From Lateral to Leader: A Study of Preschoolers’ Relationships with Peers

Erin Podgorski & Dr. Carin L. Neitzel, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

**Introduction**
There are many things that we know about the development of children’s peer relationships. We know about the changing structure of children’s play, the composition (typical size, gender segregation, and fluidity) of peer groups in early childhood, and personal characteristics which influence peer selection. Some children emerge as leaders among their peers, but little is known about processes by which children assume or come to be assigned the role of leader.

**Research Purpose and Questions**
This study examines the relationships between qualities of parent–child interactions in the home such as reciprocity and autonomy support and children’s subsequent interactions and social roles with their peers in preschool classrooms were observed. The following research questions were addressed:

1) Is there a relationship between a parents’ use of lateral interaction exchanges and strategies to encourage independence and their children’s social behaviors and socials with their peers?

2) Is the relationship between the reciprocity in parents’ interactions with their children and the degree to which autonomy is encouraged and supported modified depending on a child’s temperament and/or language abilities?

We hypothesized that preschool children practice then use interaction qualities of the parent-child relationship in subsequent relationships with peers. Also we hypothesized that the relationship between parent-child interaction qualities and children’s leadership with peers would depend on a child's temperament and language abilities.

**Method**

**Participants:**
Seventy five normally developing preschoolers (39 male, 36 female) ranging in age from 3 years 2 months to 5 years 4 months (M=4.41, SD=.72) and their mothers participated in the study. The mothers’ average years of education was 12.74 (SD = 1.80; min = 6, max = 16).

**Procedure:**
To obtain data on parenting behaviors, parent-child dyads were observed during 45-minute sessions as they worked on three joint problem-solving tasks. The tasks were designed to create a difficult context in which the mother would have to assist the child. Each task lasted 8 minutes. Mother and child interaction behaviors were coded.

**Procedure: (continued)**
To obtain data on children’s social experiences with their peers, children were observed in their preschool classrooms during indoor and outdoor activities (e.g. indoor free play, learning center choice time, and outdoor play time). An observational coding system using frequency counts and 3-point ratings scale was employed to record children’s social interaction behaviors.

**Measures**

Parenting Interaction Behaviors
Maternal behaviors were assessed during observations of the mother-child interactions in the three joint problem-solving tasks. The behaviors assessed included: reciprocity and autonomy support.

- **Reciprocity**
  - Assurance, assistance, and acceptance were indicators of reciprocity.
  - Assistance: mother providing help solicited by the child during the problem-solving tasks. Acceptance: extent of mother’s agreement with child’s input.

- **Autonomy Support**
  - Elicit input, responsive turn, and follow lead were indicators of autonomy support. Elicit input: mother encourages the child to make attempts or share ideas. Responsive turn: mother provides information or asks questions in response to child moves. Follow lead: mother adjusts to the child’s opinions, decisions, and calls for action.

**Child Social Behaviors with Peers**
Assessment of children’s behavior roles with peers focused on two main areas of dyadic interaction: leadership and dominance behaviors.

- **Leadership**
  - Cooperation and organizational behaviors (e.g., suggests play scenario, teaches/models behavior, uses verbal negotiation, offers praise)

- **Dominance**
  - Behaviors that involve coercive force (e.g., verbally threatens child, monopolizes toy, hits, pushes, grabs, etc.)

**Discussion**

There were individual differences in the degree to which “partnership-like” qualities were exhibited in the parent-child interactions. These qualities were related to differences in children’s social behaviors and roles with peers. Child characteristics moderated these influences of parent-child interactions on leadership within peer relationships.

Parent-child factors found to be related to children’s subsequent roles with peers:
- Opportunities for lateral interactions with parents
- Need for child responsiveness to social models
- Need for child expressive skills