

Parental Evaluation and Its Relation to Shame and Pride in Young Children¹

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This study examines the evaluative behavior of parents toward their young children as a function of child gender. It also examines relations between parental evaluative comments and children's emotional behavior, specifically the expressions of shame and pride. Thirty intact, middle-class, Caucasian families and their 3-year-old children participated in the study. Dyadic interactions between each parent and child were videotaped across problem-solving situations. Transcripts were coded into categories of parent evaluative behavior and children's emotions were scored. Findings indicated that parents used more specific and positive, rather than global or negative evaluations. Moreover, boys received more positive evaluations while girls received more negative ones. Although children's expression of pride was not related to parental evaluative behavior, their expression of shame was related. Gender differences in parental evaluation were observed that may explain the gender differences in self-evaluation of the children themselves.

Gender differences in children's achievement expectancy and in self-evaluation from middle childhood through adulthood have been well documented (see Crandall, 1969; Parsons, Ruble, Hodges, & Small, 1976; Stein & Bailey, 1973, for reviews). Girls generally have lower expectations for success, decreased achievement striving under failure or evaluative pressure, and are

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more likely to assume personal responsibility for failure than are boys (Dweck & Gillard, 1975; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Parsons et al., 1976; Stein & Bailey, 1973). In contrast, boys, in comparable evaluative situations, tend to show improvement in performance or increased achievement strivings, and to approach tasks that present challenges. Girls also tend to attribute failure to their general lack of ability, a global self-evaluation. On the other hand, they attribute success to luck. Boys more often attribute success to ability, and failure to external outcomes (Deaux & Emswiller, 1974; Dweck & Reppucci, 1973; Etaugh & Brown, 1975; Feather & Simon, 1973; Nicholls, 1975).

Very little is known, however, about the origins of these gender differences. While several studies of teachers' evaluative feedback in the classroom have emerged (e.g., Brophy & Good, 1974; Eccles & Blumefeld, 1985; Dweck, Davidson, Nelson, & Enna, 1978; Heller & Parsons, 1981), there have been few studies of parental socialization of gender differences in achievement expectancies, particularly with young children.

Although there are some inconsistencies, studies suggest that, in general, parents have higher educational expectancies for boys than for girls, although these biases do not emerge consistently until children are older (see Huston, 1983, for a review). However, the mechanisms by which parental expectancy messages are communicated have been only minimally explored. Although several mechanisms have been suggested (Parsons et al., 1976), one possible influence is differential parental evaluation of the successes and failures of boys and girls.

One goal of this study was to examine the evaluative statements that parents use with their preschool children. Prior to entering school, children are socialized within the family and parents serve as the first agents of influence and evaluation (Lewis & Feinman, 1991). Given the gender differences in children's achievement expectancy and in self-evaluation, it was hypothesized that parents would convey more positive evaluative comment to boys than to girls. For example, parents may encourage differential self-evaluations in boys and girls by offering more positive evaluative statements (e.g., "You're really smart," "You did that well") to boys than to girls.

Another dimension of possible parental evaluative comments has been described by Weiner (1974) and Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978). This dimension, making reference to the individual's specific actions of the self vs. the individual's total self, has been called specific vs. global evaluations. For example, a global comment would be "You are so talented" while a specific comment would be "You did it right." The global and specific evaluative comments may be important for focusing the child's attention. Global comments focus the child's attention on itself, the totality of self, while specific comments focus the child on the task. Previous studies

suggest that girls are more likely to make global comments of failure than males (Deaux & Emswiler, 1974; Feather & Simon, 1973; Nicholls, 1975).

A second goal of this study was to examine relations between parental evaluative comments and children's emotional behavior. Since the parent-child dyads examined in this study included the same children whose self-conscious emotions (e.g., shame and pride) were observed in an earlier study (see Lewis, Alessandri, & Sullivan, 1992), parental evaluative comments were compared with children's expression of shame and pride in these achievement tasks. Because of our interest in the self-evaluative aspects of emotion, we were particularly interested in seeing whether pride was more likely to be exhibited when children received positive evaluative feedback from parents. Likewise, we were interested in determining whether shame would be displayed when children received negative parental evaluative feedback. If these emotions are differentially related to parental evaluative feedback, this would provide support for the belief that an evaluative component is important for elicitation of the self-conscious emotions (Lewis, 1992; Lewis, Sullivan, Stanger, & Weiss, 1989).

METHOD

Subjects

Thirty intact Caucasian families and their 3-year-old children participated in the study. Details of the sample and subject recruitment appear in Lewis et al. (1992) and are briefly summarized here. Sixteen male and 14 female children ranging in age from 33 to 37 months ($M = 36.4$ months) were observed in the laboratory along with their parents. There was no significant difference in mean age between boys (36.8 months) and girls (36.2 months). The mean age for fathers and mothers was 33.7 and 31.6, respectively, and the mean level of formal education attained was 14.3 and 12.5 years. Families were primarily middle-class, Groups 1 and 2 on the Hollingshead Scale (Hollingshead, 1975).

Procedure

Dyadic interactions between each parent and child were videotaped during problem-solving situations that consisted of three different tasks, each including an easy and difficult version. In the "puzzle-making" activity, each parent asked their child to complete a 25 small piece puzzle minus 5 pieces (difficult task) and to complete a large four-piece puzzle (easy

task). In the "copying" activity, children were asked to copy a triangle (difficult task) and a straight line (easy task). In the "basketball toss" activity, children were asked to toss a ball through a hoop placed 12 feet away (difficult task) and 2 feet away (easy task). Children had three ball tosses to make a basket for each task.

Each parent was instructed to set a timer for a total of five minutes per task and was told to provide no physical assistance. Parents administered each task once, and to prevent boredom, different puzzles and designs were used when children were with each parent. Their level of difficulty, however, remained the same. Thus, children received a total of 12 tasks with the presentation of the tasks counterbalanced. There was significantly more success on the easy than on the difficult tasks, and no gender differences were found for task performance (see Lewis et al., 1992). The problem-solving situation was 15 minutes for each parent-child dyad and the order of parent-child interactions was balanced across parents.

Behavioral Coding

Parental Evaluations

The audio component of the videotape was transferred to a micro-cassette tape recorder and parent-child dialogue was then typed by a typist who did not know the hypotheses of the study. The typist substituted numbers for subject names so that analysis of the data could be done "blind" with regard to child gender. The person coding the data was also "blind" to the hypotheses of the study. Transcripts were then coded using the parental evaluative measures presented below.

Global Evaluations. Statements pertaining to some aspect of the child's self that extends across a wide array of domains. For example, "You are so talented," "You are handsome," and "You are smart." The evaluative nature of each comment was coded as either positive global or negative global.

Specific Evaluations. Statements commenting on the child's behavior specific to the task or domain at hand. For example, "You are not so good at puzzles," "This paper is very neat," and "You are doing it the wrong way." Similarly, the evaluative nature of each comment was coded as either positive specific or negative specific.

These behaviors were coded separately for father-son, father-daughter, mother-son, and mother-daughter. Reliabilities for the coding categories were established by having a second coder score a random subset of

10 of the 30 transcripts. Percent agreement across behaviors ranged from .84 to .95 ($M = .87$).

Expressions of Shame and Pride

Children's emotions, specifically behaviors of shame and pride, were scored from the videotapes by two different independent observers who were blind with regard to the hypotheses of the study. Following the coding system of Geppert (1986), *shame* was defined as body collapsed, corners of the mouth are downward/lower lip tucked between teeth, eyes lowered with gaze downward or askance, withdrawal from task situation, and negative self-evaluation (i.e., "I'm no good at this"). *Pride* was defined as erect posture (i.e., shoulders back and head up), smile—either open or closed mouth—eyes directed at parents, points at outcome or applauds, and positive self-evaluation (i.e., "aah!" or "I did it!"). In order to code for the emotion, 3 out of 5 of the behaviors had to occur within 30 seconds of task completion. Interrater agreement over all subjects was .93 for pride and .87 for shame (kappa-corrected reliabilities were .81 for pride and .80 for shame).

RESULTS

Parental Evaluations

A repeated measures analysis was performed where sex of the child (2) was the between-subject effect and quality of response—positive vs. negative (2)—and type of evaluation—global vs. specific (2)—were the within-subject effects. Although there was no main child gender effect, there was a main effect of type of evaluation, $F(1,28) = 117.15, p < .0001$. Parents use more specific than global evaluative statements ($M = 3.63$, and 22.57 for global and specific, respectively). There was also a quality of evaluation main effect; parents used more positive ($M = 20.07$) than negative ($M = 6.13$) statements, $F(1,28) = 106.96, p < .0001$. Moreover, there was gender by quality of evaluation interaction, $F(1,28) = 12.17, p < .002$, such that males received more positive evaluation than females (23.23 vs. 16.90, $p < .02$), while females received more negative than males (7.67 vs. 4.60, $p < .05$, by Newman-Keuls test).

There was a significant type by quality evaluation interaction, $F(1,28) = 39.71, p < .0001$, such that specific positive evaluations were the most frequent ($M = 33.47$) followed by specific negative ($M = 11.67$), global

positive ($M = 6.67$), and global negative ($M = 6.60$). The difference between each of them was significant ($p < .001$). Finally, there was a Sex \times Type \times Quality interaction, $F(1,28) = 8.47, p < .01$. While for both males and females global evaluations did not differ by quality, specific evaluations did. Males received significantly more positive specific than females ($M = 38.98$ vs. 28.00) and females received more negative specific than males ($M = 14.53$ vs. 8.80).

Parental Evaluation and Children's Emotional Expression

Correlations were obtained between parental evaluations and children's expression of shame and pride for the total sample and by gender. The expression of pride was not related to any type of parental evaluation, not for the total sample, nor for either sex. Shame expression was related to parental evaluation, the more positive evaluative statements the less shame was shown ($r = -.37, p < .05$). This was significant for positive specific ($r = -.30, p < .05$) and marginal for positive global evaluations ($r = -.29, p < .10$). Total negative parental evaluations likewise were related to shame; the more negative evaluations the more shame ($r = .32, p < .05$). This was true only for specific negative comments ($r = .32, p < .05$), not for global. Because there were so few global negative responses, the lack of a significant correlation may be due to the limited scale. Boys and girls showed similar patterns of the relation between parental evaluation and shame.

DISCUSSION

In this study, interesting differences in parental evaluative comments were found. For example, negative global statements were used least of all by parents and this was true for both male and female children. This is to be expected since statements such as "You're a dummy!" are unlikely to be used by parents when they know that they are being observed. Second, positive specific statements were used the most by parents for both males and females. Given that this experimental procedure is likely to be viewed as a teaching situation, parents were more likely to make positive specific evaluations such as "Nice job" vis a vis the task. Third, negative specific comments such as "You're not good at puzzles" were used next often by parents followed by positive global statements ("You're smart!").

We hypothesized that parents are likely to contribute to the observed differences in achievement expectancy and in self-evaluation by differen-

tially evaluating the successes and failures of their children by gender. Despite the fact that boys and girls in this sample had performed equally well in these achievement situations, the sex of the child had a significant effect on parental use of positive and negative evaluative statements. Parents of boys used more positive specific and more positive global statements than parents of girls, while for girls parents used more negative specific comments.

These results are of particular interest in light of previous findings of gender differences, both in terms of children's achievement expectancy and in terms of self-evaluation (Crandall, 1969; Parsons et al., 1976; Stein & Bailey, 1973). First, by offering more positive evaluative statements to boys and by overlooking the success of girls, parents may be teaching their sons and daughters to draw different inferences regarding their abilities despite equivalent achievement experiences. This may account, in part, for why school-aged boys and men are more likely to attribute success to ability and have higher expectancies for success (Etaugh & Brown, 1975; Feather & Simon, 1973; Nicholls, 1975).

In spite of the fact that girls achieved as much as boys in this study, they received less praise and acknowledgment of their accomplishments. By overlooking the successes of girls in achievement situations, parents may discourage the incorporation of success into the girls' self-concept and decrease the likelihood of girls attributing their success to ability. These parental differences are consistent with previous studies with school-aged girls and women that reported females to be more likely to set lower standards for themselves and to underestimate their abilities (Crandall, 1969; Huston, 1983). Differential evaluative feedback by parents, therefore, may reinforce achievement-related behaviors more for boys than for girls.

Results from the correlational analysis provide preliminary evidence of the relation between parental evaluative feedback and children's expressions of shame and pride around achievement. The hypothesis that positive parental evaluative feedback would be related to children's expression of pride was not supported. In contrast, the hypothesis that negative parental evaluative feedback would be related to children's expression of shame did receive empirical support.

In our previous study, girls were found to express more shame than boys (Lewis et al., 1992). It has been suggested that particular socialization practices may explain this gender difference in shame (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Lewis, 1992). Results from this study provide additional support for the importance of socialization factors, especially since girls received less overall positive feedback from parents than did boys. Taken together, these data suggest that parents give girls a less focused achievement orientation and that this socialization experience may predispose girls to attribute fail-

ure to themselves more readily than did boys. Negative parental feedback may promote negative self-evaluation in girls by focusing their attention on failure associated with achievement outcomes. This, in turn, may predispose girls to experience shame. Although negative global parental evaluations positively correlated with shame in boys, this occurred along with boys receiving more positive parental evaluations. Given that boys appear to be socialized within a context consisting of more positive than negative evaluations from parents, they may be less likely to attribute failure to a global factor and, consequently, are less likely to experience shame.

Dweck and Leggett (1988) have offered a theoretical argument that attempts to tie together these socialization practices and goals as they relate to achievement. They describe children as differing in goals, with helpless children pursuing performance goals while mastery-oriented children pursue learning goals. It is from these goals that cognitions and affects are derived. While such a formulation seems reasonable, self-evaluation, in terms of global vs. specific, internal vs. external, and stable vs. variable, is as likely an explanation (Weiner, 1974, 1986). The findings reported here do not resolve this theoretical difference. What we have seen are parental socialization differences toward their very young children that are consistent with older children's and adults' behavior, including affective states, attributional styles and goals, and achievement orientation.

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