

Self-Perception as a Mediator in the Relation Between Differential Parental Treatment and Future Problem Behavior



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Introduction

Differential parental treatment relates to child behavior. Low levels of perceived parental differential treatment relate to positive child self-perception during and beyond childhood (Singer & Weinstein, 2000), whereas differential treatment leads to increases in externalizing behaviors in adolescence (Scholte et al., 2006). Additionally, the less favored siblings tend to show higher levels of antisocial behavior (Richmond et al. 2005).

Hypotheses

Differential parental treatment will decrease children's positive perceptions of themselves and further increase the occurrence of future problem behavior (see **Figure 1**).

Method

Participants & Procedure

Time 1: Data was collected from a laboratory-based observational study of 145 families, each with one primary caregiver and two siblings aged 4-12 (T1). The children were 50.8% male and 49.2% female, the older child's mean age was 9.3 years (SD = 2.10) and the younger child's mean age was 6.23 years (SD = 5.12).

Time 2: Families were re-interviewed 2.5 years later (T2) using online data collection.

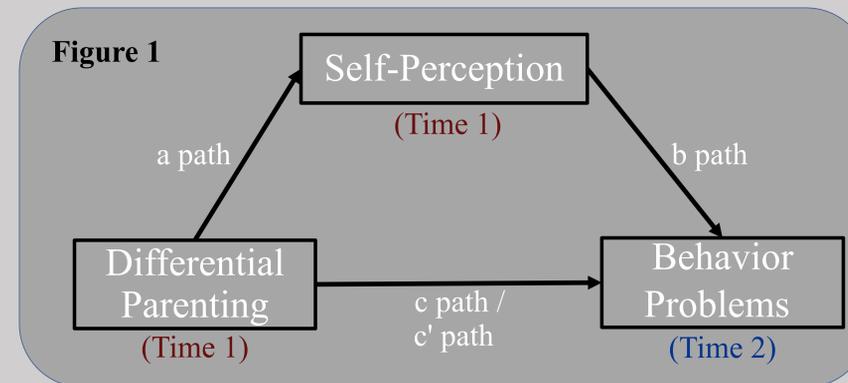
Measures

Differential Parental Treatment: T1 via the occurrence of positive or negative parent-child interactions with each child through the observational Gameboy share task (originally the View Master Task; Brody et al., 1992).

Child Self-Perception: T1 via self-report using the Self-Perception Profile for Children (Cronbach's alpha = .70; Harter, 2012)

Behavior Problems & Prosocial Behavior: T2 via primary caregiver report on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997) subscales of emotional problems, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer relation problems, and prosocial behavior (Cronbach's alphas = .64 - .82).

Results



The overall model is presented in **Figure 1**, and all path significances are represented in **Table 1**.

- **a path:** Multilevel multiple regression models revealed that T1 differential parental treatment did not significantly influence T1 child-reported self-perception.
- **b paths:** Higher self-perception at T1 was predictive of fewer T2 emotional problems, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattentiveness, peer relation problems, and greater prosocial behavior.
- **c paths:** T1 Parenting did not significantly predict behavioral problems at T2, except for a marginal trend in the data where higher T1 parent-child negativity had a slight relation to T2 higher peer relation problems.
- **c' paths:** Including the mediator of child self-perception, this relation between parent negativity and peer relation problems remained a marginal trend in the data.

Table 1 Path	Variable	β	p	
a path (Differential Parenting -> Self-Perception)	Positive Parenting (T1)	0.01	0.86	
	Negative Parenting (T1)	0.09	0.26	
b path (Self-Perception -> Behavior Problems)	Higher Self-Perception (T1)	Emotion Problems (T2)	-0.24	0.001
		Conduct Problems (T2)	-0.30	<0.001
		Hyperactivity (T2)	-0.36	<0.001
		Peer Relation Problems (T2)	-0.13	0.02
		Prosocial Behavior (T2)	0.22	<0.001
c path (Differential Parenting -> Behavior Problems)	Negative Parenting (T1)	Peer-Relation Problems (T2)	0.12	0.08
c' path (Differential Parenting -> Behavior Problems, including Self-Perception)	Negative Parenting (T1)	Peer-Relation Problems (T2)	0.13	0.05

Discussion

The hypothesized mediation model was not significant, because differential parental treatment (positive or negative) did not relate to T1 child self-perception. Negative differential parenting at T1 did marginally relate to T2 peer-problem behaviors. Interestingly though, accounting for SES, parent depression, child sex and age in multilevel models, higher T1 child-reported self-perception did relate to significantly fewer T2 emotion, conduct, hyperactive, and peer problem behaviors as well as increased T2 prosocial behavior.

Although our results did not support the hypothesized mediation model, it is note-worthy that child report of self-perception was significantly linked to parent-report of problem behavior 2.5 years later. The construct of child self-perception may be independent of differential parenting, or it may be that the measurement of parenting in the laboratory was artificial or otherwise flawed. Further research is needed to understand these links.

Strengths & Limitations

A strength of this study was its use of multiple measurements. However, the observational assessment of differential parenting did have limited variability, which may have impaired its ability to predict variance in the model. Additional work is ongoing to code that episode in a way that will capture more variability.

Additionally, the study was strengthened by considering both positive (prosocial) and negative (emotion, conduct, hyperactivity, and peer problems) behavioral outcomes, it is more focused on negative adjustment. More research into other positive behavioral outcomes that relate to child self-perception would add to the literature.

Future Implications

The longitudinal connection found between child-reported self-perception at Time 1 and parent-reported problem behaviors at Time 2 was indicative of the importance of further exploring child self-perception.

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