

# Mother-child and father-child relationships and children's internalizing problems: The impact of child gender.

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## ABSTRACT

It is well documented that the quality of both mother-child and father-child relationships is associated with children's internalizing problems. However, research has yet to examine whether these associations vary by child sex. This was the objective of this study. The quality of mother-child and father-child relationships was assessed independently at 18 months. When children were 2 and 3 years, their mothers rated their internalizing behavior problems. Results showed that higher-quality father-child relationships were associated with lower internalizing problems for girls, but not for boys. Conversely, the quality of mother-child relationships was associated with internalizing problems for boys, but not for girls.

## INTRODUCTION

- Internalizing problems are of concern in and of themselves, and are also associated with problems in other important spheres like cognitive development, academic achievement, or peer relationships.
- Many studies have examined the respective influence of each parent on child psychological functioning, but few studies have examined whether these associations vary by child sex.
- There are well-documented sex differences in child internalizing problems, and evidence that parental influences on child functioning may differ between boys and girls.
- The objective** of this study was to examine if the links between mother-child and father-child relationships and children's internalizing problems vary by child sex.

## METHOD

### Participants

- 163 mother-child dyads (77 girls)
- 99 father-child dyads (50 girls)
- Average family income: 70,000\$ to 90,000\$
- Average education of mothers: 15.5 years
- Average education of fathers: 15.2 years
- Participants are mostly Caucasians.

### Procedure

- Relationship quality:**
  - T1: 18 months
  - Based on a snack time mother-child interaction and a 10-min free-play father-child interaction.
- Internalizing behavior:** (composite of T2 & T3)
  - T2: 2 years ; T3: 3 years
  - Questionnaire completed by mothers

### Measures

- Relationship quality :** Mutually Responsive Orientation scale (MRO; Aksan et al., 2006)
  - Measures the harmonious communication, the mutual cooperation and the emotional atmosphere of parent-child dyadic exchanges.
- Internalizing behavior :** Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000).
  - Measure somatic complaints, emotionally reactive, anxious/depressed, and withdrawn child behaviors.

## RESULTS

### Correlations, whole sample

	Internalizing behavior
Mother-child relationship	-.16*
Father-child relationship	-.26*

\*p < .05.

- Both mother-child and father-child relationships of higher quality are associated with lower internalizing child behavior problems.

### When girls and boys are considered separately

#### Correlations, boys

	Internalizing behavior
Mother-child relationship	-.35**
Father-child relationship	-.19

\*\*p < .01.

- Only the quality of the mother-child relationship is associated with boys' internalizing behavior problems.

#### Correlations, girls

	Internalizing behavior
Mother-child relationship	.11
Father-child relationship	-.32*

\*p < .05.

- Only the quality of the father-child relationship is associated with girls' internalizing behavior problems.

## DISCUSSION

- These results suggest that boys and girls may be differentially vulnerable to the development of internalizing problems.
- They may be differentially affected by harmonious relationships with their parents, and be more likely to benefit from their relationship with the opposite-sex parent.

### Limitations and future studies:

- The sample size restricts generalization and power.
- Child internalizing problems were reported by mothers only.
- Mediating and/or moderating factors should be explored.
- A more comprehensive assessment of child functioning in larger samples is warranted.



## REFERENCES

- Achenbach, T. M., & Rescorla, L. A. (2000). *Manual for ASEBA preschool forms & profiles*. Burlington: University of Vermont, Research Center for Children, Youth, & Families.
- Aksan, N., Kochanska, G., & Ortmann, M. R. (2006). Mutually responsive orientation between parents and their young children: Toward methodological advances in the science of relationships. *Developmental Psychology*, 42, 833-848. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.42.5.833