

Caregivers’ Management of Very Young Children’s Noncompliance in Two U.S. Communities

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Abstract

Topic-centered frustration episodes involving the child crying, fretting, or saying no were reliably identified and analyzed in terms of four dimensions: initiation of conflict, verbal clarity of the parental strategy, tone of strategy, and resolution. The tempo and variety of socializing speech acts used by family members across the four dimensions were compared. Generalizations were made about conflict initiation across two diverse communities.

Introduction

Emotional and behavioral self-regulation is important for young children’s school success, peer relationships, and healthy family functioning (Adams, Ryan, Ketsetzis, & Keating, 2000). A wide array of cognitive and linguistic achievements undergird development of self-regulation skills that are learned in culturally patterned social interactions with family members (Kopp, 1982, 1989; Duranti, Ochs, & Schieffelin, 2012). The focus of this project is the routine practice, or *habitus* in Bourdieu’s (1977) parlance, of caring for 2- or 3-year-old children. One situated learning environment within this routine practice is dealing with episodes of noncompliance. In this project, we surveyed transcripts for the routine practice of caring for children, imposed the same behavioral requirements on every episode of noncompliance, and then compared parental strategies for managing the noncompliance as well as the outcome of the episode across two U.S. communities.

Children’s frustration tolerance is shaped by their parents’ management of noncompliance throughout early childhood. Frustration tolerance is the level of a person’s ability to withstand frustration without developing inadequate modes of response, such as “going to pieces” emotionally (<http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com>). It is a natural occurrence for young children to disagree with those around them and have episodes of frustration or temper tantrums. At age two years, children do not have well developed language skills, and their modes of response tend to be to cry, to say “No!,” or to hit. By age three and one-half years, children have much better developed language skills, and their modes of response tend to occur across a broader range (Sperry, Floress, Gile, Renn, and Sperry, 2006).

Method

Participants

- Two communities studied
 - Rural Black Belt region of Alabama; ethnically African American (n=12)
 - Rural White River valley of Indiana; ethnically European American (n=15)
- Met qualifications for free- or reduced-lunch
- Ethnographic approach, descriptive intent, and longitudinal sampling
- Had a child between 18 months and 2 years old at beginning of sampling
- Recruited for in-home videotaped observations made once every two months between 18 and 42 months of the target child

Procedures

Utilized principles of grounded theory

- Categories based in the data themselves (Strauss & Corbin, 1990)
- Trustworthiness sought through recursive analysis of episodes (Ely, 1991)
- Thick and rich description (Geertz, 1972)

Made verbatim transcripts of the second half hour of the 24 and 42-month-old sample of each child.

Coded by episodes of frustration

- Began with the family member utterance preceding the noncompliant behavior, defined by a child crying, saying “No” in refusal, or hitting another person.
- Ended when the child verbally changed the topic.

Method (continued)

Procedures (continued)

Each Episode of Frustration Coded For:

Reason of Conflict Initiation (reliability, K=.84)

- About object (C: I want crayon)
- About action (C: I want to go!)
- About person-object interaction (P: Let Brother have some)
- About person-action interaction (P: Don’t let that dog in)

Verbal Clarity of Family Strategies (reliability, K=.90)

- Question/statement (What do you want?)
- Clear command (Don’t lean on that door)
- Unclear command (Stop)
- Talk around the child (She’s going to pitch a fit now)

Tone of Family Strategy (reliability, K=.90)

- Incentive (We’ll go to the park if you’re good)
- Neutral (I can wait)
- Tease (You can’t give me no sugar with that pouty face)
- Criticism (Don’t cry for the camera)
- Threat (Do you want a spanking?)

Resolution Coding (K=.90)

- Child compliance—the child gives in to the interlocutor’s demand
- Child distraction by other—the child stops fussing because the interlocutor tickles her
- Child distraction on own—the child hears a train go by or is startled by a clap of thunder and stops fussing
- Child perseverance—the child persists and the interlocutor gives in
- Interlocutor compliance—the interlocutor does something the child wants

Results

Table 1. *Initiation of Conflict*

Initiation of Conflict	24 Mo White River	42 Mo White River	24 Mo Black Belt	42 Mo Black Belt
	No. episodes (%)	No. episodes (%)	No. episodes (%)	No. episodes (%)
Child Wants Object	8 (20%)	1 (2%)	28 (12%)	8 (6%)
Child Doesn’t Want Object	0	3 (6%)	5 (2%)	6 (2%)
Child Wants Action	11 (28%)	9 (18%)	26 (11%)	14 (11%)
Child Doesn’t Want Action	6 (15%)	7 (14%)	140 (59%)	67 (53%)
Child Wants Someone to Have Object	1 (2%)	1 (2%)	0	0
Child Doesn’t Want Someone to Have Object	3 (8%)	8 (16%)	5 (2%)	3 (2%)
Child Wants Someone to Do Something	5 (13%)	9 (18%)	2 (1%)	1 (1%)
Child Doesn’t Want Someone to Do Something	6 (15%)	11 (22%)	31 (13%)	32 (35%)
Total # of Episodes	40	49	237	126

- In both communities, there was a lack of conflict over objects (either wanting or not wanting an object or wanting another person to have or not have an object)
- Conflicts about objects started low and decreased over time for both groups
- The rate of conflict in the Alabama community is significantly higher than the rate of conflict in the Indiana community by a factor of more than 4 times
- Most conflicts concern actions or others doing/not doing actions (about 2/3rds in White River, and 9/10ths in Black Belt)
- Ethnographically speaking, the risk of environmental dangers is higher in the Black Belt—fire ants, nearby train tracks or highways, animal bites

Results (continued)

Table 2. *Verbal Clarity of Family Strategies*

Verbal Clarity	24 Mo White River	42 Mo White River	24 Mo Black Belt	42 Mo Black Belt
	No. episodes (%)	No. episodes (%)	No. episodes (%)	No. episodes (%)
Statements/Questions	193 (33%)	236 (39%)	595 (46%)	313 (45%)
Clear Commands	157 (27%)	89 (14%)	256 (20%)	87 (13%)
Unclear Commands	31 (6%)	22 (3%)	199 (15%)	103 (15%)
Talk About the Child	49 (8%)	46 (8%)	256 (20%)	190 (27%)
Others’ Talk	155 (26%)	219 (36%)	0	0

- Most striking is the degree to which White River families simply ignored the child’s conflict and began talking about something else
- This phenomenon did not occur in the Black Belt

Table 3. *Tone of Family Strategies*

Tone	24 Mo White River	42 Mo White River	24 Mo Black Belt	42 Mo Black Belt
	No. episodes (%)	No. episodes (%)	No. episodes (%)	No. episodes (%)
Incentives	59 (10%)	61 (10%)	9 (1%)	9 (2%)
Neutral	456 (78%)	491 (80%)	799 (76%)	370 (74%)
Teases	23 (4%)	23 (4%)	48 (5%)	45 (9%)
Criticisms	3 (0.5%)	7 (1%)	149 (14%)	62 (12%)
Threats	44 (7.5%)	30 (5%)	45 (4%)	7 (3%)

- Similar (high) levels of neutral comments
- Near absence of incentives in the Black Belt
- Lower levels of teases and criticisms in White River
- Slightly higher levels of threats in White River

Table 4

Conflict Resolutions

Type of Resolution	24 Mo White River	42 Mo White River	24 Mo Black Belt	42 Mo Black Belt
	No. episodes (%)	No. episodes (%)	No. episodes (%)	No. episodes (%)
Child complains	2 (5%)	7 (14%)	105 (44%)	54 (43%)
Child distracted by other	13 (33%)	6 (12%)	46 (19%)	20 (16%)
Child distracts on own	17 (42%)	18 (37%)	56 (24%)	33 (26%)
Child perseveres	4 (10%)	8 (17%)	20 (8%)	11 (9%)
Interlocutor complies	4 (10%)	10 (20%)	10 (4%)	8 (6%)

- Child compliance is received more in the Black Belt
- Interlocutor compliance is more common in White River
- Distraction is common in both communities

Discussion

- There was a much higher rate of conflict in the Black Belt.
- In White River, European American families tended to offer promises and then they ignored their children.
- If children did not distract themselves away from the source of conflict, their families tended to move to warnings and threats. More often than not, interlocutors gave in to the children’s wishes.
- The Black Belt African American families tended to confront conflict directly and they more frequently insisted on children’s compliance. They used criticism more heavily than either promises or threats.

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