

Study: verbal aggression may affect children's behavior

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The methods mothers use to control their children during playtime and other daily activities could have a negative impact on their child's self-esteem and behavior, according to a new Purdue University study.

"It's hard to tell parents how to interact with their children based on one study, but what we see here is that parents who have a propensity for being verbally aggressive have a tendency to try to direct and control their children during a play period," said Steven R. Wilson, a professor of communication who specializes in family issues. "As a result, these children were less cooperative, and not only are parents setting up situations that are challenging for them to handle, but they also are subtly undermining their child's self-esteem."

Wilson and Felicia Roberts, an associate professor of communication, are lead authors of a study that appears in the July issue of *Human Communication Research* journal. The researchers videotaped 40 mothers as they played with one of their children, ages 3-8, during a 10-minute, unstructured play period. The mothers also completed a series of questionnaires to assess their general tendency to be verbally aggressive toward others. For example, someone who is verbally aggressive is likely to insult others as a way to motivate them to comply or behave.

The researchers found that mothers who were high in the general tendency to be verbally aggressive often tried to take control of the play period. For example, the four mothers with the highest verbal aggression

scores on average were attempting to direct their child's actions once every 12 seconds, while the four mothers with the lowest verbal aggression scores tried to do so only about half as often. In addition to verbally aggressive mothers telling a child to play with a different toy or to stop playing, they also used negative body language, such as restraining a child by the wrist or shoulder, to reinforce their commands.

"Of course all parents direct their children, and people in general are always directing others to close a door or hand them something," said Roberts, who has a background in linguistics and is a conversational analyst. "It's something we do all the time. But there is a qualitative difference in the kinds of directing going on by these verbally aggressive mothers. By looking at how and when directives occurred, not just how often, we found that moms who scored highest on verbal aggression used directives to control the child and, ultimately, the way the game or activity was played. The aggressive action is not overt, as in a parent hitting or yelling, but these small negative maneuvers can say so much to a child."

Parents interested in learning more about how to improve communication with their children should contact a pediatrician or seek out community family and social service programs, Wilson said.

"We all say things to our children that we regret saying, but saying a lot of things that attack a child's self-confidence is not healthy," Wilson said. "These parents were in an unstructured, low-stress environment, and if we saw this behavior in such a brief setting, how could such negative interactions, even so subtle, affect a child over the long-term? For example, if the parents always have to control what activity they and their children are going to play - as well as for how long and how they are going to play it - you wonder if this communicates to the child that what they want to do doesn't matter."

The researchers will be looking at how praise plays a role in these types of parent-child interactions.

Source: Purdue University

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