

The Influence of Parenting Styles on Aggressive Behavior in Young Children

Wanqing Sun*

School of Computer and Software, Dalian Neusoft University of Information, Dalian, 116000, China

*Corresponding author: Wanqing_Sun1@outlook.com

Abstract. Aggressive behavior in early childhood serves as a key predictor of future health and social adjustment, and has become a central topic in developmental psychology research. This behavior is influenced by a multitude of factors, including physiological, psychological, and environmental determinants, wherein the family, as the primary context for a child's socialization, plays a critical role through its parenting styles. Existing research has predominantly categorized parenting styles into authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful types. Studies have consistently indicated that authoritative parenting is associated with lower levels of aggression in young children, whereas negative parenting styles—such as authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful approaches—are linked to higher levels of aggressive behavior. However, within the Chinese cultural context, traditional values such as filial piety and familism, along with unique parent-child interaction patterns (e.g., the traditional "strict father, kind mother" dynamic), may exert a moderating effect on the aforementioned relationships—a dimension that warrants further in-depth analysis. This study aims to systematically review the relationship between parenting styles and aggressive behavior in young children through literature analysis and to construct a theoretical model delineating the underlying mechanism with empathy as the central mediating variable. This study specifically focuses on: (1) how parenting styles influence the manifestation of aggressive behavior in young children; (2) differences in the types and frequency of aggressive behaviors across different parenting styles; and (3) the mediating mechanism of empathy between parenting styles and aggression, based on existing empirical evidence.

Keywords: Parenting styles; Aggressive behavior; Young children; Empathy; Mediating mechanism; Literature review.

1. Introduction

In the early development of children, their emotions are closely related to their future physical and mental health development, as well as social adaptability. Among these, common externalizing problems related to emotions include aggressive behaviors, among others. Currently, aggressive behavior has become one of the key research topics in developmental psychology.

The aggressive behavior in young children is influenced by multiple factors, including physiological, psychological, and environmental aspects. Among these, the family, as the primary setting for a child's socialization, plays a crucial role, with parenting styles being particularly critical. Studies commonly categorize parenting styles into authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful types. Current research primarily focuses on the types, causes, and intervention strategies of aggressive behaviors. It indicates that an authoritative parenting style is associated with lower levels of aggression, whereas negative approaches such as authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful styles tend to contribute to increased aggressive behaviors in young children. However, there remains a lack of in-depth analysis within the context of Chinese culture. For instance, traditional values such as filial piety, familism, and distinct parental roles like the "strict mother, kind father" dynamic may uniquely influence the relationship between parenting styles and children's behavior.

This study aims to systematically review the relationship between parenting styles and aggressive behaviors in young children through literature analysis and to construct a theoretical model of the underlying mechanism with empathy as a core mediating variable. It will specifically address the following questions: How do parenting styles influence the manifestation of aggressive behaviors in young children? Do the types and frequency of aggressive behaviors differ under various parenting

styles? Based on existing empirical evidence, how does empathy theoretically mediate the relationship between parenting styles and aggressive behavior?

By integrating existing research findings, this study not only contributes to proposing a theoretical framework applicable to the Chinese cultural context but also provides theoretical insights for parents and educators. It aims to promote the development of more scientific and rational parenting practices, thereby mitigating aggressive behaviors in young children and enhancing their social adaptability. In summary, parenting styles significantly influence aggressive behaviors in young children. Through literature analysis, this study focuses on specific dimensions of parenting styles and their underlying mechanisms, aiming to provide theoretical construction and conceptual guidance for the prevention and intervention of behavioral issues in early childhood.

2. Analysis of Parenting Styles and Aggressive Behavior in Preschool Children

2.1. Theoretical Relationship Between Parenting Styles and Aggressive Behavior in Preschool Children

This chapter aims to systematically review the core concepts of parenting styles and aggressive behavior in young children, with a focus on demonstrating the intrinsic relationship between them. This lays the foundation for subsequently constructing a theoretical model on the mediating role of empathy. Parenting styles, as a core element of the family environment, profoundly shape young children's emotional regulation, social cognition, and behavioral patterns through daily interactions. For example, negative parenting styles such as authoritarian and permissive approaches often lead to deficiencies in children's emotional management and empathy, thereby resulting in increased overt or relational aggression. In contrast, authoritative parenting helps foster a sense of security and awareness of social norms in young children, thereby reducing tendencies toward aggressive behaviors. This study argues that parenting styles serve as a key lens for understanding the formation and development of aggressive behaviors, primarily through their influence on children's psychological and social development as a mediating pathway.

2.1.1 Aggressive behavior in young children and its family-related factors

Aggressive behavior in young children is typically manifested as: physical aggression (direct physical assault, object snatching, spitting, etc.), verbal aggression (insulting language, threatening speech, etc.), and relational aggression (exclusion and isolation, emotional coercion, spreading rumors, etc.) [1,2]. Children aged 3 to 4 primarily exhibit instrumental aggression, which is mainly manifested as snatching objects. With age, the proportion of hostile aggression (intentional harm) increases. Failure to correct misbehavior in early childhood may plant the seeds of school bullying and antisocial behavior [3].

The etiology of aggressive behavior is multifactorial. According to Bandura's theory of triadic reciprocal determinism, social behaviors in young children (including aggressive behaviors) can be conceptualized as the product of a dynamic interplay between the child and their environment. The family, serving as the primary socializing context for young children, plays a pivotal role within this framework. Beyond individual factors such as physiological and temperamental traits, family interaction patterns, particularly the parenting styles employed, have been widely recognized as a key environmental factor in predicting and explaining aggressive behaviors in young children. The manner in which parents express behavioral expectations, provide feedback, and offer emotional support during daily interactions directly shapes the learning and internalization of children's emotional regulation, social cognition, and behavioral strategies

2.1.2 Parenting styles as a critical determinant

The core concept of parenting styles was first proposed and scientifically defined by Baumrind, and the term was formally established as Parenting Style. She defined parenting styles as parents' attempts to promote their children's personal development [4].

Parenting practices (such as choices regarding children's education, cultivation of interests, and establishment of rules) are profoundly shaped by the parents' own habitus. This habitus, which is formed within one's family of origin and social class, often operates at an unconscious level, manifesting through daily practices [5].

Based on the analysis of the relationship between parental personality traits and parenting behaviors, Baumrind employed multiple research methods to identify three typical parenting paradigms: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive. In subsequent research, scholars, including Berg, expanded this framework to comprise four distinct styles: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful. Within the spectrum of parenting styles, authoritative parenting is consistently identified as the most conducive to the socioemotional development of young children. In contrast, both neglectful and authoritarian parenting are associated with more marked detrimental outcomes for child development [6,7]. A substantial body of research has established systematic associations between distinct parenting styles and varied outcomes in children's socioemotional development. Authoritative parenting, which provides clear rules and emotional support, is optimal for the development of prosocial behavior in young children. While authoritarian parenting, characterized by strict control, tends to provoke children's anger and resistance, and permissive parenting, marked by an absence of rules, fail to foster self-control, both of which significantly and positively predict an increase in aggressive behavior in young children. In contrast, neglectful parenting, which lacks basic attention and guidance, has the most profoundly negative impact on child development [6,7].

However, in practice, parents often employ a hybrid approach that blends multiple parenting styles, though one type typically remains dominant.

2.1.3 Parenting styles and young children's aggressive behavior scale

Parenting styles were assessed using the Chinese version of the Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ), originally developed by Robinson et al. and subsequently revised by Cheah et al. The questionnaire comprises three subscales: authoritative parenting (15 items), authoritarian parenting (12 items), and permissive parenting (5 items) [8]. It employs a Likert 5-point scale (ranging from "1=never" to "5=always") for scoring. The total score ranges from 32 to 160. The Cronbach's α coefficients for the total scale and the three subscales were 0.84, 0.97, 0.95, and 0.90, respectively.

The Young Children's Aggressive Behavior Scale utilized the Aggressive Behavior subscale of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), developed by Achenbach et al., which is completed by parents. This scale is designed for children aged 3 to 16 years [9]. The aggressive behavior subscale consists of 28 items rated on a 3-point scale (0 = "not true," 1 = "somewhat or sometimes true," 2 = "very true or often true"), with total scores ranging from 0 to 56. Based on normative data from Chinese children, the clinical cutoff score for aggressive behavior is ≥ 19 for boys and ≥ 18 for girls. In this study, the Cronbach's α for the aggressive behavior subscale was 0.88.

2.2. The Effects of Different Parenting Styles

2.2.1 Authoritarian parenting and aggressive behavior

Freud posited that young children who experience abuse or emotional neglect during childhood face a several-fold increased risk of exhibiting aggressive behavior in adulthood compared to the normal population [10]. Based on extensive comparative research, Levy concluded that although overprotective parenting can provide immediate security, it inhibits the development of children's autonomy. Such developmental delays may trigger persistent inferiority complexes, which can subsequently manifest as social withdrawal or compensatory aggressive behaviors during adolescence [11]. The study by Jane et al. revealed that physical punishment, as a negative parenting practice, readily elicits problematic behaviors in children. Such behaviors, in turn, reciprocally influence parental strategies, prompting parents to adopt more controlling and coercive authoritarian parenting approaches. This interaction intensifies parent-child relational stress, thereby further evoking more profound maladaptive behaviors in children and ultimately forming a self-reinforcing

vicious cycle [12]. In aggressive environments, punishment and resistance can form a vicious cycle that continually exacerbates hostility. Bandura noted that punishment may suppress behavior temporarily, yet it fails to elicit positive alternative behaviors and may even provoke collective resistance. Truly effective approaches involve providing positive alternatives that enable people to attain rewards and achieve self-worth through prosocial behavior [13].

2.2.2 Indulgent/permissive parenting and aggressive behavior

Indulgent parenting is characterized by permissiveness and is also referred to as permissive parenting. Parental fulfillment of children's demands without appropriate constraints may hinder the development of self-control and frustration tolerance. This can lead to children's maladaptive cognitions regarding such undesirable behaviors, thereby further reinforcing aggressive tendencies. In her research, Li Fangxia explicitly indicated that such parents demonstrate excessive attentiveness toward their children, striving to fulfill all desires while accommodating their behaviors without principle. Children raised under such parenting patterns often exhibit immaturity, characterized by poor self-control and a propensity toward developing a self-centered mindset [14]. Concurrently, the status of being an only child may further impede the development of empathy, fostering egocentric thinking patterns. Such children often fail to consider others' perspectives and, when their demands are frustrated, are more likely to employ aggressive behaviors as a primary coping strategy. When young children grow up and leave the protective family environment, they often exhibit chronic negativity and difficulty coping positively due to insufficient frustration tolerance. This not only adversely affects their psychological well-being but also seriously constrains their social development, thereby frequently leading to poor interpersonal relationships and challenges in social integration [14,15].

2.2.3 Authoritative parenting and aggressive behavior

Rohner's research revealed that the democratic parenting style can systematically foster young children's socio-cognitive abilities. By establishing mechanisms for equal dialogue and negotiation-based interactions, this approach guides them to develop effective communication strategies [16]. Authoritative parenting contributes to significant advantages in cognitive development and fosters strong social-behavioral regulation skills in young children. Such children often exhibit confidence and composure in social interactions. They are able to participate actively and appropriately, and—due to well-developed emotional insight and control—they effectively refrain from resorting to aggressive behavior to resolve conflicts.

2.2.4 Neglectful parenting and aggressive behavior

In neglectful parenting environments, due to a persistent lack of emotional attention and prompt responses, young children often fail to establish a secure attachment with their caregivers. This emotional deprivation further impedes their socio-cognitive development, predisposing them to interpret others' behaviors as hostile—a tendency known as hostile attribution bias. Consequently, when encountering interpersonal conflicts or disputes, such children are more likely to adopt aggressive coping strategies rather than constructive communication approaches [15].

2.2.5 Underlying mechanisms and related variables

During child development, parenting styles influence aggressive behavior through distinct underlying mechanisms. Authoritarian parenting, characterized by high control and low responsiveness, directly fosters reactive aggression in children by inducing a hostile attribution bias and difficulties in emotion regulation. Permissive and neglectful parenting styles, through over-indulgence and emotional absence respectively, undermine the development of self-control and empathy in children. This predisposes them to employ either instrumental or impulsive aggression in interpersonal conflicts. In contrast, the authoritative parenting style, centered around rational guidance and emotional support, effectively suppresses aggressive behaviors by fostering moral internalization, social-cognitive competencies, and emotion regulation skills. This approach cultivates more socially adaptive behavioral patterns. There are clear mechanistic pathways and

complex interactions between multiple variables linking parenting styles and aggressive behavior [17].

2.3. Educational Recommendations

2.3.1 Enhancing parenting practices

Parents should refrain from employing authoritarian parenting styles such as "coercive discipline" or "over-controlling upbringing," which often impose high expectations on young children. Failure to meet these expectations may result in punishment, a practice that not only contradicts children's psychological and developmental patterns but also increases the likelihood of inducing low self-esteem, avoidance behaviors, and even triggering feelings of frustration and aggressive tendencies. Parents should actively seek to understand young children, create opportunities for heartfelt communication, and listen patiently to their expressions. Children should be encouraged to speak truthfully and express their emotions openly. Caregivers should refrain from interrupting or dismissing them arbitrarily and withhold evaluation until the child has finished speaking, so as to avoid triggering defiant reactions [18].

Parents should advocate for an authoritative parenting style, which combines emotional warmth with reasonable expectations, to foster the healthy development of a child's independence, social competence, and self-confidence. It is imperative to respect the natural progression of a child's physical and mental development. Since cognitive advancement occurs primarily through play-based activities, the premature introduction of didactic instruction should be avoided. Concurrently, parents should engage in the continuous acquisition of evidence-based parenting knowledge and adapt their approaches according to the child's unique individuality. They should champion an authoritative parenting style that balances emotional warmth with appropriate demands to promote the development of autonomy, social competence, and self-esteem. It is also imperative that a coherent educational approach be maintained within the family to provide a stable environment conducive to the child's overall growth [19].

2.3.2 Creating a positive parenting environment

According to Bandura's theory of triadic reciprocal determinism, learning within social contexts occurs through observational learning and imitation. Bandura's Bobo Doll experiment demonstrated that aggressive behavior can be acquired through observation and imitation. Children who witnessed an adult model attacking the doll precisely replicated both the physical assaults and verbal insults. This indicates that children can learn aggression without direct reinforcement or personal experience, solely by observing the behavior of a model [20]. Therefore, the environment exerts a profound influence on behavioral development, and the specific surroundings in which a young child is placed constitute a critical factor in the formation of their behavior. Personal development is rooted in and remains inextricably linked to the family, as the familial environment plays an essential role during an individual's formative years – consistent with the concept of "reciprocal determinism," which emphasizes the bidirectional interaction between environment and behavior.

Therefore, families should strive to create a harmonious and democratic atmosphere, continuously improve their parenting literacy, and consciously model behavior through both their words and actions.

Parents need to learn to rationally manage their negative emotions and set a positive example for young children. They should strive to avoid arguing or using vulgar language in front of children, as this not only causes psychological harm but may also lead them to imitate such verbal aggression and hostile behaviors. It is essential that parents develop the ability to regulate and control their emotions to foster a warm and harmonious family environment for their children.

The application of the bidirectional interaction principle to improve aggressive behavior in young children fundamentally hinges on understanding the dynamic interplay among the environment, the individual, and the behavior. The primary step involves reducing stimuli in the environment that are likely to provoke conflicts, such as providing a spacious and well-organized play area and avoiding

toys that may encourage aggressive tendencies, thereby minimizing opportunities for conflict from a physical environmental perspective. Moreover, adults should serve as proactive guides and positive role models in their interactions with children. When young children display aggressive behavior, simply scolding them or resorting to physical punishment should be avoided. Instead, adults ought to adopt a strategy of non-reinforcement—that is, ignoring the aggressive act while showing gentle concern toward the child who was targeted. This approach prevents reinforcing the undesirable behavior while simultaneously modeling a non-aggressive alternative.

It is also essential to directly teach children appropriate problem-solving strategies. Through methods such as role-playing and storytelling, caregivers can guide children to reflect on the consequences of aggression and help them understand why such behavior is unacceptable. By collaboratively envisioning a positive and socially admirable image of a child, adults can strengthen the child's motivation to emulate such role models.

The key lies in treating everyday interactions as educational opportunities. With a calm and caring attitude, adults should consistently encourage children to express their emotions and needs verbally, and help them develop skills in cooperation, sharing, and non-aggressive conflict resolution. The ultimate goal is to support children in internalizing these positive behavioral patterns [21].

3. Conclusion

When studying the relationship between parenting styles and aggressive behavior in young children, previous research has often focused predominantly on the unidirectional influence of the former on the latter—for example, how different disciplinary approaches adopted by parents may influence children to exhibit more or less aggression. However, this perspective fails to adequately acknowledge the reverse influence of the child's own behavior on parenting styles. In reality, parent-child interaction is reciprocal and dynamic: a young child who frequently displays aggressive behaviors (such as hitting, snatching toys, or having tantrums) may elicit more frequent use of punitive measures, harsh interventions, or, conversely, lead parents to feel helpless and become more permissive. Over time, the child's behavior gradually shapes the parents' coping strategies and emotional responses.

Furthermore, existing research has not adequately addressed other critical factors that may influence young children's aggressive behaviors. Child behavior development is never shaped by a single factor; multiple environmental contexts beyond the family—such as peer interactions, preschool climate, socio-cultural expectations, and media exposure—also play equally critical roles. For instance, children who frequently engage in conflicts with peers in collective settings may experience peer rejection, thereby reinforcing their aggressive tendencies. Moreover, the cultural background and social norms within which a family is situated can also indirectly shape parental judgments and responses regarding "what constitutes appropriate behavior."

Therefore, future research should adopt a more comprehensive and interactive perspective. On the one hand, it is crucial to further examine the bidirectional and reciprocal mechanisms in parent-child behavioral responses—specifically, how aggressive behavior and parenting styles mutually influence one another over time and form feedback loops. Longitudinal designs are needed to capture developmental trajectories of parent-child interactions across multiple time points. On the other hand, studies should also locate participants within a broader socio-ecological context to investigate the combined effects of multi-level factors, such as peer relationships, school environment, and cultural differences. Only by establishing an integrative analytical framework can we elucidate the complex mechanisms underlying the development of aggressive behavior in early childhood, thereby contributing to more evidence-based and effective strategies for family education and emotional-behavioral intervention.

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