

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

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## 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. **Assurance**: mother's smiling, affection, sensitivity, and engagement with child. **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

Cooperatiion 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.)

**Inter-coder agreement**: To assess inter-coder agreement, 2 researchers observed jointly and independently coded 25% of the classroom observations. Cohen's Kappas ranged from .80 to .95.

## Results

### Analyses Conducted

The relative roles of mothers' reciprocity and autonomy support with their child and child characteristics for predicting each of the child peer interaction behaviors (leadership and dominance) were examined using two hierarchical multiple regression equations. Reciprocity and autonomy support were entered in the first step. Child responsiveness, resistance, and language skill were entered in the second step to test the unique contribution and possible role in modifying the relations between parenting behaviors and child peer interactions in preschool.

### Leadership with Peers.

Children's responsiveness and language skill, moderated the relation of autonomy support and leadership. Children highly responsive to mother's support were more likely to be leaders ( $\beta = .42$ ,  $p = .05$ ); children low in responsiveness were less likely to be leaders. Autonomy support was no longer related to leadership when child language skill was low ( $\beta = .45$ ,  $p = .05$ ).

### Dominant behavior with peers.

When parent-child reciprocity and parent autonomy support were low, children were more likely to exhibit dominant behaviors with peers ( $\beta = -.50$  and  $\beta = -.20$ , respectively,  $p < .05$ ). Children highly responsiveness and who had good language skills were less likely to express dominant behaviors with peers ( $\beta = -.29$  and  $\beta = -.27$ , respectively,  $p < .05$ ).

## 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