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Aggressive Communication, Parental Communication, and Sibling Communication

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Aggressive Communication, Parental
Communication, and Sibling Communication

By

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THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF

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2000

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING
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Abstract

The family is often seen as the center of instruction for children and the base for learning communication patterns. Aggressive communication is often seen in the family, especially as a parenting method. In this thesis, the current state of available literature on aggressive communication in the family is examined. This includes parenting styles, communication relationships between one parent and one child, and the negative effects verbal aggressive communication has on children. A t-test is used to research the responses of 100 students who have verbally aggressive parents. At 2.59, the t-test supports the hypothesis that parenting communication styles concerning aggressiveness is related to the aggressive communication employed by the child in relations with his or her siblings.

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The family is often seen as the source for molding children into the adults they become. Many times, the family is blamed for the adult's wrong doings, blaming the parents for the weak discipline and degenerate moral building of the adult. Many argue that the adult merely acts as he or she was taught growing up, especially when dealing with verbal aggressiveness (e.g., Benoit & Benoit, 1988; Hansen & Schuldt, 1984; Hendrick, 1981; Hendrick, 1988; Infante, 1981; Infante & Rancer, 1982; Infante, 1987; Infante, 1989; Kelly & Goodwin, 1983; Lim, 1990; Rancer, Baukus, & Infante, 1985; Rancer & Infante, 1985). Obviously, this topic is addressed frequently.

However, there has been a decrease in the study of verbal aggression between parents and children. A case can be made that verbal aggressive communication should be studied again. This rendering is used in the literature review to study the available information on verbal aggression in family communication. The position is used to research whether there is a further need to study verbal aggression in the family.

Literature Review

Verbal Aggression.

There are many definitions of verbal aggressive communication. For example, Infante and Wigley (1986, p. 62) describe verbal aggressiveness as a personal attitude. They believe "verbal aggressiveness is the person's predisposition to attack the self-concept of other people in order to inflict psychological pain." Infante, Riddle, Horvath, and Tumlin (1992) further suggest that verbal aggressiveness is an extremely destructive form of aggression for a person to employ. Infante and Gorden (1991) also connect with Infante and Wigley, proposing verbal aggressiveness does not use affirming communication, while non-aggressive communication does use affirming communication. Beatty and Dobos (1993a) suggest verbal aggression is constructed by sarcasm and criticism.

Rubin and Rubin (1992) think some people use verbal aggression as communication because they feel it helps satisfy their emotional needs and wants. Capella (1991) draws from this argument, saying emotional responsiveness for the needs and wants of verbally aggressive people are incorporated with the verbal aggression.

Additionally, verbal aggressiveness causes communicative behaviors to occur, such as hostility and defensive communication. Infante, Riddle, Horvath, and Tumlin (1992) describe psychological pain as the biggest effect verbal aggression has on a recipient. The pain "includes embarrassment, feelings of inadequacy, humiliation, hopelessness, despair, and depression" (Infante, 1987, p. 160).

Verbal aggression has been defined by many. A description of verbal aggression for this study is parallel to Infante and Wigley's explanation: Verbal aggressiveness is the person's choice to attack the beliefs of other people in order to cause psychological pain to that particular person. This explanation is what is used when defining how verbally aggressive parents communicate with their children.

There is significant research that addresses aggressive communication as socialized behavior from childhood. The main aspects covered in this area include relationships with parents and verbal aggressiveness, where verbal aggression traits originate, and relations between trait verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness in association to parenting styles. All the covered areas

mentioned focus on the parenting styles that contribute to the aggressiveness in the children when they grow to adulthood.

It is important to define parenting styles in order to understand the importance they have in the study. Parenting styles will be identified for this study as the method in which a parent raises his or her child (Bayer & Cegala, 1992).

There are different viewpoints one can take regarding verbal aggression and parenting styles. First, research suggests the relationships between parents, children, and verbal aggressiveness is related to parenting styles (e.g. Bayer & Cegala, 1992; Benoit & Benoit, 1990; Infante & Gordan, 1989; Infante and Wigley, 1986; Infante, Myers, & Buerkel, 1994; Infante & Gordan, 1991; Rubin & Rubin, 1992; Rosenfeld & Bowen, 1991; Rubin, Graham & Mignerey, 1990; Vangelisti, 1993).

Secondly, research supports that the relationship between one parent to one child is also related to the verbal aggressiveness children later use (e.g. Bandura, 1986; Beatty & Dobos, 1992a; Beatty & Dobos, 1993a; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly & Karau, 1991; Eagly, Makhigani & Klonsky, 1992; Fitzpatrick, 1988; Martin & Anderson, 1997).

Lastly, we find support for parental communication styles, regarding verbal aggressiveness as a negative trait having negative effects on the children. This is supported by many communication scholars (e.g. Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989; Infante and Gorden, 1985; Infante and Gorden, 1989; Infante, Trebing, Shepherd, & Seed, 1984; Infante & Wigley, 1986).

The topic of verbal aggressiveness is important to communication scholars. One major reason verbal aggressiveness study is important is because it helps us understand the causes and effects surrounding aggressive behavior. The study of verbal aggressiveness is also important when considering its effect on communication between siblings.

Parenting Styles.

Parenting styles can negatively affect the communication present in the relationship between parent and child. This occurs through the use of destructive parenting methods that use verbal aggressiveness.

Destructive parenting methods include verbal aggressiveness and hostility. Infante, Myers, and Buerkel define hostility as "the trait to use symbols to express negativism, irritability, resentment, and suspicion" (1994,

p. 73). This definition is supported throughout the communication discipline (e.g. Berkowitz, 1962; Berkowitz, 1973; Gorden, Infante, & Izzo, 1988; Infante, 1988; Infante & Wigley, 1986; Jensen, 1981; Onykewere, Rubin, & Infante, 1990; Payne & Sabourin, 1990).

Hostility is a major element of destructive parenting styles. However verbal aggression is seen as the more commonly used element (Berkowitz, 1973; Duck, & Miell, 1986; Graham, Barbato, & Perse, 1993; Hosman, 1991; Infante & Wigley, 1986).

Parenting styles that use verbal aggression do appear to negatively affect a child's social, cognitive, and emotional development (Bayer & Cegala, 1992). It can be argued that verbal aggressiveness does negatively affect a child's development in communication if the aggression is used as a parenting style. The parenting behavior occurs in patterns (Bayer & Cegala, 1992). The patterns include autonomy-love, control-love and control-hostility.

Autonomy-love as a parenting pattern is an argumentative parenting style. "While (the parents) expect appropriately mature behavior of children and consistently enforce family rules, autonomy-love parents are generally child-centered and openly express their

positive regard" (Bayer & Cegala, 1992, p. 303). This parenting style is not usually considered verbally aggressive.

The control-love quadrant of parenting involves "a complex and conflicted set of parental attitudes and behaviors" (Maccoby and Martin, 1983, p. 45). This parenting style is referred to as the Permissive style (Baumrind, 1967). Permissive parents often use guilt or diversion tactics for punishment when they exercise their authority. However, permissive parents usually do not engage in arguments with their children. Permissive parents are not seen as verbally aggressive.

The last parenting style is control-hostility. This is called the Authoritarian style of parenting and uses verbal aggression tactics (Baumrind, 1967). Parents using the Authoritarian parenting style are highly demanding, yet simultaneously unresponsive to their children's needs and desires. Their verbal messages to their children are unilateral and tend to be negative. The Authoritarian parent usually does not give reasons when he or she issues a directive to a child. Additionally, the authoritarian parenting style does not encourage verbal responses from the children (Baumrind, 1967).

The parenting style a parent chooses to use affects the amount of verbal aggression employed in the relationship with the child or children. Obviously, the Authoritarian parent uses verbal aggression mostly, and does tend to have a negative effect on the children's communication development (Infante, Myers, & Buerkel, 1994; Horvath, 1995; Rubin, Graham, & Mignerey, 1990). A parenting style employing verbal aggressiveness is a model for the children in the family, which supports the need to study verbal aggressiveness between siblings.

Verbal Aggressiveness from One Parent to One Child.

Sometimes the communication one parent gives to one child is verbally aggressive. This can affect the way the one child reacts to the parent and uses communication.

(Martin & Anderson, 1997; Beatty & Dobos, 1993b).

Communication in relationships is often symmetrical.

Therefore, children may become verbally aggressive toward the parent who is verbally aggressive.

Beatty and Dobos (1992a) found that verbal aggression from one parent to one child results in the child negatively responding to the relationship. The use of aggressive communication from one parent to one child results in conflicts and also dissatisfaction with the

relationship between the parent and child (e.g. Bem & Allen, 1974; Fitzpatrick & Badzinski, 1985; Galvin & Brommel, 1991; Johnson & Medinnus, 1969).

This information could lead to an assumption that verbal aggressiveness from parents to children can be used between siblings. Beatty and Dobos (1992a) state that verbal aggressiveness from one parent to one child may cause hostility between the siblings in the family. This point offers support for the need to study verbal aggressiveness between siblings. Indirectly, the verbal aggression the one parent uses with the one child influences the child's verbal aggression with his or her siblings.

Verbal aggression used in a relationship between one parent and one child may also result in hostility and a termination of the relationship. Negative views of the parent may be formed by the child, and in adulthood the child may terminate the relationship (Beatty and Dobos, 1992b). This could lead to use of verbal aggression between the terminating adult child and his or her siblings.

Parenting Communication Styles and Negative Effects on Children's Communication Styles.

Communication traits are "enduring consistencies and differences in individuals' message-sending and message-receiving behaviors" (Infante, Rancer, & Womack, 1997, p. 150). How one learns to behave and communicate can happen in many ways. One that is apparent and supported by researchers is the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Bandura (1986) states that cognition plays a large role in the learning process. People can learn new behaviors and communicating styles, including negative communicating styles, from others in their environments (Bandura, 1986).

Verbal aggressiveness, when used as a parenting style from one parent to one child, is a destructive trait with negative consequences (Infante, 1987; Infante & Rancer, 1996; Infante & Wigley, 1986). Considering the social cognitive theory, a parent who uses aggressive communication passes the communication and its negative effects on to the children (Martin and Anderson, 1997). The communication interaction that has the greatest effect on children are the communication interactions they have with their parents (Vuchinich, Vuchinich, & Coughlin, 1992). The

children use the aggressive communication themselves. They do so in a negative fashion as they model their parents. This type of communication style has negative effects on the children.

The verbal aggressive communication style convinces the child this communication form is correct. This communication style is probably present in every situation in which the child may be involved, although the form varies (Horvath, 1995). The family context is where most children learn to communicate and how to communicate. It is also where most children learn how to think about communication (Bruner, 1990 & Vangelisti, 1993). If this context is a negative, destructive one, such as an environment where verbal aggression is used as a communication style, parenting style, and relation between one parent to one child, then there will be negative effects on the child's communication habits.

Given all the past information available, it is supported that verbal aggressive communication is negative. It is also supported that parental styles using verbal aggressive communication have negative effects on the children. Lastly, it is supported that relationships between one parent and one child can be negative if verbal

aggression is used. Although there is much research support, little is current. Currently there is also little emphasis on the effects aggressive communication has between siblings.

There is no extensive research on the correlation between parental verbal aggression and child verbal aggression. Are the two related? This is a major gap in the current research.

The gap consists of having no available research on verbal aggression that examines its possible effect on children's verbal aggressiveness resulting from their parents' aggressiveness. We also do not know what effect parental verbal aggressive communication has on the communication between siblings.

With this previously mentioned research, there is an apparent gap in the research regarding verbal aggressiveness in the family. Parental verbal aggression is widely covered, while verbal aggression between siblings resulting from parental verbal aggression is limited. Verbal aggression between siblings resulting from parents' verbal aggression needs to be studied. Also, verbal aggression from a child to his or her friend resulting from parents' verbal aggression needs to be studied. Obviously,

verbal aggression between siblings as a result of parental verbal aggression needs to be studied.

Contradictions are also important to look at with this topic. The major contradiction in the research currently available finds that verbal aggression is not learned behavior (e.g. Beatty & Dobos, 1992a; Beatty & Dobos, 1992b). However, other research has found that it is learned behavior (e.g. Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986). This type of contradiction could be further studied to find validity in one of the research areas.

There are weaknesses, too, in the methods of research currently available. The main weakness encountered in the literature is the difference in surveys used to assess verbal aggression in families. The different surveys may not have the same validity. Therefore, the results may turn out more or less favorable for the individual conducting the research. Perhaps using one survey form could eliminate this weakness. The survey could specifically look for verbal aggression in a single way. The use of one survey would help validate the research findings. This weakness can be easily fixed.

The research that has been conducted is outdated. The research has not been extensive in areas such as, the

relationship between parental verbal aggression and child verbal aggression. This shows a need for this particular research.

Research Hypothesis and Questions

With respect to the intensive study completed thus far on verbal aggression and parenting, the following hypothesis was generated.

H1: Parenting communication style concerning aggressiveness is related to the aggressive communication employed by the child in relations with his or her siblings.

This hypothesis targets a new area of study to be explored.

The research questions employed were the following:

RQ1: What parenting style was used by the parents of verbally aggressive adults?

RQ2: What communication style is used by the adult to his or her siblings whose parents use verbal

aggressiveness for communication and an

Authoritarian parental style (control-hostile)?

Methodology

Subjects.

The subjects used to test the hypothesis were 100 college students in a Midwest public university of about 10,000 total students. Subjects were solicited through the auspices of the university housing and required speech communication classes; participation was voluntary.

Procedures.

The subjects were given a survey with demographic questions and with 20 questions using a characteristic five-point Likert scale. The survey consisted of 10 questions about the subjects' parents' communication style towards their children. The survey included 10 questions pertaining to the subjects' communication style towards their siblings. The survey used Infante and Wigley's (1986) Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (see Appendix).

Timeline.

The following timeline was employed:

November 16, 1999: Surveys were distributed to SPC 1310
classes and residence halls

November 17, 1999: Surveys were collected from classes and
residence halls

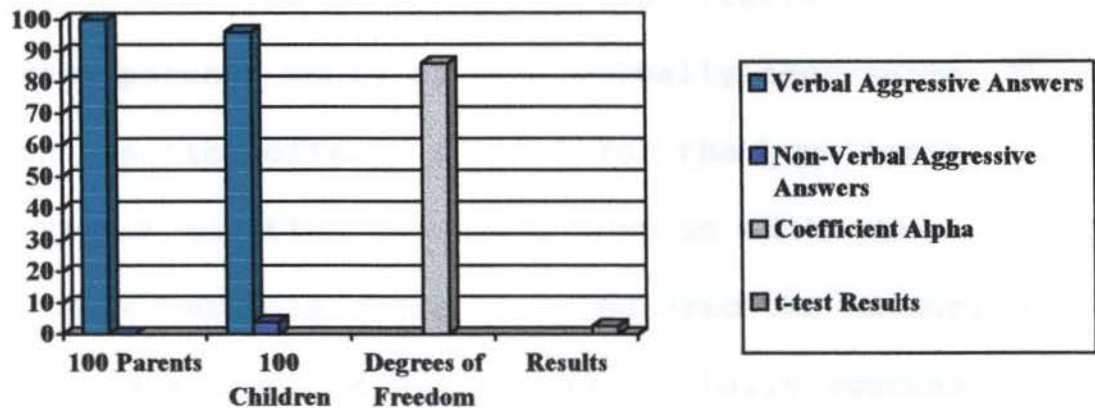
November 20, 1999: Data analysis and processing

Measurement.

Students whose parents displayed the typical verbal aggressive communication patterns as explained earlier constituted one group. The students whose parents did not display the typical verbal aggressive communication patterns explained were used as the other group. Thus, the independent variable was parental communication pattern. The dependent variable was the answers given to the questions. A t-test was utilized because it is able to measure the differences between the two groups of verbally aggressive parents and verbally aggressive children. An independent-sample t-test was used to measure the differences between the parents' verbal aggressiveness and their children's verbal aggressiveness.

Results

After completing the survey evaluation, a direct connection between the parents' verbal aggressiveness and the children's verbal aggressiveness was found. The differences between the parents' verbal aggressiveness and their children's verbal aggressiveness were measured using an independent-sample t-test. The degrees of freedom in the t-test were 86. After conducting the t-test, the results showed $t = 2.59$.



Discussion

Conclusions

Consistent with the few observations on parental communication among literature about verbal aggression, the hypothesis was supported. The t-test showed support for the hypothesis that parental communication style concerning aggressiveness is related to the aggressive communication employed by the child in relationships.

Research question number one was answered by the use of an Authoritarian parenting method. It showed a more Authoritarian parenting style was used with the children who were verbally aggressive. This addressed the implication that the children of Authoritarian and verbally aggressive parents would also be verbally aggressive. This research question offered support for the hypothesis.

Research question two found that an adult whose parents were verbally aggressive and used the Authoritarian parental style almost always became verbally aggressive himself or herself. This research question also offered support for the hypothesis.

More research may be conducted on the topic of relationships between parental verbal aggression and child

verbal aggression. This study supported the idea that the children use verbal aggression displayed by parents.

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Appendix

Instructions: This survey is concerned with how we try to get people to comply with our wishes.

Indicate how often each statement is true for you personally when you try to influence other persons.

Use the following scale, writing in the number next to the question:

1 = Almost never true

2 = Rarely true

3 = Occasionally true

4 = Often true

5 = Almost always true

1. I am extremely careful to avoid attacking individuals' intelligence when I attack their ideas.
2. When individuals are very stubborn, I use insults to soften the stubbornness.
3. I try very hard to avoid having other people feel bad about themselves when I try to influence them.
4. When people refuse to do a task I know is important, without good reason, I tell them they are unreasonable.
5. When others do things I regard as stupid, I try to be extremely gentle with them.
6. If individuals I am trying to influence really deserve it, I attack their character.
7. When people behave in ways that are in very poor taste, I insult them in order to shock them into proper behavior.
8. I try to make people feel goo about themselves even when their ideas are stupid.
9. When people simply will not budge on a matter of importance I lose my temper and say rather strong things to them.
10. When people criticize my shortcomings, I take it in good humor and do not try to get back at them.

The next portion of the survey is concerned with our parents trying to get people to comply with their wishes. Indicate how often each statement is true for your parents when they try to influence other persons. Please use the following scale, writing in the number next to the question:

1 = Almost never true

2 = Rarely true

3 = Occasionally true

4 = Often true

5 = Almost always true

1. When individuals insult my parents, they get a lot of pleasure out of really telling them off.
2. When my parents dislike individuals greatly, they try no to show it in what they say or how they say it.
3. My parents like poking fun at people who do things that are very stupid in order to stimulate their intelligence.
4. When my parents attack a persons' ideas, they try not to damage their self-concepts.
5. When my parents try to influence people, they make a great effort not to offend them.
6. When people do things that are mean or cruel, my parents attack their character in order to help correct their behavior.
7. My parents refuse to participate in arguments when they involve personal attacks.
8. When nothing seems to work in trying to influence others, my parents yell and scream in order to get some movement from them.
9. When my parents are not able to refute others' positions, they try to make them feel defensive in order to weaken their positions.
10. When an argument shifts to personal attacks, my parents try very hard to change the subject.

Please circle the answers to the following questions:

What is your gender?

Female

Male

What is your ethnic background?

African-American

Native-American

Caucasian

Asian/Pacific Islander

Mexican-American

Other Hispanic-American

Other