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 reuniaon 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.

RESULTS (cont’d)

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of Child</th>
<th>Parent Emotional Availability</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parent Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 yr old</td>
<td>.30**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 yr old</td>
<td>.47**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 yr old</td>
<td>.38**</td>
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- 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 child’s behavior is not simply a response to a perceived lack of control.

RESULTS

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child Age</th>
<th>ECBI Intensity Scale</th>
<th>ECBI Problem Scale</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 yr old</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 yr old</td>
<td>.43**</td>
<td>.57</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 yr old</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.34</td>
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- 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 suggest 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.