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ABSTRACT

The relationship between marital distress and children's level of functioning was examined in a study in which children were observed in peer and family interactions. Couples were considered distressed if both partners scored below the mean on the Marital Adjustment Test. The subjects were members of five families with distressed couples and eight families with couples that were not distressed. All families included a child between the ages of 3.5 and 6 years. Parents and children were seen together in a family session; parents were then seen in a marital session and children in a 30-minute, in-school, free-play session with friends. The interactions in the free-play session were coded to measure the quality of the child's peer relations. Although the expectation that children of families with distressed couples would evidence disruptions in peer relations was only partially supported, children of nondistressed parents were able to engage in higher levels of play than were children of distressed parents. However, children whose fathers were less happy in their marriages received more positive attention from their peers. Further research is recommended. (LB)

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The Impact of Marital Functioning on Children's Peer Relations: An Interactional Study

Mari Clements

A poster presented at the 1991 biennial convention of the Society for Research in Child Development.

Studies have found that divorce is related to child problems (e.g., Hetherington, 1972), with the marital conflict frequently preceding divorce as the critical factor (e.g., Emery, 1985; Markman & Jones Leonard, 1985). Specifically, the amount, intensity, and duration of parental conflict is related to negative child outcomes: children of conflict-free divorces are less likely to have problems than children from intact but highly conflictual homes or homes where parental conflict continues after the divorce (e.g., Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1976).

Most of these studies on the impact of marital discord on children look at the children within the family structure and are thus unable to measure fully the influence of marital conflict. The child is not limited to familial interactions, but also interacts with peers, neighbors, teachers, and others. In particular, learning to interact with peers is an important developmental task (e.g., Hartup, 1976). The child's peer relations are important in moral development, general emotional adjustment, and socialization. Given these important roles, evaluation of the child's overall level of functioning is incomplete without assessment of peer relations. The basic objective of this study is to assess the extent to which peer relations reflect disturbances in the family.

Assessing peer relations in and of themselves is insufficient for understanding the impact of marital discord. While many peer studies have been conducted, few studies have examined both peer and family relations of children of discordant marriages, limiting the conclusions that can be drawn.

This study examines marital distress and child functioning. The child is observed in peer and family interactions, allowing a more complete and accurate assessment of functioning.

Method

Subjects

Subjects are 5 distressed and 8 nondistressed families with a child between the ages of 3 1/2 and 6 years recruited from the Denver Family Development Project, a longitudinal study of relationship development at the University of Denver. When this study began in 1980-81, the parents of these children were planning marriage. Since then they have been followed up at approximately yearly intervals, during which marital satisfaction and other indices of marital quality were assessed (see Markman, 1990, for details).

For the purposes of this study, couples were considered distressed if both partners scored below the mean for this sample on the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959) at their most recent follow-up point. If both partners scored above the mean or if only one partner scored below the mean, couples were considered nondistressed. The average male MAT score for the distressed group was 107.00 (s.d. = 9.94) and the female mean was 108.66 (s.d. = 6.45). The nondistressed male average was 125.44 (s.d. = 9.44) and the female average was 124.13 (s.d. = 13.69).

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Measures

Marital Adjustment Test (MAT) (Locke & Wallace, 1959). This 15 item questionnaire is widely used to assess marital satisfaction and has been shown to have excellent reliability and validity in discriminating between distressed and nondistressed couples (Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977).

Peer Interaction Coding--Live Evaluation. This coding system is a live adaptation of coding systems developed by Gottman and colleagues (Gottman, 1983; Gottman & Katz, 1989). Children are observed for thirty minutes in a free play situation. This observation is divided into three minute segments which are coded for particular behaviors on a presence or absence basis. The entire interaction is coded on several global dimensions (e.g., Positive Attention Received from the Peer Group).

The coding system has four parts: Level of Play, Negative Affect, Positive Affect, and Global Codes (See Table 1). Interrater reliabilities were computed separately for each of these parts. Percent agreements of 93% for Level of Play, 89% for Negative Affect, 85% for Global Codes, and 58% for Positive Affect were obtained. Cohen's kappas were .91, .83, .63, and .49 for Level of Play, Negative Affect, Global Codes, and Positive Affect, respectively.

Procedures

For the purposes of the present study, children and their parents were seen twice. Both parents and children were seen in a family session. In addition, parents were seen in a marital session, and children were seen in a school session. In the laboratory family session, children and parents completed three interaction tasks.

In the marital session, couples completed a brief interview, a set of interaction tasks, and a series of questionnaires. The MAT (Locke & Wallace, 1959) is one of these questionnaires.

The free play portion of the study is a 30-minute in-school observation of the child playing with friends. These interactions were coded to measure the quality of the child's peer relations, paying particular attention to the level of interaction between the child and the peer group, the amount of positive and negative affect exhibited in the interactions, and several global measures of interaction.

Results

It was expected that children of distressed families would evidence disruptions in peer relations as compared to children of nondistressed families. This expectation was only partially supported.

There were no differences between children of distressed parents and children of nondistressed parents in amounts of solitary play, parallel play, or common ground activity. T-tests conducted for the two highest levels of play, however, did show differences (See Figures 1 and 2). Children of nondistressed parents exhibited significantly more fantasy play. This difference was observed both for stereotyped fantasy play (e.g., pretending to be Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles $_R$) and nonstereotyped fantasy play (when the play is entirely of the child's creation with no previously existing characters used).

A second set of findings, however, was less clear. Regression showed that lower levels of husband's satisfaction in marriage is associated with higher levels of positive attention from peers (R square = .34, $p < .05$). In other words, children whose fathers were less happy in their marriages received more positive attention from their peers (See Figure 3). This

finding held true for both concurrent satisfaction and mean satisfaction over the history of the marriage.

Further, correlations between distress and the remainder of the global codes were almost entirely in the reverse direction. In general, more positive outcomes on these codes were associated with less marital satisfaction, particularly on the part of the husband. This pattern also held true for both concurrent marital satisfaction and mean satisfaction over time (See Table 2).

Discussion

While initial hypotheses were not entirely supported by this study, important results remain. Children of nondistressed parents were able to engage in higher levels of play than children of distressed parents. This finding replicates previous work (Gottman & Katz, 1989), and suggests that marital satisfaction may play an important role in children's peer relations.

One possible explanation for this finding is that less satisfied couples may model less positive interactions and may have more trouble sustaining higher levels of interaction. Children who grow up in such environments may have deficits in important skills necessary for levels of play that require a greater degree of interaction. This can be understood in terms of the increased demands for cooperation and effective communication that are found in fantasy play. Unlike solitary or parallel play in which interaction is at a minimum and unlike common ground activities in which there typically are rules to follow, fantasy play calls upon the child's ability to negotiate and to create their own structure. In less satisfied families, the parents may not have fostered these abilities as much as parents in satisfied couples.

The second set of findings argue for a compensation hypothesis. While children of distressed marriages are less able to engage in higher levels of play, they seem to have developed other strategies that allow for positive peer interactions. Although positive attention received from the peers is the only variable to reach significance, the other global codes are all related to marital satisfaction in the same paradoxical direction. The lack of significance for these variables is quite possibly a result of low power. Power for analyses involving negative escalation was only .29 and for analyses involving the amount of positive attention the child gave his peers was only .17.

Further work is necessary both to increase power in testing these hypotheses and to examine more closely mechanisms linking marital satisfaction to peer relations.

Table 1
Peer Interaction Coding System--Live Evaluation

I. Levels of Play
   - A. Solitary Play
   - B. Parallel Play
   - C. Common Ground Activity
   - D. Stereotyped Fantasy Play
   - E. Nonstereotyped Fantasy Play

II. Positive Affect
   - A. Affection
   - B. Laughter
   - C. Joy and Excitement
   - D. Humor, Wit, and Hilarity
   - E. Compliments and Approval
   - F. Sympathy and Comforting
   - G. Sharing, Consideration, and Helping
   - H. Affirmation of Relationship
   - I. Positive Teasing

III. Negative Affect
   - A. Conflict
   - B. Anger and Frustration
   - C. Whining
   - D. Crying
   - E. Negative about Friendship
   - F. Bossiness and Dominance
   - G. Fighting and Physical Aggression
   - H. Negative Teasing
   - I. Sadness and Unhappiness

IV. Global Codes
   - A. Positive Attention Received
   - B. Positive Attention Given
   - C. Negative Attention Given
   - D. Negative Escalation

Table 2

Correlations between Marital Satisfaction and Global Codes

	Marital Satisfaction		
	Father's Current	Mother's Mean	Father's Mean
Positive Attention Received	.56*	.13	.60*
Positive Attention Given	.30	-.08	.20
Negative Attention Given	-.02	.00	-.06
Negative Escalation	.40	-.15	.16

* $p < .05$

Figure 1.

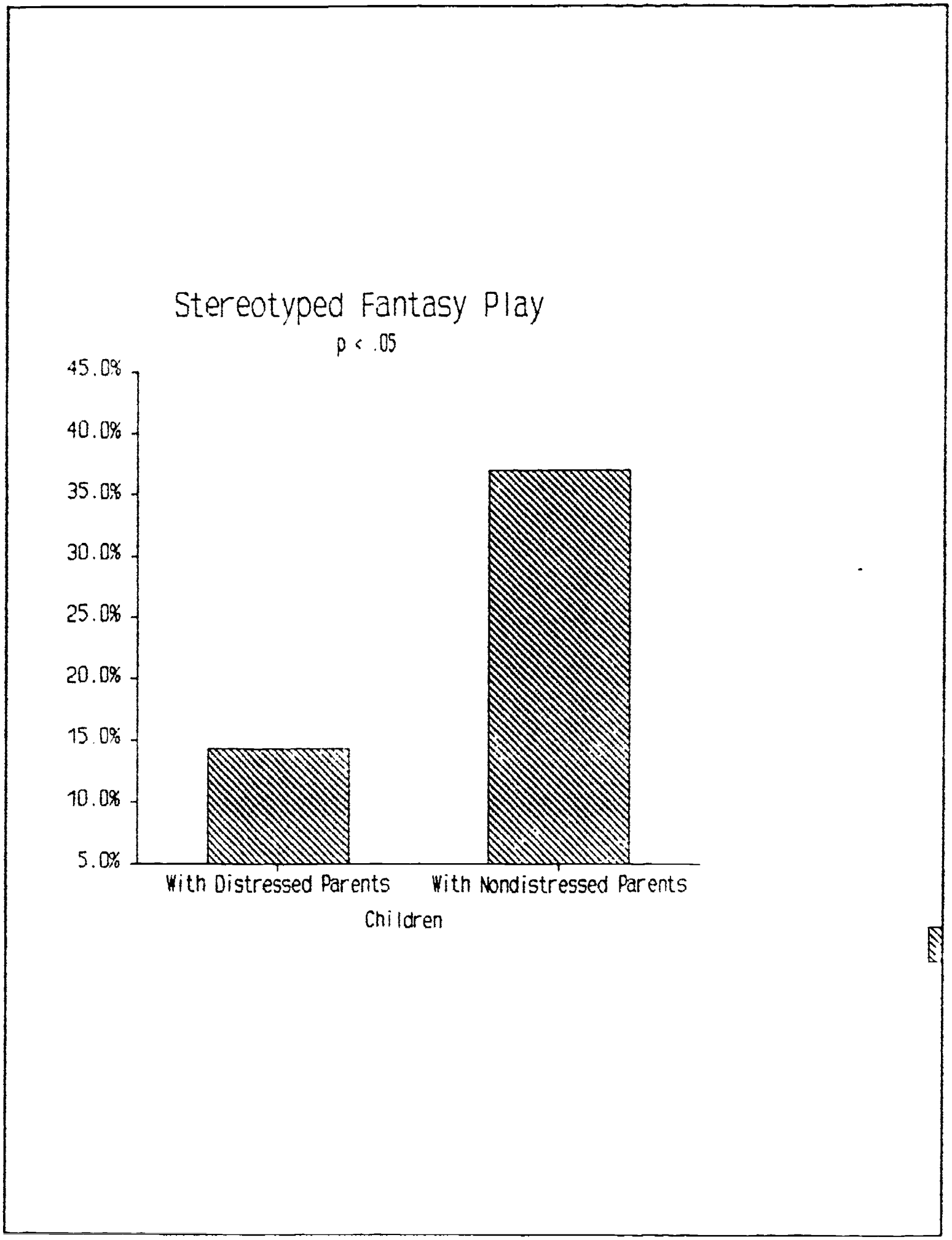

Stereotyped Fantasy Play
p < .05
45.0%
40.0%
35.0%
30.0%
25.0%
20.0%
15.0%
10.0%
5.0%
With Distressed Parents
With Nondistressed Parents
Children

Figure 2.

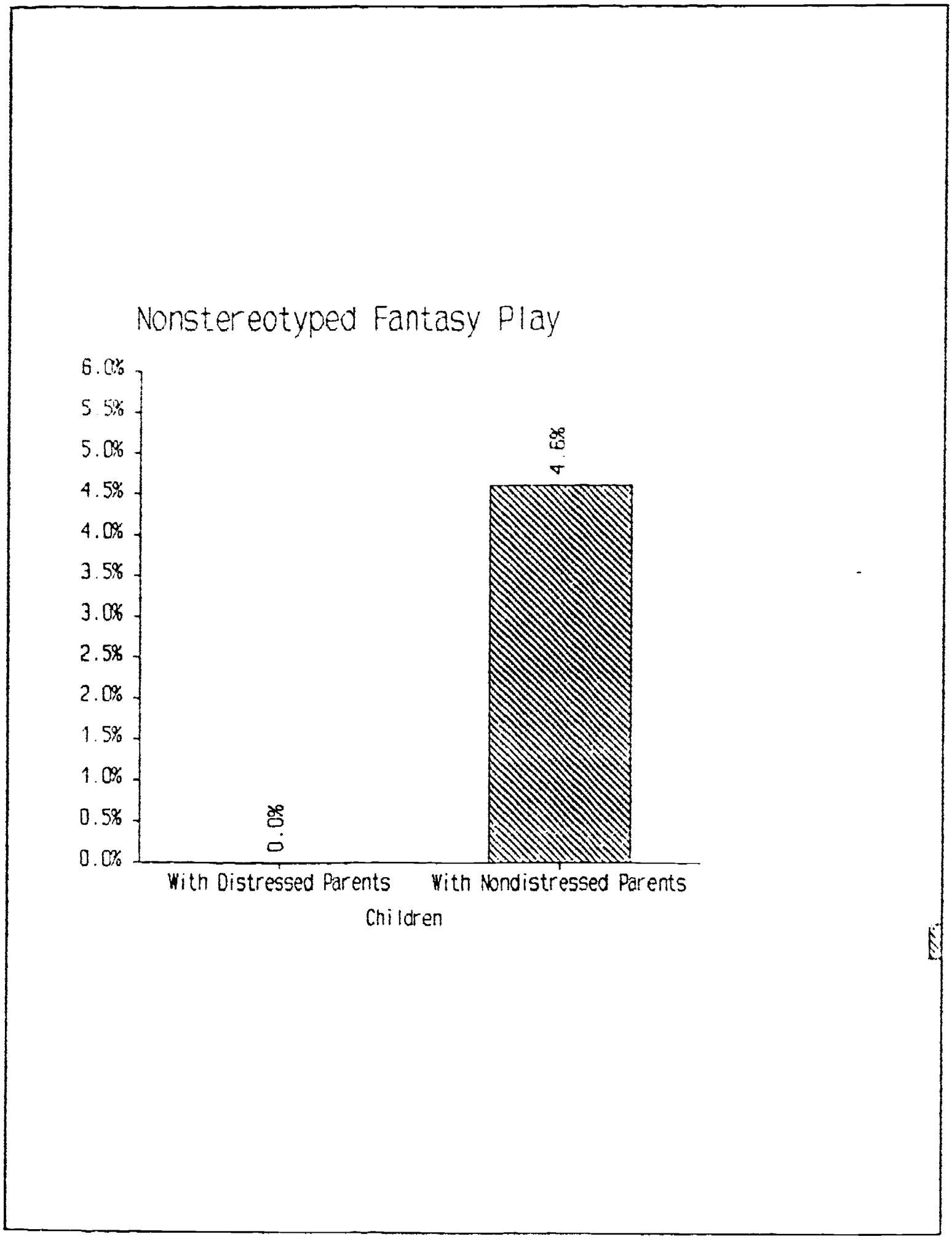
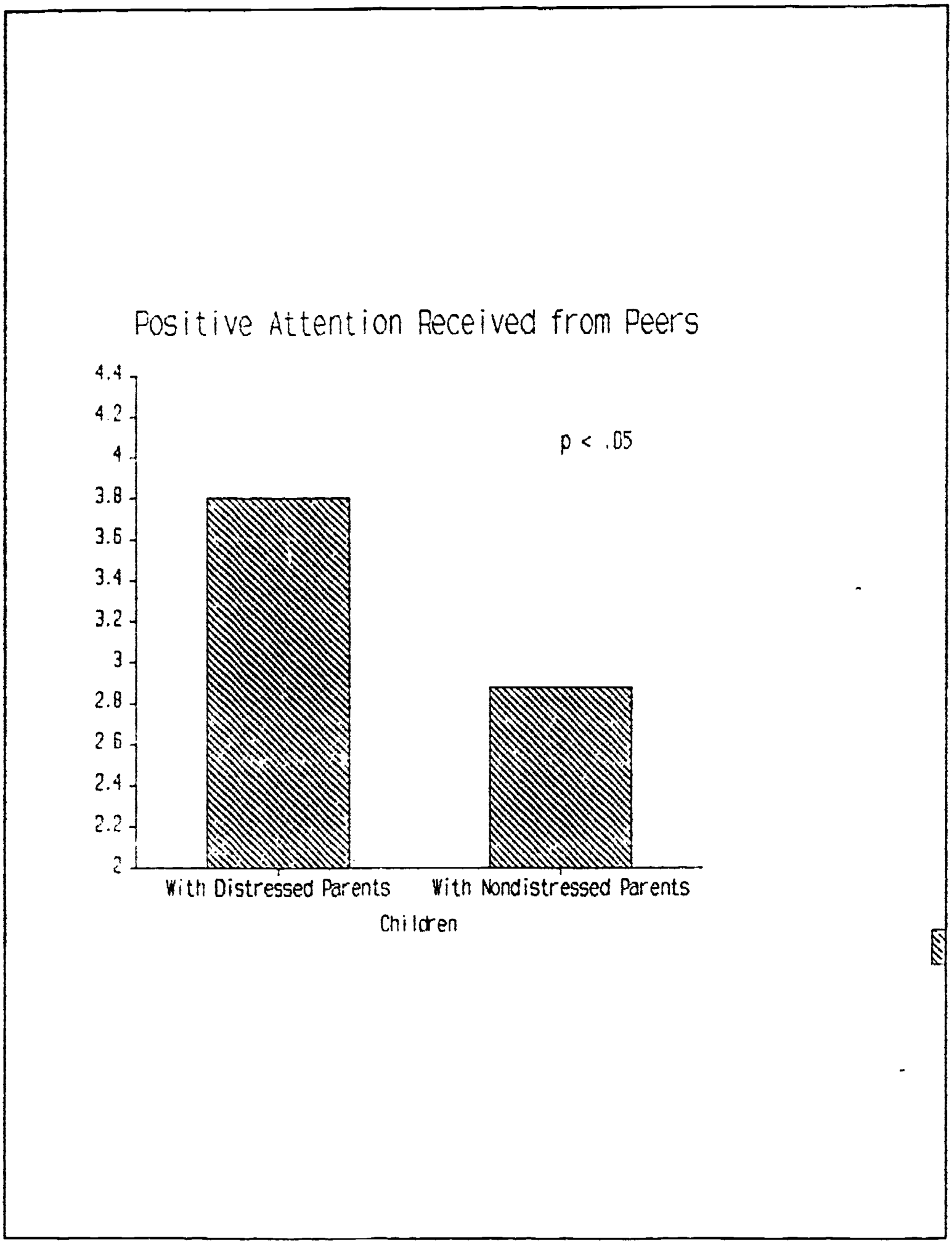

Nonstereotyped Fantasy Play
6.0%
5.5%
5.0%
4.5%
4.0%
3.5%
3.0%
2.5%
2.0%
1.5%
1.0%
0.5%
0.0%
0.0%
4.6%
With Distressed Parents
With Nondistressed Parents
Children

Figure 3.


Positive Attention Received from Peers
p < .05
4.4
4.2
4
3.8
3.6
3.4
3.2
3
2.8
2.6
2.4
2.2
2
With Distressed Parents
With Nondistressed Parents
Children