

Boys will be boys and girls will be girls: Trauma and aggressive behaviors

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ABSTRACT

- The purpose of this study is to examine the differences in the ways traumatized boys' and girls' use aggression in their relationships with their parents.
- We evaluated boys and girls relational and physical aggression with their parents in 15 minute assessments, using the observational coding system to code children's punitive (physically aggressive) and caregiving (relationally aggressive) controlling behaviors.
- Participants were 152 parent-traumatized child dyads; 97 boys and 56 girls who were referred to PCIT because of their children's disruptive behavior problems.
- Results showed that boys used more punitive controlling behaviors and girls used more caregiving controlling behaviors. This confirms findings suggesting boys and girls are equally aggressive, but use different strategies to show it; and that these different styles are observable in early interactions with their parents.

INTRODUCTION

- When children have been exposed to trauma, such as domestic violence, physical abuse, or neglect, some may show symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), including re-experiencing, avoidance of trauma related stimuli, and increased arousal (e.g., Appleyard & Osofsky, 2003; Saigh et al., 2002)
- Children who have PTSD symptoms often use maladaptive ways of coping with their trauma, reporting externalizing (e.g., defiance, aggression) and internalizing behavior problems (e.g., being withdrawn, depressed) (Scheeringa & Zeanah, 1995).
- Trauma symptoms appear to be related to the severity of aggressive behaviors, but studies have found gender differences in aggressive styles, especially in peer relationships (Cullerton-Sen et al., 2008)
- Some research suggests that there is a difference in the type of aggression each gender uses: Boys have been shown to be more likely to use *physical* tactics in their aggressive behaviors such as pushing, and hitting, and girls are more likely to use *relational* tactics, such as lying about others or verbal bullying (Cullerton-Sen et al., 2008).
- Research regarding gender differences in aggression typically focus on the child's peer relationship (e.g., Cullerton-Sen et al., 2008; Nelson & Crick, 2002), however, some research suggests that these behaviors also may be observed in interactions with their parents (Kuppens, Grietens, Onghena, Michiels, 2009).
- There has been little examination into gender differences in the young traumatized children's aggressive styles, and whether gender differences in the use of physical and relational forms of aggression can be extended to their style of interacting with their parents.
- The purpose of this study is to examine the differences between traumatized boys' and girl's use of aggression in their relationships with their parents .

HYPOTHESES

- Based on previous research with peers, we hypothesized that we would observe gender differences in young traumatized children's aggressive behaviors in interactions with their parents:
 - Boys will demonstrate more *physical* forms of aggression in the form of punitive role reversal behaviors than girls.
 - Girls will demonstrate more *relational* types of aggression in the form of caregiving role reversal behaviors than boys.

METHODS

Participants

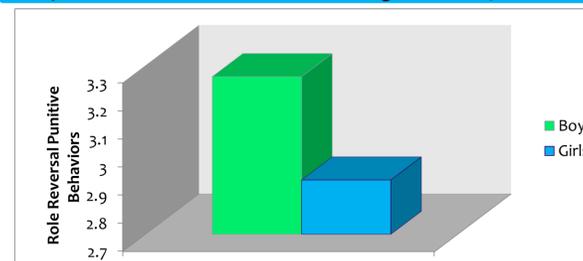
- 123 parent-child dyads were included in the current study after being referred to the UC Davis CAARE Center for Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) because of their disruptive behavior problems.
- Parents entered treatment with children ranging in age from 2-8 with an average age of 4.89 years. 77 children were male and 46 were female. Parents in our sample had an overall average age of 29.76 years. The sample of children was diverse with 30.1% of the sample reporting to be Caucasian, 22.0% African American, 29.3% Latino, and 1.6% Asian.
- Measures**
- Parent-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-Trianalogue (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).
- For this study, we will look specifically at the child's controlling behavior as measured by the BEAS-T (West et al., 2009). The controlling scale is categorized into 3 subscales addressing the child's punitive role reversed behaviors, bossy role-reversed behaviors and caregiving controlling behaviors.
- Children demonstrating punitive role reversal behaviors act aggressively and punitively towards their parent. Children demonstrating bossy role-reversed behaviors attempt to direct the parent in play. Children demonstrating caregiving controlling behaviors demonstrate parentified, directing, or overly bright and helpful behaviors toward their parent.
- The Trauma Symptom Checklist for Young Children (TSCYC; Briere, 1997) was used to assess children's trauma related symptoms. The TSCYC is a 90-item caretaker-report instrument developed for children aged 3 – 12 and includes a clinical scale for anger/aggression.

RESULTS

Table 1. Demographic Statistics for Parent-Child Dyads

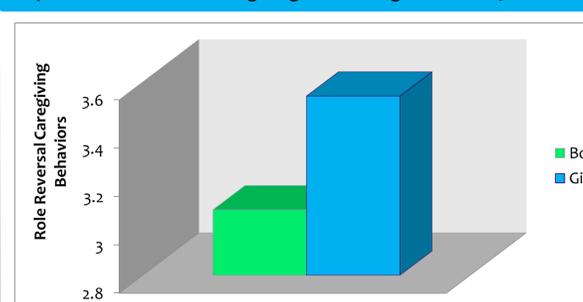
Characteristic	N = 152
Marital Status % Single	46.3
Caregiver educational attainment (Mean years)	11.36
Physical Abuse History (%)	34.9
Neglect History (%)	38.4
Domestic Violence History (%)	68.4
Substance Abuse History (%)	39.5
Mean age of caregiver in years (SD)	29.8 (5.8)
Sex of Parent (% Female)	97.6

Graph 1. Role Reversed Punitive Controlling Behavior by Sex of Child



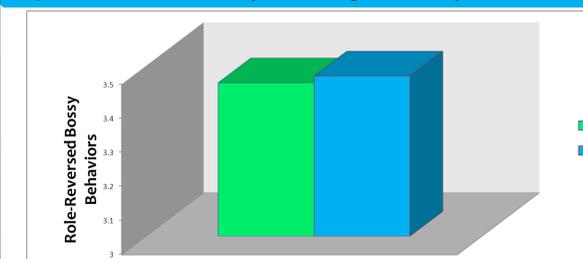
- Analyses showed that boys demonstrated more punitive role-reversed controlling behaviors in interactions with their parents.

Graph 2. Role Reversed Caregiving Controlling Behavior by Sex of Child



- Analyses showed that girls demonstrated more care-giving role-reversed controlling behaviors in observations with their parent.

Graph 3. Role Reversed Bossy Controlling Behavior by Sex of Child



- Analyses showed that there were no differences between boys and girls and their bossy role-reversed controlling behaviors.

RESULTS cont.

- Results showed that boys demonstrated more punitive role reversed controlling behaviors than girls.
- Girls demonstrated more caregiving role-reversed controlling behaviors than boys.
- There was no difference between boys and girls in their role-reversed bossy behaviors.

DISCUSSION

- The purpose of this study was to investigate the differences between traumatized boys' and girls' use of aggression in their relationships with their parents.
- Results showing gender differences in the levels of punitive and caregiving controlling behavior shown in the 15-minute observational assessment confirmed our hypothesis that we could observe differences in physical and relational aggression in young children interacting with their parents.
- Boys style of using more punitive and less caregiving controlling behaviors suggest their use of more physical and less relational aggression with their parents.
- In contrast, Girls style of using more caregiving and less punitive controlling behaviors suggesting their use of more relational and less physical aggression with their parents.
- Results showed that traumatized boys and girls used similar amounts of bossy controlling behaviors.
- Research into the effects trauma on young children highlight their physically aggressive behavior, but often ignore ways in which they use relational strategies to control others. Because of this omission, assessments may have overlooked important trauma symptoms in girls.
- This study's findings also demonstrate that these symptoms appear in young children in interactions with their parents. This is important, as these differences have primarily been examined in children no younger than middle childhood.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

- Our findings suggest that caregiving controlling behavior (i.e., parentified, directing, or overly bright and helpful behaviors) is more evident in traumatized young girls than boys, and may be one way in which they use relational strategies to control their environments. Traditionally these behaviors have been not been counted as clinically significant indicators of a trauma response. These findings suggest that therapists should take note of these behaviors as evidence of negative effects of trauma on the child and the parent-child relationship.

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Type of trauma could also modify type of aggression manifested, for example trauma violating boundaries of trust, such as sexual abuse, could result in different forms of aggression than trauma violating physical safety, such as natural disasters.
- Types of aggression used could also depend on parent factors, such as gender or emotional availability. Further studies could examine the effects of interacting with mothers vs. fathers, and the differential effects of parent emotional availability on their male and female children.



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