

Child Controlling Behaviors: Precursors to Role Reversal in Early Childhood

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INTRODUCTION

- 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.

HYPOTHESES

We examine the presence of controlling behavior across three age groups: 3, 4, and 5 year olds. We hypothesize:

- We will observe more role reversed behavior in older than younger children.
- Older children will be less likely to react to the inherent control in the play context with role reversed behavior.
- Parents' behavior should predict controlling behavior in older children more than younger children.

SAMPLE

- 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.
- There were no significant differences in the sample by age.

Child Sample Description (N = 115)

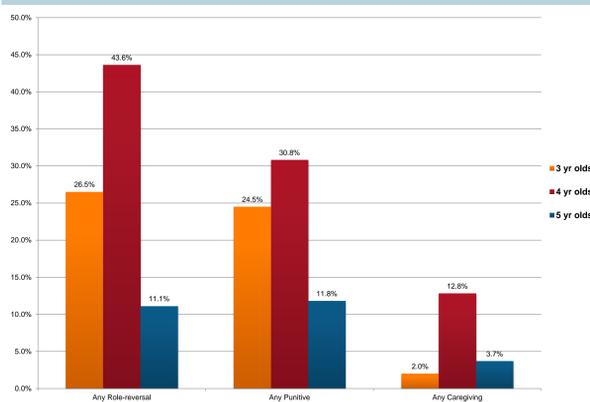
Age in Years	N
3	49
4	39
5	27
Ethnicity	%
Caucasian	57.4
African American	20.0
Latino/a	18.3
Other	4.3
Risk Experience	%
Exposure to Domestic Violence	53.9
Neglect	45.2
Prenatal Drug Exposure	35.7
Physical Abuse	29.6
Sexual Abuse	10.4

METHODS

- Mother-child dyads were videotaped for 15 minutes in 3 play situations varying in degree of maternal control required: child directed play, parent-directed play, and clean up.
- Parents' and children's emotional availability and children's role reversed controlling behaviors were coded using the Brief Emotional Availability Screener-Triialog (BEAS-T; Timmer et al., 2009) which contains 4 parent scales (sensitivity, hostility, control, & passivity) and 3 child scales (positive response, engagement, & controlling). Intraclass correlation coefficients for intercoder reliability were above $r = .80$. Research has shown significant correlations between Biringen's (2000) Emotional Availability Scales (3rd Ed.) and the BEAS-T (West et al., 2009).
- Children's behavior and whether they were reported as being a problem by mothers were measured by the Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory (ECBI; Eyberg & Pincus, 1999).

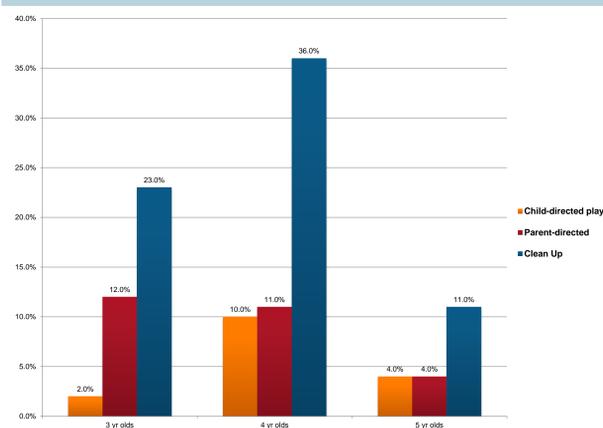
RESULTS

Role Reversed Controlling Behaviors by Age of Child



- Results showed that 5 yr olds showed less role reversal than 4 yr olds.

Any Role Reversed Controlling Behavior by Age and Play Context



- Results showed 3 yr olds were most reactive to the shift from Child to Parent-directed play; 5 yr olds were less reactive to the shift to Clean up.

RESULTS (cont'd)

Correlations of Role Reversed Controlling Behavior and Parent Emotional Availability By Age of Child

Child Age	Parent Passive	Parent Intrusive	Parent Hostile
3 yr old	.39**	-.001	.40**
4 yr old	.47**	.01	.24
5 yr old	.38**	.10	.71**

- Parent passivity was related to role reversed behavior in all age groups. Parent hostility was related to role-reversed behavior in both younger and older children. Parent intrusiveness did not relate to role-reversed behavior, suggesting that the children's behavior is not simply a response to a perceived lack of control.

Correlations of Role Reversed Controlling Behavior and Parent Assessment of Behavioral Problems (ECBI) By Age of Child

Child Age	ECBI Intensity Scale	ECBI Problem Scale
3 yr old	-.01	.04
4 yr old	.43**	.37*
5 yr old	.27	.34

- Follow-up analyses showed that role reversed behavior was significantly correlated with reports of greater behavior problems among parents of 4 yr olds, but not 3 yr olds. Correlations among 5 yr olds do not quite reach significance.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

- 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. Further, correlations with the ECBI suggests these behaviors have clinical significance.

IMPLICATIONS

- Understanding when developmentally appropriate controlling behavior can be interpreted as showing role reversal can help clinicians better assess the meanings of these behaviors in young clients faced with adverse environments.



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