DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 195 905 CG 014 858

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TITLE Aggressive Behavior in Normal and Deviant Families of Intact and Mother-Only Families.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Mental Health (DHEW), Rockville, Md.
PUB DATE Sep 80
GRANT 1-R03-MH31509-CD
NOTE 27p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (88th, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, September 1-5, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Aggression; *Behavior Patterns; Behavior Problems; Family (Sociological Unit); *Family Environment; *Fatherless Family; Fathers; Mothers; *Parent Child Relationship; Parent Influence; *Problem Children; Siblings
IDENTIFIERS *Family Interaction Coding System

ABSTRACT

Childhood aggression is among the most common and least transitory of childhood dysfunctions. Mother-only families have higher rates of childhood aggression than do intact, father-present homes. The effect of father presence and father absence on the aggressive behavior of family members was examined, along with the behavior patterns in families with an identified aggressive target child and families without an identified aggressive child. Mother-only families (N=9) and intact families (N=15) receiving treatment for an aggressive male child comprised the sample of deviant families. Mother-only (N=9) and intact (N=16) families from the community comprised the normal sample. Trained observers rated the families over a three-week period using the Family Interaction Coding System. Families with an identified deviant child were found to demonstrate more aggressive behaviors than families with a normal target child. Of the deviant families, the mother-only family was more likely to be aggressive. Deviant intact families increased more than normal intact families in aggressive behavior when the father was absent. Mothers demonstrated increasing aggression the longer the father was gone, regardless of whether the family was normal or deviant. (NRB)

Aggressive Behavior in Normal and Deviant Families of Intact and Mother-Only Families

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Presented at the 88th Annual convention of the American Psychological Association in Montreal, Canada, September, 1980.

Aggressive Behavior in Normal and Deviant Families of Intact and Mother-only Families

Childhood aggression is among the most common and least transitory of childhood dysfunctions and accounts for approximately one-third of all referrals to mental health and child guidance centers (Patterson, 1964; Roach, 1955; Rogers, Lilienfeld & Pasamanick, 1954; Woody, 1969). Previously, aggressive children have often been considered unsuitable for treatment (Bahm, Chandler, & Eisenberg, 1961) since traditional therapeutic interventions with this client population have been discouraging (Fleischmen & Horne, 1979; Levitt, 1971; Redl & Wineman, 1972; Teuber & Powers, 1953). The long term effect of not attending to these children is devastating in personal, social, and economic terms for there is little evidence that aggressive children are able to outgrow their aggressive behavior patterns and there is a clear indication that a high proportion of them will require extended treatment and/or incarceration as adults (Olweus, 1976; Robins, 1966). In fact, in their longitudinal study of 732 children, Gersten, Langner, Eisenberg, Simcha-Fagan, and McCarthy (1976) concluded that delinquent clusters of behaviors were more stable than neurotic ones and therefore neurotic behavior may not warrant treatment; spontaneous remission alone may be sufficient but that is not true for aggressive behavior.

Mother-only families have higher rates of childhood aggression than do intact (father-present) homes (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1977; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978). This is particularly important in light of the fact that the single parent family is increasing (Brofenbrenner, 1975). In 1960 88% of

children under 18 years of age lived in families with both parents present but by 1975 only 80% lived in such a family (Norton & Glick, 1976). In 1976 more than 20 million children were in families whose parents were not in an intact first marriage and more than a million children were involved in divorce proceedings in the courts (Norton & Blick, 1976). Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1978) report that as a result of the incidence of family separation, 40-50% of children born during the '70's will spend some time living in a single parent family.

The purpose of the present study was to (a) examine the effect of father presence and father absence on aggressive behavior of family members. The study also sought to (b) examine aggression in families that had an identified aggressive target child versus families without an identified aggressive child (normal). The following questions were examined:

1. Are there differences in total deviant scores for members of normal and deviant families in intact versus mother-only homes?
2. Are there differences in total deviant scores for members of normal and deviant intact families when the father is present versus when the father is absent?
3. Are there differences in total deviant scores for members of normal and deviant intact families by day of father's absence?

METHODS

Subjects

Twenty-seven families coming to the Oregon Social Learning Center for treatment of an aggressive male child were invited to participate in this study. Of these 27 families, nine were mother-only families and eighteen were intact. All nine of the mother-only families and 15 of the intact

families agreed to participate in the study. These 24 families comprised the deviant families sample.

From the community 27 additional families were recruited to serve as a "normal" sample and were matched on age of the target child, number of siblings, socio-economic status and number of parents. These families did not have an identified aggressive child and had not requested any therapeutic intervention. For this matched normal sample there were nine mother-only families and eighteen intact families. All of the mother-only families and 16 of the intact families agreed to participate in the study. These 25 families became the normal sample.

Procedures

Each family was observed by a trained observer who rated each family member using an observational coding system. Families were observed a minimum of six times and a maximum of ten times over a three week period. For the intact families, fathers were absent from the home during every second observation, providing for a father-present/father-absent situation for intact families.

Instruments

The Family Interaction Coding System (FICS) (Reid, 1978) developed for coding the interactions of each member of a family was used in this study. The FICS has 29 codes. The Total Deviant Score (TDS) is comprised of 14 of the 29 FICS codes and are made up of the 14 coercive responses. These include Disapproval, Dependency, Destructiveness, Humiliate, High Rate, Ignore, Negativism, Non-compliance, Physical Negative, Tease, Whine, Yell, Command Negative, Cry.

The FICS was designed to describe behaviors together with the antecedents and consequences which accompanied them. In the present study a trained observer coded alternately and sequentially the behavior of the observed subject and then the person(s) with whom the subject interacted. Each event was described by code letters referring to the category(ies) to which it was assigned, along with the number(s) identifying the family member(s) with whom the target subject interacted.

The data were recorded continuously and provided a relatively complete sequential account of the interaction of a target subject with all other family members. Every 30 seconds the observer received an auditory signal, at which point the observer shifted to the next line of a protocal sheet. On the average observers were able to record five interaction units (both members of a dyad) every 30 seconds. Each member of the family served as target subject for five minutes and then the whole series was replicated. Reliability and validity data for the FICS is presented in Jones (1978).

Results of Question One

The first question was concerned with identifying differences in total deviant behavior scores of families with a normal or deviant targeted male child in an intact or a mother-only home. Table 1 contains the means and standard deviations of total deviant scores for each family position. Table 2 presents the 2-way ANOVA's for each family member and Table 3 presents Duncan's Multiple Range Test for each family position.

Insert Tables 1, 2 & 3 about here

Target Child. The ANOVA for the target child yielded significant differences on the Intact/Mother-only variable and on the Deviant/Normal variable, as well as a significant interaction of the variables. Scores of aggressive children were significantly higher than for normals. Mother-only aggressive children were higher than intact aggressive children. Intact normals, however, scored higher than children from mother-only families.

Mother. Total deviant behavior scores of mothers were significantly higher for families with deviant target children, with the highest scores attained by mothers in deviant mother-only homes. There was also a significant difference between intact and mothers-only for mothers' total deviant scores, with mother-only mothers scoring higher regardless of whether the target child was classified as normal or deviant.

Older Sister. For total deviant behavior scores of older sisters, mother-only families had the highest scores regardless of whether the family was identified as normal or deviant, with the deviant mother-only families emitting the highest level of aggressive behavior. Interestingly, though, scores of intact deviant older sisters scores were lower than scores for intact normal older sisters.

Younger Sister. The ANOVA for younger sisters indicates there were no significant differences between normal and deviant younger sister scores, nor were there differences in intact versus mother-only homes. However, Table 3 presents the results of a Duncan's Multiple Range Test for scores by each family position and while there are no significant differences between and among the younger sister cells, overall, younger sisters display a level of aggressive behavior ranking second only to younger brothers. In

fact, the total deviant score for younger sisters in the intact deviant category is the highest attained by any family member in the intact deviant category and they were second only to younger brothers on the intact normal category. Thus, while there were no differences on the variables examined for younger sisters, overall they demonstrated a high level of total deviant behaviors.

Older Brother. Deviant families were significantly different from normal families for total deviant behavior scores of younger brothers but there were no differences for mother-only versus intact families, though as may be seen from Table 2, this variable approached significance. Within the deviant older brother category, the mother-only families demonstrated much higher rates of aggressive behavior than did intact families.

Younger Brothers. Overall, as may be seen in Table 3, younger brothers demonstrated the highest level of aggressive behavior of all family positions. There were no differences found between normal and deviant families, nor between intact and mother-only families. There was, however, a significant interaction effect between Intact/Mother-only deviant, normal variables. For deviant families, the mother-only younger brothers were most aggressive, but for normal families, the reverse was true--intact family younger brothers were more aggressive.

Discussion of Question 1

For each family position the mother-only deviant family category had the highest level of total deviant behavior. It appears that in mother-only families identified as deviant, all family members--including the mother--use coercion and aggression at a high rate. This is not true for intact

deviant families, indicating that the presence of a father may have the effect of reducing coercive behaviors on the part of family members for deviant families.

For normal families, there was no consistency of aggressive behavior by family members regardless of whether the family was intact or mother-only. Normal mother-only families had a lower total deviant score than father-present families for the target child, the younger sister and the younger brother. This may indicate that for normal families the presence of the father may not be as important as would be the case in deviant families; mothers in normal families may have more skill in family management but for mothers in deviant families this management skill may be lacking. This better family management may be in the form of aggressive or coercive control, however, since mothers in the normal mother-only condition had higher total deviant behavior scores than intact-family mothers. Another explanation may be that some children are highly aggressive, leading to greater family conflict and consequent father absence.

Older sisters demonstrated more aggressive behavior in mother-only families regardless of whether the family was normal or aggressive. This may demonstrate the importance of the father as a stabilizing effect in the lives of older daughters. For deviant families, older sisters without a father present demonstrated out-of-control behavior second only to younger brothers without a father, while deviant families with an older sister with a father present resulted in the lowest aggressive behavior of any family position.

Overall, then, it would appear that deviant families benefit from the presence of a father in the home in terms of lowered aggression. For normal families, however, this is not true for the target child, the younger sister

or the younger brother--the mother-only apparently is able to provide adequate child management procedures.

Results for Question Two

The second part of this study was intended to examine the differential effect of father presence in the family during observations versus father absence for both normal and deviant intact families. Table 4 contains the

Insert Table 4 about here

means and standard deviations for each family member for normal and deviant families when the father was present and absent. Table 5 presents the ANOVA table for examining the father present-father absent question.

Insert Table 5 about here

The only statistically significant finding was for the total deviant behavior score of mothers. Mothers of deviant families scores significantly higher than mothers of normal families and this was true whether the father was absent or present.

Although the total deviant behavior score of mothers was the only finding statistically significant in this analysis, there are other observations of interest. For example, for all but the target child, deviant family members' scores are higher (n.s.) when the father is absent than when he is present. Also, for all family members' of normal families, except for mother and older brother, the opposite is true--when the father is absent total deviant behavior scores are lower (n.s.) for the target child, older

and younger sister and younger brother, an opposite finding than for deviants.

Discussion for Question 2

It appears fathers have a calming effect for deviant family members, for when he is absent all family members but the target child increase their number of aggressive behaviors. It may be that the mother's higher level of coercive behavior is an attempt to reduce the aggressive behavior of other family members, apparently unsuccessfully.

For normal families, however, when the mother increased her aggressive behavior in the absence of the father, the effect appeared to result in reduced deviant behavior for all but the older brother. It may be that in normal families the mother's use of coercion results in effective child management and that the older brother in these families provides a "back-up" in the absence of the father.

Results of Question 3

The third part of this study was to examine differences in total deviant scores for family members of normal and deviant intact families by the day of the father's absence. Table 6 presents the means and standard deviations related to this question and Table 7 presents the ANOVA.

Insert Tables 6 and 7 about here

The only statistically significant finding related to this question was mothers' scores by day of the week. For both deviant and normal families mothers demonstrated significantly higher rates of aggressive behavior the third day of fathers' absence than on the first.

In addition to the statistically significant finding regarding mothers, it is interesting to note that for deviant families the older brothers' score increases from a first day mean of .283 to a third day mean of .300 (n.s.), while mother's scores decreased from the second to the third day. Also, in normal families, from the second to the third day of fathers' absence, the Target Child, older Sister, and Older Brother reduced their aggressive behavior while the Mother, Younger Sister and Younger Brother increased theirs. Exactly the opposite is true for deviant families.

Discussion of Question 3

It appears that mothers in intact families use coercion as a child management procedure in the father's absence and that mothers increase the level of this coercive behavior over time. This pattern on the part of mothers could explain why, for both normal and deviant family members, there are not increases over time--the mother, by increasing her aggressive behavior, may elicit a consistency on the part of other family members.

General Discussion and Summary

In general, families with an identified deviant child demonstrated more aggressive behavior by family members than was true for families for whom the target child was identified as normal. Of these deviant families the mother-only family was likely to have the most aggression, indicating that for deviant families the father may play an important role as a stabilizer. This was not the case for normal families, for the mother-only normal family had lower aggression scores for most family members than intact families had. This probably indicates that the mothers in mother-only normal families have mastered effective child management skills and are able to control effectively children's behavior. An exception to this was with

older daughters who demonstrated a high rate of coercive behavior in the absence of the father, possibly as a means of assisting the mother in controlling the behavior of other family members.

Deviant intact families increased in aggressive behavior when the father was absent, supporting the position that fathers may have a calming effect for deviant families, but this was not as true for normal intact families. In normal intact families when the mother increased her aggressive behavior in the absence of the father, the other family members' aggressive behavior diminished except for older brothers.

Mothers demonstrated more aggression over time as the father was gone regardless of whether the family was normal or deviant. It may be that' increased coercion results in better control of family members. The present study stopped at three days of father absence. It would be interesting in a future study to examine this question over a longer period of time to determine whether these mothers would continue to increase their aggressive behavior. It may be that in time mothers in normal intact families would reduce their use of coercion while mothers in deviant families would possibly continue their acceleration of aggression as a method of control through punishment.

The findings of this study are consistent with the work of Hetherington, Cox and Cox (1977). They reported that single mothers ". . . use more negative commands, negative sanctions and opposition to requests of the child, particularly with boys" (p. 21) and that the divorced mother tries to control her child by being more restrictive and giving more commands which the child ignores or resists. Hetherington, Cox and Cox (1977) also found that fathers are more effective than mothers in obtaining compliance from children. In the present study this was true mainly for deviant

families but not for mother-only normal families. It appears these mothers are able to avoid coercive parental interactions better than other others.

Barclay Martin (1974) has suggested that coercive parental responses are related to aggression in boys, which is consistent with the present findings, and Heatherington, Cox and Cox (1977) report that children exhibit more negative behaviors in the presence of mothers, particularly single mothers. Patterson (1976) has described this phenomenon in "Mothers: The Unacknowledged Victims," where he indicated that the maternal role is not rewarding, particulary with mothers of problem children who demand a high rate of responding, yet provide very low levels of positive reinforcement. He reports that mothers and their aggressive children get involved in a vicious circle of coercion. He shows that decreases in children's noxious behavior, through effective parenting skills, are associated with several measures of maternal adjustment, including reduced depression as measured by the MMPI and reduced anxiety as measured by the Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale. Hetherington, Cox and Dox (1977) also found poor parenting skills to be related to aggression in children and to low self-esteem, loneliness, depression and feelings of helplessness for single mothers.

Based upon previous research and the results of the present study, it appears that supportive systems which include training in effective parenting skills would be appropriate for single parents, particularly for mothers with a child identified as aggressive. Caution must be used to not "blame the victim," the mother, but rather to provide support and skill training where appropriate.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Total Deviant Scores for Family Members of Normal and Deviant Families in Intact and Mother-only Families

		MOTHER ONLY				INTACT			
		NORMAL		DEVIANT		NORMAL		DEVIANT	
		N	Mean/SD	N	Mean/SD	N	Mean/SD	N	Mean/SD
Target Child	$\bar{X}$	9	.223	9	.981	16	.277	15	.412
	SD		.155		.663		.308		.413
Mother	$\bar{X}$	9	.329	9	.681	16	.233	15	.362
	SD		.239		.360		.172		.249
Older Sister	$\bar{X}$	5	.148	4	.988	6	.132	8	.129
	SD		.085		.640		.160		.108
Younger Sister	$\bar{X}$	2	.228	6	.754	7	.414	7	.513
	SD		.016		.659		.292		.355
Older Brother	$\bar{X}$	5	.134	5	.544	4	.128	6	.165
	SD		.069		.354		.082		.167
Younger Brother	$\bar{X}$	5	.420	3	1.026	7	.627	2	.200
	SD		.216		.456		.551		.047

Table 2

Analyses of Variance of Total Deviant Scores for Family Members of Normal and Deviant Families in Intact and Mother-only Families

Family Member	Source	Sum of Sq.	DF	Mean Sq.	F	Probability
Target Child	Intact/MO(A)	0.754	1	0.754	4.49	0.038*
	Dev./Nor.(B)	2.268	1	2.268	13.49	0.001*
	A X B	1.111	1	1.111	6.61	0.013*
	Error	7.564	45	0.168		
Mother	Intact/MO(A)	0.491	1	0.491	7.88	0.007*
	Dev./Nor.(B)	0.661	1	0.661	10.60	0.002*
	A X B	0.141	1	0.141	2.26	0.140
	Error	2.805	45	0.062		
Older Sister	Intact/MO(A)	1.029	1	1.029	13.31	0.002*
	Dev./Nor.(B)	0.946	1	0.946	12.23	0.002*
	A X B	0.959	1	0.959	12.41	0.002*
	Error	1.469	19	0.077		
Younger Sister	Intact/MO(A)	0.003	1	0.003	0.02	0.897
	Dev./Nor.(B)	0.409	1	0.409	2.14	0.160
	A X B	0.191	1	0.191	1.00	0.330
	Error	3.443	18	0.191		
Older Brother	Intact/MO(A)	0.189	1	0.189	3.99	0.062
	Dev./Nor.(B)	0.254	1	0.254	5.36	0.033*
	A X B	0.178	1	0.178	3.76	0.069
	Error	0.806	17	0.047		
Younger Brother	Intact/MO(A)	0.326	1	0.326	1.75	0.208
	Dev./Nor.(B)	0.027	1	0.027	0.15	0.709
	A X B	0.906	1	0.906	4.86	0.046*
	Error	2.424	13	0.186		

* $p < .05$

Table 3

Duncan's Multiple Range Test for Family Position[1]

Family Position	Younger Brother	Younger Sister	Target Child	Mother	Older Brother	Older Sister
$\bar{X}$	.5681	.5243	.4252	.3773	.3055	.2914
SD	.40483	.4259	.4910	.2746	.2847	.4139

[1]Those positions not significantly different (.05) are underlined.

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations of Total Deviant Scores for Family Members of Normal and Deviant Intact Families with Father Present and Father Absent during Observations

		FATHER PRESENT				FATHER ABSENT			
		Normal		Deviant		Normal		Deviant	
		N	Mean/SD	N	Mean/SD	N	Mean/SD	N	Mean/SD
Target Child	$\bar{X}$	16	.278	15	.412	16	.233	15	.351
	SD		.308		.412		.244		.336
Mother	$\bar{X}$	16	.233	15	.362	16	.304	15	.429
	SD		.172		.249		.275		.165
Older Sister	$\bar{X}$	6	.132	8	.129	6	.097	8	.231
	SD		.160		.108		.100		.148
Younger Sister	$\bar{X}$	7	.414	7	.513	7	.369	7	.600
	SD		.292		.355		.316		.403
Older Brothe	$\bar{X}$	4	.128	6	.165	4	.283	6	.430
	SD		.082		.167		.183		.482
Younger Brother	$\bar{X}$	7	.627	2	.200	7	.547	2	.233
	SD		.551		.047		.347		.189

Table 5

Analyses of Variance of To[illegible] D[illegible] Scores for Family Members of Normal and Deviant [illegible] Intact Families with Father p[illegible]esent and Fa[illegible] O[illegible]servations

Family Member	Source	Sum of Sq.	DF	Mean Sq.	F	Probability
Target Child	Dev./Nor.(A)	0.245	1	0.245	2.27	0.138
	Abs./Pres.(B)	0.042	1	0.042	0.39	0.533
	A X B	0.000	1	0.000	0.01	0.924
	Error	6.282	58	0.108		
Motner	Dev./Nor.(A)	0.251	1	0.251	5.15	0.027*
	Abs./Pres.(B)	0.073	1	0.073	1.51	0.224
	A X B	0.000	1	0.000	0.00	0.965
	Error	2.823	58	0.047		
Older Sister	Dev./Nor.(A)	0.029	1	0.029	1.70	0.205
	Abs./Pres.(B)	0.007	1	0.007	0.44	0.514
	A X B	0.032	1	0.032	..86	0.185
	Error	0.415	24	0.173		
Younger Sister	Dev./Nor.(A)	0.190	1	0.190	1.61	0.217
	Abs./Pres.(B)	0.003	1	0.003	0.03	0.872
	A X B	0.030	1	0.030	0.26	0.617
	Error	2.846	24	0.118		
Older Brother	Dev./Nor.(A)	0.040	1	0.040	0.45	0.510
	Abs./Pres.(B)	0.212	1	0.212	2.39	0.142
	A X B	0.015	1	0.015	0.17	0.689
	Error	1.423	16	0.089		
Younger Brother	Dev./Nor.(A)	0.427	1	0.427	2.32	0.150
	Abs./Pres.(B)	0.002	1	0.002	0.01	0.926
	A X B	0.009	1	0.009	0.05	0.819
	Error	2.581	14	0.184		

* $p < .05$

Table 6

Means and Standard Deviations of Total Deviant Scores of Family Members by Days of Absence when Father was Absent for Observations

		Normal				Deviant		
		Day 1	Day 2	Day 3		Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
	N	Mean/SD	Mean/SD	Mean/SD	N	Mean/SD	Mean/SD	Mean/SD
Target Child	$\bar{X}$	16	.250	.262	.250	15	.333	.233	.553
	SD		.354	.376	.309		.385	.304	.751
Mother	$\bar{X}$	16	.162	.312	.437	15	.327	.487	.473
	SD		.186	.289	.552		.301	.338	.252
Older Sister	$\bar{X}$	6	.058	.158	.075	8	.200	.237	.256
	SD		.080	.276	.099		.262	.256	.327
Younger Sister	$\bar{X}$	7	.421	.271	.414	7	.336	.871	.571
	SD		.551	.275	.398		.342	.798	.378
Older Brother	$\bar{X}$	4	.338	.350	.162	6	.283	.208	.800
	SD		.337	.349	.170		.449	.128	1.241
Younger Brother	$\bar{X}$	7	.314	.643	.686	2	.100	.550	.050
	SD		.418	.499	.590		.000	.495	.070

Table 7

Analyses of Variance of Total Deviant Scores for Family Members of Normal and Deviant Families for Intact Families by Days of Absence when Father was Absent for Observations

Family Member	Source	Sum of SQ.	Df	Mean Sq.	F	Probability
Target Child	Dev./Nor.(A)	0.329	1	0.329	1.72	0.193
	Day (B)	0.389	2	0.194	1.01	0.368
	A X B	0.443	2	0.221	1.15	0.320
	Error	16.701	87	0.192		
Mother	Dev./Nor.(A)	0.361	1	0.361	3.11	0.081
	Day (B)	0.739	2	0.369	3.18	0.046
	A X B	0.092	2	0.046	0.40	0.673
	Error	10.108	87	0.116		
Older Sister	Dev./Nor.(A)	0.185	1	0.185	3.10	0.087
	Day (B)	0.032	2	0.016	0.27	0.763
	A X B	0.018	2	0.009	0.15	0.859
	Error	2.149	36	0.059		
Younger Sister	Dev./Nor.(A)	0.526	1	0.526	2.20	0.147
	Day (B)	0.263	2	0.132	0.55	0.581
	A X B	0.846	2	0.423	1.77	0.185
	Error	8.604	36	0.239		
Older Brother	Dev./Nor.(A)	0.156	1	0.156	0.39	0.540
	Day (B)	0.227	2	0.114	0.28	0.758
	A X B	0.874	2	0.437	1.08	0.355
	Error	9.709	24	0.404		
Younger Brother	Dev./Nor.(A)	0.461	1	0.461	1.98	0.174
	Day (B)	0.476	2	0.238	1.02	0.376
	A X B	0.252	2	0.126	0.54	0.589
	Error	4.884	21	0.232		

Footnotes

1. Support for this research was provided in part by NIMH grant 1 R03 MH31509 CD.
2. Appreciation is expressed by Betty Brummet, Gayle Horne and Patricia Reinker for assistance in data collection; to Brian Basuke for assistance in computer analyses, and to the staff of the Oregon Social Learning Center for constructive assistance.
3. The families participating in this project were part of an on-going research project under the direction of Gerald Patterson and John Reid of the Oregon Social Learning Center, Eugene, Oregon.
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