



The relationship between family environment, self-esteem, and classroom behavior of school-age children

by Su Zan Lee Hoxsey

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education
Montana State University

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between children's perception of conflict and control in their family environment, children's self-report of their self-esteem, and their classroom behavior. These variables were examined to investigate the possible association of conflict and control in the family environment and low self-esteem, and disruptive classroom behavior. Conflict and control were assessed by the Children's Version of the Family Environment Scale (GV/FES); self-esteem was measured by the Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI). Disruptive classroom behavior was assessed by the Work Habits and Social Development Checklist routinely used by classroom teachers in the school.

Students from Monforton Elementary School (N=88) completed the CV/FES and the SEI, and their classroom behavior was assessed by their teacher. The results indicated a significant ($p < .05$) negative association between self-esteem and classroom behavior and between self-esteem and conflict and control in the family environment. Significant ($p < .05$) results were not obtained in the positive association of conflict and control in the family environment and disruptive classroom behavior.

Self-esteem appeared to be the link between all of the variables. Although conflict and control in the family environment were not found to be positively associated with disruptive classroom behavior, these factors were found to be negatively associated with self-esteem, and self-esteem was found to be significantly ($p < .05$) negatively associated with disruptive classroom behavior.

Recommendations resulting from this study include further research in the area of factors associated with disruptive classroom behavior. Also, the study provides information for parents, teachers, and social service agencies concerning the association of poor self-esteem with conflict and control in the family environment and classroom behavior.

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SELF-ESTEEM, AND CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR
OF SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN**

by

Su Zan Lee Hoxsey

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree**

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APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Su Zan Lee Hoxsey

This thesis has been read by each member of the graduate committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

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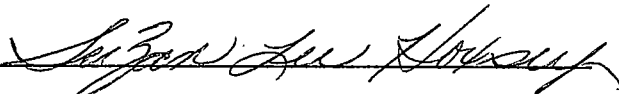
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between children's perception of conflict and control in their family environment, children's self-report of their self-esteem, and their classroom behavior. These variables were examined to investigate the possible association of conflict and control in the family environment and low self-esteem, and disruptive classroom behavior. Conflict and control were assessed by the Children's Version of the Family Environment Scale (CV/FES); self-esteem was measured by the Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI). Disruptive classroom behavior was assessed by the Work Habits and Social Development Checklist routinely used by classroom teachers in the school.

Students from Monforton Elementary School (N=88) completed the CV/FES and the SEI, and their classroom behavior was assessed by their teacher. The results indicated a significant ($p < .05$) negative association between self-esteem and classroom behavior and between self-esteem and conflict and control in the family environment. Significant ($p < .05$) results were not obtained in the positive association of conflict and control in the family environment and disruptive classroom behavior.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Someday, maybe, there will exist a well-informed, well considered, yet fervent conviction that the most deadly of all possible sins is the mutilation of a child's spirit.

-- Erik H. Erikson¹

The following study examined the relationship between children's perception of conflict and control in their family environment, their self-esteem, and their involvement in disruptive classroom behavior. In the last two decades there has been a recognition of the growing problems of children in our society. These problems have been associated with alcohol abuse by parents, the rising divorce rate, and abuse of children. All of these problems impact the family environment in which children grow and develop (Elkind, 1981). Given the rise in problems in the family environment, it is important to understand what relationship children's perceptions of their family has to their self-esteem and classroom behavior.

Alfred Adler's (1927) theory of Individual Psychology provides a potentially important conceptual framework for understanding the impact children's perception of their family has on their lives. Adler's concept of the significance of children's perception of their family environment is a primary

¹Quoted in Thorman, 1983, p. 80.

emphasis of this thesis. According to Adler's (1963) theory of Individual Psychology, the experiences of children in the family environment mold and shape their development for the remainder of their lives. Children perceive the world in the same manner that they perceive their family. Perceptions of their families affect their self-perceptions as well as their behaviors (Dinkmeyer, Pew & Dinkmeyer, 1979). In this way, children's perceptions of their family environment may be an important factor in development of children's self-esteem and how they behave in the classroom.

Statement of the Problem

The following study investigated the association between children's perceptions of their family environments, their levels of self-esteem, and their behavior in the classroom. Family environment was assessed in terms of the degree of conflict that children perceive to exist within the family, and the degree of control which children perceive that parents exert over them. Children's perception of their family environment was restricted to these two ideas because these areas have been found to be associated with behavior problems in children (Moos & Moos, 1981). Conflict was "the amount of openly expressed anger, aggression and conflict among family members" (Pino, Simons & Slawinowski, 1984, p. 1). Control was described as "the extent to which set rules and procedures are used to run family life" (Pino et al., 1984, p. 2). Self-esteem was defined as the way children feel about

themselves (Corsini, 1984). Also examined was the degree of disruptive behavior of children in their classrooms. Behavior in the classroom was described as an outward expression of how children feel about themselves, which may be related to their self-esteem (Driekurs, 1957). It was also characterized by the degree of cooperation children display with each other, their acceptance of direction from their teacher, and their respect for themselves and others.

Significance of the Problem

The problems of children in our society are growing. As the United States approaches the twenty-first century, many problems exist within families. These problems include alcohol abuse, divorce, and abuse of children (Addington, 1985; Black, 1981; Erickson & Egeland, 1987; Salter, 1988). Alcohol abuse, divorce, and child abuse may also be related to the level of conflict and control within the family environment (Aber & Allen, 1987; Emery, 1982; Moos & Moos, 1981). In 1981, 12 to 25 million children were living in families in which substance abuse was a chronic problem (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1981). In 1986 there were 66 million children between birth and 18 years of age living in the United States. Of these it is estimated that approximately 1.1 million experienced divorce (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, 1986). In the same year the American Humane Association estimated that over two million children

were physically, sexually, or emotionally abused and/or neglected in the United States. Thirty-three percent of the children reported as maltreated in 1986 were elementary school age children, age 6-11 years (American Humane Association, 1987).

The statistics cited above indicate that a large number of children in the United States live in family environments which may be detrimental to their normal development. Problems such as alcohol abuse, divorce, and abuse of children occurring within family environments may cause stress for children (Elkind, 1981). These stresses may limit children's development of self-esteem and may be associated with behavior problems at school (Driekurs, 1957).

According to Adler (1963), the family environment shapes and molds children. Children's perceptions of their family environments influence how they perceive the world around them. The following section will examine the significance of the problems of alcohol abuse, divorce, and abuse within the family environments and how they are related to development of children's self-esteem and behavior. p32

Children's self-esteem may be negatively influenced by problems in the family environment. Self-esteem is described in various ways, such as self-image, self-blame and sense of self. Poor self-image was found to be one of the prevalent symptoms of children in alcoholic family environments (Black, 1981). Self-blame, sadness and grief were found to be responses of young

children to their parents' divorce (Addington, 1985). Child abuse has a lasting effect on children's sense of self (Erickson & Egeland, 1987). Low self-esteem is a prevalent research finding in victims of sexual abuse (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986). Whether self-esteem is described as self-image or self-blame, research supports that it is significantly influenced by the family environment.

Children may act out the level of stress and trauma that they feel within their family environment. Families with a high level of conflict and a high degree of control tend to exhibit more problems than normal families (Moos & Moos, 1981; Scoresby & Christensen, 1976). It has been found that children who have witnessed family violence suffer more behavior problems than children who have not (Wolfe, Jaffe, Wilson & Zak, 1985). Expectations within the family environment can have a considerable influence on the development of behavior problems in children (Thomas & Chess, 1984). Abused children act out the stress and trauma they experience at home in disruptive, attention-seeking behaviors more often than children who are not abused (Aber & Allen, 1987). Children who are abused in their family environment justify their aggressive behavior because of their own experience (Dean, Malik, Richards & Stringer, 1986).

Children may act out at school because of the stress within their family environment. Children from homes in which alcohol abuse occurs exhibit more acting-out behaviors, and perform more poorly in school than do

children from homes in which alcohol abuse does not occur (Black, 1981). Children from divorced families also exhibit behavioral problems and poor school performance (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Emery (1982) found that conflict within parental relationships is positively correlated with children's behavioral problems. Children that are abused show a significantly greater number of behavioral problems which may result from the events and interaction problems within the family environment rather than from any one abusive incident. (Wolfe & Mosk, 1983). A prevalent result of abuse of children is disruptive classroom behavior and poor school performance (Erickson & Egeland, 1987).

The importance of the effect of a healthy family environment on children's self-esteem and classroom behavior is supported by the literature (e.g., Addington, 1985; Erickson & Egeland, 1987; Wolfe & Mosk, 1983). Given the statistics cited by the American Humane Association (1987), the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census (1986), and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1981) regarding the growing problems that families are experiencing, it may be inevitable that children from impaired family environments will develop personality and behavior problems, which they may bring to the classroom.

This study examined children's perceptions of their family environment, self-esteem, and classroom behavior. Children's perception of family environment and their self-esteem could be important to schools, parents and

other professionals in developing an understanding of the possible origin of problematic classroom behavior. Because of stresses within the family environment, children may be coming to school less prepared to cope with the academic and social demands of the classroom (Erikson & Egeland, 1987). Teachers may feel frustrated and ineffective in helping these children. The recognition of an association between family environment and classroom behavior could be of assistance to schools in deciding on children's needs for special programs, aiding in the selection of teaching staffs, helping teachers understand student problems, and assisting teachers in the utilization of referral to other agencies. This study could inform schools and parents how family environment may be associated with classroom behavior of children.

Conceptual Framework

Individual Psychology, as developed by Alfred Adler (1927), served as the conceptual framework for this study. Individual Psychology was appropriate because of its emphasis on the importance of children's perception of their family environment as the basis for their self-esteem and resultant behavior. Special attention was given to the concepts of Individual Psychology that directly relate to the research carried out in this study.

Alfred Adler was an associate of Sigmund Freud's who disagreed with Freud's view of development as driven by sexual instincts. Rather, Adler

theorized that persons are social beings and their development, rather than being pushed by sexual instincts, is pulled by social interests and personal goals (Dinkmeyer et al., 1979). People have the desire to contribute to social well being, and this desire is referred to by Adler as "social interest" (Corsini, 1979).

Adler (1927) theorized that persons search for a place in the world, a position of personal meaning. This search begins before the age of five within the family environment. It begins with the "process of judging the status of self and the status of the world. . ." and ". . . based on those perceived judgements. . ." forms ". . . a pattern of behavior that becomes the life-style" (Hanson, Stevic & Warner, 1982, p. 57). Life style becomes the personal interpretational framework used throughout life. It is shaped and molded within the family environment and is the manner in which the person receives and interprets all life experiences. It includes not only the receiving and interpreting of stimuli, but also the resulting actions and attitudes of the person. The person pursues a sense of mastery and superiority in life through the interpretational framework of the life style (Adler, 1927).

Personal perception and interpretation was the primary focus and theoretical base for this paper. Personal perception and interpretation has special significance in understanding children's behavior (Dinkmeyer et al., 1979). The interpretation of an event by a person is influenced by individual perception. This perception is based on the person's feelings and

experiences within the family environment. Personal perception and interpretation of events are the determining factors in a person's behavior (Hanson et al., 1982). According to Adlerian theory, events such as alcoholism, divorce, or child abuse influence children's perceptions. It is perception and interpretation of personal events that has the largest influence on behavior because the personal interpretation of events creates a perception of reality that guides behavior (Hanson et al., 1982).

Also of importance to this process of perception and interpretation is the concept of inferiority. All humans are born with a sense of inferiority because of their smallness, vulnerability and dependence on others (Adler, 1927). Inferiority persists throughout life and is the motivational force for humans to strive for their personal goals. Inferiority motivates humans to master their environment and to find their personal place in life. When persons perceive they have mastered an important accomplishment, their feelings of inferiority diminish. Inferiority can influence behavior negatively as well. An overwhelming sense of inferiority may influence persons to act out in anger, aggression or hostility in order to compensate for their sense of inferiority (Adler, 1927). Personal perception and interpretation of events may reinforce an existing strong feeling of inferiority which may lead to poor self-esteem and resultant negative behavior (Corsini, 1979).

In summary, Individual Psychology theorizes that persons are not controlled or determined by nurture or nature exclusively, but are also

influenced by their own perception and life style. The theory of Individual Psychology has special significance for this study. It provides a conceptual framework to examine the experiences of children in their family environment through their perception of conflict and control in that environment. Self-esteem and behavior were identified by Adler (1963) as two factors that offer a measurement of children's perceptions and life experiences. As families experience more problems and intrusions in their environment, so do the children who live within these families. According to Individual Psychology, perceptions within the family environment are a potent influence on children's self-esteem and behavior. Therefore children's perception of their family environment may give parents, teachers and mental health professionals valuable information into the self-esteem and behavioral needs of children (Dinkmeyer et al., 1979).

Operational Definitions

Three major concepts were used in this study. These concepts are children's perception of the family environment (specifically conflict and control), children's perception of their self-esteem, and their classroom behavior.

Conflict and control within the family environment were measured by the Children's Version of the Family Environment Scale (CV/FES). The CV/FES is organized into three dimensions that measure major concepts within the

family. These dimensions are relationships, personal growth, and system maintenance (Pino et al., 1984). Within the relationship dimension is the subscale, conflict. Conflict is "the amount of openly expressed anger, aggression and conflict among family members" (Pino et al., 1984, p. 1). Control was measured by a second subscale which is contained with the system maintenance dimension. Control is described as "the extent to which set rules and procedures are used to run family life" (Pino et al., 1984, p. 2). High control indicates more parental management of family rules and structure, and less democratic decision making.

Self-esteem is regarded as the way people feel about themselves (Corsini, 1984). It includes their self-acceptance and self-respect. Adler (1927) theorized that people who feel inferior may direct their energies toward proving and demonstrating their abilities to those around them through their actions and attitudes. Adler viewed self-esteem as being demonstrated in negative as well as positive actions and attitudes (Corsini, 1984). Children's report of self-esteem was measured by the Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI). The SEI defines self-esteem as "a personal judgement of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes the individual holds toward himself. It is a subjective experience which the individual conveys to others by verbal reports and other overt expressive behavior" (Coopersmith, 1967, p. 5).

Disruptive classroom behaviors are physical or verbal actions that interfere with teaching and learning in school (Driekurs, 1957). Behaviors

such as talking out of turn, lack of cooperation with peers and the teacher, and not obeying school rules are examples. Classroom behavior was measured by the Work Habits and Social Development checklist. The checklist is routinely used by teachers at the school to be studied, to evaluate students' behavior at the end of each quarter's grading period. Of the 17 items on the list, seven were used. These items are: (a) willingness to accept correction, (b) acceptance of responsibility, (c) practice of self-control, (d) obedience to school rules, (e) respect for school property, (f) respect for authority, and (g) cooperation with others in work and play.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature examines current theoretical and empirical studies in the recent literature that pertain to the possible effects of family environment on children's self-esteem and behavior in the classroom. Adler's (1927) Individual Psychology was used as a framework to support and interpret the findings of the studies. The review of literature is arranged according to the three concepts to be discussed. The first concept is the effect of family environment on children's behavior. The second concept is the importance of the family environment on the development of children's self-esteem. The final concept considers the possible effects of the family environment on children's self-esteem and classroom behavior. The review of literature chapter will conclude with a summary of the literature and a statement of the research hypothesis.

Family Environment, Self-Esteem, and Classroom Behavior

Family Environment and Effects on Children's Behavior

According to Alfred Adler (1963), the important constructs of an individual's personality are formed by the age of four or five. Heredity and environment are two of the important factors that determine how children see themselves and their world. Individuals use their heredity and environment to understand and find their place in the scheme of life. The family environment provides the foundation that influences children's interpretations of life, relationships with others, and who and what they are (Adler, 1963). Children learn by trial and error what influences the significant people around them (Dinkmeyer et al., 1979). The family environment is the primary social environment for children, and it is through this environment that children learn rules, customs and behavior (Corşini, 1979). The family environment may be the primary or only source of information and feedback for children prior to their entry into school (Dinkmeyer et al., 1979).

The family environment is an important source of support for children. Browne and Finkelhor (1986), in reviewing recent research on sexually abused children, found that the quality and quantity of family support was a primary factor that influenced the impact of the abuse on children. Browne and Finkelhor examined a number of variables that hypothetically relate to the

effects of sexual abuse on children. These variables are duration and frequency of abuse, the child's relationship to the offender, the type of sex act, the amount of force and aggression used, the age at the onset of the abuse, the gender of the offender, the age of the offender (whether an adult or an adolescent), the effect of telling or maintaining a secret, parental reaction, and the result of agency intervention. In reviewing the literature on parental reaction, Browne and Finkelhor (1986) found that the mother's negative response aggravated the trauma. Children who were sexually abused and experienced an angry response from their mother exhibited more behavioral problems. The authors cautioned that only two studies have evaluated parental reaction, and more research is necessary. Browne and Finkelhor also reported research findings indicating that the trauma of sexual abuse appears to have its greatest impact during latency (ages 6-12). They concluded their review of recent research by stating that knowledge about the causes and effects of sexual abuse is still in its infancy and further examination of these factors and their association is needed. They continued by explaining that sexual abuse of children is a trauma, and regardless of long-term effects, there is a need to understand the immediate effect on childhood. This effect can be examined through children's perceptions of their experiences.

A study of women who were sexually abused as children (Gold, 1986) offers some data about the possible mediating function the family environment

plays in helping people survive traumas. Gold studied 191 women to determine the long-term effects of childhood sexual victimization. In Gold's study, 103 of the women had been victims of sexual assault as children and 88 of the women had not. Gold examined the correlation between and within the groups on several variables. There were no significant statistical differences on demographic variables between the groups of women, other than their level of education. The non-victimized women had more education. Women who had been victimized as children attributed bad events to themselves and good events to others more frequently than the non-victimized group. Their victimization and manner of attribution were significantly related to their adult functioning. Also of importance was the women's perceptions of their mother's response to them and to the abuse at the time of the event. Women who perceived their mothers as emotionally supportive at the time of the incident were more likely to have satisfactory emotional relationships in adulthood than the women who perceived their mothers as non-supportive. In addition, the mothers' responses to the victimization and their placement of blame for the incident influenced the victims' attributional style. As the author pointed out, it is difficult to know if the style of attribution of events preceded or resulted from the abuse. There may be long-term effects of childhood sexual victimization on adult functioning. However, in retrospective studies such as this one, it is difficult to determine the origin of these effects, and whether or not they are a result of

the abuse or originated prior to the abuse in the family environment. Gold did state that more research into the support of children by their mothers is needed. As this research indicates, adult functioning is related to perception of family environment during childhood, and the relationship of this perception to children's functioning needs to be studied in more depth.

In a study of 198 children ranging in age from 4 to 16, Wolfe et al. (1985) found that children from families in which there was violence and maternal stress due to that violence were rated higher in behavioral problems and lower in social skills than children who did not live in violent families. The study determined that 26.5% of the 198 children exhibited problems severe enough on the Child Behavior Profile to place them in the clinical range of disturbance. The study also concluded that the more exposure to violence children experienced in their families, even if the violence was indirect, the more likely they were to have high levels of behavioral problems. A further examination of children's perception of conflict within the family environment may provide more important information on behavior problems.

School aged children who were often victims of sexual abuse have some very specific problems and behaviors (Salter, 1988). They also display many of the same problems as children from divorced or alcoholic families, such as anger, aggression, and acting out behavior. Addington (1985) stated that 9 to 12 year-old children of divorce often have behavior and school problems and these problems tend to be more severe than other age groups. He

observed that the duration and intensity of these problems is often related to the duration and intensity of the conflict between the parents. The atmosphere of conflict and disruption in the family environment has a profound influence on the behavior of the children involved. These children carry the influence of their family environment to the classroom (Addington, 1985).

Aber and Allen (1987) examined 190 preschool and early school-age (4-8 years old) children to study their development. Ninety-three of the children they studied were classified as maltreated (the children had multiple overlapping incidents of abuse and neglect). These children were referred to the study by social workers from public and private protective service agencies. Sixty-seven of the children were from families that received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Several instruments were used to measure the children's socio-emotional development. A factor analysis was used to evaluate the data. The researchers found that the maltreated children had significantly less feelings of security and less trust for adults than the children in the other two categories. The researchers also found that the maltreated children were more intent on gaining attention from adults. The researchers speculated that this attention-getting behavior may have resulted from parental punishment and control. This study supplied important information on the behavior of maltreated children and concluded that excessive control in the family environment may contribute to attention-seeking behavior in maltreated children. A high degree of control may

contribute to high dependency in the children which appears to relate to attention-seeking behavior. The researchers suggested that further study into the relationships of these factors is necessary.

A study by Wolfe and Mosk (1983) compared the behavior of abused children with the behavior of low income children who were not abused and other children who were neither abused nor low income. All of the children in the study were between 6 and 16 years of age. The Child Behavior Profile was used to assess the behavior of all of the children because it gathers demographic information as well as behavioral information. Social workers either administered the CBP to parents or asked parents to fill out the CBP themselves. A multivariate analysis established that there was no significant difference in the age, occupation, or number of members in the family in the three groups. A two-tailed t-test was used to establish whether there were differences between the abused group and the AFDC group on appropriate childrearing methods. They found that the abusive parent defined physical aggressiveness and childrearing methods differently than AFDC parents. They also found that abused and low income children exhibit significantly more difficult-to-manage and maladaptive behaviors than the non-abused children. No significant differences in the behavior of AFDC children and abused children were found. The researchers suggested that the stress of maltreatment and financial deprivation in the family may have a direct correlation to the behavior of children. They also concluded that behavioral

