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Relationship Between Parenting Style and Aggression in a Spanish Children Sample

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to ascertain whether there are any differences in the parenting style received by two groups of children who obtain low-risk and high-risk scores, respectively, in relation to aggressive behaviour and determine which parenting variables are linked with the presence or absence of this kind of problematic behaviour. We selected a sample of 33 children between 3 and 14 years old (21 male and 12 female) with risk scores in aggressive behaviour and another similar group with low scores in this variable. After administering both instruments to the parents, we carried out a binomial logistic regression analysis which resulted in a prediction model for the 87.9% of the sample, made up of the parenting variables: father's satisfaction with parenting and role orientation, and mother's autonomy and limit setting. Moreover, our analysis of the variance revealed significant differences in the support and communication perceived by the fathers and mothers of both groups. Lastly, the utility of results to propose intervention strategies within the family based on fathers involvement and an authoritative style is discussed.

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1. Introduction

Although aggressiveness can be understood from an ethological perspective as an adaptive pattern, aggression is an extremely important problem for all humans, regardless of where they live. The higher incidence of gender violence, intra-family violence, child abuse, delinquency, etc, indicates that aggression is an important component of a wide range of psychosocial problems that give good reason to study this phenomenon from a psychological perspective.

Numerous attempts have been made to define what we understand by aggression or aggressive behaviour, proving that it is by no means an unequivocal term, but rather presents different psychological, social, moral etc. connotations. In one such attempt to pin down this term, Bandura (1973) defined it as an acquired behaviour that is damaging and destructive, and which is controlled by reinforcements. Subsequently, Edmunds and Kendrick

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(1980) defined the term 'instrumental aggressiveness' as a willingness to manifest harmful behaviour as a means of obtaining extrinsic reinforcements. Both definitions refer to the interaction between the subject and the environment, which manifests itself through specific behaviours such as shouting, hitting, threatening, harassing, attacking, invading, humiliating, etc. These behavioural expressions of varying intensity can be grouped into verbal and non-verbal manifestations, physical and psychological, overt and covert, with clear intent and purpose in the damage caused (Di Giunta, Pastorelli, Eisenberg, Gerbino, Castellani & Bombi, 2010; Fariz, Mías, & Borges de Moura, 2002). In the Behaviour Assessment System for Children (BASC), Reynolds and Kamphaus (2004) also point to the multi-dimensional nature of the phenomenon and define aggression as the tendency to do physical or emotional harm to others, encompassing both physical aggression, through behaviour such as breaking others' possessions, hitting others or hurting animals, as well as verbal aggression manifested through behaviour such as arguing, criticising, threatening, insulting or blaming others. The Spanish adaptation of the BASC shows a high correlation between this construct and the construct of aggressive behaviour contained in the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL) by Achenbach (1991). Furthermore, in both the DSM-IV-TR and the previous versions, inappropriately aggressive behaviour is included within the Conduct Disorder and shows high correlation with other behavioural disorders such as ADHD or Oppositional Defiant Disorder (APA, 2002).

It could be said that genetic characteristics are important components on aggression, that play an important role, determining parent-child relationships from the first time (Narusyte, Andershed, Neiderhiser & Lichtenstein, 2007). Despite this genetic influence, numerous theories have been developed that link aggressive behaviour in childhood with parenting habits Carrasco and González (2006). The most important variables studied include rejection, lack of support and affection, the use of punishment to control the child's behaviour, lack of supervision and communication, and inconsistent discipline. Furthermore, numerous studies conducted in recent years have demonstrated that an excessively authoritarian parenting style or on the contrary an excessively permissive style favour the appearance of aggressive behaviours in the child, whereas an authoritative style, characterised by high levels of support, supervision and flexibility, acts as a protective factor against aggressive behaviour (Baumrind, Larzelere & Owens, 2010; Roa & Del Barrio, 2002; Tur, Mestre, & Del Barrio, 2004a, 2004b). There are also other family elements related with aggressive tendencies such as paternal violence, alcoholism, the quality of relations and marital upsets, divorce, single parenthood (Del Barrio & Roa, 2006), substance dependence and antisocial behaviour (Buschgens, Van Aken, Swinkels, Ormel, Verhulst, & Buitelaar, 2010). A low SES also appears as a factor associated with aggression and other deviant behaviours in children. (Côté, Vaillancourt, LeBlanc, Nagin, & Tremblay, 2006; Knutson, DeGarmo, & Reid, 2004).

Based on the model put forward by Darling and Steinberg (1993), according to which parents display a relatively stable parenting style manifested through specific parenting practices, numerous studies have attempted to link aggressive behaviour not only with different styles of parenting, but also with other more specific constructs referring to parental interaction with their children. One of these constructs is known as 'limit setting', which refers to the consistency of rules established by parents and the reasoned induction towards their compliance by children. Various studies have found in this variable an important protective factor against aggressive behaviour (for example, Côté, et al., 2006; Romano, Tremblay, Boulerice, & Swisher, 2005). Studies that have measured inconsistency in normative style, on the other hand, have found a direct link between this variable and aggressive behaviour (for example, Mazefsky & Farrell, 2005; McCoy, Frick, Loney, & Ellis, 1999; Vaillancourt, Miller, Fagbemi, Côté, & Tremblay, 2007). On other occasions, different types of discipline have been compared, observing that aggressive discipline, characterised by a low level of reasoning and high levels of physical, verbal and emotional aggressiveness, generates aggressive behaviour in the children, whereas less aggressive and more reason-based discipline does not (Sheehan & Watson, 2008).

Other studies point to a lack of supervision, together with inconsistent disciplinary guidelines, as the decisive factor in the aggressive behaviour of children (for example, Knutson et al., 2004; Mazefsky & Farrell, 2005; McCoy et al., 1999). As an example of this relationship, the study carried out by Mazefsky and Farrell (2005) with 1196 high school students from rural areas in the US concluded that a parenting style characterised by low levels of supervision and discipline, together with a low level of parental support, favoured aggressive behaviour in the teenagers, especially when they witnessed violence in their surroundings and provocation by others. The

line between a lack of supervision and autonomy is fairly thin; hence some studies carried out by Mestre et al. confer a positive significance on the latter insofar as it encourages responsibility and security, acting as a protective factor against aggressive behaviour (Mestre, Samper, Tur, & Díez, 2001; Mestre, Frías, Samper, & Nácher, 2003), whereas in other studies carried out subsequently, the same authors suggest that autonomy can be harmful when contextualised within a negligent parenting style (Mestre, Samper, Nácher, Cortés, & Tur, 2004; Samper, Aparici, & Mestre, 2006).

Another aspect that has proven to be fairly influential on aggressive behaviour in children refers to marital relations and the distribution of tasks as a couple. Some studies have found a link between an inadequate distribution of family tasks, conflicts within the couple and aggressive behaviour in the children (for example, Brook, Zheng, Whiteman, & Brook, 2001; Romano et al., 2005).

Previous studies carried out on the Spanish population had shown that variables such as autonomy and discipline, pertaining to the parenting style of mothers and fathers, are closely linked with certain behavioural problems in their children such as hyperactivity and impulsiveness (Raya, Herruzo, & Pino, 2008) or aggressive behaviour itself (Mestre et al., 2004; Samper et al., 2006). Furthermore, the fact that the Spanish population is experiencing the mass incorporation of women into the work market, and therefore the greater involvement of fathers in parenting tasks, compels researchers to focus on the possible risks this family reorganisation might entail on the adaptation of children. This new family situation gives greater importance to the parenting style of fathers, which has so far been studied to a much lesser extent than that of mothers (Winsler, Madigan, & Aquilino, 2005), and so it would be interesting to assess both styles separately and describe the main differences between them. So far, little is known about the way in which the interaction between the father's and mother's parenting styles affects the functioning of the family. However, as pointed out by Lindsey & Mize (2001) and Karreman, Van Tuijl, Van Aken and Deković (2008), based on a systemic perspective of the family, the relationship between the father's and mother's parenting style could be expected to play a more important role in the child's development than the father or mother individually.

Ultimately, this study aims to ascertain whether there are differences in the parenting style received by two groups of children who obtain high and low risk scores respectively on the instrument used to measure the aggressive behaviour, and determine which parenting variables are linked with the presence or absence of this kind of behaviour. In other words, we expect to develop a predictive model of belonging to a group with high scores and another group with low scores on aggression, based on some parenting variables. Finally, this paper also aims to describe the main differences observed between the parenting styles of mothers and fathers in interaction with the aggressive behaviour described in their own children.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

To select a wide number of participants with an average socio-economic background (trying to neutralize the influence of SES on aggressive behaviour in children), three Nursery, Primary and Secondary Schools were chosen, located in the Spanish provinces of Cordoba and Jaen. Information was obtained from 432 participants, out of which 66 were selected and divided into two groups of 33. All the participants in the first group were placed in the area of risk in relation to the variable 'aggressiveness' as reported by their parents (risk group), with a T score over 60, as detailed below in the description of the instrument. The second group encompassed all participants with a T score under 40 for this variable (low aggressiveness group), and for this selection process, they were paired with those from the risk group in terms of gender and school level.

Each group contained 21 boys and 12 girls aged between 3 and 14 years old, with an average age of 7.82 (SD= 3.49) for the risk group and 7.64 (SD= 3.34) for the low aggressiveness group, with no significant differences between the two groups in relation to this variable, since $t = -0.216$ ($p = 0.829$). Each group was distributed as follows in terms of school level: 13 from Nursery Education, 6 from the first and second level of Primary

Education, 2 from the third and fourth level of Primary Education, 8 from the fifth and sixth level of Primary Education, and 4 from the first and second level of Secondary Education.

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2.2. Instruments

In order to compile information, the following instruments were used:

An adaptation into Spanish of the “Behaviour Assessment System for Children” (BASC) (Reynold & Kamphaus, 2004). The purpose of this system is to evaluate a wide range of pathological and adaptive dimensions using different sources of information (parents, teachers and children) and different methods (questionnaires, developmental history and observation). In this case, the questionnaires for parents were used. This questionnaires, which are divided into three levels according to age (3-6, 6-12, 12-18), present an internal consistency index of 0.70. Test-retest correlation (three months interval) was 0.85, 0.88 and 0.70 for the three levels of questionnaire completed by parents. For this sample, internal consistency index was 0.74.

Of all the different scales included in this instrument, the aggression scale was used for this study, defined by the instrument as the “tendency to act in a physically or verbally hostile manner that is threatening to others”. This scale presents internal consistency indexes between 0.79 and 0.75, depending on the age of the subjects.

The scores obtained for any of the scales are transformed into T scores, which indicate the distance of a particular score in relation to the control group mean, thereby enabling comparisons to be made between subjects of different ages. These T scores can vary between 0 and 100 and present a mean of 50 and SD of 10. On the basis of these T scores, different levels are established: scores below 30 are considered very low, under 40 low, between 40 and 60 intermediate, over 60 at risk, and over 70 clinically significant.

The other instrument utilised was the Parenting Questionnaire (PCRI-M) by Roa and Del Barrio (2001) adapted from the Parent-Child Relationship Inventory (Gerard, 1994), which measures paternal and maternal practices and attitudes towards parenting using a direct score. It comprises 78 items with four response options (totally disagree, disagree, agree and strongly agree), which are grouped into seven scales. High scores on the different scales indicate greater agreement with the situation defined in each scale. The seven scales are:

Support, social and emotional, received by a mother or father.

Satisfaction with parenting: satisfaction obtained by a parent through parenthood.

Involvement: level of interaction and parental knowledge about their child.

Communication: perception regarding the effectiveness of communication with their child.

Limit setting: level of exigency in obedience of rules.

Autonomy: ability to give the child independence.

Role orientation: attitudes about the role played by each gender in parenting.

A small social desirability scale is also included.

The internal consistency of the instrument for this sample, obtained using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient, is 0.87. For each scale, this coefficient ranges from 0.68 for the Support scale to 0.78 for the Satisfaction scale. Furthermore, in the case of this sample, the questionnaire presents good construct validity, given the correlations between the different scales on the questionnaire, especially in the most important parenting scales such as Involvement-Satisfaction with parenting (0.51), Involvement-Communication (0.64), Limit setting-Support (0.42), Limit setting-Autonomy (0.44) and Satisfaction with parenting-Limit setting (0.37).

2.3. Procedure

Once the schools were selected, as indicated in the Participants section, contact was made with the head teachers of the schools once their school board had provided their consent to participate in the study. Teachers informed to families and assisted in the distribution and collection of questionnaires. Families that agreed to collaborate voluntarily completed the P format (parents) of the BASC in its different versions depending on the age of the children, and the PCRI, completed by both the father and mother.

2.4. Data analysis

To evaluate the possible effect of parenting style on aggression, an ex-post-facto design was applied with a quasi-control group. Hence, a dichotomic variable was used as the dependent variable, derived from the T score obtained in aggression. The two options for this variable were 0 for subjects with a low aggression score, and 1 for subjects in the risk area. For this purpose, subjects were selected if their T score in aggression, as reported by their parents, situated them above the level of risk, and another group was chosen with low aggression scores, equivalent to the first group in terms of gender and school level.

Subsequently, binary logistic regression analysis was performed. Based on the coefficients estimated by logistic regression for each of the variables, in accordance with its probability of belonging to either level of the dependent variable, this process classed each subject into one of the two categories proposed.

Logistical regression enabled various models to be established, the most efficient one being the model that predicts the highest percentage of correctly classified subjects with the lowest number of possible variables, since the main purpose of this analysis is to establish a model that predicts the dependent variable using the independent variables. The model comprises an equation made up of estimated coefficients and the scores of the different variables, giving a resulting score between 0 and 1, with a cut-off point of 0.5: scores between 0.5 and 1 indicate the probability of obtaining a high score in aggression; scores between 0 and 0.5 indicate the contrary.

To perform these analyses, the following predictive variables were taken into account, from the perspective of both the father and the mother: Support, Satisfaction with parenting, Involvement, Communication, Limit setting, Autonomy and Role Orientation.

Subsequently, in order to describe the differences between the scores obtained by the mothers and fathers from both groups for the PCRI factors, a one-way analysis of variance was performed, using the gender of the parent and the dichotomic variable aggression as the fixed factors. The differences in terms of gender were analysed along with the interaction with the dichotomic variable aggression.

3. Results

On the aggression scale, for possible T scores between 0 and 100, the risk group obtained a mean T score of 68.18 (SD= 8.487), ranging from 60 to 90, whereas the low aggression group obtained a mean score of 36.52 (SD= 2.078), with a minimum of 32 and a maximum of 39.

By applying binary logistical regression analysis to these two groups, between the different possible models, a prediction model was established comprising 4 factors described in Table 1. This four-factor model was selected since it predicts whether a subject will belong to one or the other group for a large percentage of the sample with a fairly small number of variables. The goodness-of-fit for the model was good, with a Chi-Square of 51.685 and 4 degrees of freedom, statistically different from zero. Furthermore, the Cox & Snell R-square and the Nagelkerke R-square presented acceptable values: 0.543 and 0.724, respectively. The Hosmer-Lemeshow test to evaluate correspondence between real and predicted values of the dependent variable did not provide significant results, since $X^2= 3.559$ ($p=0.829$).

As for the classification of subjects, a mean percentage of 87.9% was obtained for correctly classified subjects, obtaining identical percentages for both groups in accordance with the dependent variable.

Table 1. Variables included in the model.

VARIABLES	B	S.E.	Wald	d.f.	Sig.	Exp (B)	95% C.I. Exp (B)	
							Lower	Higher
Father's satisfaction	-,176	,110	2,550	1	,110	,838	,675	1,041
Father's role orientation	-,247	,121	4,159	1	,041	,781	,617	,990
Mother's limit setting	-,683	,189	13,070	1	,000	,505	,349	0,732
Mother's autonomy	,819	,282	8,455	1	,004	2,268	1,306	3,939
Constant	13,579	5,192	6,841	1	,009	789578,0		

One of the main applications of logistical regression analysis is the possibility of creating an equation that can be used to classify a subject in one of the conditions of the dependent variable and knowing the probability of manifesting a high level of aggression depending on the score obtained for one or more of the independent variables.

The equation is:

$$\text{Probability of belonging to the risk group} = 1/1 + e^{-[B_0 + B_1(X_1) + B_2(X_2) + B_3(X_3) + B_n(X_n)]}$$

The result would be a number between 0 and 1; hence subjects would be classified in the risk group if they obtain a score between 0.5 and 1 and in the low aggression group if they obtain a score between 0 and 0.5.

When two subjects were chosen at random, one from the low aggression group (subject number 8) and another from the risk group (subject number 45), the probability of b1 obtained for the first was $0.022 < 0.5$, hence this subject was correctly classified by the model in the low aggression group; and the score obtained by the second was $0.996 > 0.5$, and therefore this subject was also correctly classified by the model in the risk group.

Furthermore, of particular note was the strong influence of the variable 'mother's discipline' on the possibility of belonging to the risk or low-aggression group, since when logistical regression analysis was applied, only inserting this factor as the independent variable, 78.8% of subjects were correctly classified.

Finally, to describe the differences between the parenting styles of mothers and fathers in both groups, one-way analysis of variance was applied to each of the factors in the PCRI, revealing that, in the case of perceived support, mothers presented a significantly lower mean score than fathers (mean score for fathers = 25.68; SD= 3.38, mean score for mothers = 23.36; SD= 3.95, $F= 14.587$, $p= 0.000$), whereas the opposite was true for communication (mean score for fathers = 28.14; SD= 3.68, mean score for mothers = 29.47; SD= 3.78, $F= 4.199$, $p= 0.042$). The interaction with the dichotomic variable aggression did not yield significant results in any case.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this study was to analyse which factors in the parenting style of fathers and mothers were linked with a higher or lower probability of obtaining a score in the risk area of the BASC in relation to aggressive behaviour. As mentioned in the introduction, many authors have described a link between certain aspects of parenting style and aggressive behaviour in children; to such an extent that they have even established certain family models directly linked to this relationship. Accepting some methodological limitations like group size, cross-sectional or using questionnaires and behaviour reports taken from a single source of information, the findings of this study reflect important differences between the two groups: a combination of high scores in autonomy from the mother together with lower scores in satisfaction with parenting and role orientation from the father and limit setting from the mother had a significant influence on the increased probability of obtaining a score in the risk zone on the BASC for aggression.

In general, most of the variables included in the model, with the exception of autonomy for the mother, were predictors of a high probability of scoring in the risk zone when they present low scores, and as predictors of a high probability of scoring in the lower aggression zone when they present high scores. This largely coincides with the findings of previous studies such as Côté et al. (2006) and Romano et al. (2005) in relation to discipline and the establishment of consistent rules. It also coincides with the observations of Mestre et al. (2004) and

Samper et al. (2006), who pointed to excessive autonomy as a risk factor in relation to aggressive behaviour in children, and other data along the same lines as those obtained by Brook et al. (2001) and Romano et al. (2005) for the distribution of parenting tasks in the home. A new variable – the father's satisfaction with parenting – was included in the model obtained in this study, which gives good account of the negative effects of such problems in children on the well-being of parents and the family in general. Therefore, these kinds of problems must be analysed in terms of interaction, since although the family situation described might be a precursor to aggressive behaviour, these problems in children can also destabilise the family dynamic, generating inappropriate patterns of interaction with the parents.

The results obtained are also coherent with the findings of Roa and Del Barrio (2001, 2002) who, in accordance with the parenting models proposed by Baumrind (1991), identified higher scores on the main scales of the PCRI with good parenting, in line with the authoritative model. At the same time, these two authors state that low scores denote problems implementing adequate parenting, identifying them with the authoritarian model. Along these lines, taking into account that a lack of limit setting was one of the main characteristics used to identify the permissive model and that, in turn, this factor has proved to be decisive in the prediction of aggressive behaviour, the findings of this study concur with the majority of authors that the authoritative model predicts a low score in aggression.

As for the main differences observed between the parenting styles of mothers and fathers, they are limited to a lower score in the social and emotional support received by mothers, and a lower score obtained by fathers in communication, which indicates that there are few differences between the parenting styles of mothers and fathers, although these differences occur in fairly significant and representative aspects of a relatively traditional family model, in which the majority of the family burden falls to the mother. This finding is particularly interesting, especially in variables frequently used to describe parenting style such as limit setting and autonomy which, in the case of the mother, have proven to be good predictors of aggression. Accordingly, it could be said that the parenting style of the mother presents a greater specific importance, although the model obtained confers a high importance on factors pertaining to the parenting style of the father, such as satisfaction or role orientation. In this respect, the findings of this study support the observations made by Lindsey and Mize (2001) that the relationship between the father and mother's style is a better predictor of aggression than the father or mother's style separately.

This study may provide some information on the intervention with families in which children manifest a high level of aggressive behaviour, since it can provide guidance about certain specific aspects of everyday parenting practices which can be modified, such as setting clear rules and ensuring their enforcement, supervising the children's different chores, and involving all the members of the family unit in the different parenting tasks in order to facilitate a work/life balance for both parents.

Finally, in terms of the future, new studies could be conducted to provide information about certain aspects yet to be clarified such as possible differences in the forms of discipline used by both parents. Furthermore, this study opens up a broad new avenue of research, through which other problems – both externalising and internalising in nature – could be tackled.

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