

Preteens Talking to Parents: Perceived Communication and School-Based Aggression

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Abstract:

In order to combat escalating aggression and violence in schools, it is important to understand the relationship between intrafamilial communication and aggressive behaviors. In this study, the authors examined the link between preadolescents' perceptions of parent-child communication and their levels of school-based aggressive behavior. The results indicate that perceived effective communication was highest for mother-girl dyads, followed in order by mother-boy, father-boy, and father-girl dyads. Second, no difference between preadolescents' levels of aggressive behaviors in school on the basis of gender of child was found. Finally, the results indicated that preadolescents' perceptions of effective parent-child communication were negatively correlated with school-based aggression. Implications for prevention and intervention strategies are discussed.

Keywords:

preteens, adolescents, children, parents, communication, parent-child communication, aggression, school aggression, school, counseling, family counseling, mother-child, father-child, dyadic interactions, open communication, closed communication, Aggression Questionnaire, Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale

Article:

With limited opportunity for interactions with extended family members, it appears that being able to communicate with parents in a healthy manner is imperative for the well-being of preadolescents (Hunter, 1985; Noller, 1995). For example, Beyers, Loeber, Wikström, and Stouthamer-Loeber (2001) found deficient parent-child communication to be a factor for future aggressive behaviors of male adolescents in low-socioeconomic status (SES) localities. In addition, parental modeling of communication affects how children relate to other adults and peers throughout their lives (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Sabatelli & Anderson, 1991). Children who learn aggressive behaviors in their families are at higher risk for peer rejection, depression, and withdrawal (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Further, these children are more likely to be aggressive in peer interactions (Patterson, Dishion, & Bank, 1984), to engage in various forms of delinquent behavior (Cashwell & Vacc, 1996), and to further the cycle of aggression with their own children in years to come (Conger, Neppl, Kim, & Scaramella, 2003).

Most commonly, researchers have examined parent-child interaction from the parents' perspective (Margalit, 1985). Researchers in the area of family communication rarely focus on children's perceptions, yet these viewpoints are necessary in providing a comprehensive picture of the family environment (Amato, 1990; Sagatun, 1991; Zaslow & Takanishi, 1993). Furman and Buhrmester (1985) compared children's perceptions of various types of relationships and suggested that future research be conducted to explore the relationship between children's perceptions and existent interactional patterns within the family. Similarly, Zaslow and Takanishi (1993) stated that a benefit of understanding adolescents' behavior and perspectives using adolescents' self-reports is the development of more appropriate intervention approaches. From this information, researchers can gain further insight into the connection between family interactions and school-based behavior and how children's interactions transfer from the home to school settings.

Few researchers have examined preadolescents' perceptions of family communication as related to school-based aggression. Patterson and Dishion (1985) noted that aberrant behavior typically begins in preadolescence because of maladaptive family interactions. Thus, research needs to be conducted to further understand this particular age group's perceptions of parent-child communication in order to decrease school-based aggression. Other parent and child characteristics need to be considered in terms of how perceptions are filtered. For example, children's gender (Callan & Noller, 1986) and parents' gender (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990) may be important factors in how children view communication with their parents. Jackson, Bijstra, Oostra, and Bosma (1998) found that mother-child communication is perceived as more positive than father-child communication by both boys and girls. Thus, the potential interaction between parents' and children's gender on preadolescents' perceptions of parent-child communication merits attention.

The focus of this study was on preadolescents' perceptions regarding communication with parents in the home and how these relate to aggressive behaviors. The study was designed to examine fifth through seventh grade preadolescents' perceptions of communication in parent-child dyads and the link between these perceptions and levels of school-based aggressive behavior. Parents' and children's gender, because they may influence the relationship between family communication and the level of school aggression, were considered. The research questions addressed were: First, do preadolescents' perceptions of parent-child communication vary on the basis of the gender of children or parents? Second, do preadolescents' aggressive behaviors in school vary on the basis of the gender of children? Third, do preadolescents' perceptions of parent-child communication relate to aggressive behaviors in school?

METHODS

Population and Sample

Participants included 28 fifth graders, 18 sixth graders, and 54 seventh graders (aged 10 to 13 years) in two public schools in the southeastern United States; only children who had at least one parental figure in the home were included in the study. The majority of participants were female (58%, $n = 58$), resided with both biological parents (59%, $n = 59$), and were Caucasian (73%, $n = 73$), with 18 (18%) African Americans, 1 (1%) Native American, 4 (4%) Hispanics, and 4 (4%) classified as "other." Although 146 students participated in the study, 46 students exceeded the criteria on the inconsistency scale of the Aggression Questionnaire (AQ) and were excluded.

Instruments

Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale (PAC)

The PAC (Barnes & Olson, 1982) is a 20-item Likert-type scale used to obtain participants' perceptions of mother-child communication and father-child open and problem communication. Barnes and Olson (1982) reported the Cronbach's α reliability coefficient for the total scale ($r = .88$). The total scale score was calculated by summing all items, with reverse scoring used for items on the Problems in Family Communication subscale, and was used in this study as the predictor variable, parent-child communication. The fifth grade reading level on this instrument was lowered by a grade level with the permission of David H. Olson (personal communication, August 2000), and the modified instrument was field tested with 25 seventh grade students for parallel-forms reliability (Mother Forms $r = .97$; Father Forms $r = .90$).

Aggression Questionnaire (AQ)

The AQ (Buss & Warren, 2000) is a 34-item, 5-point, Likert-type scale consisting of five factors: Physical Aggression, Verbal Aggression, Anger, Hostility, and Indirect Aggression. The instrument provides a total scale, which has reported reliability (coefficient α) of $r = .90$ for the group aged 9 to 10 years and $r = .92$ for the group aged 11 to 12 years. The total scale was used as a composite score representing the outcome variable of school-based aggression.

Demographic Questionnaire

Students also completed a demographic form including information on gender, family structure, family members' ages, ethnicity, and child residence arrangements. In addition, students indicated whether they were

thinking of a biological custodial parent, a custodial stepparent, or a cohabitating partner of a custodial biological parent when completing the PAC. This information was used to verify that students completed the PAC on the basis of parents with whom they resided.

PROCEDURES

To ensure an adequate sample size, the middle school principal requested the participation of two academic “teams” at each designated grade level (sixth and seventh grades). Each team was composed of three classrooms. Parents were sent a letter that explained the purpose of the study, requested active parental consent for the children to participate, and described steps to ensure confidentiality.

Participants completed all instruments in one sitting during class time and received no incentives. Standardized test directions and the rights of the test takers were explained in age-appropriate language before measures were administered. Students were informed that participation was voluntary and completed a written assent form.

Distributed in a packet, instruments were completed in the preferred order of students. Students were asked to complete the AQ on the basis of their self-perceived behavior in school. Also, students were asked to complete the modified form of the PAC with their primary caregiver in mind and then specify the relation of that person. Students specifying two parents in the home answered a total of 40 items regarding parent-child communication (two pages of 20 items for each caregiver). Students specifying one parent in the home answered a total of 20 items.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for the 2 × 2
(Gender of Parent × Gender of Child)
ANOVA Using Modified Parent-
Adolescent Communication Scale Scores

Parent Gender	Child Gender	
	Male	Female
Male		
<i>n</i>	32	44
<i>M</i>	73.16	64.61
<i>SD</i>	16.02	17.43
Female		
<i>n</i>	42	58
<i>M</i>	74.45	77.55
<i>SD</i>	16.49	13.04

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Previous researchers (Barnes & Olson, 1982), working to establish norms for the PAC, found mean scores of 66.56 (*SD* = 12.10) for the PAC-Mother and 63.74 (*SD* = 12.02) for the PAC-Father. For the current participants, the descriptive statistics for responses regarding both mothers (*M* = 76.25, *SD* = 14.59, *n* = 100) and fathers (*M* = 68.21, *SD* = 17.27, *n* = 76) indicated higher ratings of effective parent-child communication for the current sample than the standardization sample of the PAC. The differences may be due to older adolescents participating in the norming sample (the majority of whom were 16 to 20 years of age), because parent-child communication is often perceived to decrease in mid- to late adolescence (Jackson et al., 1998; Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990).

Buss and Warren (2000) found a raw mean score of 83 for the youth standardization sample (ages 9 to 18) of the AQ. The raw score of 88.10 (*SD* = 24.31, *N* = 100) for the current sample (ages 10 to 13) would translate into a *T* score of 51 from the original sample. Thus, the AQ scores of respondents in this study appear consistent with scores obtained by Buss and Warren in their norming study.

Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 posited that there would be no difference between preadolescents' perceptions of parent-child communication on the basis of the gender of children or parents. To test this hypothesis, a 2 (gender of parent) x 2 (gender of child) ANOVA was used (see Table 1). The observed F statistic ($F = 5.86, df = 1, p < .05$) exceeded the F critical value using a .05 α level. Post hoc analyses indicated that the main effect for children's gender was not statistically significant, because the observed F statistic ($F = 1.28, df = 1, p > .05$) did not exceed the F critical value using .05 α level. The main effect for parents' gender, however, was statistically significant, because the observed F statistic ($F = 8.76, df = 1, p < .05$) did exceed the F critical value using a .05 α level. Further, there was a significant interaction effect between the gender of parents and the gender of children ($F = 5.86, df = 1, p < .05$). Figure 1 illustrates the differences between perceived communication within the four different possible parent-child dyads between the gender of parents and the gender of children. Higher scores indicate more effective parent-child communication, and scores can range from 20 to 100.

Hypothesis 2 posited that there would be no difference between preadolescents' aggressive behaviors in school on the basis of the gender of children. To test the hypothesis, a student's t test for independent samples was used. For the 42 male respondents, the mean was 88.69, and the standard deviation was 25.70. For the 58 female respondents, the mean was 87.67, and the standard deviation was 23.47. The t test failed to reject the null hypothesis ($t = .20, df = 98, p > .05$). Thus, no statistically significant difference was found between reported preadolescents' aggressive behaviors in school on the basis of the gender of children.

Hypothesis 3 posited that parent-child communication would account for a significant amount of the variance in school-based aggressive behaviors. To test Hypothesis 3, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to systematically evaluate the explained variance of school-based aggression from preadolescents' perceptions of parent-child communication. In order to obtain the unique effect of each independent variable (i.e., mother communication and father communication), a multiple regression was conducted using the dependent variable (school-based aggression) with both independent variables (mother communication and father communication) for the 67 participants who reported living in two-parent homes (i.e., two biological parents or blended families; see Table 2). The overall regression of the independent variables accounted for 22% of the variance, $R^2 = .22$, $F(2, 64) = 8.99, p < .05$, in school-based aggression. In this model, communication with the father was a stronger predictor of school-based aggression ($\beta = -.55$) than communication with the mother ($\beta = -.20$).

DISCUSSION

A difference between preadolescents' perceptions of parent-child communication on the basis of the gender of children or parents was noted with participants. Communication between mothers and daughters, mothers and sons, fathers and daughters, and fathers and sons was found to be quantitatively different. It appears that although both girls and boys in this sample reported better communication with their mothers than with their fathers, the discrepancy between communication with mothers and fathers was stronger for girls than for boys. This information could be particularly useful for counselors working with preadolescent girls who are acting aggressively in school. Engaging their fathers in counseling could prove beneficial in successfully increasing father-daughter communication and, perhaps, decreasing school-based aggression, though the latter supposition requires further empirical examination using experimental rather than correlational methods.

No difference between preadolescents' levels of aggressive behaviors in school on the basis of the gender of children was found. This supports similar research findings that adolescent boys and girls both engage in aggressive behaviors (i.e., direct or indirect aggression) to some extent (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Salmivalli, Kaukianinen, & Lagerspetz, 2000). This finding suggests that both boys and girls need to be targeted for prevention and treatment efforts related to school-based aggression.

Table 2
Multiple Regression Analysis Results for Explained Variance From Parent-Child Communication Among Respondents in Two-Parent Homes

Variable	Coefficient	SE	95% Confidence Interval		Standardized Coefficient
			Lower	Upper	
Intercept	138.16	15.27	107.66	168.66	—
Father communication (slope)	-0.56	0.19	-0.93	-0.18	-.55
Mother communication (slope)	-0.46	0.10	-0.66	-0.25	-.20

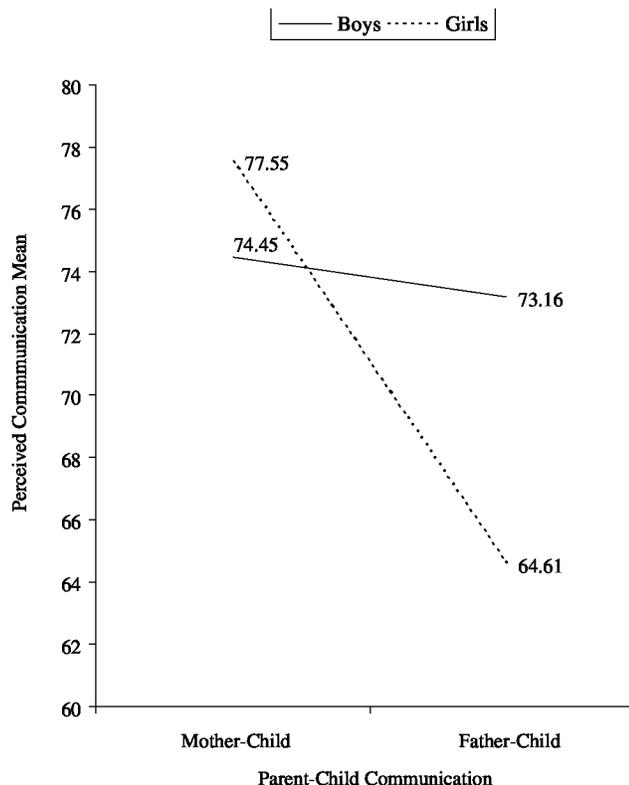


Figure 1: Mean of Preadolescents' Perceptions of Parent-Child Communication on the Basis of the Interaction of Children's and Parents' Gender

The results in general indicate that preadolescents' perceptions of effective parent-child communication are negatively correlated with school-based aggression, with 22% of the variance accounted for in the overall regression model. The model was considered for respondents in two-parent homes, and the results indicated that father-child communication ($\beta = -.55$) was a stronger predictor of school-based aggression than mother-child communication ($\beta = -.20$).

It is important to note, however, that parents were defined as male or female primary caregivers residing in the same households as the children, including a biological custodial parent, a custodial stepparent, or a cohabitating partner of a custodial biological parent. Therefore, treatment interventions for two-parent homes may include any variation that fits the definition of a parent used in this study.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING

Preadolescents' perceptions of parent-child communication appear to differ on the basis of the gender of children and parents, with the results of the current study indicating an interaction between the two. Thus, the treatment of parent-child conflict needs to incorporate perceptions of relations with each parental figure (Reed & Dubow, 1997). In terms of counseling children, especially girls who behave aggressively at school, it seems important that fathers are involved in treatment and prevention, because father-child communication is a stronger predictor than mother-child communication of such behavior among children in two-parent homes. Although the findings of this study are correlational, and experimental studies are warranted, the results suggest that residential fathers' communication with preadolescent children might be an integral focus in counseling. However, fathers are less likely to seek counseling and to self-disclose in sessions compared with mothers (O'Brien, 1988). Counselors can encourage fathers to participate in counseling by expressing the benefits of therapy during phone invitations, providing supplementary sessions to focus on fathers' own concerns, engaging fathers in family sessions, and using a structured and directive therapeutic style (Carr, 1998). Fathers tend to prefer structured therapy rather than traditional "talk" therapy (O'Brien, 1988).

Counselors need to understand the needs, preferences, and perspectives of fathers in counseling in order to provide the most effective treatment possible in working on parent-child communication. When involving fathers in family counseling, developmental and social influences need to be addressed. Often, the fathers of preadolescents are struggling to balance home and work responsibilities, and they may be experiencing “midlife crises” (Goodnough & Lee, 1996), while concurrently, the preadolescents may be going through their own identity development. Counselors need to account for the additional concerns of fathers with each individual case.

To assist fathers in fostering communication with their preadolescents, counseling should take a multigenerational approach to examine a father’s relationships with his own father and to make modifications from this relationship to the relationship with his preadolescent (Goodnough & Lee, 1996). Often, “bad parenting” can then be reframed as “not having a good father role model” or “needing practice,” which suggests strong potential for change. Fathers are pivotal in the success or failure of the family’s ability to solve familial problems (Carr, 1998). Thus, it is imperative that counselors provide fathers with the necessary knowledge to enhance father-child communication. Fathers need to be empowered in sessions to rely on their innate parenting skills to decrease their dependence on mothers when relating to their children (Goodnough & Lee, 1996). Fathers may find that working with male counselors assists them in systematically lessening feelings of incompetence and helplessness regarding parenting responsibilities (O’Brien, 1988).

Of course, when mothers fill both the mother’s and father’s parental roles for children in single-parent homes, it is essential that these single mothers become active in treatment and prevention strategies for school-based aggression. Mother-child communication is only one component in addressing these behaviors with this household type. Clearly, the causes of aggressive behavior are multifaceted, and counselors need to consider other factors, such as monitoring, parenting style, and available resources, when working with single-parent (mother-led) families. Further exploration of factors affecting single-parent (father-led) families needs to occur given the rise of this family type.

In general, the literature suggests that strengthening parent- child communication decreases childhood aggression. Certain issues (i.e., teaching social skills, parental monitoring, and developing family cohesion) are of particular interest in achieving this goal. Treatment interventions for aggressive preadolescents need to include both parent training and child social skills training (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989).

The focus of parent training tends to be on increasing parental monitoring to assist children in developing appropriate social interaction skills and to foster open communication. The parental monitoring of friendships may be helpful in ensuring healthy peer associations and children’s well-being. Further, family management practices, such as problem solving, monitoring, and support, have been linked to nonaggressive peer interactions (Patterson & StouthamerLoeber, 1984).

Cooney, Hutchison, and Costigan (1996) suggested that children need to know how to respond to social situations, and children can best achieve this through dialogue with their parents on appropriate conflict resolution strategies. Parent training should emphasize increasing effective communication and family cohesion, while child social skills training should include information regarding the risks of associating with deviant peers (Cashwell & Vacc, 1996). Communication skills training for adolescents also should include such elements as active listening, perspective taking, and empathy building (Henry & Sager, 1996).

Prevention programs and treatment interventions that strengthen family relationships and communication are important in the prevention of violence among children (Dykeman, Daehlin, Doyle, & Flamer, 1996). The Multidimensional Family Therapy approach may offer a viable treatment option for counselors to shift the focus from behavior management problems to parent-child relational and attachment difficulties that foster negative feelings (such as anger and hostility) that can lead to adolescent aggression (Diamond & Liddle, 1999). Thus, the focus of counseling becomes resolving parent-child conflict by addressing the causes rather than the

outcomes of such relational problems. Further, those treatment approaches that focus on the strengths of families tend to be more successful in teaching adolescents appropriate social skills (Henry & Sager, 1996).

Juhnke (2000) suggested that school violence prevention should be a collaborative effort of teachers, administrators, school counselors, parents, additional family members, and community leaders. He also suggested that it is imperative for students to understand the clear behavior expectations of school personnel and parents. There are multiple entities, including family, school, peers, and society, that influence the aggressive behavior of children (Smith & Furlong, 1998). Because children who behave aggressively in school are not all alike, interventions should meet the needs of children on individual, school, and family levels (Morrison, Robertson, & Harding, 1998). Thus, parents, teachers, and community leaders need to work together to provide a safe environment for children.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Cross-validation of our sample for various geographical locations and demographics would increase the generalizability of the model. Further, it is recommended that future research include more focused samples regarding such attributes as SES and ethnicity, because the demographic information collected for this study was used for descriptive purposes only. Experimental studies need to be conducted to determine the optimal prevention and intervention strategies to decrease school-based aggressive behaviors. More specifically, it is recommended that future research examine which interventions are most effective in improving father-child communication and the effect this has on decreasing school-based aggression. Similar investigations regarding treatment efficacy should take place for children residing in single-parent homes. Further, researchers need to consider the growing number of single-parent homes led by fathers. Finally, birth order and sibling influence may need to be factored into future research.

LIMITATIONS OF THE CURRENT STUDY

A key limitation of this study was that the data collected were subjective (i.e., self-reports). Although self-reports are not the only way to obtain children's cognitions, they appeared to be the most appropriate form of assessment for this study. The issue of selection bias also was a concern because it was unknown how the classrooms that participated may have differed from the population as a whole. Further, it was unknown how children who had parental consent to participate may have differed from those children who did not have parental consent to participate. Because the sample was taken from one geographical location, generalizability beyond fifth through seventh graders in central North Carolina public schools must be undertaken with caution. Finally, the interpretation of the data was limited because nearly one third ($n = 46$) of the original participant pool ($N = 146$) was excluded because of elevated inconsistency scores on the AQ.

CONCLUSIONS

Preadolescents' perceptions of effective parent-child communication were negatively correlated with school-based aggression. The results further indicated that a significant interaction effect between the gender of parents and the gender of children exists. Further, the findings of this study suggest that both male and female preadolescents reported better communication with their mothers than with their fathers.

The discrepancy between communication with mothers and fathers was greater for girls than for boys, indicating that counselors may find strengthening father-preadolescent communication to be a goal of counseling, especially for preadolescent female clients. Treatment interventions need to take into account the impact that parents' gender, children's gender, and family structure have on parent-child communication. In addition, counselors need to target prevention and intervention strategies to both boys and girls, while involving teachers, parents, and children for a collaborative effort in decreasing school-based aggression.

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