Mother–Child Play: Collaboration or Power Struggle?

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"The stretching of family boundaries begins in childhood" (Karraker & Grochowski, 2006, p. 346). One of the most complicated aspects of raising children involves letting go, allowing a child to make the next move toward independence. For most parents this is a bittersweet process; for some parents letting go becomes a highly conflictual process. When children are young, renegotiation of power involves subtle shifts managed through verbal and nonverbal communication by parents and their offspring. "The pushes and pulls among family members as they work together to meet individual and family needs require negotiation" (Karraker & Grochowski, 2006, p. 346). Yet, in healthy families, the end goal is to empower every family member.

Negotiating family power does not come easily to all parents. Although some parents make very conscious choices about raising children, many rely on their family-of-origin or cultural patterns to raise the next generation without considering any alternatives. In certain cases, positive outcomes result; in other cases, struggles abound. The transactional nature of relationships, or the mutual influence process, serves as the unpinning for the connection and interaction between a parent and a child. Therefore, styles of play or conflict may work well for one parent-child dyad and become problematic for another one, even in the same family.

Family power struggles are natural and even healthy as long as one person is not always overpowered. Part of parenting involves "letting go" as a child struggles to learn new ways to gain independence. Physically abusive parents are characterized by the following patterns in face-to-face family interactions: (1) frequency, duration, intensity and sequencing of negative parenting behaviors, (2) verbal aggression and physical aggression are linked, (3) abuse reflects how parents form/pursue interaction goals, (4) thinking and feeling differently during family interaction and (5) holding distorted perceptions of their child as an interaction partner (Wilson, 2006).

In the United States corporal punishment, such as slapping, hitting, grabbing, or shoving is declining; it is highest with younger children and declines through adolescence (Olson, DeFrain & Skogrand, 2008). Do you believe these changes might contribute to the use of verbal aggression? If so, what
might be done to also reduce the amount of verbal aggression?

REFERENCES

The mother and child relationship represents one of the most powerful human bonds. Such a connection is seen as uniquely special; many consider it a cornerstone for a child’s well-being and development. Yet, just because persons in a relationship hold the label of “mother” or the label of child does not predict with accuracy the nature or quality of their tie.

For many, the word “play” brings back fond childhood memories. Although difficult to define precisely, researchers have identified several typical elements of play, including that it is: (a) intrinsically self motivated (done for the satisfaction of doing it), (b) freely chosen by participants (children forced into an activity are unlikely to view it as play), (c) pleasurable, (d) non-literal (often involves an element of make-believe), and (e) actively engaged in, physically and/or psychologically (Hughes, 2010). Through play, children use their creativity and imagination, practice adult roles, learn to work in groups and manage conflict, address fears in a non-threatening environment, and discover their own interests (Ginsburg, 2007). Children sometimes play alone, but often play with siblings, peers, parents, and other adult caretakers. By joining their children in play, parents have the chance to see the world through their child’s eyes while communicating that they are responsive and involved with their child (Ginsburg, 2007).

Although play is “fun” rather than “serious,” observing parents and children playing together can reveal important insights about the parent-child relationship. We have studied how mothers who self-report a tendency towards verbal aggressiveness play with their children. We found that they often try to control the interaction rather than following their child’s lead. In other words, a tendency to be verbally aggressive is associated with broader patterns of parenting that may undermine children’s self-esteem or encourage oppositional child behavior even in situations that are supposed to be fun. To clarify this point, we provide a brief background on verbal aggression, describe our own research on parent-child play, and discuss what the findings tell us about the role of communication in defining healthy parent-child relationships.

VERBAL AGGRESSION AND PARENTING
Infante and Rancer (1996) define verbal aggression as behaviors that attack another’s self-concept in order to inflict psychological pain (e.g., feelings of humiliation or embarrassment). They distinguish verbal aggression from argumentation: the former occurs when parents attack their child personally whereas the latter occurs when parents explain why they disagree with their child’s ideas. Examples of verbal aggression include calling a child “dumb,” “lazy,” or “no good” as well as yelling or swearing at a child.

Although all parents say things that they later regret, many studies have found that frequent parental verbal aggression is associated with negative outcomes for children, including low self-esteem, depression and anxiety, having trouble making friends, getting into fights with other children, and poor school performance (Moore & Pepler, 2006; Solomon & Serres, 1999; Teicher, Samson, Polcari, & McGreenery, 2006; Vissing, Straus, Gelless, & Harrop, 1991). These studies show that: (a) parental verbal aggression is associated with negative outcomes for children even after controlling for parents’ physical aggression (e.g., slapping, shoving), (b) the frequency of parental verbal aggression is as good—if not a better—predictor of negative outcomes for children as is parental physical aggression, and
In the communication discipline, a large body of research has focused on trait verbal aggression (VA), or individual differences in people's general tendency to be verbally aggressive. Most studies measure people's trait VA using Infante and Wigley's (1986) verbal aggressiveness scale, which asks respondents to rate whether statements such as the following are true of them: "When individuals are stubborn, I use insults to soften their stubbornness" and "If individuals I am trying to influence really deserve it, I attack their character." Parents who score high on this measure are thought to be extremely sensitive to situational stressors (e.g., a child who repeatedly ignores his/her parent's reminders that it is bed time) and hence more prone to using verbal aggression. Parents high in trait VA report being angry with their children more often and spanking their children more frequently compared to parents who score low on the scale (Bayer & Cegala, 1992, Roberto, Carlyle, & McClure, 2006).

Although parents who self-report a tendency to be verbally aggressive may be most likely to act directly on this predisposition (i.e., attack their child verbally) when faced with situational stressors, the predisposition may be evident in other ways that parents behave even in situations that are much less stressful. Our own research has investigated differences in mother-child play when mothers are high versus low in trait VA.

MATERNAL TRAIT VA AND MOTHER-CHILD PLAY
In our research, we observed 40 mothers playing with one of their children between the ages of 3 and 8 years (Roberts, Wilson, Delaney, & Rack, 2009; Wilson, Roberts, Rack & Delaney, 2008). Mothers were recruited from two social service agencies in a large metropolitan area and paid $50 for participating. On average, mothers were 31 years and had completed 13 years of education. About two-thirds described their ethnic background as "African American," 20% as "Hispanic/Latina" and the rest as "European American," "Asian American," or "Other." About 60% were single mothers who lived with their children, extended family, and/or an unmarried partner. Flyers advertising the study (approved by our university) were posted at the social service agencies, and mothers contacted us to set a time to complete the study.

Upon arriving at the social service agency, each mother was videotaped playing with her child for approximately 12 minutes. A blanket was placed on the floor of a conference room and a box of toys (e.g., puzzles, blocks) was placed on the blanket. A camcorder on a tripod was set in the corner to videotape the play. The mother and child were told that they could play with one or several toys in any order that they chose. They were asked to stay on the blanket so that they would be in range of the camera. After 10 minutes, a researcher knocked on the door and said it was time to clean up. The mother had been instructed to put the toys back into the box at that point, making sure her child helped clean up. This cleanup period lasted about 2 minutes. Upon completing the play session, the mother responded to several questionnaires including the trait VA scale, after which we answered questions and thanked the mother and child for participating.

Initially we trained undergraduate coders to count the number of commands and suggestions each mother used during her play period (Wilson et al., 2008). Commands take the form of imperatives, such as "Take that out of the box" or "Help momma clean up." Suggestions propose a course of action for the child (or mother and child) in the form of a statement, such as "Let's do this" to "You gotta put it in the right hole" (explaining how to use a toy). Coders also identified any instances of verbal aggression or statements in which a mother communicated overt disapproval of her child (e.g., "You're lazy," or "It's no wonder your little brother doesn't like to play with you"). Other undergraduates were trained to rate the degree to which each child was cooperative during the play period. Child cooperation was defined as the degree to which the child's actions were in harmony with the apparent wishes of the mother, and demonstrated by behaviors such as a child complying with the mother's commands/suggestions as well
as asking questions rather than demanding his/her own way. None of the undergraduate coders knew which mothers had scored high or low on the trait VA scale.

Several interesting findings emerged from these initial analyses. First, verbal aggression did not occur in these play-time interactions. The 40 mothers performed virtually no verbally aggressive behaviors as they played with their children. This may reflect that mothers were being videotaped, their children were actively engaged with new toys, and the play sessions were only 12 minutes long. The play periods did not contain the types of situational stressors (e.g., repeated child noncompliance) that would elicit verbally aggressive behavior. A second, key finding is that although mothers were not verbally aggressive, those mothers who scored high on the trait VA scale still used far more commands and suggestions during the play periods compared to mothers who scored low on trait VA. It is important to clarify that all mothers gave commands and suggestions as they played, but mothers high in trait VA did so especially often. For example, the 10 mothers who scored highest on the trait VA scale on average made more than 5 commands or suggestions during each minute of their play period, whereas the 10 mothers who scored lowest on trait VA made about 3 commands or suggestions per minute. Finally, children of mothers high in trait VA were rated as less cooperative than children of mothers low in trait VA. This occurred despite the fact that observers did not know which mothers were high or low in trait VA and even though most children appeared to enjoy the play.

Given these initial findings, we wondered: what were mothers high in trait VA doing with all those commands and suggestions? When low trait VA mothers made commands or suggestions, were they doing similar things? To answer these questions, we selected the four mothers from the overall sample who scored highest on the trait VA scale and the four who scored lowest for more detailed analysis (Roberts et al., 2009). The two subgroups were similar in terms of mothers’ age, ethnicity, and education, and both contained preschool and elementary school-aged children. We created detailed written transcripts for all eight play sessions, taking note of what mothers and children said and also nonverbal features such as vocal pitch, pauses, and gestures. We analyzed what child behaviors led up to mothers’ commands and suggestions, what mothers were trying to accomplish with them, and how children responded, looking for differences that consistently distinguished high vs. low trait VA mothers.

Based on these follow-up analyses, we concluded that mothers high in trait VA not only used commands and suggestions more often than low trait VA mothers, they also approached the activity of “play” itself differently. High trait VA mothers tended to treat the play session as a “task” to be managed, and attempted to control the choice of activities and the manner in which activities were done. Low trait VA mothers tended to treat the play session as something to be done collaboratively with the child (i.e., play for play’s sake), and hence used a variety of actions including commands and suggestions to support their child’s playful pursuits.

Comparing how two mothers—one high in trait VA and the other low—initiate a new activity with their child should help illustrate this difference (for more examples, see Roberts et al., 2009). Excerpt 1 occurs at the start of the play period involving a high trait VA mother and her three-year old son. The mother (M) pulls a shape sorter from the box, but her child (C) is not particularly interested and keeps trying to return to the box of toys.

Excerpt 1 (Dyad 21)

1. M: Wanna play with mommy?
2. C: Uhhuh.
4. (2 second pause) M pulls out shape sorter from box C turns back to box of toys
5. M: Come here let mommy show you. M’s hand on C’s shoulder, M squeezes and
6. pulls slightly back
7. M: Wait a minute. M removes toy from C’s hand
In this example, the child already had pulled out a container of Lego blocks from the toy box, but his mother instead invites him to play with a different toy that she has selected: the shape sorter (line 1). Although the child initially accepts her invitation (line 2), his attention quickly returns to other toys in the box. The mother then uses a series of commands (lines 3, 5, 7–8, and 10–11) along with physical touch (lines 5–6 and 11–13) to prevent her son from moving towards other toys. Her verbal and nonverbal behavior indicate that her focus is on completing a particular game that she has chosen, and her son's interest in other toys is not encouraged. In the process, she sets up a power struggle in terms of who will decide what activities are to be performed.

Excerpt 2 involves a low trait VA mother and her 6 year old daughter. After putting together puzzles, they are transitioning to a new activity: drawing/writing on a pad of paper.

Excerpt 2 (Dyad 31)
1. C: Yeah. I wanna write some markers.
2. M: Here go some paper.
3. C: Kay.
5. C: We're gonna write your name then we're gonna draw.
6. M: We're gonna write your name then we're gonna draw.
7. M: I'm gonna write on one.
8. You're gonna write on one.
9. C: Kay.
10. M: Watcha wanna write?
11. C: I don't know.
12. M: Or what you wanna draw?
14. M: Here you can write on this.
15. I'll write top of here.
16. C: I'm gonna write my name with a red marker.
17. M: I'm gonna draw.
18. C: I'm gonna write my name first. I'm gonna write my last name too.

In this example, the low trait VA mother does make several commands and suggestions (lines 6–7, 9, and 13). Yet this example differs in important ways from the first one. Here, the mother's commands and suggestions help set up a drawing activity (e.g., lines 15–16, where the mother gives them both something on which to draw) that she and her daughter have jointly chosen. The mother asks several questions to solicit her daughter's input (lines 4, 11, 13) and some of her suggestions elaborate on her daughter's answers (e.g., lines 5–6). By the end of the excerpt, the child describes her unique part of the activity (she's going to write both of her names even though her mother has started to draw). The daughter does not resist her mother's suggestions, perhaps because the activity is constructed collaboratively with the mother organizing some details while also inquiring about her daughter's plans or preferences.

IMPLICATIONS
Mothers who score high versus low in trait VA differ not just in how much verbally aggressive behavior they direct towards their children but also in how they orient to positive interactions such as play. Our research has implications for
understanding the nature of trait VA, including what the trait VA scale actually measures (Infante & Wigley, 1986). Rather than only being hypersensitive to situational stressors, parents who score high on trait VA appear to be very sensitive to power or control even during positive parent-child interactions. High trait VA mothers in our study appeared to frame play sessions as situations in which they needed to take control as opposed to playing with their child for play's sake (Wilson et al., 2008). Our findings also may help explain at least part of the reason why children, as they get older, tend to be less satisfied with the parent-child relationship if their parents are high in trait VA (Beatty & Dobos, 1992). Play is supposed to be fun, but what messages do parents communicate to their child by playing in ways that downplay their child's preferences and limit their child's autonomy?

At a more practical level, our findings suggest that high trait VA parents would benefit not just from learning about the harmful nature of verbal aggression, but also from programs in which parents are encouraged to practice following their child’s lead and side-stepping unnecessary power struggles with their children during play. One such parenting education program is the Incredible Years which was designed by Carolyn Webster-Stratton at the University of Washington (Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2001). The program helps parents develop positive relationships with their children, including children with conduct disorders. Training programs such as the Incredible Years would profit from considering how learning child-directed play may be especially valuable for particular types of parents such as parents who are high in trait VA.

REFERENCES


Webster-Stratton, C., Reid, M. J., & Hammond, M. (2001). Preventing conduct problems and promoting social competence: A parent and teacher

**QUESTIONS/THOUGHTS**

1. What is trait VA and what is the impact of trait VA on children? Why might some parents consider verbal aggression to be necessary parenting behavior?
2. What are examples of verbally aggressive behavior? Are parents who are high in trait VA always verbally aggressive with their children? Why or why not?
3. What did the authors learn about the relationship between trait VA and how mothers’ interacted with their children during play?
4. The authors conclude that mothers high in trait VA may use more commands because they view play as a task to be controlled compared with mothers low in trait VA who view play as a collaborative activity. What are some other reasons why mothers high in trait VA may use more commands?

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