

The Family Studies Project—Looking into Parent-Child Relationships

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Amanda Spoto, Senior majoring Psychology examines the effects on a child's ability to interact in a social setting

Spoto's clear goals from the start

Amanda Spoto, a senior majoring in psychology with a minor in environmental health, has worked for the Family Studies Project since spring 2009. Spoto declared her psychology major as soon as she entered USC, along with a pre-medical school emphasis. She is also the president of the Alpha Epsilon Delta pre-med fraternity. Her passion for learning influenced her decision to engage in psychological research as soon as possible.

“As soon as I entered USC, I instantly knew that I wanted to participate in a psychology research lab, specifically one involving children health,” Spoto said. And Spoto quickly found what she was looking for. Under the guidance of Dr. Brian Baucom, Spoto has become a well-integrated part of his Family Studies Project. In fact, she is currently the project manager and an essential part of several progressive studies.

The Family Studies Project

Funded for more than twenty years, the longitudinal study has attracted a lot of positive attention from all affiliates in the psychology field. Over many years, the study has focused on looking into the arousal and emotional valence in the parent-child relationship. The purpose of this is to look specifically into how aggression in the parent-child bond contributes to a child's development, including physical, social, psychological, and emotional health. More specifically, this project aims to examine the effects on a child's ability to interact in a social setting.

Testing the families—an unbiased approach

With 150 families in the participant pool, all families have been a part of the project since the first wave of the study. The families are culturally diverse and the composition includes a mother, father, and at least one child, male or female. Spoto and her colleagues invite one family at a time into the lab. Upon arrival, each member of the family writes down the top three problems the individual is facing within the family dynamic. Three out of the nine problems are randomly selected for the family to discuss. The family is put into an isolated room as the conversation is videotaped and recorded. Each member of the family is encouraged to participate in the conversation as much as they want. Spoto and her researchers provide a natural atmosphere for the family in order to permit normal conversations.

Spoto and her fellow researchers then analyze the conversation in several ways. Firstly, arousal based on the rises and falls in the frequency of each family member's voice is recorded on a quantitative scale. Arousal refers to the individual's audio response to a certain statement. This can be a soft, whispering voice or a loud, bold voice. Secondly, each family member's emotional valence is measured. This refers to how positive or negative a person is during the conversation. Spoto and her colleagues measured this factor by watching the conversation without audio, allowing for solely assessing facial responses. Depending on how often a family member uses their hands or bold facial remarks, the family members are rated quantitatively. Lastly, the researchers assessed entire familial aggression. The families were rated as low aggression, mild aggression, and high aggression. After combining all three factors and running a multi-level regression, Spoto found interesting results.

The surprising results

It is expected that in less aggressive or normative families, a mother or father's arousal is equivalent to that of the child. For example, when the mother is emotionally negative, the child is presumed to have low arousal. However, Spoto and her researchers found that children from more aggressive families were more physiologically aroused than children from less aggressive families. When either the mother or father of an aggressive family shows unsafe emotions, meaning high arousal and negativity, their child actually showed less arousal. Figures 1 and 2 display these results.

Figure 1. Child arousal and mother arousal

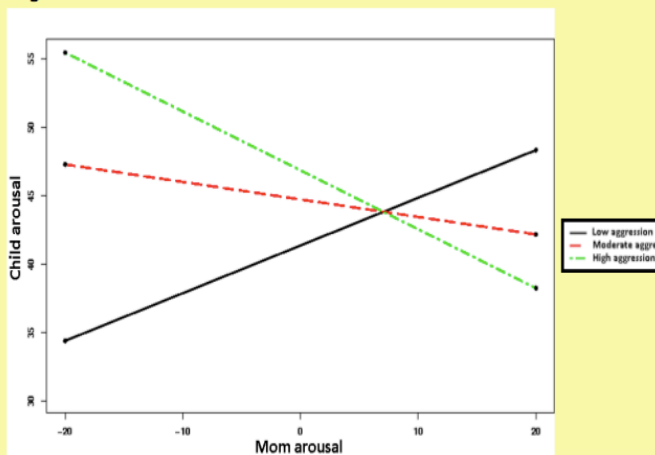
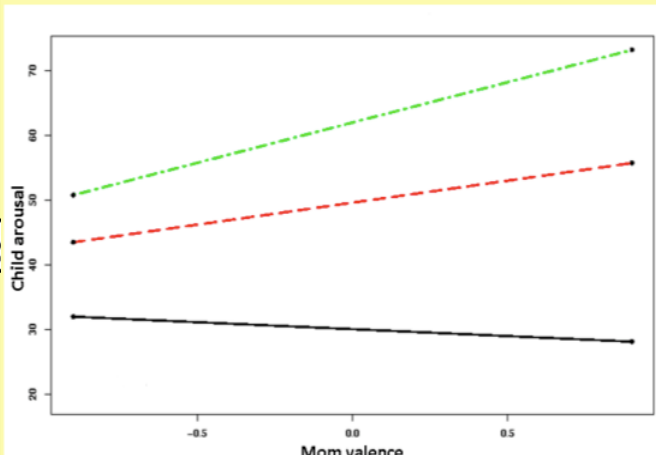


Figure 2. Child arousal and mother valence



These results show several conclusions. Mainly, that there is a significant relationship between a parent's interactions with a child. More specifically, an aggressive family contributes negatively to a child's social growth. This raises several questions: How does a mother or father's attitude toward their child affect the child's aggression? How does the child interact with peers? Once the child is older, how will he or she react in romantic relationships? Clearly, Spoto and her colleagues have many questions to address in future studies.

Future Implications

These interesting results compelled Spoto to look further into the dynamic parent-child relationship. In the next wave of the study, Spoto and her fellow researchers plan to include a new factor- approach: avoidance. This signifies how much a family member engages in the conversation based on body language, body orientation, and eye contact. For example, if someone were to lean forward, this implies that person is engaged in the conversation. With this additional information, this allows for another measure of emotional arousal. Thus, depending on the results, this may strengthen the study even more so.

Spoto presented these intriguing results in the Spring 2011 Undergraduate Research Symposium. She plans on presenting her Senior Thesis in next year's Symposium. Needless to say, this isn't the last of Spoto we'll be seeing.