

Child Controlling Behaviors: Precursors to Role Reversal in Early Childhood

Dianne Thompson
UC Davis Children's Hospital
CAARE Center
Susan G. Timmer
Anthony J. Urquiza

Punitive and caregiving controlling behaviors in young children are characterized as strategies for preschool children to access their attachment figure during times of stress (Crittenden, 1992; Main & Cassidy, 1988). Although children attempt to control people in their environments at an early age, existing research suggests we should not witness evidence of role reversal until children approach 6 years (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 2008; Moss et al., 2004). We observe controlling behaviors in the young children at our clinic, though it is unclear whether this behavior is related to attachment. Typically these behaviors have been assessed during a reunion after two separations. We ask whether controlling attachment behavior can be observed in young children in other assessment contexts.

The study sample consisted of 115 biological mother-child dyads referred to treatment primarily by Child Protective Services. Children ranged in age from 2 to 6 years and 56.5% are male. We examined the presence of controlling behavior across three age groups: 3, 4, and 5 year olds. Results of analyses showed that younger children showed more role reversal than older children and that younger children were more reactive to a loss of power. These findings suggest that much of the role reversed behavior seen in younger children may be a manifestation of their developmentally appropriate desire for independence. Results showing the connection between role reversed behavior and parent emotional availability suggests that not all controlling behavior can be attributed to a desire for independence.

First Author

Dianne Thompson
UC Davis, Children's Hospital
CAARE Center
3300 Stockton Blvd.
Sacramento, CA 95820
dithomp@yahoo.com
(916) 734-4205