\*Ethnicity is self-reported.

\*\*This is the child's grandmother; she has sole custody of the child.

study are similar in terms of race/ethnicity and education, though the 4 high VA mothers are, on average, older (and were older when they gave birth to their first child). These mothers are also parenting slightly more children as compared to the 4 low VA mothers. However, in the larger sample, after controlling for mother's race/ethnicity, education, marital status, number of children, and age at birth of first child as well as child age and sex, maternal trait VA scores still predicted rates of maternal directing as well as child cooperation in the larger data set (Wilson et al., 2008).

The 4 high VA mothers all happened to bring sons to participate with them in the study, whereas 2 of the low VA mothers came with sons, and 2 arrived with daughters. The children of high VA mothers also are slightly younger than those of low VA mothers. In terms of sex of the child in the dyad, mothers in the larger study who interacted with sons ( $M = .42$ ) issued directives in more of their 6-second units, on average, as compared to mothers who interacted with daughters ( $M = .29$ ),  $t(38) = 2.19, p < .05$ , Cohen's  $d = .71$ . However, the partial correlation between maternal trait VA scores and rates of maternal directing, controlling for the effect of child sex, was  $r(36) = .47, p < .01$ ; this is virtually identical to the zero-order correlation,  $r(38) = .48, p < .01$ . These results clearly indicate, therefore, that the relationship between maternal trait VA scores and directing is not influenced by child sex. Thus, we were confident that the difference in sexes of the children represented in the high vs. low VA subgroups was not a significant factor in the play interactions we analyzed.

#### Procedures

All participants completed a 10-minute play period with one of their children (who was between the ages of 3 and 8 years old) and a clean-up session (approximately 2 minutes). Playtime was videotaped in a conference room at the social service agency where the mothers and children received services. A box with five types of toys appropriate to the range of possible ages (e.g., puzzles of different types, drawing materials, building blocks, a shape sorter) was set on a blanket in the middle of the room, and mothers were told that they and their children could play with any or all of the toys in any order that they wished. The only constraint was that the mothers should make sure that she and her child stayed on the blanket to be within range of the video camera.

During the 10-minute play period, researchers waited in a hallway outside of the room and observed the play period on a monitor; mothers and children were aware that they were being observed. At the 10-minute mark, one researcher knocked on and opened the door and said,

"It's time to clean up" before closing the door again. Mothers had been instructed, when that signal occurred, to put all of the toys back in the box and to make sure that their child helped. The clean-up period varied somewhat in length, but averaged just over 2 minutes.

Following the play period, mothers were interviewed and completed a demographic questionnaire and several measures including Infante and Wigley's (1986) trait VA scale. Trait VA scores were derived for each mother by summing each mother's responses to the 10 negatively worded items from the VA scale. Levine and colleagues (2004) recommend using only the negatively worded items based on prior research suggesting that two dimensions underlie the scale; their conclusion is that only the negatively worded items (e.g., "When individuals are very stubborn, I use insults to soften their stubbornness") actually tap the propensity for verbal aggressiveness as originally intended (see Beatty, Rudd, & Valencic, 1999; Levine et al., 2004).

#### Data Analysis

Because this was intended as a descriptive study, we did not enter the analytic process looking for evidence to confirm specific hypotheses regarding how the groups might differ in their predispositions toward parent-child interaction. The conclusions we draw are the outcome of the repeated observation and detailed transcription of recorded materials, not an interpretation of those materials guided by particular theoretical framework.

Each of the eight videotaped interactions (each approximately 12 minutes) initially was roughly transcribed by the authors. Each author was responsible for transcribing two of the videotapes: one in the high VA category and one in the low VA category. Since the authors had been working with the materials for several months, they were not masked to these VA categories. Through this transcription process, which itself is a first level of analysis (Roberts, 2008), the authors were alert to contrasts and similarities between the videotaped play periods. Analysis proceeded with authors bringing their assessment and description of both unique and similar behaviors to the research group; these assessments were then scrutinized by the whole group through repeated viewings and the detailing and correction of transcriptions.

Based on this process, the authors developed a list of verbal and nonverbal sequences (actions) that tended to occur within each category (high or low VA tapes). Once this set of actions was available, researchers returned to the task of looking for behaviors or sequence types across the categories: "low VA" tapes were inspected for instances of "high VA" behavior, and vice versa. The underlying assumption was

always that all mothers in the sample might well engage in all types of activities. Thus, researcher efforts were directed at finding where the two groups overlapped and where they were distinct. For example, the provisional category of "mother initiates activity" initially emerged from observation of high VA dyads; there was a stronger tendency for this to occur in those interactions. However, in working through all eight videotapes, it was clear (and expected) that low VA mothers also choose activities. It actually became these points of overlap that continued to drive the analysis presented here. The examination of core activities that occur in both high and low VA dyads, but that are enacted in qualitatively different ways, became the research focus.

For the final analysis, the first author retranscribed all instances drawing on the analytic and technical framework of conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). This approach constrains the researcher from introducing intuitions into the analysis, the emphasis instead being on "strict and parsimonious structuralism" (Levinson, 1983, p. 295). It is an agnostic approach, designed to allow for patterns of interaction to emerge, not simply from the analyst's viewpoint, but from the orientations and behaviors of the participants within the interaction.

## Results

High and low VA mothers displayed different orientations to playtime activities with their children. Although it was quite rare that either group of mothers enacted explicitly verbally aggressive behavior, high VA mothers treated the game-focused activities as tasks to be accomplished, tending to control the choice of activity and the manner in which it is played. In contrast, mothers low in trait VA tended to work synchronously with or in support of their child's playful pursuits; their verbal and nonverbal action was primarily in the service of advancing the play itself. The basis for drawing this distinction and its implications is developed in the following analysis.

The excerpts presented here are examples of behaviors that were common across the 8 interactions examined. We have chosen to juxtapose instances that provide clear contrasts and have organized them under general headings of mother-initiated versus child-initiated activity. This distinction is important because it takes into account the fact that in a play setting both mothers and children can make proposals or bids (vocally or nonvocally) to pursue a particular activity. Qualitative differences emerged in both cases: during mother-initiated activities, high versus low VA mothers varied in the degree to which they controlled how the child engaged with the activity; during child-initiated activities,

high versus low VA mothers varied in whether they supported (or not) the development of that play activity. The excerpts presented here provide the clearest instances of these contrasts, but we are by no means presenting all available instances given constraints of the space and the printed medium. Additionally, we present examples from different dyads to show that the contrasts we emphasize are not unique to a particular mother but are repeated or contrasted across dyads. In the transcribed excerpts participant names have been changed to pseudonyms; nonverbal actions are described in the right hand column. Transcription symbols are explained in Appendix A.

### *Mother-Initiated Activity*

In excerpts 1 and 2 (following) we present contrasting cases in which a high VA and a low VA mother initiate activities with their children. The aim here is to demonstrate how commands and suggestions (e.g., directives) are in the service of different activities. In both situations the mother initiates an activity, moving to control the direction of the play, but the low VA mother (excerpt 2) initiates an age-appropriate playful form of competition (a race to put together puzzles). In contrast, the high VA mother directs the child to leave the activity he is engaged in (he became "distracted" by another toy) and return to the one they had started together (assembling shape blocks). Excerpt 1 exemplifies the lack of adjustment to the child's choice of activity that was common in high VA mothers' interactions with their children.<sup>1</sup>

#### EXCERPT 1 (DYAD 6)

- 1 M: Come on let's put this back
  - 2 together then you can play with that.
  - 3 I want you to do this first.= Come on.
  - 4 (3.0)
  - 5 C: (a one)
  - 6
  - 7 M: >No, that don't have nothing to
  - 8 do with it.<
  - 9 M: Look.=
  - 10
  - 11
  - 12 M: =This is what you gotta do.
  - 13 M: You gotta take the shape,
  - 14 C: Yeah.
  - 15 M: and put it where it belo:ngs.=Come on.
- C reaches for blue piece.*  
*C's hand grazes green piece.*  
*M picks up green piece.*  
*M's left arm comes up under child's right and pushes it back.*

The mother's initial inclusively formulated suggestion ("let's put this back together") is reformulated and upgraded into a simple declarative (lines 1-2) as she explicitly indicates a personal desire for the child to first finish the prior project ("I want you to do this first"). During the brief silence (line 4) and vocalization (line 5) the child is reaching for one of the shape blocks, apparently moving to comply. As he reaches, however, he brushes against another block, causing it to roll slightly. The mother treats this move as correctable: In line 7 she begins by saying "No, that has nothing to do with it," and then proposes that he watch her do the task.

During this verbal rejection of his move to return to the play they had been engaged in, the mother also moves her arm up under the child's and pushes the child's arm back (lines 9-11). We characterize this as "physical negative touch" (PNT) as defined by Borrego and colleagues (2004): "any physical touch that is intended to be antagonistic, aversive, hurtful, or restrictive of the . . . child's activity" (p. 899). The child's arm goes up in a high arc, possibly indicating a forceful touch, and he moves his arm out of the mother's trajectory toward the block.

In contrast to excerpt 1, in the following (excerpt 2) a low VA mother also takes control of the play period using commands and suggestions, but this mother is setting up and running a puzzle race between herself and her child. The interaction is a fun competition, evidenced by the laughter and giggling.

## EXCERPT 2 (DYAD 38)

- 1 M: Okay let's have a race.  
 2 C: [Wait. Wait.  
 3 M: We're gonna have a race.  
 4  
 5 (1.0)  
 6 M: Do the other- (-)  
 7 Momma do this.  
 8 D[on't cheat,  
 9 C: [heh heh  
 10 M: don't cheat. On your ma[r]:ks,  
 11 C: [oops. heh heh  
 12 M: get ready,  
 13 (0.2)  
 14 M: You cheat.  
 15 C: heh heh heh heh [heh heh  
 16 M: [SOn your ma[r]:k,  
 17 get ready,\$ get set  
 18 C: heh heh heh  
 19 M: Go.
- C finishing a puzzle.*  
*M hands child another puzzle.*  
*M and child tip puzzles.*  
*C reaches for puzzle piece.*  
*C poised to place piece.*

This low VA mother uses several commands and strong affirmative formulations (e.g., lines 1, 3, 6, 8). In fact, in terms of frequency within this short excerpt, she actually uses more commands than the high VA mother in dyad 6 (above). In addition, the formulations are similar: the low VA mother also initially uses the polite, inclusive form ("Let's . . .") in suggesting the race (line 1) and then reformulates this (line 3) into an upgraded, stronger declarative statement ("We're gonna have a race."). However, beyond this initial similarity, the additional commands in this excerpt are formulaic for the initiation of a race (e.g., get ready, get set, on your mark, go, etc.), and others are common in playful competition (e.g., don't cheat). Thus, while this low VA mother is also clearly controlling the play in formulating how she wants the activity to proceed, she is using this kind of language to organize a form of fun or friendly competition. The child is apparently enjoying the anticipation of the race as evidenced by the laughter that begins at line 9 and continues as the race unfolds (lines 11, 15, 18).

The distinction between the high VA and the low VA mother's approaches to organizing activities in this setting is consistent with a distinction noted across interactions: While both high and low VA mothers direct their children and may try to control their children's activities, for low VA mothers, the play is treated as play, not as a task to be accomplished. The low VA mother in this segment presents a challenge (and a form of teasing) that her child seems to enjoy. The high VA mother (excerpt 1) is simply insisting on a course of activity, one that the child has not been particularly successful at or engaged with.

A similar contrast is illustrated in excerpts 3 and 4. In 3, a high VA mother verbally and nonverbally attempts to alter the child's course of action (toward involvement with other toys). This occurs at the outset of the play period when the mother has chosen a shape sorter for them to play with, but the child is not particularly interested and keeps trying to return to the box of toys.

## EXCERPT 3 (DYAD 21)

- 1 M: >Come here let mommy show you .<  
 2  
 3  
 4 M: Wait a minute.  
 5  
 6 M: This next okay?  
 7 C: M hm ( )  
 8 M: >Come right here=  
 9 Put it right here.<  
 10
- M's hand on C's shoulder;  
 M squeezes and pulls slightly back.  
 M removes toy from C's hand.*  
*C is returning to lean in the toy box.*

- 11 M: Look. Wait a minute.  
 12 M puts her hand on child's  
 13 lower arm and pulls towards  
 14 her; child straightens his  
 15 arm backward and lifts it  
 out of her grasp.

As with the high VA mother in excerpt 1, this high VA mother is also using commands to direct the child's activity to come in line with her activity choices for them as a dyad (lines 1, 4, 8, 9, 11) and she uses physical negative touch (described in lines 11-17) to disrupt the child's trajectory toward other toys. Her verbal and nonverbal behavior indicate that her focus is on completing a particular game that she has chosen, and the child's interest in other toys is not encouraged or supported.

In excerpt 4, below, the low VA mother is also making the choice of activity, but she simultaneously is soliciting the child's input. Just prior to the transcribed talk, the mother asks her child if she wants to "write." The mother is actually reintroducing the idea of drawing/writing on a pad of paper that has been sitting out on the blanket throughout about 9 minutes of puzzle activity.

#### EXCERPT 4 (DYAD 31)

- 1 C: Yeah. I wanna write some (markers).  
 2 M: Here go some paper.  
 3 C: Kay.  
 4 M: What are we gonna do.  
 5 C: We're gonna write.  
 6 M: We're gonna write your name (then)  
 7 we're gonna draw.  
 8 Simultaneously M and C set paper  
 and markers in front of them.  
 9 M: I'm gonna write on one.  
 10 You're gonna write on one.  
 11 C: Kay.  
 12 M: Whatcha wanna write?  
 13 C: I on't know.  
 14 M: Or what you wanna draw.  
 15 (5.0)  
 16 C gets settled in front of sheet of  
 paper which is on the blanket.  
 17 M: Here you can write on this.  
 18 I'll write top of here.  
 19 M hands C pad; M picks up a  
 20 puzzle and puts her single sheet on  
 it.

- 21 C: I'm gonna write my name  
 22 with a red marker.  
 23 M: I'm gonna draw.  
 24 C: I'm gonna write my name first.  
 25 I'm gonna write my last name too.

This low VA mother initiates the writing activity by asking her daughter if she wants to write and then formulates commands that are actually in the service of organizing the play activity (lines 6, 7, 10, 18). This directive behavior is punctuated with questions that solicit the child's input (lines 4, 12, 14). Both the directives and the questions elaborate on the daughter's utterances; for example, when the child offers "we're gonna write," the mother extends this by saying, "We're gonna write your name then we're gonna draw" (lines 6-7). In sum, not only is the mother organizing the structural details (supplying sheets of paper and backing to write on) she is also soliciting the child's preferences for how to proceed.

Overall, in the previous four contrastive excerpts, in which both high and low VA mothers initiate activities with their children, high VA mothers are using commands and suggestions (i.e., directives) to shape the trajectory of the child's activities in a way that indicates a preferred adherence to completing a task and completing it in a certain manner. The formulations also tend to reflect an orientation to pacing ("come on" or "wait"), and physical negative touch was twice used to bodily interrupt the child's course of action. In the dyads with low VA mothers, commands and suggestions are also used. Indeed, in the case of the excerpted "puzzle race" sequence (excerpt 2) they are actually numerous, yet for the low VA mothers, the directives are in the service of organizing materials for a cooperative form of mother-child play.

#### Child-Initiated Activity

Across both high and low VA mother-child dyads, children as well as mothers initiate activities. All of the excerpts in the current section are instances of child-initiated activity. Here we first contrast the way that a high VA and a low VA mother handle a similar action by their respective children. In the first examples (excerpts 5 and 6) we contrast two instances of children spilling Legos® out of a container. The high VA mother (excerpt 5) moves to intervene and uses physical negative touch soon after the blocks begin to spill out, while the low VA mother (excerpt 6) allows almost all of the blocks to spill out before she tells the child to "wait."

In excerpt 5, the play period has just begun. The mother is holding the suitcase (that holds toys) open and pulls out a plastic shapes puzzle.

The child, however, pulls out a container shaped like a boy (with a plastic hat) that contains Legos®. The mother closes the suitcase and turns to the toy and child, nonverbally accepting his choice.

## EXCERPT 5 (DYAD 24)

- 1 M: What's that on his head.  
 2 What's that on his head.  
 3 C: A hat.  
 4 M: A hat.=Ooh let's bring it right here.  
 5 Let's bring it right here.  
 6 Let's see what's (happening).  
 7 M: Can you take it off?  
 8 C: Yes.  
 9 (2.0)  
 10 M: Breathin so hard: d ( )—  
 11 can you get it?  
 12 C: Yeah.  
 13 C: Eh—(.) Pull it.  
 14 M: Aw:  
 15 M: The::re.=Wait.  
 16 *M watches him upturn the container.*  
 17 M: Wait don't do it like that Tom.  
 18 DON'T DO IT LIKE THAT.  
 19  
 20 YOU MAKIN IT GO EVERYWHERE.  
 21 *C steps forward, bends slightly.*  
 22 See.  
 23 (.)  
 24 M: Come on. Let's get out—  
 25 Let's get some more out.

The mother's initial talk (lines 1–12) is formatted to engage with the child and the toy he has chosen. Her "known answer" question (line 1) about the hat on the toy initiates a connection between her and the child; her vocal tone projects excitement and interest in the toy. Her suggestions and commands are also designed to get her involved with the toy and the child.

At line 15, the mother's "The::re" indicates that the hat has been removed. The first "Wait" (line 15) is uttered as the child turns the container over, however, and the Legos® start to drop out. When 4 blocks (of about 20) have tumbled out, the mom puts her hand on the upturned bottom of the container and her voice gets distinctly higher and louder (lines

17–20) as she moves to alter his behavior. We refer to this abrupt, negative shift in voice quality as a "short burst." The mother then puts her hand on the child's arm and pulls him slightly, but enough, so that he bends forward (described in lines 18–21). We characterize her non-verbal action as physical negative touch in that it is restricting the child's activity.

In a similar situation, the child with the low VA mother shakes the Legos® container causing blocks to spill out almost entirely. The mother does not resist this activity, allowing (our characterization) the blocks to tumble around the room. As the last block or two is coming out, the mother's voice gets louder in a manner similar to the short burst described above, but there is no verbal corrective or criticism of the behavior.

## EXCERPT 6 (DYAD 38)

- 1 C: I wanna play with legos.  
 2 M: You wanna play with legos?  
 3  
 4 ((2 lines elided))  
 5 M: Pour em out.  
 6  
 7 ( 8.0 )  
 8  
 9  
 10 M: WAIT WAIT.  
 11  
 12  
 13 C: Heh heh  
 14 M: Ok Come on. Let's—what we gonna build?  
 15 C: We gonna build a (.) a big big  
 16 M: A big tower?
- M reaches for Legos® and removes lid.*  
*C has one hand on container and starts to tip it.*  
*M also has hands under the upturned toy so blocks are falling onto her hands.*  
*Only 2 blocks left in container; the rest are now rolling away across floor.*

The distinction between the low and high VA mothers' orientation to the falling blocks is evident in the rapidity with which the high VA mother sanctions the behavior (it is almost immediate) and her use of the short, harsh tone and physical negative touch to disrupt the child's activity.

The last two examples of child-initiated activity are intended to illustrate how low VA mothers cooperate with their children's course of action but are also actively engaged with it as productive play (not as a task).

In excerpt 7, the low VA mother asks permission to join her child's drawing activity.



## EXCERPT 7 (DYAD 2)

- 1 M: Can I have one?=  
 2 C: =Here rip it out.  
 3  
 4 M: What color.  
 5  
 6 (3.0)  
 7 M: What color do you want.  
 8 (2.0)  
 9 M: It's hard to see on that  
 10 color (.) Bobbie.  
 11 C: What?  
 12 M: It's hard to see on that color.  
 13 C: Mmm  
 14 M: .hh mm What is it?  
 15 C: Sna::ke.  
 16 M: Very nice. It's pretty.
- C is holding marker package.  
 M reaches; C slightly tips pack  
 toward M.  
 C begins to color on a sheet of  
 black paper.*
- M empties markers on the floor.*

At lines 1 and 4 the mother is asking permission to join the child in the coloring by asking for his preference about a color (presumably so she can add to the drawing). Her report (line 9) that it is hard to see what he is drawing (since the paper is black), is not taken up by the child; he persists in drawing on the black paper. The report formulation is a possible criticism, but it is accomplished without directly suggesting, offering, or insisting on changing the paper. Instead, the mother finally just asks what he is drawing (line 14) and positively assess it (line 16).

In excerpt 8 the mother and child are engaged jointly in an activity (preparing a toy for assembly by disassembling it). The child has chosen the toy (shape blocks).

## EXCERPT 8 (DYAD 41)

- 1 C: Th(em) toys?  
 2  
 3  
 4 M: Yup. Me and you supposed  
 5 to play together . . . hhh. hhh  
 6 (10.0)  
 7  
 8  
 9  
 10  
 11
- Child is indicating the  
 suitcase containing the  
 toys.*
- C starts removing small  
 blocks nested in larger  
 base blocks. Mom removes  
 two base blocks, pauses in  
 her activity a moment, and  
 then resumes.*

- 12 C: Them puzzle stay.  
 13  
 14 M: mm We can take em out.  
 15 (0.8)  
 16 M: Get the ones [behind ya.  
 17 C: [This—  
 18 C: This goes, (1.0)  
 19 this goes (0.5) here.
- M arraying base blocks on  
 the floor.*
- C finds a block he can use.*

In this interaction, the child has chosen a direction for the play, and the mother follows. This is common across mother-child interactions with low VA mothers. However, this mother is not simply letting the child lead her in the development of this activity; she is authoritative, helping to shape the contours of the game. Her disagreement with him (at line 14), about whether or not larger blocks can come out, is unopposed by the child. She formulates this as a collective activity ("We can take em out"). Her utterance (line 16), which directs the child to look "behind" him (the blocks are actually at his side) for other blocks is in the service of shaping and moving the play forward.

It should be noted as well that both high and low VA mothers engage in positive affiliative behavior, such as echoing each others utterances in a way that displays alignment and engaging in simultaneous clapping and other celebratory activities. However, because these behaviors did not occur either uniquely in one group and not the other (as did PNT in the high VA mothers) nor did they occur sufficiently in both groups (as with the child-versus-mother-initiated activity) we have chosen not to illustrate them here. It is a reminder, nonetheless, that the mothers in these two categories engaged in a wide variety of activity types. We have primarily shown the negative behaviors of the high VA mothers in contrast with the low VA mothers, but this should not be interpreted as a complete lack of positive, affiliative behavior on the part of high VA mothers.

## Discussion

The central concern of this study was to explore whether mothers with a predisposition to verbal aggression, as measured through self-reports, exhibit communication orientations that are different from mothers scoring low in verbal aggression, even during short, nonconflictual play periods. We approached this question by qualitatively analyzing 8 videotaped interactions of mothers and children playing together for 10 to 12 minutes in a controlled setting. These 8 interactions were chosen from the

extreme ends of the distribution of scores for mothers who participated in a larger study (Wilson et al., 2004; Wilson et al., 2008).

Although there is little that appeared "verbally aggressive" in these interactions, mothers whose self-reports indicated different levels of trait VA exhibit different orientations to playtime with their children. Mothers high in trait VA treat these game-focused interactions as tasks to be accomplished. This manifested in high VA mothers working to control the choice of activity or the manner in which a child engaged with an activity. Consequently, high VA mothers tended to be corrective about how a child was playing or insistent on what activity should be initiated. Mothers scoring low in trait VA, however, tended to work synchronously with the child on the games chosen; their contributions were designed to advance the play *qua* play. For example, both high and low VA mothers issued directives (commands and suggestions, as operationalized for the larger quantitative study), but high VA mothers tended to use them in the service of orchestrating the child's engagement with the activity (e.g., how or what to play with), and low VA mothers used directives in the service of the play activity itself (e.g., initiating a puzzle race, organizing materials for drawing.)

These findings, based on a qualitative analysis of 8 playtime interactions, suggest that the differences in number (of directives) found in the larger quantitative study (Wilson, et al., 2008) may also reflect differences in kind. That is, mothers categorized as "high" and "low" VA both engage in verbal behaviors such as commands and suggestions, but differ, as demonstrated in their verbal and nonverbal behavior, in their overall orientation to interacting with their children. The high VA mothers tended to control the choice of activity and the manner in which it was played (using directives and, on two occasions, physical negative touch). While each excerpt has several interesting overlapping and complexly related features, on the whole excerpts 1, 3, and 5 illustrate how three different high VA mothers attempt to enforce their own, or negatively disrupt, a child's course of action. In contrast, in excerpts 2, 4, and 6, the low VA mothers contribute to (or support) a course of action. Excerpts 7 and 8 illustrate how low VA mothers are not simply supporting their child's lead, but they are also actively engaged in shaping the play (this is equally evident in excerpts 2 and 4). In sum, both high and low VA mothers attempted to exert control at various points in these interactions, but for low VA mothers the verbal and nonverbal action was in the service of advancing the play itself: organizing the materials, initiating friendly competitions, or asking permission to join an activity underway.

Orienting to play activities as a set of tasks to be accomplished means that there is likely a perception on the part of the high VA parent that there are correct or preferred ways of doing certain activities. Such

a perception might lead the mother to correct the child for not doing the activity in the right way. This, then, is what could lead to more commands from the high VA parent. However, orientating to the activity as true play between mothers and children would presume that there were a lot of possible outcomes or that outcomes were not as important as the process of the play itself.<sup>2</sup> For those mothers, in this case the low VA mothers, there was not the same imperative to monitor the child to make sure she or he is playing the "right" way. These two orientations also presume different relationships between mother and child: the first being hierarchical (mother as expert who is "teaching" the child how to proceed), and the second being more collaborative (the child's ideas are valid). In the second case, the mother is more likely to adapt to the child's suggestions rather than attempt to control the child.

Because verbal aggression may undermine self esteem or social competence, this study contributes to our understanding of how this might transpire even in situations, such as play, where significant conflict is not expected. Indeed, if play is defined as "a meaningful context for children's social and cognitive growth" (Tamis-Le Monda, Uzgiris, & Bornstein, 2002, p. 221), then we can expect play episodes to be supportive and positive. Playtime can be a time in which "safe ground" (Morgan & Wilson, 2007) between parent and child is established and affirmed. If, during play, children are corrected repeatedly or meet with impatience, or their proposals for play activities are met with resistance from parents, perhaps this makes it difficult for children to figure out how to elicit positive (or avoid negative) reactions. Or perhaps children may inevitably elicit negative reactions regardless of what they do.

This study offers the opportunity to look closely at several episodes of mother-child interaction so that we can further untangle and appreciate the subtlety of the verbal and behavioral choices that may indicate risk for verbal aggression. Because we cannot make causal connections between the behaviors we illustrate and the self-report scores of the participants, our findings must be taken as descriptive and preliminary. They are limited by the small number of dyads examined and by the complexity of situating a short moment of interaction as illustrative of larger trends.

However, with these caveats in mind, we propose that mothers scoring highest and lowest on the VA scale have very different orientations to interacting with their children in these laboratory-based playtime interactions: The high VA mothers tend to work to control the pace and direction of their children's activities, and the low VA mothers tend to work synchronously or in support of their child's playful pursuits, with their verbal and nonverbal action primarily in the service of advancing the play itself. This finding may well have to do with the setting in which the play occurred. The high VA mothers may be orientating to playing

with their children while being watched as a task in itself, rather than as real play, and this may differ from the low VA mothers' orientation to public viewing of their playtime activity. Whatever may be driving the mothers' differing behaviors with their children, our understanding of the quantitative difference in low and high VA mothers' use of commands and suggestions is further developed in this qualitative assessment of the differing use of these directive utterances.

As these findings are further refined and understood, future controlled studies could test whether clinical coaching interventions might influence outcomes such as parent- or child-perceived self-efficacy. Since parents need to know a broad range of skills, both how to lead and how to follow (Eyberg, 2005), our findings indicate that high VA parents may only be strong in their urge to lead and may lack skill or confidence in being able to follow their child.

## Appendix A

### Transcription Symbols

.	Falling, "final" intonation as at the end of a sentence
;	Continuing, "comma" intonation as in speaking a list
?	Rising intonation
:	Sound stretch; usually elongation of a vowel
CAPS	Louder than surrounding talk
* *	Reduced volume between these signs
> <	Faster speech between these signs
—	(underline) Stressed element
↑↑	Speech between these signs is hearable as higher in pitch
(.)	Untimed "micropause" (less than half of a second)
(1.0)	Timed pause, represented in seconds
=	Talk that is latched, quick continuation; no space or overlap between the utterances
[	Marks onset of overlap
-	(hyphen) Speaker cuts off own speech
( )	Transcriber doubt
((sniff))	Untranscribed sound
\$	(dollar sign) Talk between these signs is with a "smile voice"

### Notes

1. We are not suggesting that there is something inappropriate about asking a child to complete an activity or that every bid for new play by the child

should be followed by the parent. We are simply noting that this high VA mother insists on completion of the prior activity and, more important, that she is impatient with the child's attempt to get back into the game.

2. We acknowledge that *true play* is a relative term. Play takes on different forms between parents and children, between children, and so on. The forms of play we see in this publicly viewed laboratory setting may not even be the forms of play mothers and children engage in at home. We therefore use 'true play' in terms of the present context only, not in the sense of some actual or truest form of play.

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