



A NATURALISTIC EXAMINATION OF CHILDREN'S ANGER EXPRESSION

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INTRODUCTION

Emotion processes are integral to children's social, cognitive, behavioral, and physiological development. Negative emotions—particularly anger—have been a primary target of research investigating emotion expression in children because of the ramifications of poor negative affect regulation on the development of social competence as well as on long-term mood and behavioral outcomes (Kerr & Schneider, 2008).

Inferences about children's emotion regulation are limited by a dearth of knowledge about the emotionally expressive behaviors that occur outside of the laboratory and the natural stimuli for those behaviors (Campos, Frankel, & Camras, 2004). For example, the majority of child emotion research addresses children's independent behavior or behavior within mother-child dyads, limiting inferences about emotion expression within the context of the whole family system.

This study applies naturalistic observational techniques to comprehensively and reliably describe the characteristics and contexts of 7 to 12-year-old children's anger expressions with family members (including mothers, fathers, and siblings) in their homes and community settings.

METHOD

- Part of a larger study conducted by the UCLA Sloan Center on Everyday Lives of Families.
- Participants: 31 families headed by dual-earner, middle-class couples with at least one "target" child between the ages of 7 and 12 (14 girls, 17 boys). All target children had either one or two siblings. Two families were headed by same-sex couples, so one father from each of these families was randomly selected for the analyses described below.
- Families were recorded in their homes by two videocameras on one weeknight and one weekend day starting when the parents arrived home from work (weekday) or woke (weekend), and ending when the children went to bed. Clips were selected for periods of time when the target child was on screen with one or both parents. Anger expressions (including whining and other mild forms of anger) were identified and coded for type of anger behavior, the intensity and duration of the expression, the apparent cause of the expression (e.g., a precipitating event, such as a reprimand), the family member (if any) perceived to be responsible for the cause (e.g., mom), and whether or not the child was previously angry (i.e., had expressed anger within the previous 30 seconds).

RESULTS

Expression Characteristics:

Intensity: Strength of the expression

- Mild: 83%
- Moderate-to-high: 17%

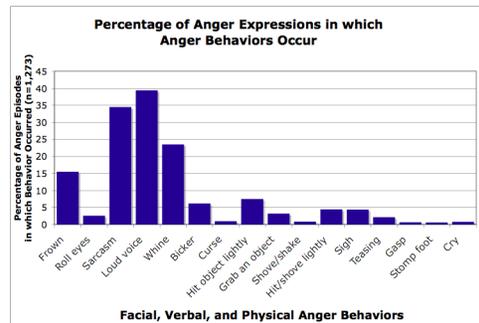
Duration: Length of the expression

- ≤ 2 secs: 80%
- >2 secs: 20%

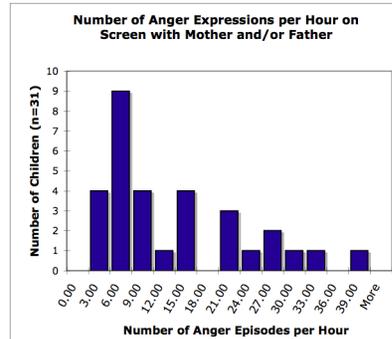
Previously Angry: Child had also expressed anger within the 30 secs prior to the current expression (26%)

Anger Behaviors:

- Facial: Frowning and/or eye-rolling: 18%
- Verbal: Using a loud voice/yelling, whining, cursing, using sarcasm, bickering: 55%
- Physical: Pushing or hitting someone, hitting or grabbing objects, clenching fists, stomping feet, crying, etc.: 23%



Contexts of Anger Expressions (Including Causes*) and % Occurrence in Expressions (N=1,273)



Family member cause	Cause was precipitated by child's mother, father, or sibling, or no person was responsible	Mom: 28% Dad: 28% Sib: 15%
Verbal Disagreement	Target child disagreed with family member's verbal comment	38%
Compliance/Reprimand	Family member made compliance request of or reprimanded child	17%
Homework	Discussion of homework, or child's attempts to complete homework	11%
Physical act	Family member's non-aggressive physical act (e.g., blocking the TV)	11%
Refusal	Family member refused child a desired object or activity	9%
Personal Failure	Child failed at a task (e.g., missed basketball shot)	5%
Being Ignored	Family member ignored child's bids for attention	5%

*Note: Cause variables are not mutually exclusive

Anger Expressions Caused by Fathers v. Mothers

- The data suggest that fathers seem to precipitate stronger anger responses than mothers do. Compared to anger expressions caused by mothers, expressions of anger precipitated by fathers were more likely than would be expected by chance to reach at least a moderate level of intensity ($\chi^2=5.4$, $p<.05$) and to be part of a series of more than one anger expression ($\chi^2=7.2$, $p<.05$).
- Fathers were less likely than would be expected by chance to precipitate girls' anger expressions, whereas mothers were more likely than would be expected by chance to precipitate girls' expressions ($\chi^2=6.3$, $p<.05$).

DISCUSSION

- The majority of children's anger expressions in this sample proved to be mild in intensity, brief in duration, and to occur independently of other anger expressions.
- The most common causes of anger expressions were verbal disagreements, requests for compliance/reprimands, family members' non-aggressive physical acts, and homework. The most common anger behaviors were verbal ones (as opposed to facial or physical ones), loud voice being the most common behavior. Physically aggressive behavior was very uncommon, occurring in only 4% of all expressions.
- Anger expressions perceived as being caused by the father were more likely than expressions caused by the mother to be of higher intensity. Fathers were less likely and mothers more likely to be the cause of girls' anger expressions; however, girls were not less likely than boys to express anger at a higher intensity.
- Future laboratory research can draw from these descriptions of children's anger behaviors and the causes of their anger expressions to develop experimental paradigms that match real-world contexts, and compare expressive behaviors that occur in laboratory settings to the range of behaviors observed naturalistically.

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