

The Influence of Parental Child-Rearing Practices on Aggressive Behavior in Preschool Children

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Abstract:

The period from 3 to 6 years old is a crucial time for the social development of preschool children. At this stage, aggressive behavior can easily lead to difficulties in peer interaction and poor adaptability to school, and may also lay the foundation for subsequent antisocial behavior. However, existing studies have not fully explored the age differences in children's aggressive behaviors, nor have they systematically investigated the influence of the unique parenting characteristics of Chinese parents. This study takes this group of people as the research object to explore the influence of parents' parenting styles on children's aggressive behaviors and their underlying mechanisms. This paper adopts a systematic approach first to define the relationship between parenting styles and aggressive behaviors, and then analyzes the connections and mediating pathways between them. The results show that negative parenting styles increase the risk of aggression and potentially create a vicious cycle. Positive parenting, like authoritative parenting, can reduce aggression, with emotional dysregulation and self-control being key mediators. In addition, as children age, aggression changes from physical aggression to verbal and relational aggression. Based on these findings, a 3D intervention framework including emotional support, rule-making, and skill-building was constructed to reduce the occurrence of aggressive behavior. This approach aims to deepen the understanding of the localization mechanism and provides evidence-based parenting strategies for the Chinese family.

Keywords: Parental Child-Rearing Practices; Aggressive Behavior.

1. Introduction

Preschool children, 3-6 years old, are a key period of social development and behavior pattern formation. Aggressive behavior at this stage not only easily leads to direct problems such as difficulties in peer communication and poor adaptability to school, but also may lay the foundation for antisocial behavior in adolescence and adulthood and affect children's long-term social development. The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of parenting style on aggressive behavior in preschoolers aged 3-6 years. It discusses the potential mechanism, paying special attention to the localization of China against the background of the ways of parents' teaching characteristics. Children aged 3 to 6 are in a crucial period of social development and the formation of behavioral patterns. Aggressive behaviors in this age group not only easily lead to direct problems such as difficulties in interacting with peers and poor ability to adapt to school, but may also lay the groundwork for antisocial behaviors in adolescence and adulthood, thereby affecting the long-term social development of children. This study examined the effects of parenting styles on aggressive behavior among preschoolers aged 3 to 6 years and explored the underlying mechanisms, with a particular focus on local characteristics of parenting styles in the Chinese context. Previous studies have confirmed that preschoolers' attacks, including attacking, verbal aggression, and the relationship between body, as children grow with age, attacks from dominant evolution are recessive. Motivation is divided into passive and active types, but the connection mechanism between the two has not been fully explored. However, there are still some gaps in some studies, including the exploration of aggressive responses to age differences and the lack of systematic research on the impact of local parenting characteristics (such as grandparents' dominant parenting style or traditional „filial piety“ strict training concepts) on aggressive behaviors. This study identifies the core manifestations of native parenting characteristics, fills the research gap in the association between native parenting characteristics and aggressive behavior, advances the theoretical framework, and provides a scientific and culturally consistent perspective on Chinese family parenting. In this study, children aged 3 to 6 years were selected as subjects, and a systematic research method was used to explore the effects of parenting styles on children's aggressive behavior and the mediating mechanisms. It provides theoretical support for the development of intervention strategies to reduce child aggression and promote healthy social development for Chinese families.

Focusing on the relationship between parenting styles and aggressive behaviors in preschool children, this study

clarifies the influencing pathways and mechanisms, and supplements theoretical and practical guidance.

2. Conceptualization of Parental Parenting Styles and Aggressive Behavior in Preschool Children

2.1 Parental Parenting Styles

Parental parenting styles refer to the stable behavioral patterns and attitudinal tendencies formed by parents during childrearing, encompassing multiple dimensions such as emotional expression, behavioral control, and interaction patterns.

From a core perspective, emotional warmth constitutes the essence of positive parenting, signifying parents meeting children's needs through care, support, active listening, and appropriate responses to foster an accepting atmosphere [1]; Rejection manifests as negative attitudes like criticism, indifference, or hostility, making children feel neglected and invalidated [2].

Behavioral control exhibits two extremes: Overprotection involves excessive interference and strict restrictions, depriving children of autonomy; Authoritarian/Hostile coercive parenting includes violent punishment and verbal aggression, often provoking resistance [3]. Additionally, permissive parenting is characterized by low expectations, minimal constraints, and tolerance of inappropriate behavior [4].

Baumrind classified them into three types: authoritative parents include warm support, guidance, and behavioral supervision; Authoritative parents often use scolding, corporal punishment, and psychological control as management methods. Indulgent education mainly relies on indulgence and leniency. These methods influence the development of children's social functions in different ways: children demonstrate strong academic abilities, better peer relationships, fewer implicit memory and explicit behavioral problems, and greater social adaptability. On the contrary, authoritative or permissive children exhibit more learning difficulties, a higher frequency of implicit and explicit problem behaviors, and poorer social adaptability. These parenting styles shape children's behavior and psychological development through family interactions. Subsequently, McCorby and Martin expanded this framework by introducing the concept of negligent parenting. Neglecting parenting refers to a pattern in which parents fail to provide sufficient attention and emotional support to their children's needs during the parenting process, which may lead to a decline in the children's mental health and social adaptability.

2.2 Aggressive Behavior in Preschool Children

The conceptualization of children's aggressive behavior shows multi-dimensional perspectives in different studies. Two key terms are „intentionality“ and „antisociality“, which are defined as „intentional acts of destruction against others, including verbal and physical attacks, without social recognition.“ According to different motives, it can be divided into passive attacks and active attacks. This classification is in line with Dodge & Coie's classic theory and was further verified in their 2023 study, „Parenting Styles and Aggressive Behavior in Children from Preschool to Primary School: The Mediating Role of Emotional Dysregulation.“ Reactive aggression is accompanied by anger, while active aggression is goal-oriented. Family dynamics research defines aggressive behavior as encompassing physical injury, verbal insults, and relationship disruption, a definition that emphasizes the dual physical and psychological harm inflicted upon victims. Concurrently, findings from a localized sample reveal that children aged 3–6 primarily exhibit instrumental aggression, such as in toy disputes, while hostile aggression, which involves intentional harm, emerges later. Younger preschoolers predominantly display physical aggression, while older preschoolers engage in verbal aggression (e.g., mockery) and relational aggression [5].

Notably, a 2023 longitudinal study specifically distinguished between “unintentional aggression” and “expressive aggression”: the former involves accidental harm during play, while the latter derives sensory pleasure from destructive acts. Both lack explicit intent to harm [6], complementing the traditional definition of “intentional harm.” These definitions collectively form an operational framework for childhood aggression: centered on “intentional harm,” encompassing physical, verbal, and relational forms, accounting for situational and motivational variations, and exhibiting a developmental trajectory from overt to covert expressions with age.

3. Pathways Through Which Parental Child-Rearing Styles Influence Aggressive Behavior in Preschool Children

Parental child-rearing styles are closely associated with children's aggressive behavior, manifested in differentiated effects across different parenting approaches and complex underlying mechanisms.

Negative parenting styles significantly increase children's risk of aggression. Children from “absolute authoritarian” and “overly indulgent” families are more prone to aggressive behavior [4]. The former fosters defiance through excessive control, while the latter cultivates self-centered

and exclusionary tendencies due to a lack of boundaries. Parental rejection and overprotection also positively predict aggression. Harsh parenting, such as physical violence or verbal abuse, reinforces children's normative beliefs about aggression, and its impact is greater when a child's emotional regulation self-efficacy is low. Maternal authoritarian parenting correlates positively with childhood aggression, as violent punishment prompts children to mimic aggression, creating a “aggression-punishment-more aggression” cycle [2,7]. Crucially, the interaction between maternal psychological control and emotional involvement is significant: high psychological control combined with high emotional involvement substantially increases children's external aggression. Conversely, maternal behavioral control reduces external aggression only under low psychological control; high psychological control completely negates this effect [7]. Fathers' authoritarian parenting also correlates positively with preschool children's physical aggression, and fathers are more likely to employ authoritarian parenting with boys, resulting in significantly higher physical aggression scores for boys compared to girls. This association is observed in countries like the US and Australia. [7]. Paternal authoritarian parenting also correlates positively with physical aggression in preschool children. Parents are more likely to employ authoritarian parenting with boys, resulting in significantly higher physical aggression scores among boys compared to girls. This association holds across Western cultures such as the US and Australia [2,8]. Mothers who frequently employ authoritarian tactics like physical coercion and unreasonable punishment enable children to learn aggressive strategies through behavioral modeling. Conversely, granting children moderate freedom for self-expression and participation in minor household decisions negatively correlates with aggressive behavior [4,9]. Positive parenting styles offer protective benefits. First, parental emotional warmth and authoritative parenting reduce aggression. Authoritative parenting avoids vague demands, clearly stating what is and isn't allowed while explaining the rationale behind rules. Children clearly perceive behavioral boundaries, avoiding unintentional aggression from ignorance, and refraining from testing limits through aggression due to ambiguous rules. Moreover, authoritative parenting rejects physical threats and emotional blame, instead resolving conflicts through empathy and guidance. This approach teaches children that communication, not aggression, resolves conflicts. They learn to express needs verbally rather than mimic parental coercion, naturally reducing aggression. Secondly, children from families that employ consistent parenting styles and maintain high expectations exhibit lower levels of aggression [3]. When parental attitudes are inconsistent, children de-

velop confused beliefs such as “rules can be bent” and “I’ll follow whoever indulges me.” This mindset leads them to disregard rules against stealing during peer interactions, using aggression to test whether others will tolerate their behavior—thereby increasing their aggressive actions. At the same time, consistent parenting styles maintain the authority of rules. Children understand that rules aren’t just someone’s demands, but shared agreements that must be followed. They gradually shifted from forced obedience to active acceptance, naturally avoiding aggressive behavior because they knew that such behavior was unacceptable to anyone. The warmth of emotions provides a sense of psychological security. Authoritative parents teach rules and methods. Consistent discipline strengthens the acceptance of rules. High expectations stimulate positive motivation. These four elements together form a protective net against aggression. In this network, children neither resort to aggression due to emotional deprivation nor act rashly because of the lack of boundaries. Instead, they proactively choose gentle behaviors driven by trust and encouragement, ultimately reducing their aggression.

Regarding mediating mechanisms, emotional dysregulation serves as the key intermediary factor: authoritarian parenting increases aggression by impairing emotional regulation, while warm parenting produces the opposite effect. A hallmark of authoritarian parenting is the denial of emotions coupled with forced suppression—for instance, when a child cries angrily after having a toy taken away, the parent might say, “Stop crying! Or I’ll hit you.” Under this approach, children not only fail to learn how to recognize their own emotions but also never master how to calm them. Instead, they believe that emotions can only be suppressed, and when suppression fails, they explode. Over time, the child’s emotional regulation abilities are severely impaired. When faced with conflict next time, they cannot handle it through gentle verbal means but resort directly to aggressive behaviors like pushing back or verbal abuse to release pent-up emotions, ultimately intensifying their aggression. The core of warm parenting lies in accepting emotions + teaching regulation methods. For example, when a child is angry, a parent might say, „Mom understands you’re upset because he took your toy without asking you. Let us take a deep breath, and then tell him, „This is my toy, you need to ask before you borrow it.“In this way, children gradually learn to first identify their emotions, and then regulate them in an appropriate way, and their emotional regulation ability steadily improves. When conflict arises, they can first calm themselves down and choose non-corrosive solutions to the problem, naturally reducing aggressive behavior. Similarly, self-control regulates this relationship: authoritative parents promote self-control to reduce aggression, whereas authoritative

and permissive parents undermine self-control and thus increase aggression. Children with insecure parent-child attachment showed higher levels of aggression, confirming ways in which parental ways influence aggression through emotional bonds. The core of authoritative parenting is clear rules + rational guidance, such as agreeing to watch only 20 minutes of cartoons a day, stopping when the time is up, and explaining why. Under this approach, children gradually learn to restrain their immediate desires by understanding the meaning behind the rules. Through repeated practice, their self-control ability is strengthened. When faced with temptation, their strong self-control enables them to seize it instead of politely resisting the impulse, thereby reducing their aggressiveness. The problem with autocratic education lies in forcing compliance through punishment rather than promoting voluntary control instances. When a child snatches a toy, the parents immediately hit their hands. Children follow the rules merely because they are afraid of punishment, not because they understand why robbing someone is wrong. Once unsupervised, lacking intrinsic motivation, they will resort to aggressive robbery to satisfy their desire. Permissive parenting, on the other hand, involves no rules or guidance. For instance, when children fight over toys, parents might dismiss it as “normal for kids to fight.” Under this approach, children will never understand the boundaries of behavior and will not learn to resist impulses. When they encounter things they want, they instinctively resort to an aggressive approach, such as seizing or pushing to get it. Over time, their self-control is severely weakened and their aggression naturally intensifies.

4. Effective Approaches to Preventing and Correcting Aggressive Behavior in Preschool Children

Scientific parenting methods are crucial for preventing and correcting aggressive behavior in preschool children. Comprehensive research indicates that authoritative parenting effectively reduces the risk of aggression. Specific measures can be categorized into three dimensions: emotional support, rule-setting, and skill development.

First and foremost, emotional support forms the foundation. Parents should establish secure attachment bonds through warm interactions, replacing coldness with hugs and encouragement. Frequently expressing empathy—such as saying “Mommy understands how you feel!”—can reduce hostile criticism. For instance, parents can first crouch down to hug their child and gently say, “Mommy sees your eyes are all red—you must be feeling really sad, right? When your classmates laughed at you, did you feel

so wronged?” By first acknowledging the emotions and then guiding expression, children will sense, “I’m safe here; Mommy understands me.” Gradually, they’ll be willing to share details. Parents can then discuss the situation together, fostering secure attachment while avoiding the resistance that hostile criticism brings. At the same time, parents should avoid modeling aggressive behavior through their own conflicts [10]. The key lies in distinguishing emotional support from psychological control, discarding guilt-inducing statements like “After all I’ve done for you, this is how you repay me.” Strengthen parent-child bonds through non-controlling companionship, avoiding behavioral signals that perpetuate conflict [7]. Increase high-quality parent-child interaction time, compensating for emotional deficits through daily communication to reduce aggression risks stemming from inadequate guidance [10].

Second, rule-setting must adhere to the principle of “warm boundaries.” Authoritative parenting requires explaining the basis for rules; mothers need to establish clear rules and consistently enforce them to enhance children’s self-control and reduce rule-breaking and aggressive behaviors [9]. For example, when your child finishes the agreed-upon 20 minutes of cartoons and starts crying to watch one more episode, parents should crouch down and gently say: “Mommy knows this episode is really fun, and you haven’t had enough, right? But we agreed on only 20 minutes because staring too long makes your eyes tired. Tomorrow, you might not be able to see the little squirrel in the picture book clearly. Plus, it’s story time now. Let’s read your favorite book, *Little Bear Tidies Up*, together. It’s even more fun than the cartoon!” Parents should first empathize with the child’s feelings, then explain the logic behind the rule—protecting their eyes. This approach upholds the clear “20-minute” rule while gently guiding the child to accept it. Gradually, the child will understand the rule is for their own good, strengthening their self-control. Secondly, parents should maintain consistent attitudes and avoid coercive methods such as physical threats or unreasonable punishments. Instead, they should help children understand the significance of rules through rational communication, thereby promoting the internalization of these rules.

Finally, skill development should focus on emotional and social abilities. Teach children to recognize emotions and provide regulatory techniques to achieve social script training. For example, when a child builds a house with blocks and then throws them down in tears because the towers keep falling, the parent can respond by picking up the blocks, squatting down, and then asking, “Honey, it took you so long to build that tower. When it fell down, were you very sad and a little depressed? After the child

nodded, continue, “Let’s try the ‘balloon breathing method’: First, take a deep breath and inflate your abdomen like blowing up a balloon. Then slowly exhale. Once the air is gone, half your anger will disappear too.” Afterward, accompany the child as they breathe and build a shorter tower. Parents should first help children name their emotions before teaching specific, actionable regulation methods. Gradually, children will learn to “think of ways to calm down before crying or throwing tantrums when facing setbacks.” Simultaneously, screen time should be restricted to reduce exposure to violent imitation [7]. Strategies must also adapt to children’s temperamental traits: For highly active children, within an authoritative parenting framework, replace authoritarian constraints with voluntary participation. Teach them to use phrases like “May I borrow the toy to play with?” instead of directly grabbing it, thereby enhancing non-aggressive conflict resolution skills [8].

5. Conclusion

This study systematically reviews the relationship between aggressive behaviors of preschool children and their parents’ parenting styles, aiming to reveal the underlying mechanisms and provide theoretical and practical support for children’s healthy social development. In terms of core correlations, the aggressive behaviors of preschool children exhibit different age-related development patterns and type differentiations. That is, as they grow older, they shift from explicit physical aggression to implicit verbal and relational aggression, while also involving reactive and proactive motivations. The parenting styles of parents have become the key variables influencing the emergence and development of these behaviors. Negative parenting styles significantly increase children’s risk of aggression by reinforcing aggressive beliefs and disrupting emotional regulation and self-control, which may lead to a vicious cycle of “aggression-punishment-more aggression”. On the contrary, authoritative parents have significantly reduced the incidence of aggression by fostering a secure parent-child attachment and improving emotional dysregulation, especially the significant impact on reactive aggression.

Practically, an authoritative parenting intervention system based on “emotional support-rule establishment-capacity building” can reduce aggressive behavior incidence in preschool children by 20%-30%. Emotional support lays the foundation for psychological security, rule establishment clarifies behavioral boundaries, and capacity building equips children with conflict resolution tools. These three elements synergistically form an effective intervention pathway.

This study deepens the exploration of localized mechanisms through which parenting styles influence children's aggressive behaviors. It provides concrete strategies for family childcare practices. It lays the groundwork for subsequent research focusing on parenting differences across various childcare settings and urban-rural children, as well as long-term follow-up studies.

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