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CHILDREN'S REACTIONS TO STORIES DEPICTING PARENT-CHILD CONFLICT SITUATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Earlier investigators have found a relation between some of the attitudes of children toward their parents and the age and sex of the children. Simpson (24) analyzed the parent preferences of children from five to nine years old and found that the mother was preferred to the father by children of all ages and sex groups except the five-year-old girls. She also found an increase in mother-preference from five to nine and a corresponding decrease in father-preference during this period. Stogdill (26) found that delinquent and problem children were more likely to prefer the parent of the opposite sex than non-problem children. Newell (18) in a study of attitudes revealed in the psychiatric examinations of juvenile delinquents found that 80 per cent of the boys preferred their mothers while 53 per cent of the girls preferred their fathers. Stagner and Drought (25) found an insignificant positive correlation between children's attitudes toward fathers and toward mothers. Meltzer (16, 17) in an analysis of sex differences in attitudes of five- to eight-year-olds toward parents found boys more often expressing favorable reactions toward the mother and girls more often expressing such reactions toward the father. The girls also reacted to both parents with a pleasant feeling tone more frequently than did the boys. Studies of the development of children's ideals by Hill (11) and Macaulay (15) show that, while in general children choose ideals from their own sex, the proportion of girls choosing men is higher than that of boys choosing women.

Various studies of hostile and aggressive behavior among young children have been made. Levy (13, 14) investigated the hostility patterns exhibited by children in a doll play situation structured to call forth sibling rivalry. Seashore and Bavelas (23) and Barker *et al.* (2) studied responses to frustration in children. Goodenough (10) and Felder (8) tabulated the nature and frequency of anger outbreaks in young children. Fite (9), Bach (1), Baruch (3, 4), Pintler (21), Phillips (19), and Phillips *et al.* (20) investigated aggression through studies of the doll play of children.

¹ Study conducted in partial fulfillment for graduation with highest honors in psychology from the University of Illinois.

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The Children's Form of the Rosenzweig Picture-Frustration Study (22) uses cartoon pictures to elicit hostile responses from children. These responses are analyzed on the basis of the direction of aggression and the type of reaction. Despert and Potter (6) investigated the fantasy life of children through repetition and composition of stories. They found anxiety, guilt, wish fulfillment, and aggressiveness as the most common themes. Korner (12) analyzed hostility in children from four to six years of age through children's responses to stories of frustrating situations and adults' ratings of the children's behavior. She found no relation between the amount of hostility expressed in the test situation and actual hostile behavior reported by the parent or between emotional adjustment and hostility.

The hypothesis under investigation in the present study is that differences exist between boys and girls in their attitudes toward their mothers and fathers. The problem is to study these differences in terms of the responses of children to stories depicting parent-child conflict situations.

METHOD

Instrument

The instrument used in this investigation consisted of nine short stories depicting common situations of parent-child conflict in the home. (See Appendix.) The stories were selected to fit the following criteria: 1) the situations were to involve frustration of the child by the parent; 2) the situations were to be such that every child was likely to have undergone similar experiences in his daily life; 3) the situations were to be equally applicable to boys and girls; 4) substitution of either mother or father as the frustrating agent was to be possible in every situation; 5) the situations were to be appropriate for children between the ages of five and nine; and 6) a large part of the child's daily life was to be covered in the total group of situations. Frustration was reflected through parental command, punishment, and threat of withdrawal of affection. One story dealing with reward was introduced to determine whether the children would differentiate between the reward and the conflict situations.

A form in which the story character was a girl was used with girls, and one in which the story character was a boy was used with boys. Mother and father were assigned alternately to the ten stories as the frustrating figure. The stories then were arranged in random order. The frustrating figures were reversed to provide an alternate form. This resulted in four forms, two for girls and two for boys.

Procedure

Three investigators took part in the collection of data. A standardized procedure was used and the interview was recorded on a wire recorder. The interviews took place in a school room. Each child was interviewed

individually. While filling out an information card on the child, the interviewer chatted in a friendly manner for a few minutes in order to establish rapport. She told the child that she had a machine which could take down what was said. The recorder was turned on, and the child asked to say a few words. This recording was played back to him.

The interviewer presented a standardized introduction to the stories.² This introduction attempted to establish identification with the story character on the part of the child, asked the child to choose a name for the boy or girl in the stories, and gave general instructions as to what the child was expected to do. One of the story forms was then read to the child. The form was alternated for each subject. After each story the interviewer said, "Now let's pretend ——— can do anything he (she) wants. What does ——— feel like doing? . . . How does ——— feel inside?" Prompting and encouragement to give longer responses was through repetition of the original questions, the child's statements, and standardized phrases such as, "You can make up any story you want," "What do you think?" and "Anything else?" At the end of the interview the child returned to the classroom.

Subjects

The subjects were 49 second grade pupils. Twenty-eight were girls and 21 boys. Thirty children were seven years old; 19 were eight. The group included seven Negroes, four boys and three girls. Eight children, five girls and three boys, were not living with both of their natural parents at the time of testing; of these children, two boys and a girl were Negroes.

The children were residents of two separate areas of the town. Twenty-four children, ten boys and 14 girls, were from the area close to the school. These children are referred to as the non-university group. The other 25 children, 11 boys and 14 girls, were brought to the school by bus from two housing projects for university students and faculty. These children are referred to as the university group. The occupations of the fathers of the children in the non-university group, as listed on the school records, included jailor, laborer, soldier, landscaping, over-the-road driver, insurance salesman, roofer, university employee, salesman, employee of milk company, welder, manager of service station, road foreman, contractor, floor mechanic, electrician and factory worker, painter, barber, and dry cleaner. The mothers of this group were all listed as housewives, except for one listed as a maid.

² "I have some stories to tell you. They are about a boy just like you. Let's give this boy a name. What would you like to call him?" (Boy's form) . . . "All right, we'll call him ———. ——— lives with his mother and father in a town like this one. He goes to school and is in second grade. ——— likes to do many things. He plays with his friends; he listens to the radio; and he looks at his books. I'm going to tell you some stories about things that happen to ———. I'll tell you MY story and then you tell me a story about how ——— feels. You may make up any story you want. Okay? . . . Let's go."

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The occupations listed for the fathers of the university group included student, graduate student, teacher, scientist, professor, superintendent of state agency, army, and research biologist. The mothers of the university children were housewives, secretaries, a museum worker, university staff member, and a case worker in a social agency.

RESULTS

Procedure

The responses of the children to the nine conflict situations were scored in four categories: emotional, constructive, active opposition, and simple compliance.

An emotional response is one in which an emotional outburst is the sole response, or in which there is physical or verbal attack on the parent, or a threat to withdraw affection from the parent.

A constructive response is an original method of getting at the goal in a socially approved manner.

Active opposition includes disobedience, asking permission, denial of the parent's statement or judgment, and attempts to force the parent to change his statement or action. Active opposition may be manifested either in behavior or in a wish to behave in a certain way.

Simple compliance consists of those cases in which the total mode of response of the child is compliance.

TABLE I
FREQUENCIES OF RESPONSES OF ALL SUBJECTS TO EACH STORY

<i>Story Number</i>	<i>Emotional</i>	<i>Constructive</i>	<i>Active Opposition</i>	<i>Simple Compliance</i>	<i>Total</i>
1	8	14	6	21	49
2	3	..	33	13	49
3	1	..	30	18	49
4	10	1	32	6	49
5	10	25	7	7	49
6*
7	8	28	1	12	49
8	2	..	41	6	49
9	6	26	7	10	49
10	8	1	28	12	49
TOTAL	56	95	185	105	441
PERCENTAGE	12.70	21.54	41.95	23.81	100.00

* Story 6, the reward situation, was not scored.

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In cases where the response could fit into more than one category, or where two different responses were given by the child, a method of priority was used. Emotional response was given first priority, followed by constructive, active opposition, and simple compliance. A response was classified as compliant only if that was the only form of behavior suggested by the child.

TABLE II
SIGNIFICANCE OF DIFFERENCES USING CHI SQUARE TEST

<i>Group Analyzed</i>	<i>Analysis of Difference Between</i>	<i>Value of Chi Square</i>	<i>Significance</i>
Total group	Seven-year-olds — Eight-year-olds	5.90	None
Total group	Boys — Girls	1.42	None
Total group	Mother items — Father items	5.24	None
Boys	Mother items — Father items	5.56	None
Girls	Mother items — Father items	2.02	None
Father items	Boys — Girls	1.93	None
Mother items	Boys — Girls	1.84	None
University*	Boys — Girls	1.58	None
University*	Mother items — Father items	2.28	None
Non-University*	Boys — Girls	2.27	None
Non-University*	Mother items — Father items	2.94	None
Total group	Negro — White	9.55	At .05 level
Total group	With parents — Without parents [§]	8.40	At .05 level
Total group	University — Non-University	11.04	At .02 level
Total group [†]	University — Non-University	15.67	At .01 level
Total group [‡]	University — Non-University	16.19	At .01 level
Total group [•]	University — Non-University	14.12	At .01 level

* Negro children and children not living with both natural parents have been eliminated.

† Negro children have been eliminated.

‡ Children not living with both natural parents have been eliminated.

§ With Parents refers to children living with both natural parents at the time of testing. Without Parents refers to children not living with both natural parents at the time of testing.

Data

The total frequency of each type of response is reported in Table I. The investigators were unable to find any responses which could be scored as constructive for stories 2, 3, and 8.

Analysis of the responses to story 6 (the reward situation) shows that all of the children distinguished between this story and the conflict situations.

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TABLE III
DIFFERENCES IN PER CENT OF TOTAL RESPONSES FOR NEGRO
AND WHITE CHILDREN

	<i>Negro</i>	<i>White</i>
Emotional	14.28	12.43
Constructive	15.87	22.49
Active Opposition	31.75	43.65
Simple Compliance	38.10	21.43
TOTAL	100.00	100.00

The children were divided into groups on the basis of a number of different criteria and the chi-square test of significance was applied to the differences in response between the various groups. (Table II)

Analysis of the responses of the Negro and white children indicates a difference significant at the .05 level. A comparison of the percentage of responses in each category for these two groups may be found in Table III.

The differences in the responses of those children who were living with both of their natural parents at the time of testing (hereafter referred to as children with both parents) and those children who were not living with both of their natural parents (to be referred to as children without both parents) also are significant at the .05 level. Table IV presents a comparison of the percentage of responses in each category for these two groups.

Preliminary analysis of the university and non-university groups indicates a difference significant at the .02 level. After the Negro children are eliminated from the group, the difference is significant at the .01 level. It is also significant at the .01 level after the children not living with both natural parents are removed. Following elimination of both the Negro children and those children without both parents, the difference remains significant at

TABLE IV
DIFFERENCES IN PER CENT OF TOTAL RESPONSES OF CHILDREN
WITH AND WITHOUT PARENTS

	<i>With Parents</i>	<i>Without Parents</i>
Emotional	13.23	9.52
Constructive	23.02	12.70
Active Opposition	42.06	41.27
Simple Compliance	21.69	36.51
TOTAL	100.00	100.00

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the .01 level. A comparison of the percentage of responses in each category for the university and non-university groups following these eliminations is to be found in Table V.

TABLE V
DIFFERENCES IN PER CENT OF RESPONSES OF UNIVERSITY AND
NON-UNIVERSITY CHILDREN *

	<i>University</i>	<i>Non-University</i>
Emotional	6.46	19.44
Constructive	24.24	22.92
Active Opposition	45.96	41.67
Simple Compliance	23.23	15.97
TOTAL	99.99	100.00

* Following elimination of Negro children and children not living with both natural parents at the time of testing.

DISCUSSION

Frequency of responses

Active opposition was found to be the most common response of the children in this study to situations involving parent-child conflict. This type of behavior is evidently a typical aggressive reaction to a frustration situation. Second are constructive responses and simple compliance, which are nearly equal in frequency. These represent responses which are not aimed at defiance of the parent. Constructive and compliant responses may be considered socially acceptable forms of behavior. Least common are the emotional responses, which would appear to be a reaction of helplessness and further frustration which does not find an outlet in any other form of activity. Emotional responses apparently represent an extreme form of frustration which results when the child does not find any other satisfactory mode of response.

The differences found here are due not only to the differences in the responses called forth by the nature of the various situations but also to difficulties in the formulation of certain responses to some of the stories.

Stories 2, 3, and 8, which involve command, result in a high proportion of opposition, with compliance as the second most frequent form of response. These stories do not arouse a great number of emotional responses in the children. Constructive responses are not found in these cases due to the nature of the situations.

Story 4, the command story, in which the parent interferes physically in the child's activity, is similar to the punishment situation in story 10. It arouses a greater degree of emotional response than did the simple com-

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mand situations. As in the command situations, active opposition is the most frequent form of response to these stories. Compliance is also a frequent response to these two stories, occurring about as frequently as the emotional responses. Few constructive responses are shown in these situations.

Stories 1, 5, 7, and 9, which are considered to imply a threat to withdraw parental affection, elicit a large number of constructive responses. These are apparently an effort to change the behavior of the parent or to by-pass the parental frustration and attain the goal through some other means. The other differences here are not as definite as those in the command and punishment situations, but certain trends are apparent. Emotional responses are almost as numerous as in stories 4 and 10, indicating that here also an area of emotional significance to the child is touched. Opposition, compliance, and emotional responses are exhibited to about the same degree in these situations, except for stories 1 and 7. The low opposition on story 7, where the parent does not kiss the child goodnight, probably is due partly to the difficulty of formulating an opposition response to this story. The high degree of compliance on story 1, where the parent does not have the present he promised the child, may be related to the position of this story in the test series. A number of children showed hesitancy as to exactly what was expected of them as well as hesitancy to express their feelings freely on the first story.

Age differences

In consideration of the absence of significant differences between the responses of the seven- and eight-year-olds it must be remembered that all of these children are in the second grade. If differences were to exist on these stories it is unlikely that they would be evidenced by two groups so similar in age.

Sex differences

In no cases are the differences between boys' and girls' responses to the mother items or the father items significant.

It is apparent that the boys and girls in this study present essentially similar responses to both the mother and the father. The results indicate that the the pattern of response of the child is similar whether the mother or the father is the frustrating agent and that sex is not a significant factor in determining the type of reaction pattern a child develops.

Negro-white differences

In considering the difference between the Negro and white children, the small size of the Negro sample must be considered. There is a larger degree of compliance on the part of the Negro children, more active opposition from the white children, and a larger proportion of constructive responses from the white children (Table III).

The study by Davis and Havighurst (5) on color differences in patterns of child rearing indicates that the fathers of lower class Negro children tend to discipline their children more and spend less time teaching and playing with them than do white fathers. The more authoritarian parent-child relationship in the Negro families may be a factor leading to the larger degree of compliance and smaller amount of active opposition evidenced by the Negro children. The higher frequency of constructive responses among white children may be due in part to the less authoritarian atmosphere. There may be a factor of difference in intelligence present, since the Negro children are all from the non-university group while a large proportion of the white children are the sons and daughters of college people. The general differences in occupational level and educational background of the parents of the university and non-university groups may have some significance here.

With parents—without parents differences

The data report more constructive responses, slightly more emotional responses, and less compliance from the children with both parents (Table IV). The sample of children who were not living with their natural parents is small. Information on the situation in which each child was living, the reasons for this arrangement, and the degree to which emotional feelings on the part of the child and parents were involved was not available to the investigators.

It is possible that these differences reflect a more authoritarian atmosphere in the homes of the children not living with both parents which results in a greater degree of compliance and few constructive responses. There may also be an element of insecurity which results in a larger degree of compliant behavior. The results indicate that the original family-child relationship is a factor in the type of response given by the child.

University—non-university differences

The non-university children presented a larger number of emotional responses, while the university group presented more compliance and slightly more opposition (Table V).

The children in the university group come from families of a different occupational class than those in the non-university group. There is no overlap between the occupations of the parents of the children in these two groups. The regions in the community in which these two groups live differ. The parents of the university children are of a higher educational level than the parents of the non-university children. It is probable that there is a difference in intelligence between the university and non-university children.

In addition to the study by Davis and Havighurst (6) previously discussed, Dolger and Ginandes (7) report that children from families of

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high socio-economic status offer more constructive and amicable solutions to discipline situations than do children from average homes. The children from average homes tend to solve discipline situations by an appeal to authority.

It should be remembered that the stories used in this investigation were developed in terms of applicability to middle-class children similar to those in the university group. It is possible that some of the material objects (e.g., radio in the home, present for child, and so forth) and some of the situations (e.g., insistence on eating dinner before having dessert) were foreign to the experience of the non-university children and therefore might not have had the same emotional significance for them as for the university group.

It is likely that a more democratic home atmosphere and a more friendly and relaxed parent-child relationship exist in the families of the university children, while the families of the non-university children are likely to be more authoritarian. The university home is likely to evidence more respect for the children as individuals, to consider the wishes and ideas of the children to a greater degree, and to adopt a more cooperative approach to planning and decision-making, both in daily routine and in special activities. This democratic atmosphere and comfortable parent-child relationship is apt to result in a wider range of behavior and greater resourcefulness. Thus, the university child presents both more opposition and more compliant responses. The non-university child, on the other hand, may be faced with a feeling of utter frustration and helplessness and react with the more elemental emotional outburst. It is interesting that the university group does not present a significantly higher percentage of constructive responses than the non-university group. A difference of this sort might have been expected in terms of the general pattern of differences.

The university child may also develop a higher level of frustration tolerance. He may be more willing to comply with a request or a disappointment, assuming a reason for the apparent inconsistency of his parents, and be more willing to accept an occasional apparently irrational command. He may feel less initial antagonism toward his parents and so evidence more compliance with requests and less readiness to interpret parental behavior as a threat to withdraw affection. He may show a more relaxed and matter-of-fact approach to the whole situation. On the other hand, he perhaps feels more freedom to rebel in those situations where he has a definite disposition to do so.

It is possible that there may be a factor of difference in intelligence influencing the larger number of possibilities of response that occur to the university child. Another factor which might be influential is that expression of emotions may be more common and acceptable in the non-university family than in the university family, where temper tantrums, kicking, screaming, attack on the parents, etc., are looked upon with disfavor.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

This study was designed to investigate differences between the attitudes of children toward their parents. Nine short stories depicting parent-child conflict situations were presented to 49 second grade children. Responses were classified as emotional, constructive, active opposition, and simple compliance. No significant difference was found between the responses of seven- and eight-year-olds. The difference between the responses of boys and girls and the differences in the responses given to stories including mother and father were not significant. Differences between Negro children and white children, and differences between those children living with both natural parents and those children not living with both natural parents were significant at the .05 level. The difference between the children of university personnel and children from families not connected with the university was significant at the .01 level, following elimination of the Negro children and those children not living with both natural parents.

Conclusions

The pattern of response of a child seems to be similar whether the mother or the father is the frustrating agent. Sex does not appear to be a determining factor in the development of the response pattern of a child. Differences in the home atmosphere and parent-child relationships of university and non-university children are significant in the genesis of differences in response to frustration.

APPENDIX I

STORIES DEPICTING PARENT-CHILD CONFLICT SITUATIONS

Form 1 for Boys

1. One day ——'s mother goes downtown shopping. She promises to bring —— a surprise when she comes back. As soon as school is out, —— runs all the way home to see what the surprise is. But when he gets there, mother doesn't have a surprise for him.

2. —— and his father go to the store to buy dessert for dinner. When they get home it's time to eat. —— thinks about how good the dessert is going to taste. Then he finds out he doesn't like the rest of the dinner. He wants dessert very much, but his father says —— can't have any dessert until he eats all of his dinner.

3. One of ——'s friends asks —— to come over for dinner. ——'s mother says he may go if he changes his clothes and washes his face and hands. —— is in a hurry because his friend's family is going to eat right

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away. He doesn't want to be late. But ——'s mother says he cannot go unless he cleans up first.

4. —— is listening to his favorite radio program. The part of the program he likes best is just starting. Then his father tells him to go and get ready for bed. —— wants to finish listening to the program, so he doesn't want to go. His father turns off the radio, picks —— up, and starts him out of the room.

5. —— gets a new box of paints. He has a lot of fun painting pictures all afternoon. When he's finished, he picks out his very best picture and hurries to show it to his father. But father says he doesn't like the picture very much.

6. ——'s father has company one Sunday afternoon. —— helps bring in chairs for them. He passes the cookies and candy. When the company goes home, he helps his father clean up. Then father says, "I am very proud of you because you were so polite and helpful."

7. —— gets all undressed and climbs into bed. He lies there waiting for his mother to come in to kiss him goodnight. Mother kisses him goodnight every night. But tonight —— waits and waits and mother doesn't come.

8. It's been raining all day long. —— has had to stay inside all by himself. At last the rain stops. —— is very happy he can go out to play with his friends. He runs outside. They have just started playing when his father comes to the door and tells —— to come inside.

9. —— just got a new game. He's been wanting to play with it all day, but the game needs two people. His mother promises —— that she will play the game with him after dinner. —— hurries through dinner. When dinner is over, he brings the game to his mother. But mother tells —— she is busy and can't play.

10. —— has been playing outside with his friends. It's very muddy because it has been raining. The sidewalk is very slippery. All of a sudden —— slips and falls. When —— comes inside he's all covered with mud. Mother is very angry and scolds him. Then mother says, "Because you got so dirty this morning you have to stay inside this afternoon."

The blanks were filled in with a name suggested by the child.

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