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Parents' Perspectives: How They Use Behavior Modification Techniques With Toddlers Aged 1-3

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How They Use Behavior Modification Techniques With Toddlers Aged 1-3

by

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BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION TECHNIQUES WITH TODDLERS AGED 1-3

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Abstract

Role-models, most often parents, are vital in the process of teaching children how to communicate and resolve conflicts. Children, specifically toddlers just learning to speak, may present unique disciplining challenges. This study examined the various methods of conflict management strategies parents use to try and change their toddler children's behaviors. The main parental strategies studied include: verbal, imitative, physical, and no-action. Using a snowball sampling approach, 28 men and women participants were interviewed. The findings show that parents most often used verbal or imitative techniques to discipline their children. However an overwhelming majority agreed that verbal techniques do not work as well as imitative methods in encouraging the retention of desired behavior. Most parents agreed that their toddler did not comprehend the words but grasped the tone, thereby changing the child's actions in the short-term but not retaining the behavioral suggestion on a long-term basis.

Keywords: conflict, imitation, behavior modification, discipline techniques, toddler, parents.

Parents' Perspectives: How They Use

Behavior Modification Techniqueswith Toddlers Aged 1-3

What comes to mind when you see the word communicate? Talking? Most often we think about communicating in the verbal sense but many face-to-face interactions also have a non-verbal component (i.e., gestures, facial expressions, posture, etc.). "Non-verbal communication is often used to express a thought or thoughts and make your message more appealing and interesting to the person you are speaking" (Phutela, 2015, p. 43). Additionally, although some people may lack in verbal communication skills, the majority of us can learn and interpret non-verbal cues (Phutela, 2015). Take, for example, a foreigner who is attempting to assimilate in a new country. The foreigner may pair their verbal communication with hand gestures, for example, drinking coffee: joining the pointer and the thumb and tip them towards the mouth. This may help the receiver understand the message more clearly even if the words are not present. This powerful idea of communication via multiple forms can serve as the foundation for how parents, guardians, and teachers send messages effectively to young children who aren't yet verbally mature.

Role-models, such as parents, can make lasting impressions for a child's future success (Fagot, 1997). Successful influence (i.e., repeating desired behavior and not repeating undesired behavior) can be difficult to accomplish when conflicts arise and can be exacerbated when the child is too young to communicate through normal channels and/or rationalize with. How can parents then maximize this influence to produce desired behaviors and deter undesired ones? It is at the toddler age that conflicts are most prevalent because the toddlers are just beginning to form their independence (Gloeckler & Cassell, 2012). Two studies, by Bayer, Whaley, and May

(1995) and Fagot (1997), highlighted this notion of effectively resolving toddler conflicts, however, to my knowledge, the strategies have not been comparatively analyzed to determine the most effective method. This study examines the various methods of conflict management strategies parents and/or guardians use to discipline or encourage wanted behaviors in toddlers. The main methods I examine are verbal, imitative, physical, and inaction. Using in-depth interviews, this study investigates which method has shown desired behaviors being learned and retained for future use (versus undesired behaviors being learned and not used in the future) from the perspective of parents/guardians of toddlers aged 1-3 years. By focusing on multiple conflict management strategies, the study hopes to contribute to growing scholarship in the area of behavior modification with toddlers. The findings would also be beneficial to an audience of parents, day-care providers, and teachers who could tailor their future interactions with toddlers.

Social Learning

Modeling is a behavior we all use, whether we are learning a new language/culture as an adult, or learning social conventions as a child. Much of what we understand of "imitation" was created through the work of Professor Emeritus of Social Science in Psychology at Stanford University, Albert Bandura. In his famous Bobo doll experiment, Bandura (1971) proposed that behavior is learned through vicarious means. Bandura's experiment utilized children as subjects who were shown an adult behaving violently towards a Bobo doll. After viewing these actions, the children were then led into a room and allowed to play. After a short time, the proctor entered the room and removed all toys but the Bobo doll to incentivize anger. It was noted that the children who had previously viewed an adult model being aggressive were twice as likely to exhibit similar behavior towards the doll themselves, when angered (Baer & Bandura, 1963).

This "violence begets violence" finding was critical to understanding how behavior can be learned through imitation.

In 1978, Bandura re-ran the experiment with film-mediated models to determine if role-models on film/television were just as effective at provoking imitation and the results were the same. Bandura was able to connect the points that children learn from role models whether in person, animated and regardless of relationship. Studies by Baer (1963), Bandura (1963, 1971), and Shantz (1987) highlight that toddler conflicts can be effectively resolved by reinforcing desired behavior through the modeling of wanted behaviors. Although imitation is often taken for granted, it is one crucial tool in passing along behavioral traits to our young ones. Whether those traits are good or bad, children are sponges and tend to soak up much of what they see from role-models. This was noted by Baer and Bandura who wrote "children frequently reproduce entire parental-role behaviors – including the appropriate mannerisms, voice inflections, and attitudes" (1963, p. 592). If this intrinsic motivation to reproduce behaviors from parental role-models has already been established outside of conflict times, then it holds much weight that children would model their parent's actions during times of conflict as well. Many scholars have applied social learning theory to teaching and managing conflicts in children. If one considers how often children and adults learn through imitation, (e.g., sports, manners, and new languages), then one can easily apply it to behavior. Gloeckler and Cassell studied problem solving with toddlers in their 2012 study and determined that although verbal scripts and physical interventions are often the "go-to" for caregivers, mirror-play and role-play are inadvertently used as well. Additionally, the authors noticed that toddlers need more than someone solving their problems for them, because cognitive ability of toddlers may not be

sufficient to comprehend a verbal order. Given the finding that adults intervene using commands (summons or stop) or physical intervention over 50% of the time (McTear, 1986), it is reasonable to consider that other methods (imitative, in-action) should be studied to determine their effectiveness the other 50% of the time. This study bridges the gap by reviewing all methods of intervention in terms of effectiveness. Since many adults use verbal commands as their first "go-to" strategy, this study attempts to detect other tactics used to teach toddlers. Since these tactics are often intuitive, situations will be provided to flush out those details. Often a parent's first response may not be how they would actually respond in real-life; to account for this disconnect third-person scenarios will be used.

Literature Review

Nelson Mandela wrote in his autobiography: "People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite" (1995, p. 116). Similarly, Bandura said, "People are not born with pre-formed repertoires of aggressive behavior, they must learn them" (1978, p. 14). Bandura notes that many conflict characteristics such as combat, ridicule, and so forth all require extensive learning. Additionally, he notes that role-models can range from parents to teachers to family to strangers. Whether it is a witness to bullying or a hard-nosed disciplining parent, a child can internalize all these actions into future use (Fagot, 1997). Pertaining to my study, this is important to note because children are sponges and will absorb the good but, sadly, as Bandura notes, also the bad. Research is needed to understand which tools are best to use for future success in the area of conflict resolution and behavior retention. Simply, much of imitation theory is common sense

and can be applied to many situations that affect pets, children, and even adults. As parents

traverse the landscape of their developing toddler, their role is not an easy one.

A Parent's Role

Role-models, most often parents, are vital to the success of their toddlers learning the best

conflict management tools. Fagot (1997) studied how a parent's style of behavior can shape how

toddlers interact with their peers, and how a toddler's socialization can be positively or

negatively impacted based on their parental role-model. Fagot also noted that when parents

displayed negative behaviors, their children were more often linked to aggressive or poor peer

relationships. Luckily, this relationship can function both ways, in fact, a children's overall

behavior can be directly impacted by a parent's child-rearing practices (Maccoby, 2000).

Maccoby goes on to state that although genetics plays a key role in pre-disposition of child

behavior, external environmental factors like parental influence have been largely ignored.

Maccoby refered to a scenario in which two groups of children were studied. Both groups of

children were born into homes with genetic illness (i.e., schizophrenia), however, the group of

children who were adopted out into families without this illness never developed the disorder.

Of the children who remained in the home with the dysfunctional parent, they were three times

more likely to acquire the illness themselves. Macooby states that genetics is not the sole

determinant for child behavior, rather it is the combination of genetics and the parental role that

determine the child's development.

Parents can use several methods of discipline during different phases of a child's life.

This study uses four categories as a baseline to understand which category works best to resolve

toddler conflicts: verbal, no-action, physical, or imitative. Many scholars have reviewed

effectiveness of each strategy independently but none, to my knowledge, have looked at them comparatively. I have used McTear's 1986 definitions, in addition to my own, to provide four succinct categories parents can relate to.

Definitions

The following descriptions will add definition to the keywords above so the reader will understand how the study operationalizes each term.

Conflict

Conflicts will be generally defined as a toddler exhibiting confrontation to a peer, family member or parent for any reason.

Role Play

Role play is a form of imitation that also serves to reinforce lessons (e.g., playtime, story-time, pretend) with or without the child being given verbal feedback. Role play often leads to the child being able to repeat the behavior autonomously. When coupled with conflict management, Chen (2003) found that toddlers find the most value (via the recognition of another's feelings) when they are allowed to resolve conflicts on their own. In an earlier study, Chen, Fein, Killen, and Tam (2001) studied toddler conflict and how the toddler can increase positive social interactions when allowed to figure out the conflicts on their own, finding increased negotiations in the absence of an adult. Dunn and Slomkowski (1992) agree and find that a toddler's social competence should be judged based on their method of resolving conflicts, which only occurs 26.1% of the time.

<u>Verbal (aka: talking)</u>

Young toddlers are often just forming the foundation of their vocabulary. Often children are only

armed with a limited number of words to use daily and these words may not assist them in their

conflicts. Take the following verbatim record shared by Shantz (1987):

Mother: "Don't pull my hair! Madam! Don't pull hair. No. It's not nice to pull hair, is it?"

Child: "Hair." Mother: "Hair, yes, but you mustn't pull it, must you?" Child: "Yes!" (Smiles),

Mother: "No! No!"

This exchange highlights the motivation of the child to dominate the relationship by

pulling hair of the mother. The role-model/mother could choose instead to engage with the

toddler by providing words to replace the negative behaviors with verbal queues the child can

use in the future (Gloeckler & Cassell, 2012). In the case of the situation shared from Shantz

(1987), the mother could reframe her statement to better demonstrate feelings and encourage her

child to use provided words to express her anger in the future instead of pulling her mother's

hair:

Mother: "Ouch! When you pull Mommy's hair it hurts and makes me sad."

Child: "Hair."

Mother: "Hair is for brushing, brushing Mommy's hair makes Mommy happy."

Child: "Yes!"

The embedding of emotional tools (e.g., "ouch," "hurts," "sad") into the responses

demonstrates the importance of feelings. This is crucial to providing security and the importance

of coming to a joint solution (e.g., pulling hair hurts, brushing hair is good).

Inaction (aka: ignoring, no intervention)/Physical Intervention

In-action on behalf of the mother in the hair pulling scenario (Shantz, 1987) would involve

ignoring the behavior and providing no feedback to the child. Consider the previously used

example reframed to encompass no-intervention as a conflict management strategy. Although

some research has supported the natural development of conflict resolution by allowing the child

to resolve problems on their own. Inaction as tested by Chen et. al. (2001) only had an effective

resolution rate of 26.1%.

*Mother: *Mother ignores child but continues to hold.*

Physical conflict resolution tactics are most commonly seen when a parent spanks a child,

or in safety situations (i.e., when the child's action may cause harm and the adult needs to

physically remove them for their well-being). Laible and Thompson (2002) determined there

was short-term success but long-term suppression of the internalization of values.

Consider the reframed scenario (Shantz, 1987) in the case of physical conflict

management.

*Mother: *Mother pushes child's hand away and sets child down.*

Imitative (aka: demonstrative and modeling)

Social learning theory posits that behavior is learned vicariously, so the modelling of wanted

behavior is a powerful tool for caregivers to employ (Bandura, 1971). Consider the previously

used example (Shantz, 1987) reframed to encompass a vicarious learning strategy.

*Mother: "Ouch! When you pull Mommy's hair it hurts and makes me sad." *Use of exaggerated*

lip pout

Child: "Hair."

Mother: "Hair is for brushing, would you like to brush your dolly's hair with Mommy?"

*Mother shows child how to brush the dolls hair.

Allowing the child to perform the wanted action of brushing the doll's hair, and seeing the happiness of creating independence to complete the task on her own, may be enough of a motivation suggesting a different course of action in the future than pulling the Mother's hair. This method also provides the positive association between hair needing to be brushed and not as a tool for inflicting pain via the role-play between the toddler and the doll.

A Toddler's Role

Bayer et al. (1995) looked at toddlers and the strategies used by their teachers to resolve conflicts. The authors noted that teachers often used verbal scripts to persuade toddlers via providing instructions. This finding is interesting because the Office of Child Development in Pittsburgh PA (nd) emphasizes that toddlers between the ages of 1-3 years have limited vocabularies and because of this may become frustrated and display anger/aggression. Another study by Caplan, Vespo, Pedersen, and Hay (1991) found that verbally competent two year olds responded to conflicts in a verbal manner, which the authors concluded alluded to their capacity to understand words and respect of another playmate's ownership of an item. However, in those younger than two and/or not verbally competent, verbal commands were not used. This study emphasized the importance of the cognitive development in toddlers which would indicate whether a toddler is mature enough to seek meaningful resolutions using verbal means. When attempting to resolve conflicts with a toddler who is verbally immature, we often define "resistance" as synonymous with non-compliance (Klimes-Dougan & Kopp, 1999). However, Klimes-Dougan and Kopp challenge this traditional view and suggest that resistance in toddlers

should be seen as a feature of autonomy which is a hallmark of a better-rounded mind. Forcing toddlers into behaviors they don't quite understand in order to exhibit good behaviors may not have the long-lasting benefits of enabling the toddler to learn the tools for their future success.

In addition to the developmental milestones of cognition, toddlers are often just beginning to form motivations that lead to conflicts in their day-to-day lives. Words such as "mine" can highlight this new motivation in which toddlers are attempting to issue rights. This feeling provides the toddler with a new and grand sensation of having something all to themselves (Hay & Ross, 1982). In fact, many agree that the number one motivation for conflict in toddlers is *possession* (Dawe, 1934; Hay & Ross, 1982; Licht, Simoni, & Perrig-Chiello, 2008; Shantz, 1987). Possession is described by Licht, Simoni, and Perrig-Chiello (2008) as a clear importance of the bond between an object and a child. This apparent tendency of children to be self-serving is evident from birth. Once born, a child's only motivations are to eat, sleep, excrete, and be loved. These motivations only serve to sustain the baby for the benefit of growing. It isn't until toddler-hood that this self-serving attitude is called into question for the first time, and challenged. This attitude is defined by Dunn and Slomkowski (1992) as a characteristic being "threatened." Further, both authors indicate that this threat creates an emotional response which can be seen when a child steals a toy or refuses to share. The emotional response coupled with a lack of learned verbal tools often result in negativity and opposition (Keenan & Wakschlag, 2000).

Understanding the point of development and motivation of a toddler can help the parent tailor their disciplinary response to what works. What's effective? What isn't? How do other parents do it? Using the framework of social learning theory, which posits behavior is learned

through imitation, I pose the following questions to identify the most effective method of instilling toddlers with the most effective tools to resolve their own conflicts.

Research Questions

RQ1: What conflict management strategies are most used by parents of toddlers?

RQ2: How do parents use imitative methods when modelling desired behavior to toddlers?

RQ3: In what instances would parents of toddlers use other methods (verbal, non-action, physical) instead of imitative to achieve repetition of desired behavior in toddlers?

RQ4: Which strategies show the greatest success rate (unwanted behavior stopped, and wanted behavior internalized for future use)?

Methodology

Qualitative research is important to provide context and relationships among variables (Creswell, 2014) as well as detail and understanding to theoretically motivated questions (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). Many parents have an idealized version of themselves and their children; generally speaking, qualitative interviews can capture that idealization, and through the question and probing process identify truth versus fantasy (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). This can be achieved through the process of providing scenarios and requesting the answers be given from a third-person's point of view. By allowing the participant to respond impersonally usually a more truthful and candid response can be collected. Additionally, speaking with the person directly allowed me (as the interviewer) to make them more comfortable by sharing personal information about myself. This "law of reciprocity" is often cited within social penetration theory, which states that in the early stages of a relationship it is often self-disclosure and vulnerability that opens the door to sharing a deeper level of feeling with someone else (Altman

& Taylor, 1973). This openness is best achieved through research by interviews and is why I

chose this method.

Without the context behind the variables the data collected may not be interpreted

correctly. For this reason, qualitative semi-structured face-to-face/phone interviews were

chosen. Face-to-face interviews were conducted whenever possible to observe the participants'

facial reactions to understand whether what they were saying was consistent with their body

language. Each interviewee was provided the approved IRB introduction letter and given ample

time to read and review prior to beginning the interview. The interviews, which took place in

March/April of 2017 in Rochester, NY, were an average duration of 20 minutes. Participants

were parents of toddlers aged 1-3 years old. I solely spoke with parents because they often see

the best and worst of their child and this study is focused on how they handle conflicts. This

method of data collection is more efficient because parents can provide historical information not

otherwise known when conducting observational research. Many interviews occurred over lunch

while the parent was at work or after their child had gone to sleep around 8PM. Instead of

directly observing toddlers in their natural environment, I choose to interview their

parent/guardian without the toddler present. Parents were more relaxed and less rushed when not

having to care for their children.

After interviewing the parent, I requested they provide me with contact information of

others I may speak to. Using this form of snowball sampling (where participants suggest other

possible subjects to interview) helped me obtain 28 interviews. Snowball sampling was used

because the recruitment of participants was needed for a specific demographic for which

adequate frames were not available (Creswell, 2014). Although this sampling technique is not

always representative of the population, I was recruiting for was a specific demographic –

parents of toddlers. In anticipation of any ethical issues (e.g., physical and/or mental abuse) I

had planned to discretely share the Rochester, NY domestic violence link

(http://www.cityofrochester.gov/domesticviolence/). Luckily, this was not necessary.

All interviews were semi-structured and conducted based on the creation of an interview

protocol that starts broadly and then narrows. I started with demographic questions about the

participant and their toddler child. I then asked questions about the toddler's behavior and

personality style. In addition to requesting the parent reflect on common conflicts with their

child, I also provided two scenarios. In most cases the scenario helped jog the parent's memory

and he/she would share other similar stories. This is an appropriate method of data collection

because the themes will be found inductively (Creswell, 2014). Using myself as the key

instrument for data collection, I was able to notice subtle cues that tipped me off to the veracity

of the participant's responses. This also reduced the probability that data will reflect only the

idealized version of events and instead highlight truths only evident through personal

conversation (Lamont & Swidler, 2014).

My personal experiences, being a mother of one toddler and one newborn, provide a

unique personal motivation to complete this research. Having grown up as an only-child, I lack

the knowledge of how my parents would have managed a toddler. As my curiosity grows, so do

my children, and I hope these findings can better prepare me to assist my children to be socially

confident through proper communication techniques during conflict.

Data Analysis

In order to ensure unbiased findings, I recorded the conversations, with the permission of the participants. Additionally, I transcribed all interviews and assigned a pseudonym to each participant which was solely used after the interview. The transcripts and notes from each interview were reviewed to identify themes. I narrowed in on:

- methods the parent used to discipline or teach their toddler;

- methods they believed worked best and why.

Additionally, I used the software Dedoose to correlate all the transcriptions and determine prevalence of themes. I used codes I created to emphasize which methods the parents preferred. Additionally, I noted that most parents preferred either verbal or imitative behavioral modification strategies. With that knowledge, I broke verbal tactics into two groups to analyze why they were being used over imitative tactics. Codes included FV (For Verbal), AV (Against Verbal), IP (Imitative Preference). Lastly, I coded for imitation techniques that backfired (IB) and imitation techniques that resulted in learning (D=L). After the initial coding, I sorted by prevalence of each code per interview. These were then used as to how often each was mentioned as represented in Appendix A.

Demographics

The 28 parents interviewed were an average age of 32 years old. Of those parents, 32% were male and 68% female. Between both men and women, 90% were married and 86% held a degree higher than a H.S. diploma. All of the men interviewed worked full-time outside the home and most of the females interviewed also worked outside the home. There were a few women who were stay-at-home moms or worked part time. All interviewees were raising their

children in America and only two were from other countries. The socio-cultural difference in discipline techniques was not noted as the participants had been naturalized for long enough to conform to American practices. Each parent was asked demographic information about their toddler(s); in one case the parent had two children within the age range, which accounted for the 29 total toddlers. Of these 29 toddlers, 52% were male and 48% female. The average age was two years old.

Results

RQ1: What conflict management strategies are most used by parents of toddlers?

The four studied strategies (verbal, no-action, physical, imitative) were coded in the research by number of mentions/uses. The first instance these strategies were coded for revolved around the parent discussing conflict of their own choosing and how they handled it. Special attention was paid to whether the child understood the discipline and whether the behavior was repeated. Repetition of behavior was considered not effective (even if the parent believed the contrary). I also coded during two provided scenarios given to assess whether the parent would consistently use the same method or was idealizing their course of action. The scenarios alternated first-person and third-person roles, including toddlers hitting the parent and toddlers not being gentle towards pets. Given the entirety of the discussion the most mentioned forms of discipline were verbal and imitative methods. A tally of the number of mentions is referenced in Table 1. Mentions were coded individually; if the scenario response included two forms of discipline methods used, each method was tallied once. The mentions were coded by individual references of each method. For example, Don, who said, "We first started with the hitting, we'd take his hand and say "do nice" [verbal], and we tried that…and giving him the correct behavior

and demonstrating [imitative] what not to do and encouraging him to be good." Additionally, if the parent had a response that was not within the four categories of this research it was not tallied (e.g., timeout).

Table 1

Number of Mentions per Category

Mentions	Category			
	Verbal	No-Action	Physical	Imitative
Number	49	12	17	49

In this sample, the main two forms of mentioned behavior modification in toddler conflicts were verbal and imitative strategies. This is evident in the 49 mentions of both verbal and imitative methods of discipline compared to the lesser mentioned types, no-action and physical.

To understand if there were gender differences, male and females were broken out and analyzed based on discipline usage within their respective gender. For example, imitative methods have 49 mentions between men and women, however, only 55% of men mentioned using imitative methods compared to 95% of women (see Table 2).

Table 2

Percentage of Discipline Usage by Gender

Gender	Discipline							
	Verbal		No-Action		Physical		Imitative	
	%	n:N	%	n:N	%	n:N	%	n:N
Male (*N* = 9 fathers)	100	9:9	11	1:9	44	4:9	55	5:9
Female (*N* = 19 mothers)	100	19:19	58	11:19	53	10:19	95	18:19
Combined use	100	28:28	43	12:28	50	14:28	82	23:28

Overall, the combined use of each method highlights that 100% of parents have used verbal means and 82% have used imitative means to discipline their toddler. These findings suggest that verbal and imitative forms of discipline are most mentioned and most used by both men and women.

RQ2: How do parents use imitative methods when modeling desired behavior to toddlers?

Although parents used both verbal and imitative methods to discipline their toddlers, 76% of all parents interviewed agreed that imitative methods are their preferred method. Parents who noted this preference drew connections between disciplining during times of conflict and teaching during times of non-conflict. This is illustrated in the book, *The Whole-Brain Child*: *"Too often we forget that 'discipline' really means 'to teach' –not 'to punish.' A disciple is a student, not a recipient of behavioral consequence"* (Siegel & Bryson, 2011, p. 139). With this concept in mind, we can see how teachable moments can transcend into disciplining tools. To exemplify this, during several interviews, a scenario was given in which the parent was holding a toddler who was hitting them. It was then requested that the parent provide a strategy for how they would handle the situation. Jack, father of one toddler, suggested that,"we'll tell him 'no, but if you want to pat Mommy or Daddy you can do that.' We will gently show him how to do it, gently…show him how you pat someone instead of slapping them." Jennifer echoed this stating, "if I help her to pet my face it makes the connection better." Helen also confirmed and provided a similar personal story, saying, "so I grabbed her hand and I just rubbed it on my face and I said: 'you be nice to mama,' I said: 'no hitting, don't hit.'…and she was

fine." Jack, Jennifer, and Helen are all expressing how they use imitation to help their child understand the behavior they are looking for.

In a similar scenario, it was requested that the parent provide details for how they would help a toddler who was roughly handling a friendly family pet. In this case, all but five parents agreed that they would use verbal tools while demonstrating how to pet the animal. Katherine provides the example in relation to her family dog and toddler: "He [toddler] would hit her [dog], not meaning to, he just doesn't understand. So, we always say: 'nice touch' and we'd show him what nice petting looks like versus hitting her, to understand that motion and how it's different." Rachel, who reflected on her son and their family cats agrees, saying, "We would take his hand, and we use the word 'gentle' and…do the motion on their [cats] back." Abby, reflecting on her own daughter's ability to understand imitation over verbal methods, stated,

> "If I had said to her: 'you have to pet from the head down" she wouldn't have
> understood. She needs to see to do it. I've said to her: 'don't do it, you need to pet the
> other way' and she's looked at me like I have two heads…she's not delayed, she just
> doesn't grasp it as quickly as when she sees it."

Modelling behavior can not only transcend from teachable moments to discipline, it can also backfire. This alternate outcome was also shared by many parents and often in relation to the father-toddler interactions. In these cases, the parent would unknowingly teach the child unwarranted behavior, for example Travis, who said, "I definitely made the mistake of play wrestling and hitting with him. I've cut back on that because then it just leads to unwarranted hitting and things, you know?" Likewise, Mandy reflected on her husband's aggressive actions that her son picked up: "he's spanked Larson, he tried a few times. And Larson laughed, he left a

hand mark and everything, he (toddler) just thought it was funny and then started spanking everyone's butt." Women, although experiencing this less often than their male counterparts, also noticed this backfiring. Betty described how she modelled behavior for her child: "I feel like that's a power struggle sometimes, like today when I grabbed his helicopter and then it just made him grab even more." Although many parents agreed the behavior stopped short-term, Travis and Mandy commented that the behaviors were repeated days later. These backfires indicate the power of imitation on modifying toddler behavior with both positive and negative results.

RQ3: In what instances would parents of toddlers use other methods (verbal, non-action, physical) instead of imitative to achieve repetition of desired behavior in toddlers?

Most often, parents who indicated they preferred imitative methods to disciplining their children often used verbal tactics as their primary technique. It became apparent over the course of several discussions that time, ease, and convenience were the ultimate factors when choosing between their preferred method (imitative) and verbal. Many mom and dads do not always have the patience or time to discipline via the most effective means. When asked what her go-to is for disciplining her toddler, Mimi responded, "I would say verbal, a lot of the time during the day when I have all four kids I don't have time to demonstrate it to him." Rachel suggested that "for most people, your first instinct is to just go with the verbal." Abby confirmed by stating, "It's my go-to, it's so easy." The convenience of verbally stating what you need requires the least effort on behalf of the parent and is most often the first form of discipline that comes to our minds as fluent speakers. As adults with large verbal capacities we often take for granted that our toddlers do not. Interestingly, 56% of men preferred verbal as their go-to strategy for

discipline (compared to 5% of women), however, 67% of the men (47% of women) who had this preference agreed that verbal was not the most effective means of discipline. Nick confirmed by stating, "they might not quite understand," and Mike, who when asked if his toddler understands everything he says, replied, "I think, like 75%." Additionally, 45% of all parents agreed that when verbal methods were used, the unwanted behavior reoccurred. In summary, men prefer verbal methods over women, however, many parents agree that unwanted behavior is repeated after using this method, thereby indicating that the effectiveness of the verbal method is lacking.

A lesser noted but important additional finding proposes that verbal methods were also used in instances where combining with demonstrations provided a transitional tool for future use. For example, Jennifer, who said:

"I think the imitative is good and I try and pair them with words because I feel like that's the best way to transition between the two? You say 'go get me the ball' and you go with her. Eventually you say 'go get the ball' and she goes and gets it…it could happen that way."

This was an interestingly reflection by Jennifer who may have touched on a topic for future study.

In addition to verbal methods, there were only 12 mentions of no-action among parents who often cited this as a last resort option. No-action was referred to in conversations by parents as ignoring the child if they were exhibiting a behavior the parent did not want to give a response to. Most often the scenario I provided revolved around hearing and repeating swear words. Rebecca described her own experience as:

"Now that he's at the age of two and repeats everything he hears…if he hears a bad word and repeats it (because he doesn't know), I'll ignore it. He doesn't know what he's saying and if I say 'uh-oh' then he realizes that he got a reaction. Sometimes kids say things just to see how you react, so I'll ignore the spoken things if he says the wrong thing."

Other situations parents provided involved ignoring unwanted behavior, Martha clarified her own experience when asked if she ever uses no-action as a method of discipline: "Yep, like 'I can hear you, and I'm right here, but I'm not going to respond to you until you start treating me nicely.'" Helen echoed that sentiment, saying, "The ignoring her I'd say [happens] every other day, because that's when those meltdowns happen and I just ignore them as much as I can." Adalind also reflected on the power of ignoring: "when I give them too much attention it makes the situation worse." As well as Rachel, who said, "I ignore him when he's really fussy and starts acting up." In instances of bad behavior and repeating unwanted actions, no-action/ignoring is used by 43% of parents to either prevent the toddler from getting a rise out of the parent, or allowing the toddler to cool-off before the parent stops ignoring him/her.

There were 17 mentions of physical discipline among parents who most often cited safety concerns as their main use of this method. This did not always refer to the use of spankings but rather picking-up and relocating the child to prevent them from injuring. In this open-ended question, I asked parents if they used this method in any format. More men responded to using physical means than women at 67% men and 53% female. Martha elaborated on her use of force. Saying. "so I do, I hit him back and he usually goes 'owwww, that wasn't nice Mom', 'well, it wasn't nice when you were hitting me either, and I told you to stop."

Other examples of how this method was used were vague and often not answered in full detail. The social stigma surrounding the use of force might be the culprit in this case. In Abby's case, she reflected on her use of physical means to prevent her daughter from injury: "if it continues, then [I would] move her away from her, so she can't pull it." Many felt comfortable agreeing to the use of physical methods when I reflected that it doesn't always have to be spanking, however, parents were guarded in providing any further details.

RQ4: Which strategies show the greatest success rate (unwanted behavior stopped, and wanted behavior internalized for future use)?

When following up afterwards on whether their toddler understood what they were trying to get across many showed a preference towards modelling the behavior they wanted as a means to gain better understanding from their toddlers. This can be seen in Jill's case, who suggested: "They want to do well and please you and they also want to do what you're doing." The idea that toddlers watch and learn from their parents is also noticed by Hannah who said: "Daily, we're always working with her every opportunity that I get, you know…she's my little shadow." And Amy explained that: "I think that's what she's learning the best from. I'd say she's a follower right now…" Even Mandy pointed out: "They are just little parrots." Approximately 68% of all parents interviewed agreed that imitative methods have the greatest success rate. Of the 68% percent, 84% of women and 33% of men agreed that toddlers are more likely to learn and internalize imitative methods for later use. As parents we have the choice to "take moments of conflict and transform them into opportunities for learning, skill building, and brain development" (Siegel & Bryson, 2011, p. 139).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to expand knowledge pertaining to the conflict management strategies that are most used and most effective in parent-toddler interactions. The focal point of past work revolved around analyzing singular methods (e.g., verbal commands and their impact on changing toddler behavior). The present research added to scholarship in this area by defining not only what discipline strategies parents use most, but also which strategies are most effective. After analyzing the data, the top two strategies were verbal and imitative methods, confirming McTear's (1986) findings that parents intervene using verbal commands for half of all conflicts, and also adding to McTear's findings that imitation is also used for more than half of all intervention situations.

Verbal methods were found to be the most popular method among both men and women parents. Of the parents who used verbal means to discipline their children, over half agreed that it wasn't the most effective means to change behavior, often citing their toddler not understanding. This confirms Caplan et al.'s (1991) findings that often a toddler is verbally immature and unable to respond appropriately to verbal discipline. Parents were also asked whether the children repeated the unwanted behavior after being provided a verbal command and almost half agreed that the behavior reoccurred. When attempting to flesh out why parents used verbal commands when they didn't believe it to be effective, the most often heard response had to do with convenience and ease of use. As adults, we often take for granted how simple it is to communicate but our toddlers, who aren't typically verbally mature yet, may not understand what we are saying to them. This situation, as studied by Klimes-Dougan and Kopp (1999), can

cause toddlers to conform short-term but fail to grasp the tools needed to change behavior long-term.

Imitation, most often referred to as modeling by parents, was the second most used method. Although it was the second most used it was preferred over verbal methods by almost four times as many people. These two areas were often at odds with each other-all parents mentioned using verbal commands when disciplining their children, however, over 75% thought imitative to be the most effective method. When reflecting on this with the parents, many agreed with the findings presented by Baer (1963), Bandura (1963, 1971), and Shantz (1987) who highlighted that toddler conflicts can be effectively resolved by modelling desired behaviors. This action, whether immediate in-conflict or delayed via role-play, provided the toddlers with self-learned tools they were able to retain for future use without a parent present (Chen, 2003; Chen, Fein, Killen, & Tam, 2001). Parents again cited time and inconvenience as reasons they do not use imitative methods more often. The study also found a prevalence of imitative backfires that were cited most often through the behaviors of fathers. This confirmed Baer and Bandura's (1963) findings that children were twice as likely to behave aggressively after seeing an adult model do the same. During recollections of wrestling and some forms of physical disciplining the toddler ended up repeating the behavior toward another. This behavior confirms the strength of modelling and its impact on toddlers.

Inaction methods were the least used methods among parents who often cited ignoring as a response to a toddler repeating a naughty word or throwing a temper-tantrum. Inaction was described by parents as not responding in any way to a child who was mis-behaving. This often lasted the duration of the mis-behavior or until the toddler acted in a way that required the parent

to escalate the discipline to another form (e.g., timeout). Parents also agreed that this was not

often their first course of action which helps to confirm Chen et. al's (2001) findings that

resolution rates among inaction strategies is minimal. Additionally, a minor but still noticeable

number of women preferred this method over men. This might be attributed to the length of time

women are with their toddler children over men and may suggest that after a longer duration with

their child a mother's patience level waivers and inaction is a simple way to release that tension.

Physical methods were one of the more elusive methods discussed. Many parents were

reluctant in sharing their methods of discipline in this section although, in confirmation of

McTear's (1986) findings half of all parents agreed they use it. Many parents mentioned the use

of physical discipline when referring to imitative methods backfiring and removing their child

from a harmful situation. However, many parents were reserved about the depth and detail they

shared. Physical methods have a value in terms of safety but in regards to physical force, this

study was not able to ascertain whether it is effective.

Lastly, a limitation of this study was the unequal distribution of men versus women

interviewed. This limitation could be an opportunity for future studies of just male parents.

Being a woman researcher and mother, I had unique access to other mothers and was able to

provide a level of comfort that enabled them to share more freely. Of the men interviewed, many

were reluctant to divulge details and did not elaborate as freely. A male researcher may be able

to relate to a male parent more significantly than I was able to as a female. Additionally,

observing the children in these situations to confirm the parent's responses would be an

opportunity for future studies. As a follow up, having interviewed the parents once, it would be

worthwhile to study their toddlers over time to determine the long-term effects on behavior. This could include in-home observation and follow-up interviewing with the parent and the toddler.

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Appendix A

Prevalence of Discipline Strategies Used

	Mentions								After Verbal, Reoccurrence?
	Verbal	No-Action	Physical	Imitative	IP	D=L	FV	AV	
Abby	1		1	3	X	X		X	
Adalind	3	1		1	X	X			X
Amy	1	1	1	2	X	X			
Betty	1		1	4	X	X			
Don	3		2	2			X		X
Hank	3		1				X		
Hannah	1	1	1	2	X	X			
Helen	1	1	1	3	X	X		X	X
Jack	1			2	X	X		X	X
Jennifer	1			2	X	X		X	
Jill	1			3	X	X			
Johan	2				X	X		X	
Katharine	3	1	1	1	X			X	X
Leeann				2	X	X		X	
Mandy	2	1	1	3			X		X
Martha	2	1		4	X	X			X
Mike	2		1	1			X	X	
Mimi	2			3					X
Natalie	3			3	X	X			X
Nick	3	1	3				X	X	
Rachel	2	1	1	1	X	X		X	X
Rebecca	2	1	1	1	X	X		X	
Samantha	1	1	1		X	X			
Sarah	3	1		3	X	X		X	X
Steve	1						X	X	
Susan	2			1	X	X		X	
Travis	1			2	X				X
Zayn	1			1	X	X		X	X
Tally	49	12	17	49	76%	68%	21%	54%	45%
Male	100%	22%	67%	55%	44%	33%	56%	67%	
Female	100%	53%	53%	95%	89%	84%	5%	47%	
Combined	100%	43%	50%	82%					

Interview Protocol

Introduction

You have been selected to speak with me today because you are a parent or guardian of a toddler aged child (1-3 years). My research is focused on how parents/guardians resolve conflicts. My research does not aim to criticize or critique your parenting styles and/or ability. Rather, I am trying to understand the strategies and tactics used to effectively manage toddler misconduct. As a reminder, all identities will remain anonymous and there are NO right or wrong answers. Are you comfortable if I record our conversation?

A. Interviewee Background
   a. Name:
   b. Birthdate:
   c. Spouse: (Y/N)
   d. Highest Degree Obtained
B. Child(ren)
   a. Name(s):
   b. Age(s):
   c. Sex (M/F):
   d. Personality Type:
C. Generic Questions
   a. What are the common things you argue about with your toddler?
   b. Who is usually the disciplinarian in your household?
   c. What time of the day are conflicts more likely to arise with your toddler (morning, meal times, play dates, bedtimes?)
D. Specific Questions (Remind them that indecision and inaction are acceptable answers)
   a. Tell me about a time where you and your toddler engaged in a conflict.
   b. Is this a recurring argument? How often does this occur?
   c. What do you typically do in this situation?
   d. Does your partner or spouse work with you to resolve the issue?
   e. What are the positives and negatives to using this approach?
   f. Does the toddler's behavior change after the conflict is over?
   g. Is the behavior repeated?
E. Third Person Effect
   a. I will provide a brief scenario
   b. What should this parent do in this scenario to resolve the conflict?
   c. What would you do in this scenario to resolve the conflict?
   d. Probing Further? (Provide examples of each)
      i. How often do you use verbal means to resolve conflicts with your child?
      ii. How often do you use imitative means to resolve conflicts with your child?
      iii. How often do you use physical means to resolve conflict with your child?
      iv. How often do you use inaction as a means to resolve conflict with your child?
      v. Are there situations that one strategy would be best used over another?
      vi. Is there one form that works best?
      vii. Is there one form that works least?
   e. Is there anything you'd like to add that I haven't covered?

Conclusion

Thank you for speaking with me today, I appreciate the time you've taken to participate. As a reminder, the interviews will be transcribed for further analysis and a pseudonym will be assigned to you when referring to a direct quote by you in the study. If you have any recommendations for other parents/guardians with toddlers who would be willing to participate in my study, please feel free to share my email address with them. EMAIL: dhm1568@rit.edu