MOTHER'S COACHING AND MANAGING CONFLICT IN CHILD'S PEER INTERACTIONS

by

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Children’s relationships and interactions with peers have been shown to be an important factor in social development (Sebanc, 2003). The quality of those relationships predicts future socialization outcomes. Investigating the processes and mechanisms by which children learn to interact positively with peers is important to understand the development of smoothly working peer relationships. This study gathered data to answer two questions related to those mechanisms. The first question was concerned with the associations between mothers’ coaching and involvement in their children’s interactions during play with peers and children’s prosocial competent behavior. The second question specifically investigated mothers’ management of children’s conflict with peers during playtime and its associations with children’s prosocial competent behavior.

During the preschool years, children are learning to interact with peers and self-regulate (Elicker, Englund, & Sroufe, 1992). Also, children are learning more about how to independently navigate their social world and how to establish their own meaningful peer relationships. According to Sebanc (2003), young children who exhibit more prosocial behavior have good peer relationships and friendships; conversely, children who exhibit less prosocial behavior do not have as good peer relationships and friendships.

Socially competent children are actively engaged in their social world and aim to achieve challenges and problems by means of their own resources (Elicker, Englund, & Sroufe, 1992). Thus, during this time socially competent preschoolers begin to find meaningful activities and follow rules without totally depending on their caregivers. The acquisition of prosocial behavior during early childhood is important in the process of becoming socially competent. According to Eisenberg, Fabes, and Sprinrad (2006), prosocial behavior is of obvious importance in any type of relationship with peers. Defined as “voluntary behavior intended to benefit another” (Eisenberg et al., 2006, p. 762), prosocial behavior includes being able to take turns, share toys,
play well, and effectively communicate with peers. Further, prosocial behavior also includes the ability to empathize with a peer by understanding another peer’s emotional or conditional state, and the attainment of sympathetic responses to peers’ distress (Eisenberg et al., 2006). According to those authors, empathy- and sympathy-emotional responses have been strongly implicated with prosocial behavior.

The acquisition of prosocial behavior has been linked to input and support from parents. Although preschoolers are learning how to interact with their social world more independently, their mothers still have a great impact on their social behavior. Mothers may influence children’s social competence outcomes through the kind of relationships they form with their children. In those relationships, children learn behaviors and interaction strategies that they use in social contexts outside the family (Kochanska, 1995). Thus, they acquire skills to solve disagreements and conflicts, plan activities, decide what to do, and in general, interact with others (Bost, Vaughn, Washington, Ceilinski, & Bradbard, 1998; Kerns, Cole, & Andrews, 1998).

It has been hypothesized that a mother’s beliefs, perceptions, and knowledge about social scenarios influence how children interact with peers (Mize, Pettit, & Brown, 1995). A mother’s beliefs of the importance of her child’s social skills can influence the level of supervision she gives her child and peer. For example, if the mother believes taking turns in important skill to have, the mother may be inclined to be more involved during her child’s play to be sure the her child is learning and using that particular skill. A mother’s perception of her child’s social ability may influence the level of involvement during peer interactions as indicated by research (Mize, et al., 1995). Thus, some mothers may choose to be more involved during her child’s play if she perceives her child as being socially withdrawn. According to Mize and colleagues (1995), a mother’s knowledge of ways to promote social relationships between children could also have an
influence on her level of supervision. Importantly, Mize and colleagues (1995) have indicated that maternal involvement and coaching may play a key role on children’s social competence with their peers.

Other research has supported the notion that a mother can influence her child’s social competence in both direct and indirect ways (Ladd, 1992; Ladd, Profilet, & Hart, 1992; Werner, Senich, Przepysny, 2006). According to Ladd (1992), mothers offer guidance and support, monitor and intervene during peer interactions, select play environments, and offer assistance during times of need.

In addition, it has been suggested that the way mothers choose to supervise and manage conflict during her child’s peer interactions can have an impact on children’s present and future social behavior. Ladd, Profilet, and Hart (1992) suggest that the main reason why a mother supervises her children’s activities is to be able to anticipate and protect children from any environmental or relational dangers. No matter the reason, mothers’ supervision and involvement have been hypothesized to improve their child’s positive social development. The way a mother chooses to manage conflict depends in part on the cognitions she has about aggression between children and on the type of aggression, e.g., physical vs. relational (Werner, Senich, & Przepysny, 2006). In this project, interest is in positive conflict management that includes intervening when conflict arises, using reasoning to solve disagreements, positive discipline and redirecting. These strategies presumably help preschoolers develop their social skills and prosocial behavior (Sebanc, 2003).

This research represents an initial step toward further researching mothers’ influences on her young child peer interactions. It builds upon the foundation created by Mize, Pettit, and Brown (1995). In their study, Mize and colleagues (1995) investigated how mothers’ beliefs,
perceptions, and knowledge about peer play affected how they interacted with their children
during playtime with peers. In this study, however, the focus is on whether mothers’ coaching
and involvement in peer interactions, and managing conflict during those interactions are related
to children’s social behavior in different settings. Specifically, this project asks two questions
related to the mechanisms by which children learn how to interact positively with peers. The first
question is concerned with the association, if any, between mothers’ coaching of and
involvement in peer interactions and prosocial competence. The second question asks whether
mothers’ positive managing of conflict relates to children’s prosocial competent behavior. It was
hypothesized that the associations between variables in each question are significantly
associated.

METHODS

Participants

Participants included 30 mothers (N = 30) of children ages 3-5 (18 girls and 12 boys).
Mothers were invited to participate through recruitment at five area preschool/daycare programs,
libraries, the online Purdue publication of Purdue Today, and through word of mouth. These
recruitment sites primarily served middle-class families. Mothers’ mean age was 34 years and
ranged from 27-48. They were children’s main caregiver. The majority of the mothers were
White, while one was Sri Lankan and one was Hispanic. In addition, the majority (28) of the
mothers was married, 1 was divorced, and 1 was widowed. Mothers were highly educated with
the majority of them having at least a bachelor’s degree. About two thirds (66.7%) of the
mothers worked outside of the home, while the other 33.3% were full-time stay at home mothers.
Criteria for participation included having a 3-5 year old child and having the child enrolled at a
daycare or preschool.
Procedures

This was a cross-sectional study on maternal coaching of peer interactions and managing peer conflict that included administering questionnaires to the mother and the child’s teacher. Data were collected by means of three questionnaires, and a short tape recorded interview.

Upon expressing interest in the study, mothers were contacted by the principal investigator to set up a home visit. Mothers were asked to participate in an approximately 45 minute one time home visit. First, the principal investigator explained the purpose of the study and the informed consent form to the mother. Next, the mother was asked to fill out a short social demographic form in order to gather some background information on her family and her child. Next, mothers were asked to fill out two questionnaires. The two questionnaires took approximately 20 minutes to complete. After she filled out the questionnaires, the principal investigator used eight vignettes to gather data on how the mother would manage conflict during various hypothetical situations. Last, the mother was asked to provide her child’s teacher’s contact information. After the visit was complete, the principal investigator contacted the child’s teacher to ask if she would fill out two questionnaires regarding the child’s behavior during peer interactions at school. Each mother and teacher was compensated $10 as a token of appreciation.

Measures

Coaching of Peer Interactions. Mothers used the Mother’s Coaching of Peer Interactions questionnaire to report about how they coach their children and peers during playtime. This is a 20-item questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale for a response format, i.e., 1 (never) – 5 (always). The questionnaire was created for this study. Eight items formed the Coaching of Peer Interactions scale. Responses to the 8 items were averaged and that composite score was used in
analyses. Reliability analyses indicated the internal consistency Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was .85.

Mother involvement in peer interactions was assessed with the Social Interaction Knowledge Interview for Mother composed by Lu and Posada (2011). Seven vignettes were used in order to gather data on how mothers would respond to various hypothetical scenarios during playtime. Of the seven vignettes, five were coded to assess how the mother would manage conflict during these scenarios. Responses were coded by the type of participation in the scenario (e.g., did not participate in the scenario, got a teacher involved, included herself in the scenario) and level of involvement in the scenario (e.g. comforted, consoled her child, offered behavior alternatives). Each response was given a score ranging from 0 (did not do anything) to 3 (included herself and teacher in scenario) for the first variable, and a 0 (did not do anything) to a 3 (offers explanations, solutions, alternatives, or a redirection). Scores for each scenario were averaged and a composite score for both participation and involvement for each participant were calculated. Because preliminary analyses indicated that the two sets of scores were highly correlated ($r = .94, p < .01$), an overall mother’s involvement score was calculated.

Positive Conflict Management. Maternal positive conflict management was assessed with 4 items included in the Mother’s Coaching of Peer Interactions questionnaire (McDowell & Posada, 2011). The response format used was a 5-point Likert scale i.e., 1 (never) – 5 (always). Four items formed the final positive conflict management scale. Responses to the 4 items were averaged and that composite score was used in analyses. Reliability analyses indicated the internal consistency Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was .61.

Social Competence. Mothers and teachers were asked to fill out the Social and Behavior Evaluation Scale. This 30-item questionnaire includes a social competence scale that used in this
study. The scale is formed by ten items and respondents use a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (never) – 5 (often). Responses to the ten items were averaged and that composite score was used in analyses. Reliability and validity data for this questionnaire have been presented by LaFreniere and Dumas (1996). For the present study, reliability analyses indicated the internal consistency Cronbach’s alpha for the scale used was .81 for mothers and .79 for teachers. Mothers and teachers completed the SCBE separately, and answers were not shared between parties.

RESULTS

Mothers’ scores in the two scales for mother involvement when responding to the hypothetical scenarios were found to be highly and significantly associated ($r = .94, p < .01$); thus, the two scores were averaged and a total mother involvement in hypothetical conflict scenarios was used in analyses. Mothers’ and teachers’ reports on social competence with the SCBE also were significantly related ($r = .41, p < .05$). Descriptive statistics for the variables of interest are presented in Table 1. All variables were normally distributed. An overall competence composite score was created and used in analyses. Correlation analyses indicated that the variables of interest and socio-demographic variables were not significantly associated except for the associations between number of siblings and birth order and prosocial competence ($r = .40, p < .05; r = .46, p < .05$, respectively). These two socio-demographic variables were used as covariates in regression analyses.

As a first step, correlation analyses were used to determine whether scores for mothers’ coaching of peer interactions, reports of conflict management, and responses to involvement in hypothetical peer conflict situations were significantly related to social competence scores. Pearson correlation indices are presented in Table 2. While mothers’ positive conflict
management of peer conflict was found to be significantly related to children’s social competence, coaching of peer interactions and involvement in hypothetical peer conflict situations were not.

Based on the findings yielded by the correlational analysis, regression analyses were used to investigate whether positive conflict management predicted children’s prosocial competence after controlling for number of siblings and birth order. Number of siblings and birth order were entered first; subsequently, positive management of peer conflict was entered. Results indicated that the latter contributed significantly to the prediction of social competence. It accounted for an additional 13% to the proportion of variance in social competence explained, after considering the contributions of the covariates (see Table 3).

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to investigate how mothers’ coaching and positive managing of conflict in their children’s peer interactions was related to the children’s prosocial competent behavior. Mothers can have an impact on her child’s social competence by the way they involve themselves and coach their children’s play with peers. Prior research has shown a link between mother’s involvement during playtime and her child’s competent behavior (Ladd, 1992; Ladd, Profilet, & Hart 1992; Werner, Senich, & Przepysynzy, 2006). This study expanded on research by examining two specific aspects of a mother’s influence during children’s playtime.

Question one investigated whether a mother’s coaching was associated with her child’s prosocial competent behavior during peer interactions. A mother’s coaching can be defined in several different ways (e.g., parenting styles, level of involvement), and she may choose to be involved in the play for a number of reasons. Coaching can mean helping children coordinate activities, helping identify similarities between the two children, and giving verbal instruction to
one or both children. When mothers’ responses to the “Mother’s Coaching of Peer Interactions”
quotation were correlated with children’s scores on social competence, a non-significant
association was found. Neither were the scores on maternal involvement related to children’s
social competence. Findings did not support the hypothesis that a mother’s coaching was linked
to her child’s prosocial competent behavior. Although it is very well possible that a mother’s
coaching and involvement has no relation to her child’s prosocial competent behavior, it is
possible that the present study may not have included all aspects of what could be considered
‘coaching’ such as helping children structure activities or directing their play.

In addition to the previously mentioned possibility, a mother’s coaching may not have
had a significant effect on the prosocial competent behavior due to the age and ability of the
child. Like Ladd, Profillt, and Hart (1992) discussed, children around the preschool age are
learning how to engage in the social world more independently. According to research, socially
competent children at this age are becoming more independent in the social world, and they are
learning how to develop activities and follow rules without direct supervision from the mother
(Ellicker et al., 1992). In addition, Mize, Pettit, and Brown (1995) also report that if mothers
believe that their children are socially competent, then they may not be inclined to involve
themselves in their child’s play.

It is important to mention, however, that the interview allowed mothers to give their ideas
on what they would do in certain hypothetical situations. First, the transcriptions showed that a
mother would respond to a scenario based on how serious they thought the scenario was. For
example, if mothers thought that the situation was not a major issue or if they thought that the
children could figure it out for themselves, they would most likely choose not to intervene. In
other situations, like a child coming over and knocking down her child’s tower, the mother
would choose to ask the teacher for advice since they felt like it was the teacher’s space to supervise. This is in line with previous findings that show that the level of aggression that is occurring in the conflict seems to determine when and how much a mother would intervene (Mize, Pettit, & Brown, 1995; Werner, Senich, & Prezepyszny, 2006).

Question two investigated if a mother’s managing of conflict was related to her child’s prosocial behavior. This research question varies from the first because this question specifically asks whether children’s prosocial competent behavior is associated with maternal intervention in peer interactions and activities only when conflict arises. In more detail, question two inquired how a mother’s positive conflict management strategies (reasoning to solve disagreements, using positive discipline and redirecting) were associated with her child’s prosocial competent behavior. The correlation between the scores on the two variables was significant. Findings support the notion that mothers’ positive conflict management of peer conflict is linked to social competence. Further, the unique contribution of positive conflict management to the prediction of social competence was significant even after information on number of siblings and birth order were considered. It seems important for future research to explore individual differences in maternal conflict management in more depth as the way mothers go about responding to peer conflict may teach children how to competently solve disagreements and behave prosocially.

Although the study lead to interesting findings and contributed to existing literature, it still has limitations and room for improvement. An important drawback of the study is concerned with the methods used for data collection. Information was collected through questionnaires and a short tape-recorded interview. For future research, it would be important to approach the issues studied with methodologies that involve actual observations of peer interactions and how mothers get involved and coach those interactions, as well as how they manage peer conflict.
situations. In addition, tape-recorded observations of mothers talking about real conflict with their children could provide more data about a mother’s beliefs, perceptions, and coaching of child conflict. Also, observations of actual child interactions with peers to assess social competence would be desirable.

Another limitation is concerned with the sample small size used (N = 30). Findings need to be replicated and expanded in a larger sample. In addition to the limited sample size, there was not much variability in the socio-demographic characteristics of the families. Most participants were White and middle-class; only two mothers were not White. Future research would need to include samples that include dyads from different cultures and socio-economic sectors of the population.

Despite these limitations, this research shows that although children at this age are learning to become independent and not to rely solely on their caregivers, mothers may still have an influence on how their children interact with peers. The way a mother chooses to handle her child’s conflict can teach the child about prosocial competent behavior that he or she can carry on and build upon for future occasions.
REFERENCES


Kochanska, G (1997). Multiple pathways to conscience for children with different temperaments: From toddlerhood to age 5. Developmental Psychology, 22(2), 228-240. doi: 1037/0012-1649.33.2.228


### Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

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<tr>
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<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
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<td>Coaching peer interactions</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>2.25 - 4.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Involvement hypothetical conflict</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>1.30 - 2.60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive conflict management</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>2.25 - 3.75</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social competence</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>2.85 - 4.75</td>
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Table 2. Correlation Analysis for Social Competence

<table>
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<th></th>
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<th>Involvement</th>
<th>Management</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Competence</td>
<td>-.23</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.43 *</td>
</tr>
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* $p < .05$
Table 3. Regression Models for Social Competence

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<th>Model 2</th>
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<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>2.34 (.47)**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number siblings</td>
<td>.07 (.15)</td>
<td>.05 (.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth order</td>
<td>.22 (.17)</td>
<td>.21 (.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive conflict management</td>
<td></td>
<td>.28 (.13)*</td>
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</table>

| R²                              | .22*         | .35*         |

Note. * = p ≤ .05, ** = p ≤ .01. ** Beta (SE)