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Why Do Some Parents Become Impatient and Irritated When Their Preschool Children
Are Emotionally Distressed?

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Presented at meetings of The Canadian Psychological Association,
Ottawa, ON, June, 2015

Author Note. William Roberts is now at Thompson Rivers University (retired). This research was supported by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Strategic Grant 498-87-0026. Special thanks to Anne Stephenson, Lisa Kelner, and my other research assistants at York University. Q-sort data from this sample were included in Roberts (1999). We gratefully acknowledge the help of the parents, children, and teachers whose generous cooperation made this research possible.

Abstract

In a study of emotional socialization, 32 children (mean age = 4.8 years, 50% girls) were observed at home over four evenings, from supper until they settled for the night. Irritated responses to children's distress were observed in 62% of families – in 33% of fathers and 47% of mothers. Fathers' irritation was clearly associated with worse child outcomes as assessed by teacher and observer ratings in preschool. We examined possible causes: child noncompliance, parental stress, troubled marital relationships, parents' lack of emotional support and their unhappiness. None were supported. Observational data indicated children were compliant & responsive. Mothers' stress (e.g., losses, separations, troubles with friends) was associated with less irritation, not more. Fathers' stress was positively associated with irritation, but all r s were small. Correlations with marital problems were small and negative, not positive. For interactions with friends, neighbors, and kin, only 1 of 12 correlations for each parent was as large as .34, fewer than expected by chance. Life satisfaction was also unrelated to irritation (r s < .20). These results do not prove the null hypothesis, but do suggest that these obvious candidates are unimportant. The causes of parents' irritation appear to lie elsewhere.

Keywords: response; parent-child relations; child distress, parental irritation; stress; unhappiness; social networks.

Why do some parents become impatient and irritated when their preschool children are emotionally distressed?

In a study of emotional socialization, 32 children (mean age = 4.8 years, 50% girls) were observed at home over four evenings when both parents were present. Families were observed from suppertime until the target child settled for the night, an average of 32.6 ten-minute focal samples (Altmann, 1974). Among the 80,750 recorded events were 906 parent responses made during 300 episodes of child distress.

Parents responded to young children's emotional distress in many ways (as Roberts & Strayer, 1987, also found). One of them was by becoming impatient and irritated themselves. Irritated responses were observed every 64.5 min (at the median), in 62% of families (33% of fathers and 47% of mothers).

Fathers' irritation was clearly associated with more negative child outcomes as assessed by teacher and observer Q-sort ratings in preschool (Baumrind, 1968, 1971): with greater anger, $r(30) = .54$, more bullying, $r(30) = .51$, less happiness, $r(30) = -.47$, less cooperation with adults, $r(30) = -.48$, and less achievement orientated, $r(30) = -.41$ (all $ps < .025$). In contrast, mothers' irritation was not significantly associated with any child outcome, and correlations for mothers and fathers differed significantly ($ps < .05$) for 4 of 9 measures (happiness, peer competence, purposiveness, and achievement oriented behavior). We therefor examined demographic variables and possible causes of parents' irritation: child noncompliance, parental stress, troubled marital relationships, lack of emotional support, and personal unhappiness. As will be seen, none of these hypotheses was supported.

Was observed irritation related to demographic variables?

As shown in Figure 1, parental irritation was not related to family size, parents' education, age, or length of marriage. We will have more to say below about the gender difference for fathers.

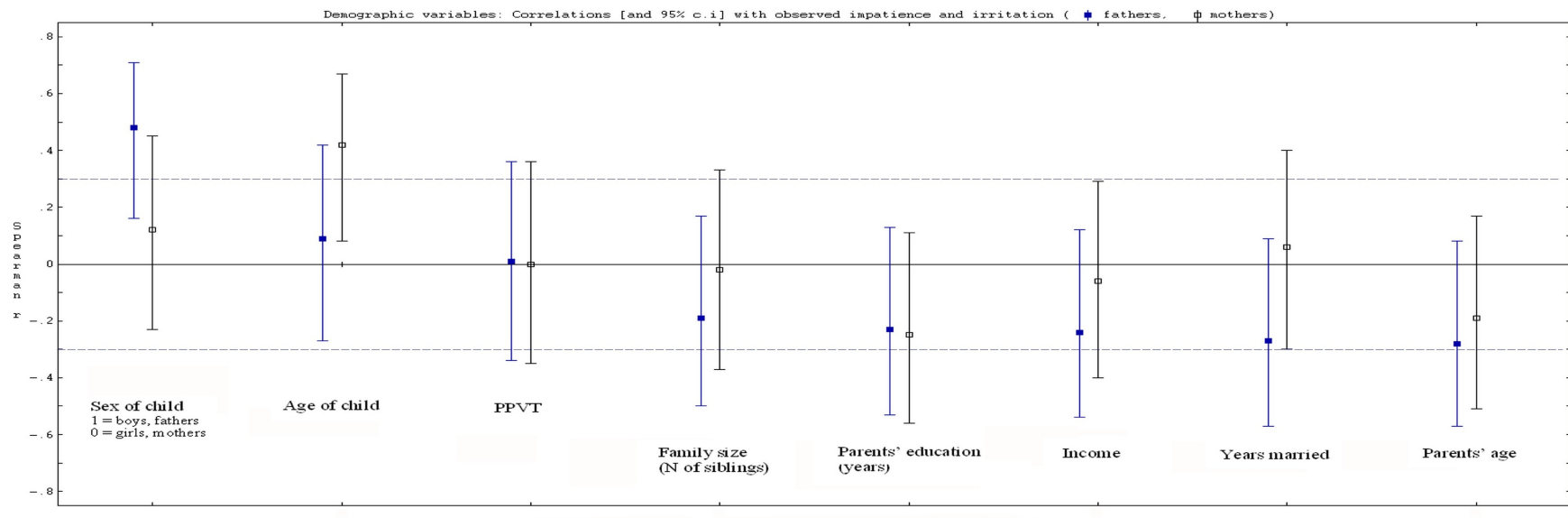


Figure 1. Demographic variables and parents' irritation: correlations and 95% confidence intervals

Was the child difficult and noncompliant?

Several observational findings suggested that parental impatience was a characteristic of parent-child relationships, rather than the children:

- The correlation between mothers' and fathers' impatience was small and nonsignificant, $r[30] = .14$.
- Fathers of sons were significantly more likely to be irritated and impatient than fathers of daughters: 2 of 16 fathers of daughters [12.5%] vs. 9 of 16 fathers of sons [56%], $\chi^2[1, N = 32] = 6.79$, exact $p = .02$, $V = .46$, odds ratio = 9.0.
- Fathers of sons were more frequently impatient than fathers of daughters: once every 111 minutes, at the median, vs. once every 250 minutes for fathers and daughters, $U = 67.5$, $p = .007$, $r_{pb}^2 = .17$.
- In contrast, mothers were not significantly more impatient with sons (56%) than with daughters (38%), $\chi^2(1, N = 32) = 1.13$, exact $p = .49$, $V = .19$, odds ratio = 2.1; and
- mothers were impatient with sons and daughters at roughly equivalent rates: at the median, every 58.8 min. with daughters and every 76.9 min with sons, $U = 111.0$, $p = .49$, $r_{pb}^2 = .00$.

As shown in Figure 2, children whose parents became irritated or impatient were similar to other children.

- They were observed to be just as compliant as other children (although more likely to initially ignore a paternal directive),
- just as likely to reply when spoken to,
- and just as likely to smile or laugh with their parent.
- Indeed, mothers who were sometimes irritated had children who spoke to them more often and who were more often physically affectionate – signs of a warm parent-child relationship.

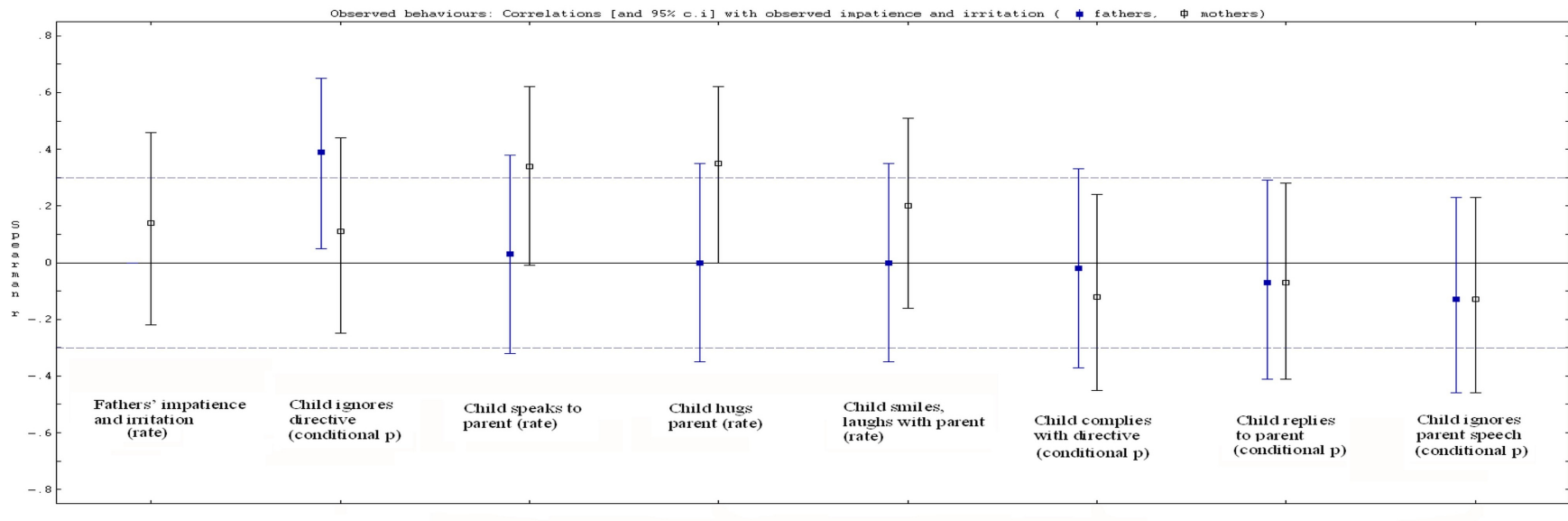


Figure 2. Children's behaviours and parents' irritation: correlations and 95% confidence intervals

Was parental irritation and impatience the result of parental stress?

Both parents completed a standard 35-item life events inventory (Horowitz, Schaefer, Hiroto, Wilner, & Levin, 1977). Events were grouped into five categories, following the suggestions of Rutter (1981).

1. As shown in Figure 3, mothers' reported stress was associated with less irritation, not more.
2. Fathers' reported stress was positively associated with irritation, as expected, but r s were generally small and nonsignificant. Only one correlation was greater than .30, and binomial tests retained the omnibus null hypothesis that all correlations were zero, $p = .15$. We concluded that stress was unimportant.

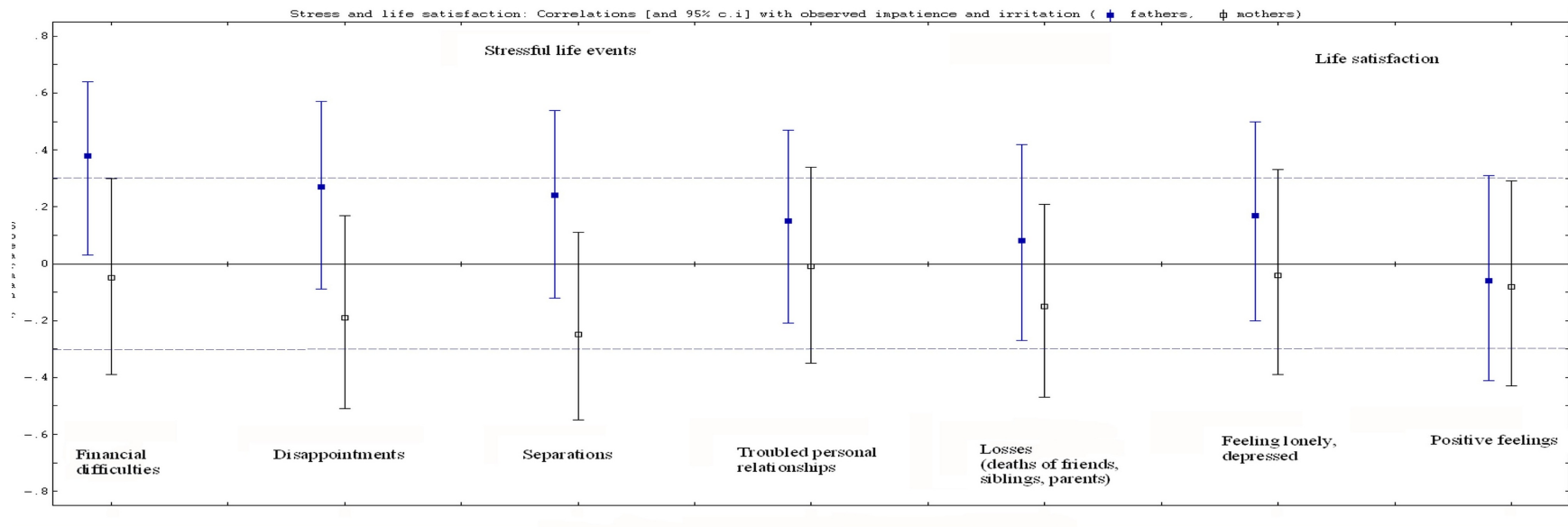


Figure 3. Parents' reported stressful events and their observed irritation: Correlations and 95% confidence intervals

Was parental irritation and impatience the result of personal unhappiness?

Parents described their level of happiness using an 11-item life satisfaction questionnaire (Bradburn, 1969). This instrument yielded two scales, one for feelings of happiness and satisfaction, the other for feelings of loneliness and depression. As shown in Figure 3, neither scale was significantly related to parental irritation. Three of four correlations were less than .10 absolute.

Was parental irritation and impatience the result of troubled, unsupportive marital relationships?

Both parents completed a detailed social networks questionnaire (Tietjen, 1978) which elicited information about

emotional as well as practical support from kin, friends, and spouse. Information from this measure was combined with spouse-related items from the life events stress inventory to index the degree to which the marital relationship was seen as supportive, satisfying, or problematic.

As shown in Figure 4, correlations with marital problems were small and negative, not positive. Emotional support from spouse was also unrelated to parental irritation ($r_s < .10$ absolute). We concluded that marital stress and emotional support were unimportant.

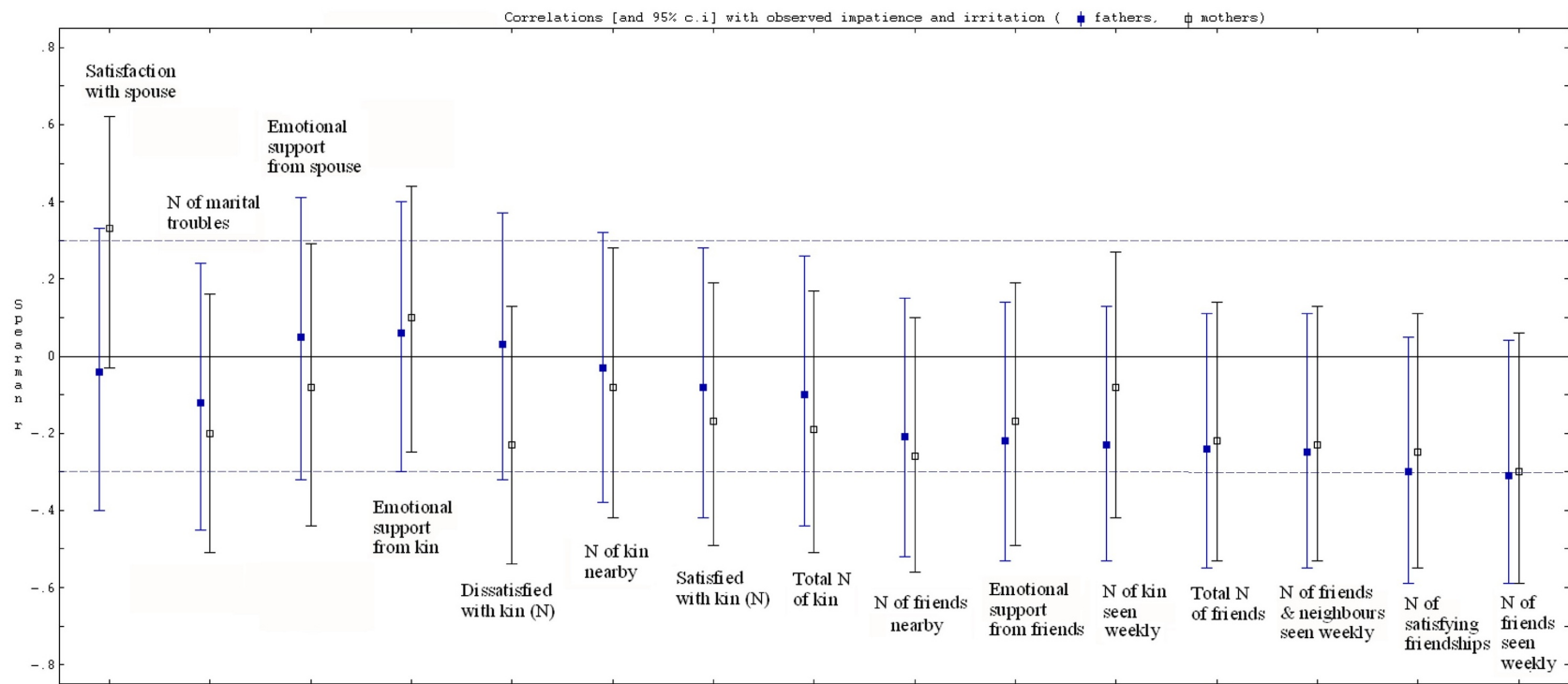


Figure 4. Reported social support and observed irritation: correlations and 95% confidence intervals.

Did parental irritation and impatience result from low levels of emotional support from relatives and friends?

As shown in Figure 4, reported social network variables were unrelated to parental irritation and impatience. Only 3 of 22 correlations were greater than .30, and binomial tests retained the omnibus null hypothesis that all correlations were zero, $p = .38$.

Conclusions.

These results do not prove the null hypothesis, of course. It may be that we failed to ask parents the right questions, or that self-report data are not adequate to address these issues. But our consistent lack of findings suggests that these obvious candidates are unimportant.

The main causes of parents' irritation and impatience may lie elsewhere, perhaps in parents' own attachment history. Young children require adult help in order to successfully regulate their emotions (Bowlby, 1982; Kopp, 1989). The failure of parents, especially fathers, to regulate their own emotions when their children are distressed may represent a temporary breakdown in dyadic regulation, with negative consequences for children's ability to regulate themselves in preschool (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005). Mothers' irritation and impatience, in contrast, may not indicate as serious a breakdown in dyadic regulation (given relationships that are perhaps warmer), so that consequences for children's behavior in preschool are more benign.

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