



The Partner Relationship, the Parent-Child Relationship, and School-Age Children's Relationship with Peers

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INTRODUCTION

According to the emotional security hypothesis (Davies & Cummings, 1994), both the quality of the partner relationship and the parent-child relationship may influence a child's adjustment in peer relationships. More specifically, children's beliefs about themselves in relation to others, based on attachment to caregivers and the quality of the partner relationship, generalize to broader working models of social relationships (Bretherton, Ridgeway, & Cassidy, 1990).

However, few researchers have examined these associations prospectively.

Research Aims:

Use longitudinal archive data from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care (NICHD SECC), which assessed child care experiences, the family environment, and children's developmental outcomes:

- To examine whether maternal parenting behaviors during the preschool years mediated the association between the quality of the partner relationship during infancy and school-age children's social adjustment. See Figure 1.
- To assess the longitudinal trajectory of both the partner relationship quality and parenting behaviors over 10 years, and potential differences in these variables between school-age children with high and low social adjustment.

METHOD

Participants

- A subsample ($n = 902$) was drawn from a larger sample of 1,364 participants who took part in the NICHD SECC, and who completed relevant measures during Phase I (age 1 month), Phase II (age 54 months), and Phase III (5th grade).
- Mothers' average age was 29 years old ($SD = 5.52$).
- 84% of mothers were Caucasian.
- 84% of mothers were married.
- 57% of mothers had some college or a bachelor's degree.
- Average annual family income = \$40,617 ($SD = 32,920$).
- 51% of target children were female.

METHOD CONTINUED

Procedures

Participants were recruited between January and November 1991 using random sampling from designated hospitals at 10 data collection sites around the United States. Only mothers over 18 years old and families with full-term, healthy newborns were included in this study.

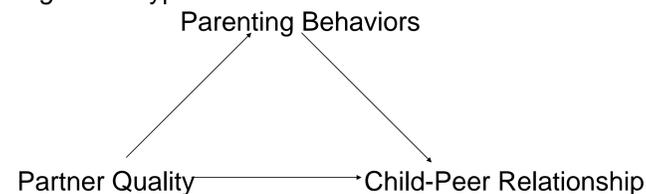
Measures

Partner Relationship Quality. The Marital Relationship Scale (MRS; Braiker & Kelly, 1979) is a 25-item self-report questionnaire comprised of 4 subscales assessing the quality of the partner relationship, including love, conflict, ambivalence, and maintenance ($\alpha = .87$). NICHD excluded the maintenance items. This was completed in the participants' homes when the infant was 1 month old. Higher scores indicate better relationship quality.

Parenting Behaviors. The Parent-Child Interaction Task (Egeland & Heister, 1993) was conducted in the laboratory when the child was 54 months old. It included several 15-minute observations of different interaction activities between the mother and child; two were too difficult for the child to carry out independently. Maternal behavior was coded considering all 3 activities simultaneously for a maternal "positive caregiving" score ($\alpha = .78$).

School-Age Children's Relationship with Peers. The Child Behavior with Peers Questionnaire (Crick, Bigbee & Howes, 1996; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Ladd & Profilet, 1996) is a 43-item questionnaire completed by the child's teacher at school when the children were in 5th grade. Four subscale scores were used based on factor analysis to comprise a total composite score of behavior with peers, including aggression, exclusion by peers, bullying and victimization, and relational aggression ($\alpha = .94$). Higher scores indicate more negative behavior.

Figure 1. Hypothesized Mediation Model



This study was conducted by the NICHD Early Child Care Research Network supported by NICHD through a cooperative agreement that calls for scientific collaboration between the grantees and the NICHD staff. The authors are grateful to NICHD for use of the data.

RESULTS

Mediation Analyses

Regression analyses indicated that parenting behaviors during a preschool observation task partially mediated the association between maternal-reported partner quality in infancy and teacher-reported social behavior with peers during 5th grade, overall model adjusted $R^2 = .035$; $F(2) = 15.11$, $p < .001$.

After controlling for partner status change over the child's life, results were essentially the same except full mediation was established, overall adjusted $R^2 = .055$; $F(3) = 16.33$, $p < .001$. See Figure 2.

ANOVA Group Comparisons

Two repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted to examine changes in partner quality and parenting over time; children were grouped according to high social adjustment ($n = 436$) and low social adjustment ($n = 461$) based on a median split of the teacher-reported outcome measure.

Results revealed a significant linear main effect for time for partner quality [$F(2, 895) = 9.78$, $p < .01$], such that partner quality steadily declined overtime; no significant main effect for group was found. See Figure 3.

Results showed no significant main effect for time for parenting behaviors, but a significant main effect for group [$F(1, 896) = 20.15$, $p < .001$], such that children with high social adjustment experienced more positive parenting at all three time periods than children with low social adjustment. See Figure 3.

Table 1. Associations Among Study Variables

Variable	Partner Quality	Positive Caregiving	Teacher-Reported Behavior with Peers
Partner Quality	1.000		
Positive Caregiving	.181**	1.000	
Teacher-Reported Behavior with Peers	-.119**	-.180**	1.000

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Figure 2. Mediation Analyses Controlling for Partner Change

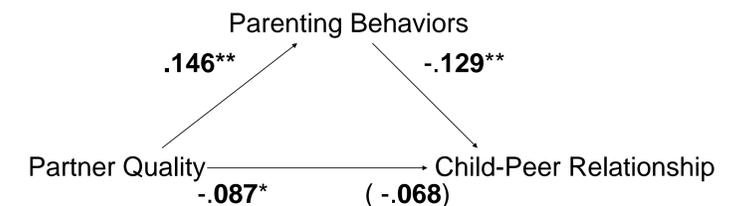
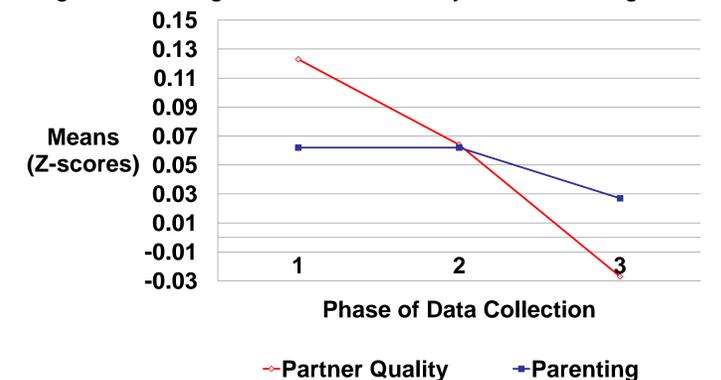


Figure 3. Changes in Partner Quality and Parenting Overtime



DISCUSSION

Implications of this study:

- Better partner quality was related to more sensitive parenting, which was in turn, related to less social difficulties with peers.
- Presence of any partner status change was related to both poorer parenting quality and more child social difficulties with peers.
- Instability of partner quality and stability in parenting behaviors during children's first 10 years was found.
- Results support both the emotional security hypothesis (Davies & Cummings, 1994) and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969).

- Maternal parenting appears important for children's social outcomes. Parent-child interactions seem to influence the child's internalized working models of self and relationships, which, in turn, guide behavior in future relationships, such as those formed with peers.
- A notable limitation in this study was the high-functioning, fairly homogenous sample.
- Future research should continue to examine the importance of the partner and parent-child relationship, as well as other contextual variables that may impact children's psychosocial adjustment, particularly in more diverse samples.